



January 18, 2019

Clover Connection

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Keep New Year's resolutions by setting realistic goals.

Failing to plan is planning to fail, and New Year's resolutions are no exception, according to a Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service expert.

"Three reasons people don't keep their New Year's resolutions are that the resolution isn't realistic, a person expects an unrealistic benefit from the desired resolution or the person wasn't prepared to make the change," said Dr. Jenna Anding, AgriLife Extension nutrition specialist, College Station.

She said most adults tend to shy away from resolutions and those who take up the challenge are more likely to be young or middle-aged.

"Statistics also suggest that those who do make a resolution are not very successful at keeping them," she noted. "But that's not to say resolutions don't work. In fact, those who make resolutions do tend to have more success at changing behaviors compared to those who don't make resolutions."

Anding said the best way to approach successful resolution-making is for people to first list the three behaviors they most want to change, such as eating better, saving money or exercising more.

"Look at the behaviors you have identified and choose the one you most want to concentrate on improving," she said. "Now take another look at the behavior you choose and write a specific goal that reflects the behavior. Write down that final goal, but make sure it is realistic and achievable."

The next step is to make a plan and come up with a series of smaller, attainable goals to work toward the final goal, she said.

For example, she said, if the goal is to run a marathon this year but at the current time it's difficult to run to the end of the block, consider starting with a more realistic goal of walking for 30 minutes a day three to five days a week.

“Once that's a regular habit, set another goal to run a 5K within three to six months and then a 10K, gradually working up to a half-marathon and then a full marathon. But remember that achieving your final goal doesn't have to fit into a rigid timetable. Just keep meeting those mini-goals as steps to that final goal.”

Anding said improving eating habits is usually one of the top New Year's resolutions, but that resolution should also be taken in smaller bites.

Committing to eat more fruit during the week is an easy way to begin the trek toward a more healthful diet.

“It's best to break this into mini-goals such as committing to eating one more vegetable or fruit each day,” she said. “Other mini-goals might include eating out no more than two times a week, bringing a healthy lunch to work at least three days a week, drinking water instead of soda and eating no more than two fried foods per week.”

She said any planning should allow for unexpected events or circumstances that may prevent individuals from accomplishing their goals.

“Make a contingency plan for obstacles such as bad weather when you aren't able to exercise outdoors — or if you find yourself in a restaurant that has limited healthy food choices,” she said.

Anding said it is important to choose and write down a specific date on which to begin the desired behavior change.

“Pick a date that is important, significant or memorable and put it on your calendar,” she said. “It doesn't have to be the start of a new year. Once you pick your date, plan out how you will accomplish your goal. In other words, identify and write down those specific actions you will need to take to be successful.”

Anding said it is also a good idea to share the New Year's resolution with friends or family and ask for their support.

“List the names of people you want to know about your resolution, and ask for their encouragement and help,” she said. “It's easier to keep your resolution if you have others supporting you, plus involving others makes you more accountable.”

Finally, Anding said, those who meet their goals should plan a way to reward themselves along the way.

“Do something nice for yourself, like a massage or spa treatment, or treat yourself to some music,” she said. “Or you can indulge in a ‘guilty pleasure’ as long as it doesn’t sabotage your success. It’s also OK to share your success with others as both a means of self-validation and an incentive for them to do something similar for their own benefit.”

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