



Council for  
Public Interest  
in Anesthesia

## Patterns and Promises: Committing to Change

Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP  
CPIA Consultant

New Year's resolutions are often about improving ourselves and always begin with great promise, enthusiasm, and good intentions. A promise is a declaration asserting that one will or will not do something—a basis for expectation and creating a reason for action. Resolutions are decisions—promises to take action, to do something.<sup>1</sup> However, many of us routinely make them, break them, and eventually forget about them, only to make exactly the same resolutions the next year.

Studies show that making resolutions, usually last-minute promises on New Year's Day, may be like wishing upon a star. It is not a real commitment to the daily effort involved in making a change. Passively wishing for change is different from committing to action, and our attitudes and follow through remain unchallenged and unchanged.

While commitments send a loud message concerning our attitudes about the things, people, and values that are important to us, few of us question whether these commitments are useful or if they restrict us and hold us to routine actions and behavior patterns. How often has your own attitude or the opinions of others prevented you from doing or trying something different or new?

Each New Year comes with a lot of emotional baggage. Making New Year's resolutions can give us a sense of control over what we did not do or should have done last year. And yet, they are often founded on negative emotions: guilt at seasonal indulgence, stress levels at work, and fear of how others perceive us. We don't consider how we feel about ourselves, and researchers say if we don't deal with these basic attitudes most of our good intentions fail.<sup>2</sup>

According to the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, people who explicitly make resolutions are 10 times more likely to attain their goals than people who don't.<sup>3</sup> Those who achieved their goals felt prepared and were more confident in their ability to make and maintain changes.



To make any change, you need more than a decision. You need a plan, a guide to put your decision into action so that you can reach your goal. It takes practice and a positive attitude. Studies show that of all our personal attributes, commitment to a goal is the single most important determinant of motivation and persistence.

### Stay Positive

Research has shown that relapses in behavior-change initiatives frequently result from negative feelings. Resolutions that feel like punishment can cause negative feelings. All resolutions should be perceived as positive changes that will help you reach optimal well-being. Resolutions are an opportunity for you to look forward in a positive way rather than to punish yourself for past behaviors. You must also decide to change to please yourself, not others.

Motives are the primary energizers of human behavior. However, they are not the only determinants of the performance of individuals. Human performance is basically a function of habits and skills that are acquired through life experience and learning.

Research suggests that people can be reasonably confident about embarking on new behaviors, but also notes that breaking a bad habit may be more difficult.<sup>2</sup> Human personality has a set of patterns, responses, and tendencies that are laid down by our genes and our early childhood experiences. These patterns are stable and hard to change because repetition makes them second nature, requiring very little thought or energy.

Norcross suggests that individuals make successful resolutions when they are committed to achieve certain goals.<sup>3</sup> Further, goal commitment depends on expectations and desired outcomes. Most important, it depends on the belief that one is able to achieve the goals.

Simply promising to do something to improve is likely to end in failure unless you understand and accept the "why" that underpins the behavior. Why do we do certain things and what do they do for us? How do these behaviors make us feel? When you lack reasons to change, it's easier to fall back into bad habits.

### First Things First

Resolutions are not just for the New Year. How about a resolution to do the things that make all your goals more achievable?

Perhaps a place to start is a simple resolve to learn to like who you are. What unique gifts, talents, and skills do you bring to this world? What is your useful sense of self? Which parts of you are all right, which traits are problematic? Don't base your opinions on what others say, but what you are most particularly proud of. Which quali-

ties and characteristics do you like about yourself?

Maybe you are proud of the way you connect with people, your capacity to feel joy and happiness, your ability to be patient and not lose your temper, or the way you have a quick smile, comforting word, or a hug always at the ready for those who seem in need. Often we are quick to see the good in others but not in ourselves.

Everyone at some point has negative feelings about themselves. Even though you may have made mistakes in the past, it's time to move on to taking care of yourself and treating yourself right.

### Maintain Your Motivation

Change what you can, and look at what you can't change from a different angle. Ask yourself if this change, situation, or goal is necessary. Becoming aware of your primary motivation to change is the best source for setting off on a new direction. Motivation can reinforce and strengthen the resolve to change when change becomes difficult.

Although making a commitment sounds simple, it involves many factors, including conscious choice-making, intention, determination, and self-discipline. You should be prepared for setbacks. We are often tempted to fall back to easy or familiar choices. You can successfully weather temporary setbacks. Don't think of setbacks as failures and don't dwell on them; use them to refocus. Avoid high-risk situations; use reminders, reinforcement, and healthy substitutes to replace the old negative behavior. Celebrate your successes.

We spend too much time and waste too much energy in futile attempts to change what we cannot change. It is a major cause of frustration, disappointment, and other forms of anger.

You cannot change many of the economic and environmental factors in your life. You cannot change another person, but you can change how you treat them, how you react to them, your opinions and judgments of them, and your relationship with them. You cannot change the past, but you can reappraise, apologize, forgive, let go,

and take responsibility for yourself and move forward.

Patterns and promises define us as unique individuals. By changing our attitudes about ourselves, we can try things we thought we were incapable of doing, or have experiences that can offer incredible possibilities.

You increase your chances of keeping your resolutions by committing to your plan even if it becomes difficult, even if you slip, and even if you lose confidence. Resolutions should not be a passive wish, but an active plan, highly motivated with expectations of success. Structure your goals positively into sub-goals and small steps that promote small, comfortable changes and continual progress. Avoid intimidation and procrastination. Keep your goals simple, measurable, and reasonable.

### Make Yourself a Promise

The best thing about resolutions is that they offer you the opportunity to think about you. Resolutions make you examine your life and reflect on what is important to you, giving you a reason to take time to look at where you are, where you want to be, and how you are going to get there. As the year unfolds, consider making a promise to yourself—one that brings you joy and happiness—something to do, something to love, and something to hope for. ■

### References

1. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition. 2007. Houghton Mifflin Company.
2. Locke E, Latham G. Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist*. 2002;57(9):705-717.
3. Norcross J, Mrykalo M, Blagys M. Auld Lang Syne: Success predictors, change processes, and self-reported outcomes of New Year's resolvers and non-resolvers. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 2002;58(4):397-405.

*Each man is led by his own liking.*

*Virgil*