NO PREP

New Year's Resolutions

The Psychology of Goals and Habits

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

New Year's Resolutions: The Psychology of Goals and Habits

Why We Make Resolutions Every January

Every January, people announce bold plans: "This is the year I get in shape." "I'm going to stop procrastinating." "I'll save more money." On the surface, New Year's resolutions look like simple promises. Underneath, they are a great example of how psychology, motivation, and social pressure collide. Humans like fresh starts. When the calendar flips, we feel as if we're closing one chapter and opening another. Psychologists call this the fresh start effect—we're more willing to change when we feel we're beginning a new "mental book," not just turning another page in the same one. The New Year, birthdays, the start of a school year, or even a new semester can all provide that feeling. We're also influenced by social norms. When

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How Goals Work in Your Brain

A goal is more than a wish. Psychologists define a goal as a mental target you commit to reaching. Good goals give your brain direction, focus, and a reason to ignore distractions. When you set a specific goal, such as "study biology for 30 minutes each school night," you give your brain a clear signal about what matters. This activates executive functions in the prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain involved in planning, self-control, and decision-making. Not all goals are created equal. Vague goals ("get healthier") are hard to measure, so your brain can't easily

tell if you're succeeding. SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) make progress visible. "Walk 20 minutes after dinner four nights a week" gives you something you can actually track. Psychologists also distinguish between outcome goals (the result you want) and process goals (the actions you'll take). "Earn a B+ in chemistry" is an outcome goal; "review notes for 15 minutes after each class" is a process goal. You control process goals more directly, which often makes them more powerful. Here's one way to compare them: Identity-based goals can be especially powerful. When you say, "I'm a reader," it's easier to pick up a book. When you say, "I'm bad at math," your brain may stop trying. New Year's is a chance to rewrite some of those identity stories in a healthier direction.

Motivation, Rewards, and Willpower

If setting goals were enough, gyms would stay full all year, not just in January. The harder part is sticking with them once motivation fades. Early on, you get a natural burst of intrinsic motivation—you feel excited simply because the change matters to you. Over time, that bursts fades and you may rely more on extrinsic motivation—rewards, deadlines, or accountability to others. Your brain's reward system plays a big role. Each time you check off a small step, your brain releases dopamine, a chemical linked to pleasure and learning. That "mini high" helps your brain learn, "This behavior is good—do it again." That's why breaking a big goal into small, frequent wins is so important. "Read 10 pages a day" gives you more chances for success than "finish five books this year" does. Willpower alone is unreliable. Self-control is like a muscle—stronger when you use it wisely, weaker when you rely on it for everything. Psychologists talk about choice architecture: shaping your environment to make the desired behavior easier. Laying out your running shoes the night before, turning off notifications during study time, or keeping snacks you want to avoid out of sight are all simple changes that reduce the amount of willpower you need. In other words, good planning beats heroic self-control.

Key Information

Type of Goal	Example Resolution	Psychology Note
Outcome goal	"Lose 10 pounds by spring break."	Motivating, but progress may feel slow and discouraging.

Type of Goal	Example Resolution	Psychology Note
Process goal	"Drink water instead of soda at lunch on school days."	Focuses on daily actions you can control.
Identity-based goal	"Be the kind of person who moves my body every day."	Connects behavior to your self-concept, which can be sticky.

Case Study Excerpt – Alex's Resolution Rewrite

On January 1, Alex declared, "This year I'm going to be perfectly organized." He bought a planner, color-coded pens, and three different productivity apps. For the first week, he filled every block of time with tasks, promising himself he'd never procrastinate again. By the second week, late basketball practices and extra homework from chemistry knocked his perfect schedule off track. He missed a few planned study blocks, felt guilty, and started avoiding his planner altogether. One afternoon, his psychology teacher asked students to reflect on a goal that wasn't working. Alex realized his resolution was too vague and too extreme. During class, he rewrote it as: "On school nights, I'll spend 20 minutes organizing my backpack and planning the next day before I check social media." Over the next month, he wasn't perfect, but he followed the new plan most nights. Instead of aiming to be a "perfectly organized person," he focused on one daily habit that made school mornings calmer.

1. What problems did Alex's original resolution have from a psychological point of view?

2. How did changing his goal into a specific daily habit make it more realistic and sustainable?

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, a major advantage of process goals over outcome goals is that they:

    a) Do not need to be connected to anything you care about

    b) Require no effort once you write them down

    c) Guarantee instant results in the first week

    d) Focus on actions you can control day to day

2. The fresh start effect helps explain why people like to set resolutions at the New Year because it:

    a) Forces everyone to choose the same goal at the same time

    b) Erases all habits and preferences you built up in the previous year

    c) Creates a feeling of a new chapter where change seems more possible

    d) Makes rewards unnecessary for behavior change

3. In the reading, choice architecture refers to:

    a) Structuring your environment to make good habits easier and bad habits harder

    b) Using only intrinsic motivation instead of rewards

    c) Designing buildings and public spaces that motivate people to exercise each day

    d) Writing goals without telling anyone else about them

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Intrinsic motivation	A) Belief in your own ability to succeed at a task
2. ___ Self-efficacy	B) Pattern of starting fresh at new time markers like New Year's Day
3. ___ Fresh start effect	C) Motivation that comes from internal interest or values
4. ___ Process goal	D) Chemical messenger linked to reward and learning
5. ___ Dopamine	E) Goal that focuses on actions or steps rather than only the end result

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. A well-designed _____ goal is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

2. When you check off a small step toward a goal and feel a little rush of satisfaction, your brain is likely releasing _____.

3. Changing your environment so the healthier or more productive choice is the easiest one is an example of choice _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Give one example of a vague New Year's resolution and then rewrite it as a SMART process goal that would be easier to track.

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain how identity-based goals (for example, "I'm the kind of person who…") might make habits more likely to stick over time.

3. Think about a time when you or someone you know "fell off" a resolution. Using ideas from the reading (like small wins, fresh starts, or choice architecture), describe one change that might have helped that resolution last longer.