

# Prone to abandoning New Year's resolutions? Research suggests blaming money worries rather than being time-poor

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People who abandon New Year's resolutions or other commitments can maintain the respect of their peers by blaming external factors such as

lack of money, new research suggests.

Studies have found that people were more likely to be seen as having good self-control despite abandoning a commitment to live a healthier life if they claimed they did not have the money for a gym membership or expensive new cooking equipment. People who instead claimed they didn't have the time to exercise or to replace a takeaway habit with healthy, home-cooked food were more likely to be seen as having poor self-control.

Dr. Janina Steinmetz, Reader in Marketing at Bayes Business School (formerly Cass), who conducted the research, analyzed which excuses boost the chances of people appearing to have good self-control even after they fail to keep a resolution or pledge.

She said, "Many resolutions or commitments involve either time or money, so the lack of one or the other seems to provide a good excuse for breaking it without adversely affecting how others see us. However, these two excuses are not equally effective. My six experiments involving around 1,200 people found that pleading a lack of money leads to better outcomes—in terms of perceptions about the individual—than citing lack of time."

For example, in one experiment, 200 online participants read about people who failed to keep a commitment to eat healthier food. Some of those they read about blamed the cost of cooking good meals, while others said they were defeated by a lack of time. Participants saw the first group as having better self-control and were more likely to consider them as potentially good gym partners.

The differences appear to reflect how much the excuse is seen as being within the person's control, Dr. Steinmetz suggests.

She said, "These results are surprising because people like to use lack of time as an excuse when they can't do something. They equate lack of time with high status. However, the studies suggest we tend to think others could find the time to exercise or cook healthy meals if they were sufficiently motivated."

"That is why citing factors many of us have less control over, such as lack of money, can produce perceptions of having better self-control even when we abandon our New Year's resolution or break a commitment."

The [results](#), published last week in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, could have implications for [local authorities](#), NHS organizations, and others campaigning on public health issues—and [health professionals](#) working with obese people.

Dr. Steinmetz explained, "People often justify a diet heavy in [fast food](#) or TV dinners by saying it is quicker than buying and cooking healthy ingredients. Organizations promoting or marketing [healthy lifestyles](#) or working with patients around behavior change can challenge that self-aggrandizing claim that people are 'just too busy' to choose the healthy option. They can promote healthy but easy-to-prepare meals using affordable ingredients or the benefits of even half an hour's aerobic activity. That would undermine the credibility of an all-too-familiar excuse."

There might also be lessons in the research for anyone in the market for a new job or romance.

Dr. Steinmetz said, "In job interviews and on dating website questionnaires, people are often invited to talk about a failure they've had in life. Obviously, we've all had them, but when explaining why, whether you're looking for a job or for romance, blaming uncontrollable

factors might help you convey a positive image. Although my research didn't look at those contexts, it might be wise to avoid the temptation to blame lack of time."

**More information:** Janina Steinmetz, Too little money or time? Using justifications to maintain a positive image after self-control failure, *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/ejsp.3010](https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.3010)

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