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New Year, New Me: Why reinventing yourself in 2023 might be bad for your mental health

Whether you decide to make New Year resolutions or not, January often feels like a good time to better ourselves. We might set goals to exercise every day, be more productive or take up a new hobby – which we hope will turn us into more successful, well-rounded people. But can trying to reinvent ourselves at the start of a New Year actually be detrimental to our well-being?

Why do we make New Year resolutions?

"We often make [New Year](#) resolutions as a commitment to use the transition point of the year changing as an anchor to achieve an ambition or goal," says [Lee Chambers](#), a psychologist and well-being consultant.

"They are a tradition based on continuing to do good and addressing things that hadn't gone so well. [Resolutions](#) also provide an opportunity to learn from mistakes, or make up for times you fell short of your values."

However, we may start a [New Year](#) with good intentions, but we often abandon resolutions after just a few weeks or even days. In fact, the [fitness](#) app [Strava](#) analysed 800 million user-logged activities to predict that most people are likely to give up on their resolutions by 19th January.

When we inevitably abandon our goals, it can come as a huge blow to our [self-esteem](#), [confidence](#) and [mental health](#). It can even make us feel like we have failed the entire year and let ourselves down – and that we will never be the person we envisioned back on 1st January.

New Year resolution pressure

Of course, setting a [New Year's resolution](#) isn't a bad thing. Going to the gym more or eating healthily can make us feel physically and [mentally](#) better and improve our health. However, problems can arise when we try to make sudden drastic or unrealistic goals.

"As with anything that causes us to suppress elements of our identity or try to move too quickly away from our current selves, there can be a well-being cost to trying to reinvent yourself," says Chambers. "This can arise from the chasing of unattainable goals, creating unrealistic expectations that you are doomed never to meet, losing joy from becoming too outcome-focused and trying to be toxically productive."

Sometimes, the [pressure](#) to stick to a goal can take the enjoyment out of the activity itself. For example, telling ourselves we will work out every single day may be impractical, particularly if alongside work or family commitments. So when we inevitably fall behind on the resolution and miss a few days, we may be more likely to abandon [exercise](#) entirely, rather than adjusting our expectations.

Focusing on perceived failures

One of the key problems is that making a [New Year's resolution](#) often involves focusing on our perceived flaws or insecurities. For example, we tend to create goals or aims based on negative thoughts, such as 'I am overweight' rather than 'I want to be healthier'.

Often, this kind of thinking can chip away at self-esteem and lead us to reflect negatively about who we are. For people prone to unhelpful or negative thought patterns, such as those with [depression](#), [anxiety](#) or [eating disorders](#), focusing on these faults can be psychologically damaging.

How to set healthy New Year resolutions

Set small, manageable goals

"My advice would be to ditch the big, abstract resolutions, and aim instead to complete some tiny goals," says Chambers. "Even the word [resolution](#) is loaded with the idea that you have a problem that needs solving."

"Using tiny goals, you can make small changes that are sustainable, simple and realistic. This makes it easier to build them into [routines](#), stay consistent, and even form them into a habit."

Don't focus on the New Year

It's also helpful to focus on one day at a time. After all, you will inevitably have days when you abandon your new [healthy eating](#) regime in favour of a takeaway, or ditch the [gym](#) to stay on the sofa. It's normal to struggle with [lifestyle changes](#), so don't feel guilty if you have a day off.

"Instead of it being about a year - which in itself creates pressure - focusing on a day feels more doable," says Chambers. "And even if you miss a day, you can commit to trying again the following day, without feeling like the whole year is a failure."

Be kind to yourself

Making self-improvements is admirable, but it is still important to be kind to yourself. [Research](#) shows how you treat yourself if you do fail can make a big difference to your [mental well-being](#). Instead of being harshly critical of yourself, recognise that nobody is perfect and that failure is inevitable sometimes.

"Tiny goals give us the ability to make lots of little improvements over time," Chambers adds. "They remove our all-or-nothing thinking and the internal pressure that stops us being kind and compassionate to ourselves."

Set approach-orientated goals

A [study](#) published in 2020 found approach-orientated goals - those in which people are positively motivated - tend to be more successful than avoidance-orientated goals, which are driven by negative thoughts.

If possible, try to focus on the positive aspects of your goal. For example, taking note of how exercise makes you feel mentally better is more likely to help you stick to your goal than concentrating on your weight.

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