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Keeping resolutions

Tips to stay on track in 2005

New Year's Day 2005 has come and gone, and for many American adults, the resolve to lead healthier lifestyles, commit to personal financial goals, or improve personal organization in home or office have vanished like the bubbles in a day-old opened bottle of champagne.

Estimates are that about 40 percent of adults make New Year's resolutions and research suggests that the vast majority of these resolutions fall into three categories: weight loss, smoking cessation, and exercise. Other top categories relate to personal finances and getting organized. By mid January many will have abandoned their well-intended resolutions. In fact, generally less than 40 percent of the people who make resolutions manage to keep them.

Behavioral scientists suggest a variety of sensible approaches to aid in keeping resolutions. These include limiting the number of personal goals set, keeping resolutions realistic, writing resolutions down, and using tools to motivate as well as to monitor adherence.

For the nearly 1,000 people age 50 and older who have participated in *Active for Life*[®] during the last 18 months, making and maintaining a commitment to get regular physical activity has been challenging, but their experiences provide practical ideas on how some midlife and older folks have been successful in starting and maintaining their resolution to be physically active.

The *buddy system* is one useful approach. It involves finding another person to help spark action or adherence to a program. For example, when Maxine Blair of Berkeley Square, OH has trouble getting out for her regular exercise she says, "I call my friend. She is always ready to walk with me. If she's not available, my little dog never turns me down."

Finding a coach can also be helpful. Coaches are available through group programs, classes or on an individual basis. Carol Nassi of Northridge, CA explains how her coach keeps her on track. When she is tempted to skip her workout, she looks at herself in the mirror and thinks, “What would Juan (her fitness coach) say if I am not exercising? I don’t want to let him down.” So she starts with a few stretches and is motivated to go out for her regular 20-minute walk.

Positive self-talk can also play a vital role in maintaining a physical activity program. In a random survey of *Active for Life*[®] participants, self-talk was the most frequently cited method people used to stick with their program. Comments included this from Don Frazier of Pinehurst, NC, “It’s hard to get started sometimes, but knowing that I will feel better later helps.”

Shirley Schultz, also of Pinehurst, says, “When I don’t feel like it, I just put one foot in front of the other and get on with my physical activity program.”

And Loraine Fricke of Hamilton, OH notes that sometimes it just takes personal determination. “I try to remember that the less I do, the less I will be able to do.”

Goal setting is a recommendation for any lifestyle change, and it proves useful for many of the *Active for Life*[®] participants. As Dorothy Hall of Memphis, TN remarks, “The greatest benefit is that exercise makes me feel more energetic and I feel like I am achieving my goals. That’s what keeps me motivated even on days when I don’t feel like being active.”

Carol Meir of Des Plaines, IL says, “I have an agreement with myself to get going and to do it.” Her goal is to have a healthy older age and to stay active as her children get older.

Marcia G. Ory, Ph.D., who directs the *Active for Life*[®] National Program Office at The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health, comments, “New Year’s resolutions usually revolve around personal behavior change goals, which can be challenging to maintain. The *Active for Life*[®] program is learning a good deal about practical and realistic solutions to help people with physical activity-related goals. What we are learning goes beyond this particular program--these same solutions can be useful with other lifestyle goals.”

Dr. Ory suggests five simple steps to help keep resolutions on track:

1. Be clear and realistic about your goals. “Instead of saying you are going to get more exercise you might be specific and say you are going to walk at least 30 minutes, starting with just two or three days a week and then building up to most days a week, with a long-term goal of being active at least five days each week. Or you are going to attend a fitness class at your local gym or “Y” three days each week.”
2. Write your goals down and leave them in a place where you can review them regularly. “It’s easy to get off course when making resolutions, but not meeting your resolutions is not a permanent failure. If you have your goal written down, you can look at it every week or month, and start again if you have not succeeded.”
3. Find someone to help you. It can be a friend, spouse or family member. “Often, if you make a commitment to another person you will be more successful in meeting goals than if you only commit to yourself. Many people find that being active with another person not only motivates them to stick with a program, but also helps increase activity level.”
4. Try something different if you find you don’t like the activity you started. “For example, if you set a goal to use a treadmill or to walk in your neighborhood and you find you don’t like this type of activity you can change it. If you use a treadmill in a fitness facility you might try a different piece of equipment such as a stationary bicycle or an elliptical trainer. If your regular walk in the neighborhood starts to bore you, simply change your route for variety. Or go to a local park or area shopping mall for your walk.”
5. Dr. Ory’s final tip – Have fun! “For many older adults, the concept of ‘working out’ brings to mind painful muscles, discomfort and heavy sweating. Our research shows that for the 50 and older crowd, the ‘No pain, no gain’ message is the wrong way to think about activity. Exercise does not have to hurt, and one need not push their body to the extreme to get health benefits. Just 30 minutes a day of moderate activity, incorporated into everyday life, is the key. So get outside and play with your children or grandchildren. If you enjoy yard work then rake, cultivate, mow and trim to your heart’s content. Set a date to meet a friend at a nearby park or local gym. Or enjoy a long and peaceful walk with your dog.”

Funded by a grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Active for Life*® programs are offered to mature adults through:

- Berkeley City Health Department - Berkeley, CA
- Blue Shield of California - Woodland Hills, CA
- Church Health Center of Memphis – Memphis, TN
- Council on Aging of Southwestern Ohio – Cincinnati, OH
- Greater Detroit Area Health Council – Detroit, MI
- FirstHealth of the Carolinas – Pinehurst, NC
- Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington, Inc. - Rockville, MD
- The OASIS Institute - St. Louis, MO, San Antonio TX, and Pittsburgh, PA
- San Mateo County Health Services - San Mateo, CA
- YMCA of Metropolitan Chicago - Chicago, IL

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