



You can gauge my success at making changes by the fact that my New Year's resolutions are always the same. Yup, come what may, every January I resolve to stop biting my nails, exercise for an hour three or four times a week minimum, spend less than I earn and limit alcohol on school nights. Looking at my diary from when I was a schoolgirl, it strikes me as pathetic how little has changed. OK, in those days it was "eat healthily" rather than "limit alcohol on school nights" – clearly wine has supplanted crisps and biscuits as my vice of choice since I was 14 – but the gist remains pretty much the same. This year, however, I have an extra incentive – I am getting married! Call me vain, but it would be nice to do justice to my (gorgeous, gorgeous) dress by sorting out the muscle tone in my arms; likewise, my hideously gnawed little digits aren't really the best foil for my beautiful engagement ring. Spending less money than I earn is clearly unfeasible until after the wedding, so that one will just have to wait.

But how to stick to a resolution? How on earth do people not fall back into their bad habits? The first couple of weeks of January are usually fine, as one is in a post-party purge mood, but after that? OK, I admit I've probably got a fairly low attention/boredom threshold, but there must be steps I can take to ensure that this time I stick to my guns and start married life as a new, improved version of myself.



### do it for yourself

"We all have different priorities, goals and values," says Pia Mugerud of Hong Kong-based Copia Coaching. "There is no one-size-fits-all solution to achieving a balance between work and life. The important thing is to have a clear sense of what matters most to you, and align your daily actions with those things that you say are truly important. Give yourself permission to spend your days doing what you most want to do – not always doing only what others expect of you." In other words, if you try to change something that you're not really committed to changing, just because you think you should, it's probably doomed to failure. There's no ambivalence in my case, I'm afraid – I know how much better I feel after a workout or a week's worth of early nights and herbal teas, but sometimes I'm just too damn lazy/weak-willed to do what I know is best for me.

### prepare

Make life easy for yourself. It stands to reason that you're more likely to stick to good habits if temptation isn't staring you in the face, so chuck out that fattening food, throw away the cigarettes, drink all the wine in the house so it's no longer there to tempt you (ahem). Says Hong Kong-based Life Coach Alistair Lamont, "make the action as easy as possible. For example if you want to get fit but don't like the gym then pick a way of getting fit you will enjoy, like a team sport. If you like the gym but have had problems motivating yourself to be there, find a training partner that you will feel bad about letting down." Or you might consider exercising in your lunch hour. For me, that was the only way to stick to it when I worked in an office, as there would always be something more enticing to tempt me after work, and early mornings have never been my forte.

(if that isn't too preposterous a word for my daily existence). Exercising in the great outdoors is a huge motivator, and this time I will stick to it (well, at least until my wedding). Any more tips to help me along my way?

"It is important to begin with realistic goals and even short and long term goals," says Wong Kei. "Make sure you reward yourself when you have reached them (but not with old habits!). When you find that you are beginning to lose motivation or you are hitting a plateau, a personal trainer can get you back on track and help you to diversify your training schedule, offer new tips and more creative fitness solutions."

### think positive

"Write down exactly what you want to achieve and post it in a place where you will see it every day," says Mugerud. "This will help remind you of what you're working toward. State it in positive terms. Instead of writing, 'I will not neglect my commitments', re-word your goal in more positive terms: 'I will always stay true to my commitments.'" It may sound simplistic, but this approach really works. Instead of thinking of "not drinking on school nights" as an unfeasible penance, I am now trying to view it as a positive thing, taking the opportunity to prepare really healthy (often Japanese-inspired) meals and delicious smoothies, incorporating a huge variety of fruits, vegetables and pulses – so I am actively doing my body some good rather than (just) not doing it harm. A bit of yoga can up the smugness ante considerably on days like this.

Which is just what I have started doing. Now I work from home, circuit training in the park is the simplest thing to fit into my schedule



how to... make changes

writer Lucy Lord

## use your action muscles

According to Lamont, the secret to changing your personal life is to exercise your 'action muscles'. "Most people have a stronger set of action muscles in one specific area of their life – work," he says. "After all, if you just had a few thoughts about what you should do but never seemed to be able to get around to doing anything you would soon be in trouble with the boss – there are specific scary consequences to not taking action in this area of your life! With many people their action muscles are a lot weaker in their personal life, and when they do use them they are mainly reactive or compromised actions, often only taken when it becomes too painful or difficult not to do anything. You don't get fired for not keeping your finances in order or not making an effort to meet new people or losing a few pounds, but it still affects your life."

Too true. So how do you start to build those muscles up? "It's a bit like building real muscle," he says. "You don't start with the 30 pound dumbbells, you begin with an easy weight that you can manage. In this case the easy weight is taking some actions that are easy to complete that will have an impact on your life. We put up with, accept, take on and are dragged down by lots of small things every day that we never seem to get round to doing anything about. By taking action on these things you will experience the sense of achievement and immediate benefits of your life becoming that little bit easier." One very small thing that had been bugging me on a day-to-day basis was the state of my make-up bag, into which a sparkly brown eye shadow had exploded. Of course it turned the daily make up ritual into a painful chore involving bits of loo paper, much swearing and the inevitable brown smudges all over my face. So a couple of days ago I rinsed it out and cleaned all the bits one by one. It took me ten minutes. Not rocket science, I know, but it's taken away a completely unnecessary thorn in my side.

## the six stages of change

Angela Brassett-Harknett is a psychologist and psychotherapist at Guy's Hospital in London. "Most of the people who come to see me want to change something about themselves," she says. "The most effective approach, called 'motivational enhancement therapy' (MET), was developed specifically to promote change, and evolved out of work with people with alcohol and drug addiction, who, like those with eating disorders, are commonly ambivalent about change."

So, if you're really serious about tackling a major issue, read and learn. MET basically states that "movement through stages of change can be conceptualised along a spiral: we aim to move upwards through the spiral but occasionally slide backwards, although not necessarily right to the bottom of the spiral, since we learn something from each attempt to shift upwards to the next stage of change," says Brassett-Harknett. There are essentially five stages of change: precontemplation, when you are unaware of, or unconcerned about your behaviour (you are not seriously considering changing); contemplation, where you are beginning to consider you might have a problem (perhaps because people have been nagging you about it), but you've made no commitment to take action; preparation, where you have made a decision to take action and are beginning to make small efforts towards change; action, where you are in the early phase of making change; and maintenance, where you have successfully made the change, taking the required steps daily to remain in your new patterns of behaviour. Interestingly, says Brassett-Harknett, "relapse is sometimes considered a sixth stage of change, representing the times when we slide back down the spiral to an earlier stage of change. Relapse is normal and enables us to regroup and consolidate what we have learned from our previous attempts to change."

Lamont concurs: "You only get the change in behaviour when you hit the roadblock and choose to get back on the horse. Most people hit the road block, think that they have failed and stop, when in fact they are just one step away from success." I don't know about you, but I find this enormously heartening – or at least I will, next time I'm tempted out to the pub of a Tuesday night.

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## kick start into action

It can be immensely helpful to kick start any new health regime with a stay at a retreat. The fact that it's all there for you and you've got the help of the professionals (and, let's face it, you've paid to be there), means you're much less likely to cheat than if you were attempting, say, a week's detox on your own. The world-renowned Chopra Center for Wellbeing is running several courses aimed at changing your life in 2008: Soul of Healing, in California; SynchroDestiny, in Hollywood, Florida; the wonderful-sounding Grow Younger, Live Longer, a cruise through Alaska's Inner Passage; and Seduction of Spirit, a meditation course in Dublin, Ireland.

Says Brassett-Harknett, "although there are plenty of people who achieve change on their own, it can be easier with the help of others, and thus engaging in helping relationships can be a good way to make changes. For some people this means seeking a therapist or some other health professional, for others it means relying on the support of friends and family members. Whatever method is selected, you will be more successful if you take time to think about: what you want to change; why you want to change it (i.e. what you will lose and what you will gain from change); and how you will achieve it, with due consideration given to planning a step-by-step approach which matches your strategy to your stage of change."



## conclusion

So how successful have I been in my quest for a more marriageable me? Well, it's early days yet, but I am mightily pleased with my little nails already. They are almost past my fingertips now – just at the stage where they will probably start breaking soon, as they are very very weak, like a baby's nails. In the past one broken nail would be the catalyst for me to give up and start biting again, but this time round, mindful of Lamont and Brassett-Harknett's words about relapse being part of the whole cycle, I shall stick it out. I am thoroughly enjoying my exercise routine and just have to repeat the mantra "slim brown shoulders" when I feel my motivation slipping. And as for healthy living on school nights – well, I'm trying. On the weeks I do achieve it I feel fantastic. And the weeks I don't are really not that bad either. I like to think of myself as a work in progress – which, let's face it, is what most of us are most of the time anyway.