

# Probing Question: Why are resolutions so hard to keep?

January 13 2011, By Grace Warren

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For the person who's trying to quit smoking, it may be a friend's offer of a cigarette at the bar one Saturday night that knocks them off track. For someone with a weight loss resolution, it may be that piece of cake at Aunt Ellen's birthday party in March. Vowing to improve your money management skills? Good luck making it past all those post-holiday sales.

Why are resolutions so hard to keep?

"It's a matter of goals in conflict," said Meg Meloy, associate professor of marketing at Penn State. "Consider the New Year's [resolution](#) of being healthy and losing weight. You set the goal of eating healthy food.

Then you're presented with all this food and the goal of eating tasty food is triggered. Which goal wins?"

Studies by Meloy and others show that when someone with conflicting goals is given a choice, the person usually pursues the goal most prominent in his or her thoughts at the moment. Instant gratification tends to win, unless the person creates a situation where the alternative goal is more prominent.

"Imagine we present a group of people with a healthy option and a tasty option. The tasty option satisfies the immediate goal of getting something delicious to eat. Most people will choose it," Meloy said. "However, if, while they're deciding, we get them to think about how the healthy option contributes to a long-term goal like weight loss, many people will choose the healthy instead." she said. Some will go back to the tasty option if given the chance to reconsider, she admits, especially if they make a promise to themselves to eat healthy food later in the day.

So what's the best way to keep our New Year's resolutions alive as the months go by?

"You can do that by continuously exposing yourself to the goal," Meloy asserted. "Find ways to trigger it in your mind." Make simple, straightforward changes as soon as possible, she said; for example, if your resolution is to save more money, go to your payroll office immediately after New Year's and arrange to put a portion of your monthly paycheck into an account you've opened for that purpose. Stick a Post-It note with your resolution written on it on your bathroom mirror or the side of your computer monitor as a reminder.

Perhaps the most effective way to keep your New Year's resolution alive is to tell others about it, Meloy said. "If a goal is really important to you, you need to make a public commitment and/or written commitment to

people that really matter to you." She cites organizations like Weight Watchers, which have written agreements and regularly scheduled meetings, as a useful tool for a person who seeks to stay true to a New Year's weight-loss resolution.

Meloy also recommended having intermediate goals that can be achieved and celebrated throughout the year. "If your resolution is to lose 50 pounds, it may seem impossible to achieve. Plan to lose 15 pounds by March, and set several other smaller goals along the way." Inevitably, people do go astray, even from the goals they've announced publicly and dedicated themselves to reaching. According to one study of New Year's resolutions, 25 percent of people have already broken their resolution by the end of the first week.

"Once they have sinned, [people](#) may perceive their goal progress as so diminished that they don't want to get back on the horse," Meloy warned. "But if you remind them that lapses are understandable and they can still make it to their [goal](#), you can reinvigorate their commitment to it."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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