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How to set achievable health goals

Many of us start the year with a grand plan to reinvent ourselves, vowing to eat better, hit the gym and look after ourselves more. But making a target is far easier than reaching it, no matter how good our intentions. So how can we set realistic targets in order to avoid giving up early?

Whether it's eating less chocolate or doing more exercise, the goals we set ourselves at the start of January rarely stick. As the dark, long days drag on, our plans often become derailed as we reach for comfort food and spend more time on the sofa.

There are multiple reasons why we find it hard to stick to New Year goals. Firstly, we tend to think big, rather than taking a realistic, long-term approach to positive change.

Our good intentions often lead us to set multiple goals too, putting immense pressure on ourselves to make numerous significant changes at the same time. So when we fall off the wagon, we feel demoralised and give up entirely.

Also, studies have shown that a conscious desire to have better self-control could actually do the exact opposite¹. Essentially, the more we want self-control, the less likely we are to have it. It's like trying to force yourself to drift off when you can't sleep - you end up more awake.

We all tend to gravitate towards big dramatic change, but making small but consistent changes are easier to stick to and can make a big difference to how you feel.

So whether you're [eating more greens](#), signing up for a [marathon](#), or cutting your refined carb intake, how can you make your goals stick?

How to stick at your goals

Think small

Setting small but achievable goals is the way to make sure they really stick, because when you find you can keep with that goal, it will increase your motivation to keep going.

There is scientific evidence to suggest that hitting minor milestones contributes to reaching larger goals. When Harvard Business School academic Teresa Amabile analysed nearly 12,000 diary entries from 238 employees across seven companies, they discovered tracking small achievements had a direct impact on people's motivation².

This is because small accomplishments boost our sense of confidence and activate the brain's reward circuit. This releases chemicals that give us a sense of achievement.

Tell other people

It's also important to seek support, whether it's from friends, family or professionals. If you want to [cut down on alcohol](#), organisations like [DrinkAware](#) offer support and practical advice on ways to reduce cravings, go alcohol-free in social situations, and more.

This might mean asking family or friends for support to help with your goal, or tackling a new goal with a friend. Telling someone else your goal, and saying the words out loud, can also be a powerful way to build accountability, and help you stick with it.

Replace things, instead of cutting them out

Going cold turkey when it comes to changing our habits is tricky. After all, denying ourselves chocolate, wine, or takeaways is most likely going to make us crave them even more. Instead, it's better to replace them with healthier alternatives.

And if you do indulge, don't beat yourself up. Making healthy changes isn't easy and even the smallest achievements count.

Don't commit to too much

Andy Romero-Birkbeck, a personal trainer, says that we also give up on resolutions because we try to do too much at once.

"Most people don't achieve their health and well-being goals because they simply try to change too many factors at once," explains Romero-Birkbeck. Therefore, it's better to aim for one goal at a time if you're struggling to keep to it.

Create habits over time

Humans are creatures of habit and changing these habits isn't easy. Therefore, making sure any health goals [fit into your day-to-day routine](#) is key.

Be realistic

When setting a goal, being realistic is key. If you work 50 hours a week, it's going to be hard to go to the gym every day. Instead, set yourself a target of going twice a week or fit in daily walks on your lunch break instead. Being specific helps too. For example, you could try avoiding sweets on a Tuesday and Thursday rather than simply pledging to cut out sugar.

Think about your motivation

[Running](#) a marathon or cutting out fast food are admirable goals, but we need to consider why we want to do something to properly commit to it.

"As with any kind of change it's important to unlock the key motivators behind the desired change or goal," says Romero-Birkbeck. "If the motivation to create the change is recognised and the drivers have been noted, it makes it much easier to stay on track. Whether it's a timed run, a waist measurement or one rep, it's all part of our journey towards the goal."

Further reading

1. [Uziel et al: The self-control irony: Desire for self-control limits exertion of self-control in demanding settings.](#)
2. [Amabile et al: The power of small wins.](#)

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