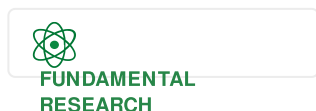


# What does science say about all the failed New Year's resolutions?

For decades, researchers have been fascinated by the dreadful resolution.



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We've all made resolutions at some point in our lives during this time of year, keeping them with varying degrees of success. The truth is, most have failed, but we continue to make them. The math isn't on our side, either.

Take for example a recent survey that shows [58 % of the population \(30 million adults](#) [↗](#) in the United Kingdom) intended to make a New Year's resolution in 2023. Not surprisingly, the majority concern health and money.



## Success rates

How many will succeed? An older [survey](#) [↗](#) paints a dire picture. A study of about 800 million activities by the fitness app Strava predicts that nearly 80 % of people who make a New Year's resolution will abandon it by 19 January.

This mad desire for self-improvement in December and January is what captivates Dr John Norcross, the father of New Year's resolutions research. "I'm interested in how people change on their own," he told ['The Wall Street Journal'](#) [↗](#).


Dr Norcross carried out a [study](#) [↗](#) on resolutions back in the 1980s. About 40 % of the 200 volunteers stuck to their resolutions after 6 months. After 2 years, the percentage fell to 19 %. An experiment followed in the 1990s involving a random sample of 159 people with resolutions and 123 without. Once again, around 40 % kept them.


Award-winning behavioural scientist Katherine Milkman, a professor at University of Pennsylvania's The Wharton School in the United States, also conducted several


[experiments](#) . “My collaborators and I have shown that on new beginnings — dates like New Year’s Day ... — you’re extra motivated to tackle your goals because you feel like you can turn the page on past failures,” she told [‘CNN’](#) . “Maybe you meant to quit smoking, get fit or start going to bed at a reasonable hour last year and didn’t. A fresh start like New Year’s lets you relegate those missteps to a past chapter and tell yourself, ‘That was the old me, but the new me will be different.’”

## Why don’t resolutions stick?

But why do so many people continue to fail at this annual ritual? There’s very little literature on the subject.

Per Carlbring, professor of psychology at Stockholm University, shed some light in findings published in the journal [‘PLOS ONE’](#) . His research revealed that the [effectiveness of resolutions depends on how they are framed](#).

Prof. Carlbring explained in a [statement](#) : “In many cases, rephrasing your resolution could definitely work. For example, if your goal is to stop eating sweets in order to lose weight, you will most likely be more successful if you say ‘I will eat fruit several times a day’ instead. You then replace sweets with something healthier, which probably means you will lose weight and also keep your resolution. You cannot erase a behaviour, but you can replace it with something else.”

Prof. Pragya Agarwal of Loughborough University in the United Kingdom put it another way in her [‘The Conversation’ article](#) : “One of the main reasons why promises fail before the end of January is because they are vague. They focus on immeasurable qualities such as being healthier, happier (without defining what that means) or earning more money (without coming up with an amount or plan).”

## Keywords

New Year’s resolution, resolution, New Year’s, goal, failure, success, money, health

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