

Expert discusses how to make resolutions that stick

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The fresh slate of the new year offers an opportunity to re-think goals and set new habits. But to ensure success with those goals, people need to think carefully about timing and what they really want, according to

Tim Bono, a lecturer in psychological and brain sciences in Arts & Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis.

"If you think about behaviors that are most likely to lead to a sense of happiness and well-being, it has a lot to do with having a sense of competence," said Bono, who studies [positive psychology](#) and how best to apply those practices to [college students](#).

"People ultimately set goals because they are seeking a sense of accomplishment, which is among the key drivers that can increase their happiness," he added.

In [previous research](#) with WashU colleague Patrick Hill, a professor of psychological and [brain sciences](#), they've seen the effect of goal-oriented thinking on students. Their research has found a correlation between those students who have a higher sense of "purposefulness" and greater use of problem-solving skills and less rumination or negative self-talk.

Goal setting can lead to a virtuous cycle, in that when reaching a goal, it instills confidence that propels further goal setting.

In addition, common resolutions to incorporate new habits like exercise and meditation "are also very effective strategies that can incorporate a sense of well-being," Bono said. Those behaviors can lead to even further release of positive brain chemicals like serotonin and endorphins.

"Certainly, goals related to physical health are worthwhile."

However, Bono warns people to not get so bogged down in goals and growth that they may forget one of the most important resolutions.

"The most important thing we can do to increase our happiness has to do with our sense of connections to other people," Bono said. "Making it a

priority to reach out to others to spend time with them, that is the most important goal for anybody to think about at New Year's or any time of year."

Bono, who also serves as WashU's associate dean for student affairs, further noted that such goals align with the university's strategic priorities of healthy excellence and a sense of belonging for its students.

Time it right

The darkest time of year is not necessarily the best time to change everything about personal habits.

"Behavior change is difficult, so in order to make progress on any goal, it's important to acknowledge that our ability to do that is determined not only by the goal itself but also the circumstances in which we are achieving that goal," Bono said.

"This time of year, there's a lot of stuff working against us," he added. "We are in the short dark days of winter, many of us experience some form of the winter blues. For a lot of us, we're simply tired following the holidays. All of those things can be an encumbrance toward our motivation."

He recommends people take a careful look at what else is going on in their life and try aligning goals with personal circumstances "that give us the time, effort and energy to make progress toward that goal," he said.

And people should not "abandon all hope" when they're not making the progress they hoped for.

"Maybe it's not a bad goal, but just a bad time of year. I think that ends up being the case for a lot of people," he said.

A better way to approach [goal setting](#) is to keep track of efforts in some form, either by keeping a log or finding a goal buddy to keep accountable.

If someone is overwhelmed this time of year, it's worthwhile to look both at the circumstances and the goal, he added.

"Give yourself permission to be human—you'll have bad days where it doesn't work as well and allow yourself to scale back as needed. It's OK to hit the pause button on a goal that isn't seeing much progress in January. Spring may be a more conducive time for following through on one's goals."

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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