



**This Year I will...
How to Finally Change a Habit, Keep a
Resolution, or
Make a Dream Come True**

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Author's Bio: M. J. Ryan is one of the creators of the Random Acts of Kindness series, which has sold more than one million copies, and the author of *The Power of Patience*, *The Happiness Makeover*, and many other titles.

Author's big thought: Learn the secret to making changes stick. People find it hard to change and the secret is that everyone has their own formula for making changes that stick. Most people don't know what theirs is. They think there is one way to lose five pounds, and another way to stay on top of their email, but they don't realize that for all changes, there is one system that works best for each individual. This book helps you lock on to your unique formula by planning, implementing, and seeing a life change through, so you can use it again and again to tackle anything you'd like to do.

Notes:

The Adventure of Living Your Dreams: We all have something we want to change about ourselves or learn to do. People can change. But it's not easy, as anyone who has tried to change a habit or do something new knows. Our brains create strong tendencies to do the same thing over and over. To bring new behavior into being takes work. Change requires that we stretch not only mentally, but emotionally and spiritually. It takes energy, determination, and aspiration, the ability to intentionally bring into being something we want. It requires starting over when we blow it or get discouraged.

We may be forced to question our assumptions about what we're capable of, or confront our deepest fears. What works for one person doesn't necessarily apply to another. Once you learn your particular success formula, once you've cultivated new inner and outer emotional, mental, and spiritual resources, you can apply those to anything you want to cultivate in yourself.

Depending on what survey you're paying attention to, approximately 45 percent of us make New Year's resolutions, but only 8 percent succeed. 90 percent of heart patients don't stick to the lifestyle changes they need to make in order to live longer and healthier lives. Even faced with the dramatic choice to change or die, they can't do it. They must don't know how to make the choice for life.

Rather than focusing on one resolution, I will take you through the process of making whatever it is you want happen. There are three things needed to make any change, mental, emotional, or physical: desire, intent and persistence. Each and every one of the ideas in this book strengthens one of those three elements. You will learn how to identify what you really desire; make specific, measurable, achievable goals to focus your intention; avoid common pitfalls that sap your desire and intent; and persist in the face of inevitable setbacks. The process is not about getting rid of bad habits, but building new, more positive ones.

The brain's tendency to habituate means we go through much of life like sleepwalkers. That's why when we want to create new habits or change old ones, our most important ally is being awake to our experience. We've got to become aware of what we're doing or not doing. Your life, like my life, is finite. It will end, and none of us can say when. Do you want to die in the state you're in? With dreams unrealized? Negative habits firmly holding you back? Each of us hold the potential for our unique form of greatness. Whenever we bring something positive in ourselves into being, we come closer to living that greatness in all its dimensions. Christopher Reeve reminds us: "So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable, and then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable."

Preparing to Change: Before you just launch out there with great enthusiasm, take some time to prepare. This is a crucial first step that many people skip. But you will greatly increase your chances of success if you stop long enough to get clear on your motivation, understand why you've been doing what you're doing now, and learn a bit about what fosters and supports real transformation.

You've got to really want this: It takes work, often a lot of work and sacrifice, and you have to really want to bring something into being. Goals rooted in what really matters are

far easier to keep than facile resolutions. What do you care enough about to apply the necessary elbow grease?

What need is being served by what you are doing now? We do what we do because it serves some need. We developed a particular habit (whether it's perfectionism or overworking) as the best way we know at the time to meet some need in ourselves. But because we're not conscious about what we're doing, the strategy we choose to solve the problem eventually becomes a bigger problem than the original one. So many change efforts fail because we bypass the crucial step of identifying the need being served. We can't make lasting change unless we recognize it and meet it some other way.

Get your three brains on your side: Neurologist Paul MacLean says inside our head are three brains, not one. Each corresponds to a different stage of evolution, and while they are connected to one another, each acts independently and is often at odds with the others. The oldest is the "reptilian" brain, which consists of the cerebellum and brain stem. This is the instinctive part of ourselves, the part in charge of our breathing, heartbeat, and all other body functions outside our conscious control. It simply repeats behaviors over and over, never adapting, never learning. Its goal is to reserve our life at all costs.

The second brain is the limbic system, which we share with other mammals. This is our emotional brain, concerned with feelings, instincts, eating, fighting, and sexual behavior. This is where we decide whether something is a good idea or not. The emotional brain isn't very smart. It understands "pleasant" or "painful" and "safety" or "danger", the patterns for which we were created when we were very young. It propels us toward pleasure and away from pain. Whenever it senses danger, it sends the body into "fight or flight". Our muscles tighten, our blood vessels constrict, and our bodies are flooded with stress hormones as we prepare to fight, freeze, or run like hell. In women it releases another hormone, oxytocin, which gives us an alternative option: to tend our children and/or befriend other women.

The third brain is the neocortex, the thinking brain that distinguishes humans from animals. This is the part of our brain capable of reasoning. It's where abstraction, as well as spatial, artistic, verbal, and musical ability resides. The thinking brain is where we decide that we want to do something different. But depending on what it is, how it's presented, and what we've done in the past, our emotional brain may not cooperate. That's why we so often "sabotage" ourselves—our emotional brain overrides what our thinking brain has decided in favor of immediate pleasure or perceived safety.

If you are serious about succeeding with your resolutions, this information is crucial. You've got to get your emotions on your side. If the change seems like it's too scary, too hard, or no fun, your emotional brain is going to work against it. The more you can find

what's fun and enjoyable about what you want, the more your emotional brain will cooperate.

Ambivalence is normal: "The most enduring state we find ourselves in at the beginning of the change process is ambivalence. We want to change and we don't. We want to get fit and we want to slob out. This is completely normal, in fact almost inevitable. We don't know what the new behavior will mean." (Anthony M. Grant, coach/psychologist and author of It's Your Life, What Are You Going to Do With It.) We are ambivalent as we set out because we've never been exactly where we're heading so we can't know what it's going to be like when we get there. In addition, every single choice we make precludes another. We always give something up to get something else. But don't overvalue the nagging whispers to stay in the cozy corner of the-way-it-is-now. Recognize that it's okay to feel ambivalent. It tends to be strongest before you begin and decreases as you begin to see the benefits of what you've put into action.

What's the price of not changing? Motivation comes first, then discipline. You must realize that the consequences of not changing are worse than whatever you have to go through to get to the new place. It's a powerful initiator because it engages the emotional brain's desire to move from pain to pleasure. You can also take a personal inventory of what negative effects your current behavior has created. Have the courage to tell yourself the truth about the current and future consequences of your behavior.

Run toward, now away from: If you have a powerful positive motivation to change, you have a very good chance of succeeding. In order to actually do something new, you have to get clear on why you are willing to expend all that energy. The benefits of where you're headed need to be clear. A strongly emotional why makes meaning out of the drudgery you may have to go through and gives you a reason to persist. While you may have been pushed into action by hitting bottom, ultimately you need something positive that you want to go toward. Trying consciously to remove a negative mental image or habit actually reinforces it. But if you create a positive image of what you want to go toward, that's what the brain begins scanning for instead. Finding a positive motivation also engages your emotional brain to work for the change, not against it.

The gap between where you are and where you want to be is a good thing: Put out what you want, tell yourself the truth about where you are, and get into action. Life will more than likely come along to help close the gap. Create a vision of who you want to be, and then live into that picture as if it were already true. Your wanting is what sets the energy of creation into motion. So you have to really allow yourself to want to believe what you desire is possible, even if you don't know how.

No time is the perfect time to begin: There never will be a perfect time. One of the tricks about change is that we have to figure out how to do it in the midst of everything

else. You have to make the change as much of a priority to yourself as the other things at the top of your to-do list.

Imagine your future positive self: When we imagine all the things that could go wrong, we create a lot of internal interference, static in our minds, that increases the likelihood of failure. Our emotional brains want to move away from the possibility of pain, so intentionally or otherwise, we goof up or give up. When, on the other hand, we focus on all the positive outcomes, our emotional brain is attracted by the possibility of greater pleasure and so it aids in our going toward what we want. Each of us has a frame, a story about ourselves and life that influences everything we think and do. Unless we change the frame, it will be hard to get different results in our lives. One way to create a new frame is to create a new, positive story about a future self. Then making the necessary changes becomes possible because you've got a new story to live into.

Understanding is the booby prize: Understanding why we are the way we are is not only not helpful, but can even prevent us from moving forward. The tendency to get stuck in the ways is so strong there's even a name for it: paralysis by analysis. It can happen to any of us when we are so focused on the whys of our current behavior that we can't get into motion to produce a different result. In preparing for the change you're about to make, allow your right brain to help you. All it takes is switching from "why" thinking to "what could be possible" thinking. Ask "what" questions rather than "why" questions: "What can I do to have more balance in my life today?" This leads to creative possibilities and forward momentum. To reap the benefits of your innovative thinking and get into motion, you need to understand two things. First, the right side of the brain loves questions, not statements. The more you can stay in questions, the more insight you will receive. Second, you need to know that the right brain is relational and metaphoric. That means the answer you get may not come in a straight forward manner. It may emerge in the form of a song you can't get out of your head, or a gut feeling, or a compelling visual image. Trust that this is an answer.

Believe you can do it: No matter what habit or dream you are looking to create, you can't do it without first somehow, somewhere inside you believing that you can. The effect of self-confidence on achieving goals has been highly researched and has been found to be a significant factor in success. Self-confidence keeps the emotional brain out of fight-or-flight fear. And it's a reminder to our thinking brains that we can meet our goals. Perhaps you dismiss or ignore your competencies. Inventory them in writing. Select four to six accomplishments and write down the strengths and skills you used repeatedly to create success. Pull out your competency inventory when you are having a crisis of confidence to remind yourself of the qualities that allowed you to succeed in the past which you can use now.

What if you've been down this road before: If your emotional brain thinks the task is too much like what you've unsuccessfully tried before, it will sabotage your efforts. So the way to start discovering the answers is to recognize that you actually are not right back where you started. You now have a wealth of information and experience from the previous attempts, no matter how many those may be, to draw on this time. You know where you got stuck, what threw you off. The key mental models of successful individuals are: they love learning; they seek challenges and value effort; and they persist in the face of reasonable obstacles. They have a growth as opposed to a fixed orientation to life. Those with a growth orientation do not see failure as an indictment of their capacities. For those folks, a problem is just an opportunity to learn new things. When it comes to making lasting change of any sort, it's crucial to adopt a growth orientation.

You can't get fit by watching others exercise: We only bring something new into being in ourselves through action. Reading and talking to others can give us insight and support, and it can offer valuable reflection on what's working and what's not only if we are doing the heavy lifting in the first place. The brain learns through experiences. Research shows that for whatever reasons more women than men tend to get stuck in thinking rather than getting into action. It's time to stop thinking about doing and start doing.

Getting into Action: It doesn't matter when you start, only that you do. In this section, you'll learn the tricks that will enable you to get the most positive start possible: the importance of getting specific and concrete, tracking progress, enlisting support, finding the time, and cultivating the attitudes of a learner that will keep you from getting discouraged at your awkwardness.

Focus, people: Pick one thing, not seven. The emotional brain likes simple. Doing too much also doesn't provide the structure the thinking brain needs to focus on. New neural pathways are created through repetition. Making a new habit requires focus so that you can keep it front and center all the time until you no longer have to consciously think about it. One great way to create such a focus is to name the year. (The Year of the Body, for example). It could be a month. Or a week. You don't need to know yet what steps you're going to take to get there. Just create a focus.

Elevator broken, use the stairs: The secret to change: one tiny step at a time. It often doesn't matter which small step. Just take one, as long as it's little. Then take another. Repeat until you've gotten where you want to be. This technique has a name—kaisen, a Japanese strategy for change that relies on tiny, continuous improvements. The small steps in kaisen don't set off fight or flight, but rather keep us in the thinking brain, where we have access to our creativity and playfulness. Breaking it down into small steps gives you the chance to experience success, which provides momentum to keep on going.

Create a huge challenge for yourself: A big change approach works better in certain situations (e.g.: life style change to prevent heart disease) Ones in which it really is a matter of life or death. Half measures are just not going to cut it in those circumstances. Pick one approach and try it in the spirit of experimentation and then switch if it isn't working.

Follow your formula for success: How have you changed a habit or learned something new in the past? That is a crucial question to consider as you set out this time. Many of us are so focused on advice outside of ourselves that we don't even know what our particular success formula is. Our past successes are treasure troves for creating success this time around. Knowing your formula can help you figure out the steps to take and the pitfalls to avoid. To apply your success formula requires letting down the little walls in your mind between one thing and another, and believing that you are your own best expert. Start by thinking about anything in the past that you were motivated to learn and you did. Then think about how you did it. Take another one, then another. Does a pattern emerge?

Strongly set your intention: One of our greatest allies of transformation is intention. Intention is not wanting, wishing, or hoping; it's the determination to do. With intention, we indicate to ourselves that we are going to do something no matter what. It's a matter of focusing our intention so that it can grow even stronger and taking the actions that make our intention turn into reality. One powerful way to signal intention as we set out is to create some kind of ritual to mark our commitment. The ceremony doesn't have to be elaborate. It can be as simple as writing down what you are letting go of and then burning up the paper.

Create a smart goal: SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound. Without these five elements, success can be very elusive. Specific refers to choosing something that you can pin down. When we create a vague goal, we set ourselves up for failure. Measurable means capable of being measured. Measurement is crucial because it makes our progress visible to us. It is possible to create a measurement for anything. In thinking about measurement, it helps to understand that it can be external or internal. The numbers for the first category are obvious. When you're measuring something internal, you need to put it on a scale, for instance -5 to +5, with -5 being the worst you ever felt and +5 being the best. Achievable means being realistic about what's possible. Relevant means something that matters to you. You've got to know why it's important to you. Time-bound refers to creating a time in the future when you will be "done". Having an endpoint puts a structure around what you're doing. When you create a SMART goal, you know when you've arrived, which is crucial to creating a sense of satisfaction and completion.

Put yourself under contract: Now it's time to put it all together by making a contract with yourself that also includes the strategies you will employ to meet your goal. Why put

it in writing? Because there's been a lot of research that making a written contract for change really helps people to stick to it. Start with something really small and a time frame that's short if that will be motivating. When the contract is up, make another, incorporating what you've learned from this one. When you create your contract, have a witness sign as well. It helps signal to yourself the seriousness with which you undertake this change and increases the likelihood you'll follow through. Make sure you refer back to your formula for success and include the strategies you will employ to meet your goal.

Become a tracker: Because change happens in small increments, unless you track yourself, you can't see the improvements you may actually be making. This is particularly true in situations when the measurements are internal—feeling more confident or less worried, for instance. By creating your SMART goal, you've already figured out what you're going to measure. Now you need to decide how often you should measure and a way to track your measurements. Don't move forward until you figure out a tracking system. Otherwise, you may be discouraged because you don't experience enough progress or underestimate how far you've come. Trackers do better not only because they can measure success, but because they can mine the data they collect to point them in more successful directions.

What kind of support do you need: As we go about living the change we want to see in ourselves, we need a way to stay close to home base and learn from other journeyers who have gone before us. If we're willing to accept support, we can avoid a great number of potholes and traffic jams that we would otherwise encounter. When you're learning something new, it's best to have support....even if it's only support in remembering your intention. The question to ask when you are bringing something new into being is...What kind of help do I need? Support can motivate us, teach us, and remind us of what we're trying to accomplish. One of the best things outside support can do for us is to help us hold ourselves accountable and create deadlines. One way to begin to answer the question is to ask yourself: when I've accomplished something in the past, who or what helped me do it? Any accomplishment will do. Now think of another. What helped you do that? Think about a third. Is a pattern emerging of the kind of support do you need?

It's going to feel awkward at first: When you first begin to do something new or different, you are not very good at it. But to learn anything, we have to leave the comfort of the known for the awkwardness of the untried. You absolutely can't change anything if you stay in the familiar. Someone once told me that people who change can tolerate anxiety better than those who stay stuck. There are three zones of existence: comfort, stretch, and stress. Stretch is where change occurs. We should welcome awkwardness when we're creating a new habit; it's the sign our brain is creating a pathway that will eventually make us proficient. Moving into the stretch zone takes courage. That's one of the reasons why changing habits or following your dream is character building. Stephen Covey reminds us, "The greatest risk is of riskless living."

Yes, you can find the time: Every day, every single one of us who is not imprisoned or enslaved chooses where and how to focus our time. It's easy to tell ourselves it's not our choice, especially when it involves some new habit or dream that takes energy to bring into being. This is not to say finding the time is easy. It requires sacrifice. Time is one of our most precious resources. Even if you can carve out only fifteen minutes a day to devote to your new habit, that's ninety one hours over the course of a year.

When you don't know what to do, channel someone who does: Thinking through someone else's eyes gives us access to inner resources we otherwise couldn't discover. By pretending to be someone else, you circumvent your habit. Want to be happier? Think of the happiest person you know. Then do what he would do. This technique works because somewhere deep inside of you, you already have the answer you are seeking. You've just got to do the hard work of remembering and applying it today. And when it comes to that, it sometimes helps to channel someone else.

Oops, I forgot: Scientists tell us that the amount of time between impulse and action is half a second. Half a second! We really don't give it any thought. An impulse arises and in a blink we're doing what we've always done because whatever pathway we've already created operates at warp speed. So to learn something new, we've absolutely got to increase our awareness so we have a choice between impulse and action. Awareness equals the potential for freedom from our habituated mind. If you can increase the gap between impulse and action, you will benefit. To help with this, put awareness jogs into place. Post stickies on the fridge for example. Temptation-proof your environment. If you are giving up something addictive, you may need to avoid the places and people associated with indulging. If human reminders cause too much tension, rely on more impersonal technologies—notes, scheduling awareness strategies in your day planner, screen savers, e-mails you set up to be sent to you automatically. You may find that you have to keep inventing new awareness jogs as your brain gets used to the old ones and they become part of the background. If you want to increase the possibility of success, be sure to put such reminders in place.

Make backup plans, not excuses: Excuses tend to fall into two categories: "It's all my fault" (I'm lazy, disorganized, stupid, undisciplined) or "The circumstances are beyond my control" (business meetings, kid got sick, dog peed on the project). The first group is expert at negative self-analysis. The second group is great at blaming everything and everyone else. Life is good at throwing us curveballs that get in our way, particularly when it comes to changing a habit or doing something different. Because more energy is required to change than to stay the same, it's easier to get thrown off a new course. Create contingency plans rather than getting bogged down after the fact in excuses, which only makes you feel bad and gets in the way of success. Plan for things to go wrong. If you make contingency plans you'll find you don't need excuses.

Use your imagination to make it easier: Imagining a peak performance is one of the techniques high-performance athletes use regularly. If the process is vivid enough the brain does not differentiate between imagining doing something and actually doing it. Either way our neurons are firing that particular sequence, making it easier to do it again. Use this “trick” to make changing a habit or learning something new easier. We need to imagine success in the three ways in which we experience the world—seeing, hearing, and feeling—in order for the brain to make new pathways. In order for this to be effective, you need to vividly imagine yourself in the situation.

Don't despair: understand the three stages of learning: Learning happens in three phases. The first is called *post hoc*, meaning after the fact you recognize that you wanted to do it differently. Before this you're not aware enough to know what's going on at all. The second is *ad hoc*, meaning that while it's happening you're aware you want to do it differently. This is *pre hoc*, which means you've learned it so well that you've got it in place before anything happens. This is when you're doing exactly what it is you want to on a regular basis, with more successes than mistakes. You've got to pass through stages one and two to get to three. Recognizing you've blown it is progress! Learn from the experience without judging yourself negatively so you don't get discouraged and give up in defeat. Say, “Great. I'm learning. Otherwise I wouldn't even notice I've screwed up.” We can move through the stages of learning something new. But only if we're willing to treat ourselves encouragingly in the early parts so that we keep our spirits up, remind our brains that we are making progress, and mine our experiences for tomorrow's efforts.

Show up with grit: Changing long-standing habits and ways of being can be extremely hard. Because of the way our brains are structured—to run the programs they already run—even changing mental habits can be quite a feat. The fact that it's hard is why, if you really want to change something or bring something into being, you've got to make the commitment to show up to accept the change as the challenge it is. Showing up is a mental, emotional, and spiritual act that expresses commitment. You acknowledge that this is serious business and that you are up to the challenge. When we show up, we exhibit grit. Grit is the determination to succeed, which may be as important as ability. Grit is a quality you create when you make the choice to show up for what you really want for yourself, no matter how difficult.

Do a postgame review: Reflection after an event accelerates learning. Do a postgame review walking or driving away from every meeting. It keeps what we're trying to learn front and center. Reflection also accelerates learning because it gives us a chance to evaluate how we're doing and course correct. What worked? How could I do it even better next time? Those are the two best reflection questions. They lead your mind to reinforce success. Consider improvement, without falling into shame or guilt.

AA is on to something—one day at a time: AA and other twelve-step programs are full of wisdom about change. "One day at a time". You just have to get through today. Then when tomorrow comes, you do it again. That's a very intelligent strategy because as soon as you think "never" or "forever", your mind immediately throws up all kinds of resistance. Forever is just too darn long. Never is just too hard. But today? Anyone can do today. When we try to make changes that are too aggressive, our system tries to maintain the status quo by swinging in the opposite direction. Because of these conflicting drives to change and to stay the same, "one day at a time" is gentle enough not to set off the "man the battle stations, something big is trying to force us into being different" part of ourselves. It moves us into action.

Practice self-appreciation every day: Most of us treat ourselves harshly when we stumble. So the very least we can do is to recognize and value when we do it right. Practicing self-appreciation is quite a challenge. It's much easier to give thanks to someone else than it is to shine the flashlight of appreciation on ourselves. Self-appreciation is powerful. It reinforces the behavior we want to bring into being. It tells the brain: do more of this. Recognizing and acknowledging our success also gives us the encouragement to try again tomorrow. It actually makes it easier to succeed the next day. Gratitude is magnetic. The more you appreciate something, the more it tends to increase in your life. According to quantum physics, somehow we do increase potentialities with our magnetic thoughts.

Keeping Going: The most crucial part of developing a new habit or making a dream come true is sustaining energy and focus over time.

How you gonna keep up the momentum: Each of us sustains momentum differently. One of the keys to creating a lasting change in ourselves is to understand what motivates each of us and how to keep it alive for as long as needed. Knowing what's true for you is crucial. Otherwise, you may end up following someone else's idea of what should work and not finding much success. If you're not sure what yours are, experiment. Your job is to discover your most effective momentum creator.

What's standing in your way?: Have you found yourself not being able to bring what you want into being in any consistent way? Perhaps what's going on is this: while you are truly committed to changing, you're more committed to something else that you are not consciously aware of that prevents you from creating forward momentum. You'll know when you've gotten to your core assumption in three ways: First, it's always dire: no one will love you, you'll be abandoned, you'll kill someone, everyone will shun you. Second, in your logical mind, you know it's not true—you aren't going to die if you work out for thirty minutes. But you believe it anyway. You may even feel tears arise. Third, it may have a familiar ring to it. You may think: I've dealt with this in therapy and here it is again, or, I've been to this place before.

Getting to your core assumption:

1. State your commitment: I am committed to spending more time with my family.
2. What are you doing or not doing that's keeping you from realizing your commitment? (Saying yes to any and all work requests so I am rarely home.)
3. What are you afraid would happen if you changed this behavior? (I am afraid that if I don't work eighty hours a week, I will lose my job.)
4. Therefore, what do you want more than being with your family? This is always self-protective—you are protecting yourself from something by your actions or inactions in number 3. (I'd rather have job security than spend time with my family.)
5. State answer number 4 as a counter-commitment: I am more committed to job security than to spending time with my family.
6. Under the counter-commitment is a core assumption that you've believed your whole life. To get at it, ask yourself what would be so bad if you gave up your counter-commitment and met your commitment? (If I don't spend eighty hours at work, I will end up destitute.)

Remember what will truly make you happy: We all do what we do to feel good. But when our emotional brains are in charge, we damn the consequences and end up suffering. Whether that's through overweight, a hangover, or regret at how we've treated someone. Remembering what brings you real happiness is a technique to keep the thinking brain in charge. That's where what we truly want beyond the temptation of this moment exists.

Don't let "them" bring you down: We often threaten those around us when we grow. We could be triggering their insecurity or envy, or challenging their internal excuse that change isn't possible. Therapists have known for decades that families are systems, and when one part of the system changes, it shakes up the rest. The system then marshals its resources to try to stay the same. Be aware that you may not have support from family and friends. Find people who will listen to you and not shame or sabotage. You can ask for family member's and friends' blessings, but you can't make your choices contingent on their behavior. The more you accept responsibility for your choices, the easier it gets. You don't need to explain, defend, or justify. Try, "Thanks for your opinion. I'm going to stick to it." When offered temptations, you only need two words, "No thanks." Prepare now for what you will do in challenging circumstances with others. That way you won't be put on the spot or get swept away from your good intentions in the tension of the moment.

Use your ABCDEs on those nasty voices in your head: Every one of us has a self-litigating choir that's great at piping up at just the wrong time. Negative self-talk is dangerous to our progress because there is a strong relationship between our thought, feelings, and behavior. Negative thinking creates negative feelings, which cause a cascade of stress hormones to be released in our bodies, making it harder for us to produce the positive action we desire. To discover and deal with negative self-talk, one of the most powerful tools is the ABCDE model.

1. A: activating event. What made you feel guilty or self-doubting?
2. B: beliefs. What thoughts do you have about the event?
3. C: consequences. How do you feel because of your beliefs?
4. D: dispute. Challenge the negative beliefs you have identified. Ask yourself if they are valid, reasonable or rational.
5. E: Effect. How do you feel now that you have challenged your negative thoughts?

The imperfect is our paradise: We expect perfection. This harsh standard is the biggest block to getting what we want in our lives. Wallace Stevens says, "The imperfect is our paradise." It's the place where our heart's desire become reality, for it is in embracing ourselves just where we are, in all our messy humanity, that we open the doorway to the possibility of transformation. Change takes as long as it takes and you may never do it "perfectly". Accepting the paradise of the imperfect doesn't mean you give up or ignore what just happened. It allows you to stop being mired in shame and guilt, and try again. Frame it as practice. The more we practice, the better we get. If we stop shaming and scolding ourselves and start paying attention to what the goof-up can teach us, our chances for success improve.

You can't change what you've done, only what you're going to do: When you stray off the path, renew trust in yourself. Apologizing to yourself is a process of learning from your mistake and restoring trust. Acknowledge that you take your resolution seriously. Treat yourself and your goals with the utmost respect. There are four parts to the self-apology.

1. Acknowledge the commitment that wasn't kept.
2. Describe the consequences of breaking your commitment.
3. Remember your context not as an excuse but as a way of learning.
4. Explore what will restore trust.

SIFT when you want to give up: Scientists tell us that on average cravings attack four to seven times a day and last only seconds. We need strategies to outlast cravings for mere seconds. Ride the wave of urge rather than fight it. Urge surf! Buddhism teaches us that thoughts and feeling rise and then pass away. You don't have to act upon them, and at some point they will disappear as easily as they appeared. SIFT is a three-minute process that stands for Sensation, Image, Feelings, Thought. To SIFT, differentiate between thoughts, images, feelings, and sensations. "I want a Coke" is a thought. Desperation is a feeling. The picture of you being deprived is an image. What most of us are least aware of are our bodily sensations. Explore the sensations and learn to recognize what you are experiencing, without trying to change it. SIFT is an awareness practice that strengthens our "witness self" or what Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls our blue-sky mind. What we can trust is that our feelings and thoughts will change like clouds floating across a blue-sky, and we don't have to act on them. If we simply sit down and pay

attention for a few minutes, sensations quiet down. It's not a one time process. You may find the need to SIFT several times a day.

Have a little fun with it, will you?: Are you having fun yet? Think of fun in two ways. First, there's the possibility of actually enjoying the new habit itself. If you can find ways to make your new habit fun, the more likely you'll stick to it. There's another kind of fun you can have, no matter what you've chosen. Lighten up around the goal itself. Stop taking yourself so seriously. Our emotional brains want fun!

Ask for help from invisible hands: There are all kinds of Buddhas and devas in other realms who will help us if we call on them. Sombofu Sone says, "The ancestors are there, always ready to help us if we ask." Every culture has a belief in some higher power or "invisible hands". There's a spiritual force that wants the best for us and will come to help if we but request it. Ask for help from invisible hands. You don't have to understand or believe. How or why it works, like everything in the spiritual realm, is a mystery to us on the human plane. And...don't forget to accept the help that may turn up!

You don't have to scarf down the whole box just because you ate one cookie: We get so mad at ourselves for violating a rule that we punish ourselves by abandoning all control. Psychologists call this the abstinence violation effect. It's a result of a harsh all-or-nothing attitude toward our behavior. It's paradoxical--the more we hold ourselves to a rigid standard, the more we then abuse ourselves with the very thing we've outlawed when we blow it. One way around abstinence violation effect is know in advance that there will be times you will blow it. Know why? Relapse is an inevitable part of the change process. It simply goes with the territory. The more you understand and really embrace the truth of that, the fewer negative consequences there will be when you blow it. The best thing to do is to prepare for lapses. Recognize now that you may have slip-ups and commit to not giving up. What is it that you want to remember when you have a lapse? Write it down and pull it out when you need it. Avoiding the abstinence effect requires you to grow your capacity for self-forgiveness. Forgiving ourselves for relapses keeps us from self-punishment that actually causes us to compound the error. Self-forgiveness will keep you from hurting yourself, and will increase your compassion for others. When we practice forgiveness of our own foibles and failings, we cultivate the capacity to do the same for those around us who need our loving care.

Look at the character strengths you're cultivating: By paying attention to the positive qualities of heart and mind that you are developing as a result of sticking to your goal, you give yourself greater incentive to hang in there. What are the character strengths you've been cultivating as you work this change? Developing these qualities is the real reward of change. They are more important than your resolution itself because they are transferable. Changing anything in ourselves is a powerful act. Take a few moments to write down what qualities you've grown in yourself with this change. It's a way of

acknowledging your efforts and inspiring you to keep on going. Now, how are you going to celebrate your newfound qualities? They are your true treasures, and can never be taken away.

Once you create the new habit, it's yours for life: Once you've done something enough times to make a new neural pathway, it's there for life. What that means is that you've gone from having to make a conscious effort to it being fairly automatic. Gary Zukav says, "Choice equals creating...You are the artist and you are also the art being created." How do you know when you've gotten there? You succeed more often than not and you don't have to work so hard to remember. It's important to recognize when you've gotten to this point so that you can stop and appreciate yourself. Acknowledge your progress and celebrate your success. If you don't take the time to celebrate your success, your brain won't register you've done it. This journey is nothing less than an exploration of your heart and soul. Take a moment now to appreciate yourself, to recognize how far you've come and what you've learned along the way. Behavior we celebrate grows ever stronger.

The old pathway's still there too—beware of stressors: Something happens—your routine changes dramatically. Suddenly you're back to old behavior. What's happened? Psychologists call it "instinctual drift", the tendency to go back to the old habit. Why? The pathway to your old behavior is still there in your brain. Don't lose heart—you've created a new pathway through your hard work and that's there too. Think of the two options as parallel roads. The ability to live up to our intentions is self-control. Self-regulation is like a muscle that gets depleted after use. Studies have shown it's much harder to stick to your intention when you've just had to use self-control in some other area. AA and other support groups teach member to HALT: be careful when Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired. Information is power. By identifying what causes you stress, you can come up with alternatives before you go off the rails. By understanding why we blow it under stress, we can treat ourselves kindly and not make matter worse.

When blown off course, apply the four A's: When circumstances throw us off course, it's time for the four A's:

1. Assess the current situation.
2. Adjust what needs to be done.
3. Admire yourself for having the strength to start again
4. Act quickly to implement your new course of action.

Admiring ourselves helps us stay positive and avoid a spiral into negative self-esteem. Acting quickly is also crucial. Otherwise, we'll lose the energy of our commitment and slide back into our bad old behaviors. Perhaps this setback is something that never occurred to you. That's where assessment and adjustment come in. What's nonnegotiable is that you're doing your thing. How and when you're going to do it—that's what's open to all kinds of rearrangements. Keeping this awareness in the face of

setbacks is key. Become an expert at starting over—you'll not only make your dream come true but increase your self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence.

Twelve tips for keeping your promise to yourself:

1. **Make it nonnegotiable:** Making it choice-less is a tool for overcoming backsliding after your initial enthusiasm fades.
2. **Make it actionable:** To succeed you must know what actions you're going to take.
3. **Come up with solutions for your usual excuses:** Instead of just hoping it will be different this time, write down your typical excuses and rationalizations and create strategies in advance for dealing with them.
4. **Use procrastination to your advantage:** 60% of the population is "pressure prompted. It's a preference, usually labeled as procrastination, for taking in information for as long as possible before being forced into action by some external deadline. If you fall into the pressure-prompted majority, find a deadline that will help you get into motion. To work most effectively, the deadline must be real and come from the outside. Pressure prompters tend to blow off self-created ones.
5. **Schedule it in:** Treat it as an appointment with a client.
6. **Do it daily:** Routines! The more you make what you want part of your everyday life, the more it will become so routine that soon you won't even have to think about it.
7. **Monitor your behavior:** Monitoring is a key to self-regulation, the capacity to do what it is you say you want to.
8. **Focus on the horizon:** Look at how far you've come, not how much you have left to do. This "horizon effect" creates encouragement and builds determination. Ask yourself how you've accomplished the task so you can mine your success for ideas on how to keep going.
9. **Take it one choice at a time:** an unconscious choice is a reaction. A conscious choice is a response. Bring your choices to consciousness. The more you focus on the positive choice you can make this very day, without worrying about forever, the more you will live yourself into the new habit.
10. **Find someone who's doing what you want and imitate them:** The more you intentionally watch those who are living the habit you desire, the more you have to draw on when you are by yourself.
11. **Teach it to someone else:** A great way to really cement a new habit is to become a mentor. Whatever you suggest to someone else, practice yourself. It's a way to really walk the walk.
12. **Treat yourself kindly:** When we treat ourselves with kindness, we don't collapse into shame or guilt but can try again with greater wisdom for having faltered.

Conscious self-creation: When we set out to keep a New Year's resolution, change a habit or bring a dream into being, ultimately we are involved in the grand act of conscious

self-creation. Rather than being stuck with the way we are now, we can actually choose the behaviors and skills we wish to learn, the life we wish to have, and follow through to a successful conclusion. Not perfectly, not always,--because we all come with a load of baggage and life isn't always kind or fair—but to a much greater degree than we could before because we've had an experience of success to draw on. In these ways, creating a new habit brings us two precious spiritual gifts: hope—that our future will be brighter than today through the efforts we make—and faith—that we can bring into being more of what we desire in ourselves and in our lives. Each of us has the opportunity to change and grow until our very last breath.

Recommendation: If you're struggling and think one more book can't possibly make a difference, think again. The author has a unique gift of breaking things into clear pieces that can be tackled.



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My associates and I specialize in and have a passion for working with successful accounting firms. Our concentration is on what are commonly called the "soft skills." Through our experience we have demonstrated that what is true for Fortune 500 companies is also true in creating a competitive advantage for accounting firms.

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