

# Resolutions That Work



How to make - & keep



new year's resolutions:



Three simple principles

Serge Prengel

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## Introduction

Every new year, we make resolutions. It feels like getting a new start on life. We're full of hope and anticipation.

But, year after year, the same thing happens. Within a few weeks, it's all gone -- the enthusiasm, the hope... Once again, the new year's resolutions have fizzled out. And we feel deflated, sad and guilty: we broke our promises to ourselves.

Research shows that the percentage of people who maintain new year's resolutions falls sharply as the weeks go by. The following shows how many of resolutions are maintained as time goes on:

- past the first week: 75%
- past 2 weeks: 71%
- after one month: 64%
- after 6 months: 46%

Source: Auld Lang Syne: Success predictors, change processes, and self-reported outcomes of New Year's resolvers and nonresolvers, by John C. Norcross, Marci S. Mrykalo, Matthew D. Blagys, University of Scranton. Journal of Clinical Psychology, Volume 58, Issue 4 (2002).

So, the "glass is half empty" perspective is that half of the people who make good resolutions at new year have given up on them by the end of June.

The "glass is half full" perspective is that half of the people succeed.

Which half do you want to be in?

It's not necessarily going to be easy to succeed, but it will be easier if you are prepared.

This book outlines three simple principles that will help you make – and keep – new year's resolutions.



Keep  
an eye  
on the goal

## Resolutions vs wishes

Are you going to make any new year's resolutions this year? If so, keep in mind the difference between a resolution and wishful thinking.

The study mentioned in the introduction compared people who had committed to a new year resolution vs. people who had simply wished for a change to happen.

By the end of June, change was 10 times more frequent among people who had made a commitment.

Good, you say.... but, in practical terms, what's the difference between a wish and a commitment?

Wishing is passive. Commitment is active.

When you wish for something to happen, you just hope that things will go well on their own. If things don't go well, there's no "Plan B". You just won't get what you wished for.

In other words, wishful thinking will get you nowhere, because it essentially amounts to professing your powerlessness: *"It would be so nice if things happened magically, without having to fight for what I want."*

In contrast, feeling committed means that:

- you have a sense that things need not be easy
- and you're ready to fight for what you want.

## Control vs. "go with the flow"

The following will illustrate the problems of "going with the flow". Jane says: *"I have had many years pass me by without taking a proactive role in determining the directions my life would go. I took a "Life Happens" attitude."*

What does this mean? Jane says: *"The concept of setting goals, actually forming a plan, taking action, and purposely achieving the wanted results, was not part of my life style."*

Now, what is the problem with this attitude? *"I know "Go with the Flow" is a popular saying, and I'm sure there are times when it's appropriate to do so... But I've come to realize how much of my power I gave away to others and to the universe by "Going with the Flow" most of the time."*

*"In contrast,"* Jane says, *"I've learned a lot about myself, and how much I can do to take my life in the direction I want to go."*

Let's imagine you are on a raft, going downstream. It's very pleasant to go with the flow. You'd be crazy to paddle upstream – except if you want to go into the other direction.

To stay with the image of rafting: Let's suppose you suddenly discover that the flow is leading you to some major falls. Now, going with the flow would just be suicidal.

Many of us think of the words “control” and “power” as “dirty” words. We do not want to be “controlling”. As a result, we can fall into the opposite trap - - not using our power, not controlling those things that we could, and should, control.

Being proactive means using our power to control those things we can control.

## **Aim for a specific goal**

It sounds so obvious that it's easy to overlook: to make any kind of change, you first have to aim for it, seriously commit to it.

The more specific your commitment, the better. The devil is in the details. For instance, committing to "eating better" or "exercising more" is going to be very difficult to practice. On the other hand, a commitment to avoid specific foods, or to exercise 3 times a week at lunchtime... are easier to follow.

Be realistic. Don't bite more than you can chew. Here again, the devil is in the detail. How do you know what is realistic, and what isn't? Sometimes, it's just a question of common sense. Sometimes, it's not so obvious. How do you know the difference? Well, sometimes, you don't. You learn it, over time.

So, what is it that's going to make that kind of commitment possible?

Commitment is not something you can fake. I'm not saying "pretend to be more committed". I'm saying; "*Give yourself a chance to feel how much you want what you want.*"

And how do you do that?

Let yourself see it. Let yourself want it. *Creative visualization* is a great way to be pulled from where you are toward your goal. Let yourself imagine what it would be like to have achieved what you want. Picture the results. Let yourself feel how good it would feel. Let yourself bask in the dream...

## **Creative visualization**

We've all heard about the use of visualization in gymnastics, in tennis, and sports coaching in general. We know that, for Olympic athletes, visualization of goals is a way to help improve performance.

Why shouldn't it work for you?

I define being proactive as *looking back... from the future.*

Creative visualization is a great way to look back from the future. More than that: a great way to be

pulled from where you are toward your goal. Images, and the emotions that go with visualizing things, are a very powerful way to motivate us.

Take a hint from Madison Avenue: Advertising doesn't sell us products just by telling us they're good for us. Advertising taps into the power of images. Commercials tell us stories that build a brand personality. At a semi-conscious level, we find affinities for these personalities. Our connections with brands are not just made on a rational level, they're emotionally charged.

"Future visioning" is a good tool for personal development. It is a way to make goals more concrete, and to make more of an emotional connection with what these goals mean to us.

Visualizing is *not* magical thinking:

- What would be magical thinking is saying that the secret to getting what you want is just to let yourself form a clear image of what you want - - that this clarity of vision is a substitute for the effort to take the steps that translate this vision in reality.

- There is a kind of poetic truth to this kind of "secret": If you have a clear, vivid sense of what you want, then you will be so motivated that the effort will seem much less onerous. In retrospect, when you reminisce about what happened, you may feel like it all happened so much more easily than it actually did!

As you contemplate making specific changes, let yourself visualize what it would be like to have achieved this goal. Let yourself feel the

excitement. The goal is in sight, you can smell it, you can taste it... Remember what this feels like: This is the experience of feeling motivated.

Capture a snapshot of this image. Of course, you can't do so with a camera. But write a few sentences to capture that image. And save these words.

There will be plenty of times, in the next few weeks, when you have moments of doubt, when the goal doesn't seem like it's worth the effort. At those times, pull that sheet of paper, and revisit the dream. Let the dream inspire you to do what it takes to get there...

This vision will be a very effective way to help pull you through the inevitable difficulties of making the changes you want.



Keep track  
of  
what you're doing

Jill has made a resolution that she was going to eat better. For a few weeks, she lives in a warm glow - - the sense that she's a good person, the kind of person who is taking steps to do what's right for her. But, after a while, she can't escape noticing that nothing much has happened. So she goes from that warm glow to a sense of discouragement: it didn't work, it never works, she just can't change the way she eats!

This need not be the case. What Jill needs is to move from the general principle of "eating better" to actually tracking how she eats, day by day.

She now reviews what she's been eating the previous day. If it's not consistent with her resolutions, well, it was only one day, and she can immediately take action to change this the following day.

Besides, as she tracks her efforts daily, or meal by meal, she has to deal with specifics. She notices that "eating better" is so vague a goal that it is difficult to act upon it. So she revises her goals to be more specific.

What is a good goal? Part of what makes a resolution work is that it can be tracked, so you can see, day in and day out, whether or not you're on track.

For instance, it is easier to track specific goals of eating (or not eating) specific foods, and amounts, than a general goal of “eating better”.

Tracking what’s happening is an opportunity to clarify your goals as you go along, as you’re instructed by experience.

## **Why we don’t keep track**

Sometimes, we don't keep track because we feel things are going so well that we don't really need to keep track. Or, conversely, we're so afraid of facing what we think of as failure that we prefer not to look at it squarely.

These are very human, very understandable reactions. But they're not helpful. Tracking your progress keeps you focused on the reality of what you're doing.

You can feel happy if you're moving right along (why deprive yourself of this pleasure?). And you can take corrective action if you're not (as opposed to criticizing yourself for it).

You can learn from your setbacks.

When setbacks happen, don't give up. Deal with them. It's not a straight line from where you are to where you want to go. But you'll get there if you keep going.

In fact, with each setback that you overcome, you learn something, you become stronger, more able to reach your goals.

## **Take good care of yourself**

All too often, we take an almost punitive attitude toward change (with, maybe, the wish that the worst it feels, the better it is for us!). Instead, remember that what you're doing is taking care of yourself. Accountability does *not* mean taking a punitive attitude. In fact, you will benefit from taking a supportive attitude

Focus on something positive: Making changes usually involves some kind of a trade-off, the loss of something... In some cases, the sense of deprivation is even more pronounced (for instance, if the change consists in stopping to smoke, or to eat a certain food...).

Look for the positive side. Focus on what you are gaining.

Reward yourself along the way: Making a change is a long and bumpy road. Don't wait for some mythical "finish line" to reward yourself. Be caring toward yourself, now.

This process is not about being miserable now, for the sake of some future happiness. So I'm not talking about giving yourself "dog treats" to push yourself to do something that you find really

unpleasant. The whole idea is actually to make the process of change itself as enjoyable as possible.

Find all the support that you can get:

Make your environment more supportive: if you're aiming to stop eating chocolate, don't keep chocolate bars... If your goal is to stop smoking, spend less time with smokers...

Share your goals with family and friends, and enlist their support.

The more difficult the change is, the more it makes sense for you to look for support beyond your immediate circle. Support can come in the form of useful information, for instance books. Support groups can be a great help. And professional help can also make your process more fulfilling.

## Getting support

There are a lot of different ways in which people can support you:

- Giving you words of encouragement...
- Sharing with you their experiences in similar situations...
- Inquiring periodically about what you're doing (unless you interpret it as prying on you or putting pressure on you)...

It's usually not enough to just ask people to be supportive. Even with the best of intentions,

people don't necessarily know what will feel supportive to you.

Tell them what you need. Better yet, have a discussion with them, about your needs, and about what they're comfortable doing. This will help you, and them, feel better about it.

Opening a discussion with family and friends is consistent with thinking about change as a process. It means you're involving them in the process, inviting them to be active participants.

## **Giving support**

What can you do when friends or family members need to make changes in their lives?

If they are set on a course of making changes, you're going to be supportive of their efforts. Maybe check with them what kind of support they need: practical help, reminders, encouragement..?

What if they need to change, but don't know it? Then, of course, you'll talk to them. Present them with the facts. Gently, sensitively. Give them information, so they can see for themselves what they need to do.

But what do you do when somebody you love is refusing to make the changes they need to make? You've tried everything, and nothing is

happening. It is very distressing to watch helplessly. The temptation is strong to keep insisting: to shake them, to get them to see what they're doing!

There are circumstances when you simply can't just sit there, waiting for change to happen: Cases where somebody's behavior would be a danger to themselves or others, where you must intervene. But, in many circumstances of everyday life, there is no such danger.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to make someone change against their will. All you achieve is getting them to see you as a nag. They see you as badgering them, shaming them, browbeating them. It becomes a matter of pride, of self-assertion, to resist you. Even if you succeed in getting them to make some small changes, these are not lasting changes. They'll quickly revert back to old patterns.

This is a time for letting go. Meaning: for you to let go.

Let your loved one know what is at stake, let them know what they can do, let them know of your concern... but also let them be. Let them feel free to come to the right choice by themselves.



**Think of  
change as a  
creative process**

Remember the statistics in the intro, about how many people give up on their resolutions after a while? So, if you're still living by your resolutions, congratulations. You can take heart in the fact that you're doing better than many other people. Having held on until now makes you more likely to keep maintaining your resolutions in the future.

This is a good time for you to reflect on what has made it possible for you to stay the course, so that you can keep consciously doing what's been working for you. In other words: Bottle your recipe for success, so you can keep drinking from it.

Now, what if you haven't been able to keep to your new year's resolutions... does it mean that it's hopeless?

Not at all. This is a great opportunity to learn from what happened, and to tweak your approach. For one thing, as we've seen earlier, you may want to revisit your resolution to make it more specific, so that it is easier to follow. *"I will go to the gym 3 times a week"* is much more specific than *"I will get into shape."* Even more specific would be: *"I am registering for a class"* or *"I am hiring a personal trainer."*

But there is something else to be learned from your failure to keep up the resolution. It gives you an incentive to see things differently. It challenges you to learn to deal with all of yourself: the part of you that wants to do better, as well as the part that is resisting. Once you get more curious about this process, you'll find it has the potential for

liberating tremendous energy toward reaching your goals.

## **Expect some bumps on the road**

If making changes was so easy, you wouldn't have so much trouble with it. Don't try to ignore the difficulties: it won't make them disappear.

There's usually a cost involved in making a change. I don't mean a monetary cost, but something you're going to have to let go of. Just to be simplistic: if you want to practice the piano 4 hours a week, you'll "lose" 4 hours of unscheduled "free" time.

Another factor to contend with is fear of change. It happens to the best of us. In the long run, you'll be better off if you acknowledge your fears and deal with them, rather than deny that you're afraid.

Don't sell yourself a bill of goods: Setbacks, temptations and relapses are an integral part of the process of making changes. Expect them, as opposed to feeling threatened or defeated by them.

Let's take a simple example:

- You decide to start an exercise program this coming week.
- Monday, you're so busy at work you just can't find a minute. Tuesday... Wednesday... Thursday...

there's always a good reason you can't go to the gym. And you start to feel discouraged.

- Well, you don't let the discouragement get to you. You learn to avoid excuses. You're now exercising 3 times a week. It seems to be working, and you're elated.

- Then you have a cold, and you have to stop exercising for a few days. The cold comes and goes; but you find it harder to go back to exercising. A few weeks go by, and you feel discouraged...

Ups and downs: At each moment of discouragement, it feels like the forces of inertia have taken over: the change will not stick. Then, when you get back on the groove, it feels like you've licked it, you can coast... Then you get surprised again...

Thinking of change as a process means that you don't take this spiraling up-and-down personally, as a failing of yours. You expect the spiraling to be there, to be an integral part of the process.

## **Be open to what happens**

The temptation is strong to see this process in black-and-white terms: either you succeed in making the change you want, or you fail.

There is some truth to this statement. But there is also a danger in it. Labeling what happened as a failure can lead you to judge yourself, to berate

yourself. Be careful to remember the difference between *"This was a failure"* and *"I'm a failure."*

One way to stay away from unproductive self-criticism is to focus on learning from what happened.

The critical voice says: *"Your resolution did not succeed because you didn't really want it to succeed."*

Well, maybe there's nothing wrong with that.

## **“Failure” can be a good time to reassess goals**

Sometimes, a resolution is just a "should" -- something we believe we "should" do, but don't really want to do. And there are plenty of "shoulds" that are unnecessary burdens we put on ourselves.

Maybe learning calculus in your spare time would truly expand your mind; then again, if you don't really want to take it up as a hobby, you might still lead a happy life without it!

The "failure" of your attempt at change is a good time to ask yourself whether the change was necessary in the first place. If it wasn't, you can be thankful for the inner wisdom that led you to disregard the "should".

Now, sometimes, a "should" is something you really should do, something that would actually be good for you. For instance, you may be very ambivalent about stopping smoking... but, in the long run, it will be better for you if you to stop.

So the "failure" to keep your resolution is a good time to stop and reflect. You can learn from this "failure". Analyzing what happened will help you figure out better ways to deal with it.

You now have an opportunity to understand what it is that makes you break your good resolutions. This, in turn, will help you find out what to do about it.

## **Growth is a creative process**

I like to think of change as a creative process. That is, it happens over time, and it involves learning from confronting the obstacles we encounter in our process.

You shoot for a goal. If you achieve it very easily, you can step up your efforts, buoyed by your success. If it's too hard, you can adjust your goal (instead of giving up altogether).

More specifically, I see the process of change as a spiraling process.

A road is linear: once you pass a point, you're beyond it, you keep going straight ahead, you never pass that point again unless you turn back.

In the process of change, progress is not always linear. You go up for a while, then you start going down. Then you go back up again... just like a spiral.

I like the symbol of the spiral for another reason. You'll notice that a spiral expands: starting as a small point, it grows to cover an ever-widening area. This is what happens with the process of change. You grow from this process, as you accept and integrate your dark side.

## **Integrate the rebellious side**

We all experience, to some degree, a conflict between different parts of ourselves. There's a part that directs us to do what we *should* do... and a part that rebels against any directives.

As we become more conscious of the rebellious part of ourselves, we begin to understand it better. We start to accept it, instead of judging it, fearing it, denying it, or running away from it. As a result, we become better able to make contracts with ourselves that we can live with, and fulfill.

Chances are, like so many people, you've been trying to force yourself to stick to your resolutions through sheer strength and bullying. And, like so

many people, you break your resolutions within a few weeks or a few months.

Amazingly enough, the solution is not in bullying yourself more (or in burying your head in the sand, giving up making resolutions altogether).

The hope for new beginnings lies in understanding yourself better... in making peace with the rebellious part of yourself... in integrating all the parts of your personality, to be fully yourself.

## **Change is a complex process:**

As you deal with the concrete change you're pursuing, you encounter obstacles.

Dealing with these obstacles makes you come to grips with the rebellious part of yourself.

As you get to know yourself better, and accept all of who you are, you gain new strength from this knowledge and acceptance.

This personal growth, in turn, helps you clarify your goals and achieve those that are truly good for you.

## In conclusion

The traditional approach sees resolutions as an act of willpower. There is, of course, plenty of truth to this. But there is another aspect to making – and keeping – resolutions: This is a creative process where you get to know yourself, and to grow, as a result of taking risks.

When you make resolutions, you take a risk, because you let yourself see how much you want something that you're not sure to get.

When you track your resolutions, you keep taking a risk, because you let yourself see honestly how things are going, and whether or not you're able to do what you want to do.

As you understand more about yourself, and the complexities of what makes you tick, you're also taking a risk: You can be scared of what you see in yourself.

What you actually discover is that facing the truth actually sets you free. It gives you renewed energy to pursue the changes you really need, and much greater satisfaction with the process of making these changes.

## **About the author**

Serge Prengel helps people make the changes they want, in their life, career and relationships.  
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