



Baby steps

Realistic strides taken consistently can lead you towards your health and fitness goals

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BY GORDON CRAIGIE

IT'S THAT TIME of year again: the New Year's resolution season is upon us. More than half of us will set New Year's resolutions, despite some studies showing that over 90 per cent will result in failure. But don't lose faith just yet: some neuroscience researchers think the key is choosing reasonable goals—not over-ambitious ones.

"The main reason why New Year's resolutions fail is because people set unrealistic goals," says Dr Benjamin Gardner, senior lecturer in psychology at King's College London. "If you're not doing any exercise and your resolution is to go to the gym five times a week, then you're probably not going to succeed."

Dr Mark Griffiths, professor of behavioural addiction at Nottingham Trent University, agrees. "People may be victims of false hope syndrome, which is characterised by a person's unrealistic expectations about the likely speed, amount, ease and consequences of changing their behaviour," he explains.

Indeed, the recurring theme from the experts is to be realistic about where you currently are and your ambitions for your health. After that it's mainly about mak-

ing small but attainable changes to move you closer to your goals. So how can these principles be applied to the most popular types of New Year's resolutions, which are often diet and exercise related?

Wembley Costco member Yvonne Wake, a wellbeing and lifestyle consultant (wellbeingandlifestyle.co.uk), offers simple dietary advice. She says, "One of the best ways to start is not to change your eating habits all at once, but to commence by eating smaller portions. Remember that feeling a tad hungry is not all bad if you are trying to lose weight."

When it comes to exercise, you might have heard of the "10,000 steps per day" recommendation, which has been heavily promoted in recent years. At its most basic level, this boils down to simply walking more, on a regular basis. Other studies recommend standing as opposed to sitting when you have the choice, using stairs instead of lifts and making many other small changes that, in aggregate, can lead to big gains in health.

According to the British Nutrition Foundation (nutrition.org.uk), such activities could collectively burn almost 500 kilocalories (equal to 500 food calories) every day. But, life is rarely that simple and fat loss is not an exact science. Sarah-Anne Lucas, a Kent-based empowerment coach (birdonabike.co.uk), says, "You have to be kind to yourself and, whatever you choose to do, be consistent, as consistency will overrule everything."

"New behaviours are helped by start-

ACTION POINTS

THE FOLLOWING tips from experts cited in the main story can help you make small changes to fulfil your New Year's resolutions in 2017.

• "One of the easiest routes to failure is to have too many resolutions. Once you have got one thing under your control, you can then begin a second resolution."—*Dr Mark Griffiths*

• "Small changes deployed in the same place is a superb way to 'fix' a new behaviour. For example, if doing five press-ups every day is your goal, then before you put your coat on to go to work, use that action to trigger doing the press-ups."—*Jim McKenna*

• "Walking will be your best friend in your old age, so start now. Thirty minutes a day is all you need to start. Get off the bus a stop earlier, as this is easy to do if you don't have time to actually go for a walk."—*Yvonne Wake*

• "Small changes, done consistently, with intensity, will produce results. Work towards drinking 500 millilitres of water first thing in the morning. This will symbolise your acceptance of change and produce a noticeable increase in your energy levels within a week."

—*Sarah-Anne Lucas*

• "Celebrate every success and small step forward. We are more likely to continue an action if we feel good about ourselves. Accept and acknowledge any lapses, then be kind to yourself and continue. Giving up won't get you anywhere."—*Dr Caroline Hough*

ing with a small change in behaviour and training yourself to do that regularly and often," says Jim McKenna, a physical activity and health professor at Leeds Beckett University. He also says that a big early mistake when reaching a goal is shifting to a higher goal before new behaviour from a previous goal has become fixed in your routine.

"Taking lots of small steps moves us forward as effectively as taking two huge, much more difficult steps," says Dr Caroline Hough, a life coach and former general practitioner (aspiring2wellness.com). "If we miss a step, we are less likely to feel awful and give up."

Experts agree: setting realistic goals and taking small, consistent steps can help you reach your 2017 health and fitness New Year's resolutions. **C**

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