

# Healthy Resolutions: Plan for Success

RITA AND MARGOT enroll in an exercise class, both resolving to become lifelong exercisers. A year later, Rita is still exercising fairly regularly, while Margot does nothing more than take an occasional walk with friends. Why are some people more likely to stick with their resolutions than others?

## **Manage stress and cope with negative feelings.**

Stress is the No. 1 cause of exercise falling by the wayside. The ability to manage daily life stress protects people from the negative feelings that interfere with positive intentions. It takes energy to exercise regularly and eat in a new way. Stress causes negative feelings such as pressure, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, fatigue and anger. These feelings deplete our energy reserves, and make it more likely that we'll fall back into those comfortable old ways.

What's the best way to manage stress? Stress management classes and workshops offer good advice on dealing effectively with sources of stress through better problem-solving, time management and communication skills. Cultivating a positive attitude and lifestyle that includes adequate sleep, a healthful diet and regular exercise help as well. Many people have found that regular physical activity provides the best antidote to stress.

If unhealthy habits have helped you deal with negative emotions, new methods of comforting yourself must be developed. Working out, talking to friends or doing something pleasurable like watching a funny movie can replace destructive coping methods like smoking or overeating.

## **Anticipate and solve problems.**

The problem-solving skill goes hand in hand with stress management. Problems can easily disrupt newly established

habits such as not smoking or skipping desserts. Problems often arise in the form of simple interruptions: visitors, parties, eating out and holidays. Anticipating and planning for these and more serious disruptions help to prevent that loss of control that accompanies a break from routine.

## **Sense of control.**

People who persist in the face of difficulties often do so because they have a sense that what they do matters, that their decisions and actions can make a difference. People with this positive outlook are better problem-solvers, and do not give up easily.

**Keeping track of progress is particularly helpful in changing lifestyle behavior.**



Jim Whiting

## **Supportive environment.**

Supportive families, work places, communities and friends help the seeds of new habits take root. For example, a supportive work place might offer flexible scheduling, access to exercise facilities or at least supervisors who won't look at you like you're crazy if you go for a walk during your lunch hour. Many exercisers find that the health center environment, along with its exercise instructors and personal trainers, provides support for a healthful lifestyle. Many support groups meet weekly to motivate people to sustain their progress. A personal trainer with whom you check in every month serves the same purpose.

## **Self-monitoring.**

People who successfully change lifestyle behaviors, such as exercise and eating habits, say that keeping track of their progress is especially helpful. Self-monitoring usually takes the form of a daily record of the behavior you are trying to change. People trying to establish an exercise habit can keep an exercise log. People trying to change their eating behaviors can write down what they eat each day.

## **Problematic triggers.**

Certain factors stimulate a predictable response for each of us. For some people, walking into a bar for a beer means it's time to smoke a cigarette. Watching a movie might be a signal that triggers eating popcorn or candy. People who successfully change problematic behaviors try to identify signals that trigger these behaviors, and then work to change or eliminate the trigger situation, or at least plan more effective responses. For example, some people find it easier to quit smoking if they also quit drinking. If movies trigger too much junk food eating, switch to low-fat popcorn. If evening boredom triggers eating binges, get out of the house to attend night-time events.

## **Physical activity.**

People who engage in regular physical activity are more likely to stick to their resolutions, even resolutions unrelated to exercise. Regular exercise helps reduce stress and gives people a sense of control. Physical activity increases daily energy levels and provides a sense of personal well-being that sustains you through challenging times. **RM**

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