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BE WELL

Mindful Ways to Create Habits, Resolutions and Intentions to Improve Your Well-Being

Despite it being February already, I still feel that I am preparing for 2021, looking at my life and determining what habits and behaviors are supporting me, and which ones are not. Essentially, that took me most of January, which is why I am finally getting around to finalizing my 2021 Positive Habits and Resolutions. As a mindfulness instructor, I not only want to use mindfulness, neuroscience, and science-backed research to support the absolute best outcomes in my own life, but I want to support others to do the same. I do not want to just create a list of aspirational positive tasks that fall by the wayside as life gets in the way. I want to learn how to integrate them fully into my life in a way that is sustainable, so they have the best chances of success. Thus, according to my quick study into the creation of sustainable habits and resolutions, the methodology I outline below should help all of us take some positive steps in the right direction in 2021!

First, we begin with habit formation and recognizing habits.[1] What is a habit? It is a routine or behavior that is repeated regularly and tends to occur subconsciously or involuntarily. Habits are done often and built into your daily routine without much effort. Habits stem from convenience as more than 40% of the actions people perform every day are not actual conscious decisions, but unconscious habits. A habit is different from an addiction, which is an action done over and over again, despite causing harm to our lives. Habits are an important force that our brains actually cling to, because they create neurological cravings where a certain behavior is rewarded by the release of "pleasure" chemicals in the brain.

Second, we must implement some "habit hacks" to cultivate better habits:

1. **Think Small – Really Small:**
   a. Create an atomic habit, or a really small habit.
   b. Thinking small is easier because once you get started, you can build.
   c. For example, Do not promise yourself you are going to read more books, instead commit to reading one page per day.

2. **Create a Physical Reminder**
   A physical totem can make the habit or standard you are trying to hold yourself to into something more than idea. (Example: AA chips)

3. **Lay out your supplies (journal, running clothes, etc.)**
   You are less likely to take the easy way out if it's embarrassingly simple to do the thing you want to do.

4. **Piggyback New Habits on Old Habits**
   Use an existing habit and add something to it, like walking and picking up garbage. Instead of walking the dog, run with the dog.

5. **Surround Yourself with Good People**
   We are the average of the five people we spend the most time with.

6. **Commit to a Challenge**
   a. It is easier to hand yourself over to a scripted practice where you just need to show up.
   b. Handing the wheel over to someone else is a way to narrow our focus and put everything into the commitment.

7. **Make it Interesting**
   Find a way to stay motivated. I use the Insight Timer to track my meditations. BBOD workouts – 21 days, 80 days, 100 days.

8. **It's About the Ritual**
   Create the practice and then just repeat it in the exact same way.

9. **It Doesn't Have to be an Everyday Thing**
   What matters is the results average out.

10. **Focus on Yourself**
    If you wish to improve, be content to be seen as ignorant or clueless about some things, like the news.

11. **Make it About Your Identity**
    I am a writer, I am a meditator, etc.

12. **Keep it Simple**
    Little things make a difference.

13. **Pick Yourself Up When You Fall**
    Don't quit because you aren't perfect.

Third, we implement a simple trick to keep any new goal or resolution. What makes people stick to their goals or resolutions? A study of 1,000 people arrived at a very simple tweak that increases the percentage of successfully implemented goals and resolutions: rephrase the goal or resolution as something positive that you would like to ***COMMIT TO DOING***, rather than something you ***would like to stop.***[2] So, think, "I will start to do _____", as opposed to "I will quite or avoid or stop _____." This reframes your goal or resolution as an Approach Goal and not an Avoidance Goal. The positive reframing of your goal or resolution works because it is extremely challenging, if not impossible, to erase a habit, but it is much easier to replace it with something else. Thus, if you want to drink less alcohol at night, pick another beverage that you will increase – such as tea or other non-alcoholic beverages. If you want to watch less television, commit to reading more. If you take the habit you want to change and replace it with another goal you can move towards, or approach, that new goal will not leave any space to retain the older habit or behavior.

In conclusion, when creating new goals or resolutions in 2021, do so with the disclaimer that we are all still really depleted and stressed because of the pandemic and do not have the energy and will-power to tackle too much significant change. So, be realistic and kind with yourself. Do not push yourself to make too many changes all at once. Prioritize any Approach Goals you would like to implement. Here is a positive approach goal that I have implemented in 2021: "In 2021, I will start to be gentle with myself." Join me in this endeavor and find ways to cultivate new healthy habits that will support your overall well-being, in a mindful way.

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[1] Adapted from The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business, by Charles Duhigg.

[2] Adapted from "A large-scale experiment on New Year's resolutions: Approach-oriented goals are more successful than avoidance-oriented goals," PLOS ONE Journal, published December 9, 2020 (https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0234097)