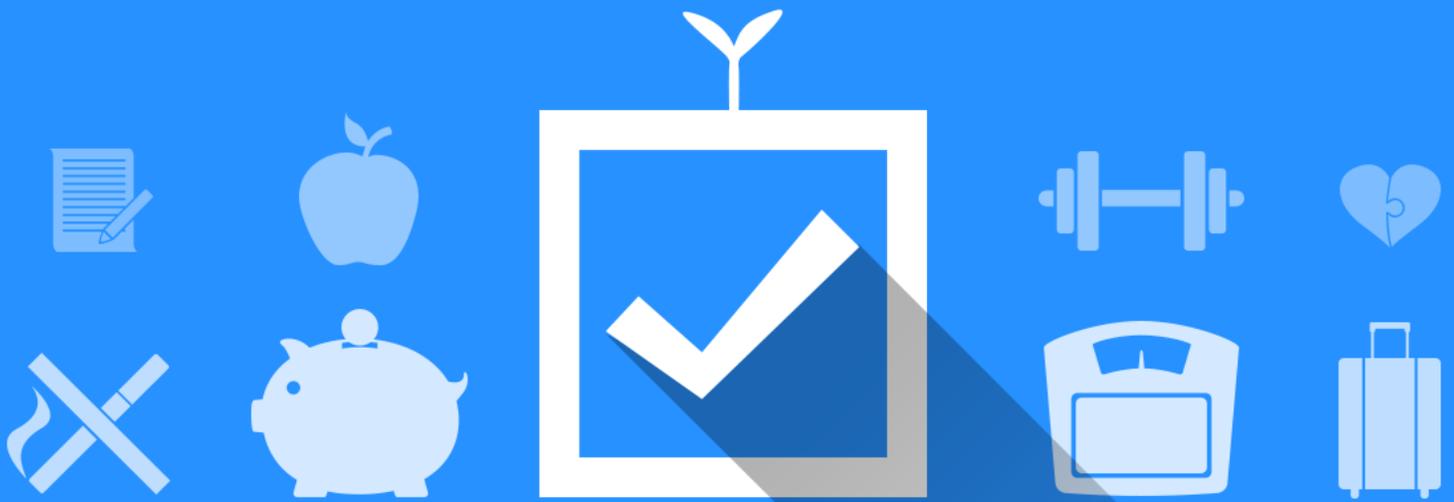


A Year of Productivity
Presents



NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS GUIDEBOOK

Everything you need to make and keep
your New Year's resolutions

By Chris Bailey

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Introduction

WELCOME!

If you could simply flick a switch and then begin to make lasting changes to your life, there would be no reason for this guidebook to exist.

The fact is, making lasting changes to your life is tough, which is probably why **92% of people fail at their New Year's resolutions every year.**¹ That's what drove me and a few friends to put together this guide.

This guidebook will walk you through everything you need to do to keep your resolutions this year, including stepping back from your life to pick your resolutions, making a plan, and then working to keep that plan by clearing your mind, cutting out distractions, and getting it done. **I'm so confident in what's in these pages that I'll make you a personal guarantee: if you follow everything contained within this book, you *will* keep your New Year's Resolutions this year.**

I can't promise you that it will be easy to keep your resolutions, because to be honest, a lot of the time it won't be. But if you are willing to put in the time and effort, I promise I will give you the tools you need to make the changes you want to make.

Let's do this.

ABOUT A YEAR OF PRODUCTIVITY

For the past several years I have been completely obsessed with becoming more productive, so much so that when I graduated from University last May, I decided to decline two full-time job offers to dedicate an entire year of my life to becoming as productive as possible. That led me to create A Year of Productivity, the very website you are reading this guidebook on right now. Since last May, I've read as many books as I could get my hands on, and conducted weird productivity [experiments](#) on myself, like [meditating for 35 hours in a week](#), [watching 70 hours of TED talks in 7 days](#), [living in total seclusion for 10 days](#), and [being a total slob for a week](#).

At the time of publication (January 6th), I'm a little over eight months into A Year of Productivity, and over that time I've experimented with countless productivity methods and techniques. I've thrown a lot of ideas at the wall, and while a lot of them have stuck, a lot more haven't. Within these pages (pixels?) are not only the meticulously researched ideas and lessons courtesy of the (much smarter) people that have come before me, but also my own perspective on their ideas based on my experimentation and first-hand experience with them. **I have**

¹ Source: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dandiamond/2013/01/01/just-8-of-people-achieve-their-new-years-resolutions-heres-how-they-did-it/>

personally put every single thing in this guidebook into practice, and have removed all of the bullshit that's either overhyped or doesn't work.

A Year of Productivity has taught me a ton about what works and what doesn't in becoming more productive, and I've brought as much of that as I could to this book, while I stand on the shoulders of giants, of course.

HOW THE MONEY PART WORKS

Ryan, Chris, Zack and I created this guide to make something awesome, and if you like supporting awesome things, you can throw some money our way and we'll split it amongst ourselves. **But you absolutely don't have to contribute**, particularly if you can't, or you don't want to for any reason.

The goal of this guidebook is not to make money, it's to create a resource that will help you keep your New Year's resolutions, and to make something that's unlike anything that's been published on the web before. For these reasons, there are no ads, sponsorships, or sign-ups that you'll need to slog through in order to read this guidebook—simply scroll through, and enjoy! You can even download an .epub, or .mobi version of the guidebook to read on your e-reader if you'd prefer (the very version of the book you're reading now!)

Because we don't want to be annoying, this is the only time we will talk about the money aspect of this guidebook, though you can support us at any time by clicking the little money bag symbol in the header. Money is nice, of course, but what's even nicer is creating something awesome and spreading it to as many people as possible.

WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS BOOK

The book you are about to read was written, designed, programmed, and animated by a small, dare I say it, incredibly talented team comprised of four people.

Chris Bailey – Writing and Editing

Definitely the least talented of the four people who worked on this guide.

Chris Bailey is a graduate from Carleton University in Ottawa, where he majored in management and marketing. He's currently dedicating a full year to devouring everything he can about productivity and then writing about it at A Year of Productivity.

He spends most of his time meditating, reading, writing, and drinking large amounts of green tea in one sitting.

Chris also dislikes when people refer to themselves in the third-person, like he is doing right now, writing this blurb.

Chris is also very handsome.

Chris Sauvé – Web Programming

Chris Sauvé is an undergraduate student at Carleton University completing his final year of the commerce program with a minor in computer science. It took him three years of university education before he figured out that he hated business and just wanted to write code for a living. But, as they say, “c’est la vie”.

Chris spends most of his time working on [open source software projects](#), freelance web development, and enjoying the company of his lovely fiancée.

Ryan Wang – Design

Ryan Wang graduated from the University of Ontario Institute of Technology with a bachelor's degree in information technology. He co-founded [SkopWorks](#), a small indie game studio, and they're hard at work on their first game, set to launch this year.

On the side, Ryan does freelance graphic design. He loves clean, crisp and vivid designs, and you can find some of his work at [clearful.net](#).

Ryan also likes to participate in game jams from time to time. [Here are a few games](#) he made with his friends.

Zack Lovatt – Video Animation

Zack Lovatt is a Toronto-based motion designer and finds bio-writing to be a very strange exercise. He designs and animates segments for [feature films](#), broadcast, online promotional videos and all manner of electronic displays.

You can view his portfolio on [his website](#).

Part One: Choose Your Resolutions

The hidden costs of making resolutions

On the surface everyone likes the *idea* of making positive changes to their life, but in practice there's usually something keeping you from actually making positive changes, like how much time, energy, mental resistance, focus, and willpower you have. I think the easiest way to tell if a change is a high enough priority for you is to look at whether you've made it already. If you've made the change already, chances are it's important to you, and if you haven't made it already, it's probably not as important (in practice) as you might think it is.

This guide contains everything you need to make and keep your New Year's resolutions this year, but before you write a plan to keep your New Year's resolutions, it's essential that you understand the hidden costs of making resolutions. Or put another way, the reason you haven't made them already.

As a human being, you only have so much time, energy, and willpower to get you through the day. Even the most positive changes can zap you of your time, energy, and willpower, so it's crucial that you understand the costs of making changes to your life, as well as what changes you should be making in the first place. Taking the time to understand these costs can help you determine not only how much a change will affect your life, but also whether a New Year's resolution is actually worth making.

During my second year of University, I decided to subscribe to The New York Times (Sunday delivery). Every Sunday morning, before my roommates woke up, I would wake up early, press a fresh cup of coffee, and sit down with the paper, skimming the week's articles.

This continued for a couple of months, until May, when my roommates went home for the summer. That's when I realized something: I didn't actually enjoy reading The New York Times.

In my head, I liked the *idea* of being a guy that reads The New York Times every Sunday (even though I live in Canada), so I subscribed. It's hard to admit: I mainly read the paper so people could see me reading it. I unsubscribed shortly after I realized this, and haven't much read much of the paper's articles, even online, since. (Actually, maybe the story's a little funny looking back.)

In a similar fashion, I think people like the idea of becoming a more productive person. They, like me, want to be known as "that guy" or "that girl" who wakes up at 5:30 every morning to run, meditate, read, and eat a huge, healthy breakfast before most of the world even wakes up.

The problem, of course, is you can't become a better person overnight. **You don't just get to become better because you decide to—you have to *work* at becoming better;**

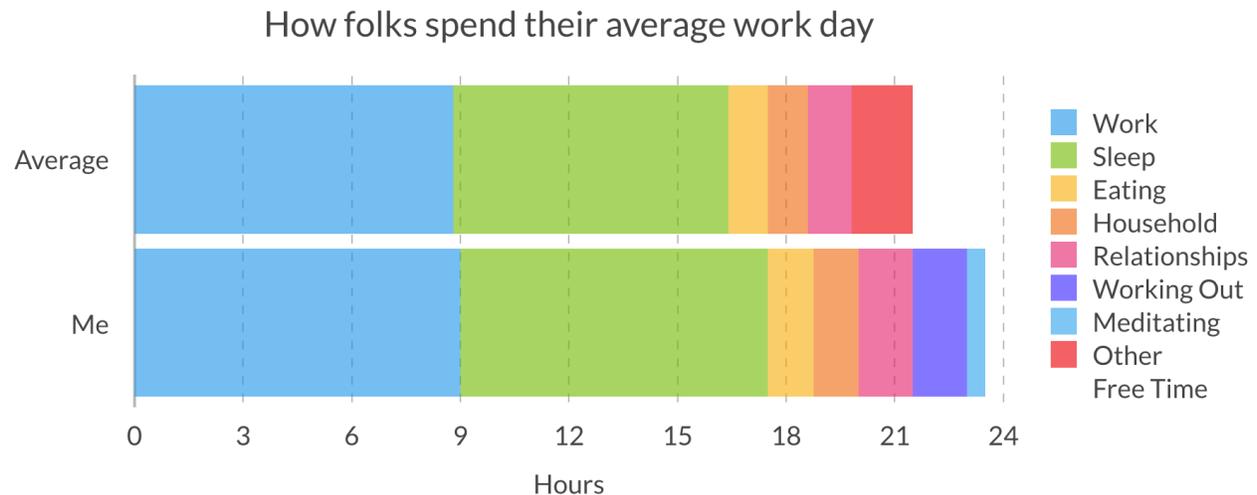
pushing on the outer boundaries of your potential until they budge. If you could simply decide to be more productive, you would already be as fit, rich, and focused as George Clooney or Angelina Jolie. You also wouldn't have a reason to read this book, and I wouldn't have a reason to write it.

New Year's resolutions often involve taking on more stuff, but when you take on more commitments or make changes to your life, you can actually make yourself less productive, because there are some hidden costs associated with those changes, like how much time, willpower, and motivation they can eat up.

3 HUGE, HIDDEN COSTS OF MAKING NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

1. New Year's resolutions eat up time

On an average day, the average person: works for 8.8 hours, sleeps for 7.6 hours, eats for 1.1, does stuff around the house for 1.1, invests 1.2 hours into their relationships and caring for others, and spends 1.7 hours doing "Other".² Here's what a typical person's day looks like, compared to a typical day of mine since I've started A Year of Productivity:



(Note: The "average" stat above is for someone who is employed, 25-54 years old, and has kids. I don't have kids.)

² Source: The [American Time Use Survey](#).

For the project, I have added more elements to my life, in an effort to become more productive. Adding these extra elements has a massive cost: time. I love working out and receiving all of the benefits of working out, but on an average day I'm at the gym for 1.5 hours, which is a considerable chunk of my spare time. After I take time to meditate (30 minutes), invest in my relationships with my family, friends, and girlfriend (1.5 hours), I have a grand total of 30 minutes left over. And, usually because it takes time and emotional labor to switch between the elements of my day, I don't have any extra time at all.

That's okay, because I love what I do, and I love the challenge of turning myself into a better person. But it does show how important it is to make resolutions for the right reasons. New Year's resolutions eat up time; maybe a lot more than you think.

If you already have in your mind a New Year's resolution you want to make, now is a great time to stop and think about:

- Whether you like the *idea* of making the resolution more than you would enjoy the results of that resolution
- How much time the resolution will cost, compared to how much time you have, and how much time you're willing to dedicate to it.

2. New Year's resolutions suck up your willpower

Studies show that the how much willpower you have is not a character trait. Willpower is a [depletable resource](#), and chances are you will expend quite a bit of it when you're keeping your New Year's resolutions.

You start every day with a fresh tank of willpower, but over the course of a day, as you restrain yourself from picking at your co-worker's candy jar and force yourself to hit the gym in the morning, your willpower reserve depletes.

Forming new habits can suck up a lot of willpower. I can personally feel my willpower reserve steadily draining as the day wears on, especially on days where I have to really force myself to wake up super early, and then drag my butt to the gym.

Depleting your willpower reserve is incredibly costly if you don't expend your willpower on the right things, for the right reasons, and I think draining your willpower is a cost of making New Year's resolutions that a lot of people overlook. (As we'll talk about later on, this is also a great reason to make *smaller* New Year's resolutions.)

3. Results are often invisible at first, which is discouraging

Your brain is wired to respond to cues in your environment, because it has grown to expect rewards for certain behaviours. That's why you (without thinking) tap on the 'Email' icon on your phone when you see new messages come in, or automatically start walking toward the laundry room after your dryer buzzer sounds.

Having clear, specific rewards for your behaviour is the key to making new habits stick (we'll talk about forming habits later on in my interview with Charles Duhigg), but with a lot of resolutions, like working out and meditating more, you might not notice results at first.

Especially when you adopt behaviours that are more beneficial in the medium-to-long term, not having clear rewards can be discouraging and can make adopting a new habit a lot more difficult.

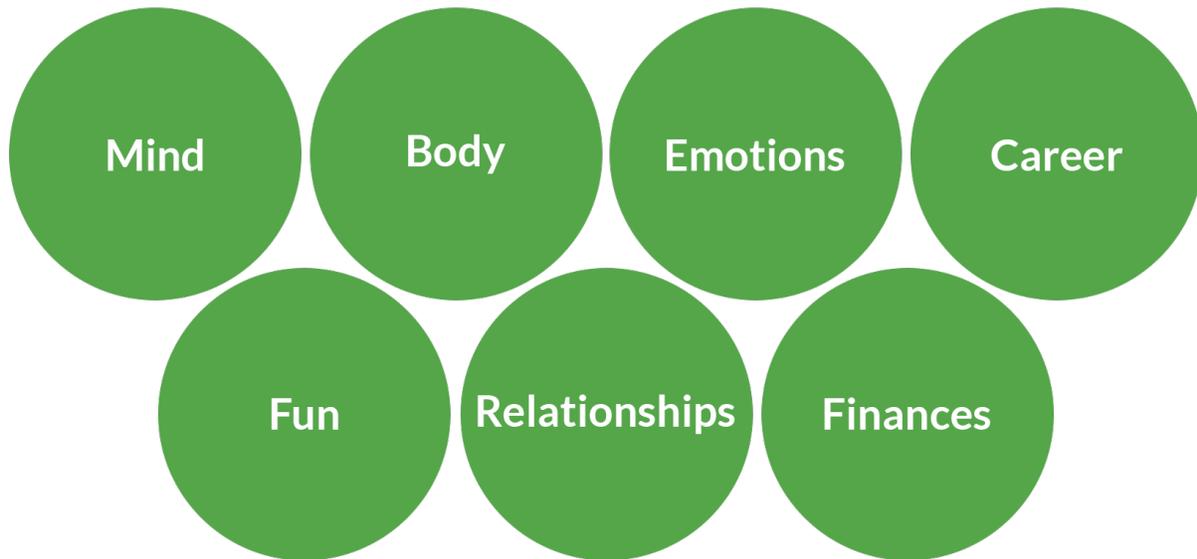
A good way to make new habits stick: reward yourself after completing something that doesn't have noticeable, immediate benefits. For example, drink a glass of chocolate milk after you work out, or drink a cup of tea after you meditate. This helps solidify the cue-routine-reward habit sequence in your head, which will make things much easier the next time around.

Being mindful of how much time, willpower, and motivation your New Year's resolutions will cost you is something that not many people do, simply because it's a lot more fun to fantasize about having a six-pack than it is to think about what you will need to do to get there. But doing so will help you become more realistic about how keeping New Year's resolutions will impact your life, so you can anticipate the costs of keeping your resolutions, without being discouraged by them later on.

If your New Year's resolutions make it through this first filter and you've determined that they won't cost you too much time, willpower, or motivation, I think it's then important to take a step back and look at how your resolutions fit into your life from an elevated perspective.

Your life at 10,000 feet

On a very fundamental, elevated level, every day you invest your resources (like time, energy, willpower, money, and focus) into a number of different hotspots, like the ones below:



Your hotspots, when added up, make up who you are, and I think they are a great way of classifying how you spend your time and energy.

There may be more hotspots than the ones above (which were taken from J.D. Meier's brilliant book, [Getting Results the Agile Way](#)), like "Spiritual" and "Social", but I think this model encompasses most of how you spend your time on a daily basis.

If you're typical, on a day-to-day basis you likely don't think too much about which hotspots you invest your time into. You have routines and habits that you do automatically, and you may not often take a step back from them to see your life from a higher level. But taking a step back is certainly worth doing.

To be able to take a step back from your life, it's important to first take inventory of exactly what is in each of your hotspots.

DIVE DEEPER INTO YOUR HOTSPOTS

The 'hotspot' way of looking at your life is a terrific way to step back from how you invest your time and energy on a daily basis to look at your life from an elevated perspective. I highly recommend integrating the hotspot way of thinking deeper into your life.

Inside every hotspot is a list of sub-categories. For example, here are a few examples that J.D. Meier suggests including under your 'Body' hotspot:

Hotspot	
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eating/nutrition• Exercise• Sleeping• Dental• Stress• Senses• Health/medical• Systems (cardio, digestive, immune, skin, respiratory)

Expanding each of your hotspots, like in the example above, will help you identify what New Year's resolutions to make, because you will be able to see your entire life at a glance, and identify where you need to change the most. (If you have already decided which resolutions you want to make, this model will show you where those resolutions fit into the bigger picture of your life.) This process might take an hour or two, but if you ask me, that's time well spent. It's a lot of fun to step back from what you do on a daily basis, and think about how you invest your time and attention on an elevated level. You don't need to expand your hotspots in a ton of detail—just enough to break down what is inside of each, to create a glanceable list of what it means to be you.

The hotspot way of thinking isn't just a great source of inspiration when making resolutions; it's also a great way to prioritize what's important to you, view your life as a portfolio, and figure out what parts of your life need attention.

Tip: I recommend reviewing your list of hotspots every week. It takes only a few minutes, and the returns are incredible. For example, every week I remember several things I should include on my to-do list just by scanning my hotspots. Stepping back and seeing your life from an elevated perspective shouldn't just be something you do on New Year's.

KNOW YOUR VALUES WHEN YOU PRIORITIZE YOUR HOTSPOTS

After you've broken down the hotspots in your life, prioritized what's the most important to you, and stepped back from how you invest your time to see your life from a higher perspective, it's important that you define what your core values are.

That might sound corny and pointless, but it's not. Defining your core values will help you align your goals with who you really are, and you will be much more motivated to act on your resolutions this way. When you make resolutions that are in line with what you deeply value, you

can be sure that you're not just making a resolution because you like the *idea* of making the change (think back to my New York Times story); you can be sure you deeply value whatever change you plan to make. If you're having trouble defining your values, what often works for me is to look at how I spend my time on a daily basis, and then work backward from there toward my values.

When it comes time to work toward your New Year's resolutions, you're going to have both easy and difficult days, but your values will stay consistent regardless. **I think it's hugely important to 'hook' your New Year's resolutions as deep in you as possible, and you can't dive much deeper in you than your values.**

After you determine your values ([here's](#) a good, lengthy list to get you started), reprioritize your expanded list of hotspots based on what you value. Then, look where you need to change. Look out for hotspots you want to spend more or less time in, areas of your life you have neglected, and areas that you want to focus more on in the New Year.

By breaking down your life into hotspots, then reprioritizing your life by digging deep into what's important to you, you can be sure that you examine every single element of your life for what New Year's resolutions you should make, and that your New Year's goals will line up with what you really care about.

Choose Your Resolutions

After you pick apart the potential costs (in time, willpower, and motivation) of your New Year's resolutions, and break down your life into hotspots and prioritize your hotspots based on your values, it is then relatively easy to scan your hotspots to pick what New Year's resolutions you should make.

This method of determining what resolutions to make works for a few reasons:

- Understanding the potential costs of your resolutions will help you determine whether a resolution is actually worth making, or whether you simply like the idea of making a change. (This is especially important if you came to this guide already knowing the resolutions you want to make.)
- Breaking down your life into hotspots will force you to consider making resolutions in *all* aspects of your life, so you will leave no stone unturned when you plan for the new year.
- Digging deep to discover what you truly value will help you determine what elements of your life are the most important to you, and which ones you should change.

A lot of people make a crucial mistake at this juncture: they stop planning, and don't create a plan to follow to actually follow through on their resolutions. I strongly believe that this is why 92% of people fail at their their resolutions.

But don't you worry one bit—I've got your back. Now that you've chosen your resolutions, let's make a plan to keep them.

Part Two: Make a Plan

First thing's first

After you decide what New Year's resolutions you want to make, your next step is to create a concrete plan to keep them.

This part of the guidebook contains everything that should be in your plan, and it is divided into three chapters.

- The first chapter will force you to dive deeper into your actual goals, and will show you how to clearly define what you want to accomplish
- The second chapter will talk about how you form habits, and how you can convert your resolutions into habits you can adopt
- The third chapter goes over four more elements you should seriously consider putting in your New Year's plan, including peer pressure, some structure, and a way to avoid the "progress trap"

But before we jump into creating a plan, I have to call you out on something. It's a trap I fall into almost every day because I read and write about becoming more productive so much.

I often fall into a trap of reading about some cool changes I should make to my life, but then I completely forget about them a few days later because I didn't act on what I learned.

This guide may be interesting to read, but it will also be completely useless to you unless you act on what you learn. Without actually acting on what you read, you're basically just looking at productivity porn. I think that's a trap that's easy to fall into; after all, reading about changes you can make to your life is way more fun than actually acting to make your life better.

So if you haven't already, I highly recommend you take out a pen and paper (or fire up Word in another window) before you read on.

Alright, let's get planning!

Make your goals SMART, small, and challenging

When you create a plan to achieve your New Year's resolutions, it's critically important that you make your goals SMART, small, and relatively challenging. Doing so will force you think about what accomplishing your goal will actually be like, and it will also help you define exactly what you want to accomplish.

MAKE YOUR GOALS S.M.A.R.T.

The "SMART" model to setting goals is very simple and very powerful, and it's so powerful that I use it every week or two. **It's a very simple framework for creating goals, and unfortunately for that reason it can be easy to gloss over.** In practice, though, the framework is one of the most powerful techniques available to you to convert your vague New Year's resolutions into goals that you can create a plan for. Now is a good time to take out a pen and paper if you don't have them out already.

The SMART model says that for a goal to be a good one, it has to be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based.

Specific

Your goal should be as specific as possible. That means your plan should include:

- What you want to accomplish, in as much detail as possible, as well as what the end result will look like
- Who needs to be involved for you to reach your goal
- Where you will accomplish the goal
- Why you want to accomplish the goal, and what costs will be associated with the goal

The more specific you make your goal, the more powerful your plan will be, since you will know exactly what you want to accomplish.

For example, instead of making a New Year's resolution to lose weight, make your goal as specific as possible. For instance: "I'm going to lose 15 pounds, with a personal trainer, at the gym after work every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and I want to accomplish the goal so I can look amazing in my sexy man-speedo when I go to Cuba in February. It will cost me four hours a week, and some willpower until I make a habit of going to the gym, but it will be worth it.")

Measurable

Next, define exactly how you will measure your progress in reaching your goal, and make sure the criteria you use to measure your goal's progress are quantifiable. For example, if you plan to lose weight, know exactly how many pounds you will lose, and exactly how you will measure your progress.

If you don't measure your progress toward your goal, it will be impossible for you to figure out if you're on track to achieve it. In your plan, make sure you include exactly how you will measure your progress, as well as how often you will measure your progress (e.g. "by weighing myself before breakfast every morning").

Attainable

This is a biggie, and determining how attainable your goals are might require a bit of processing on your part. Is the resolution you've defined up to this point realistically attainable by you? What do you not have that you will need to accomplish your resolution? Will you have the energy/focus/time to achieve it?

The "attainability" of a goal is centered around you, and whether you have the focus, energy, time, and drive to achieve it.

Relevant

A goal that is relevant is deeply connected to your values and priorities (both of which you defined back in Part One).

Relevance can also refer to whether it is the right *time* to follow through on a goal. Some resolutions might be worth following through on later in the year (e.g. training for a marathon later in the year after the weather is warmer).

Time-based

Time creates urgency, and your goals should be time-based. For example, instead of making a goal to lose 10 pounds, make a goal to lose 2.5 pounds a month for four months.

It is also important to define the milestones you will reach along the way to reaching your big goal, and when exactly you plan to reach those milestones. Since you have already defined your goals to be measurable and attainable, you will be able to make realistic, real progress toward your milestones after you create your plan.

It's often not an easy process to define milestones for a goal, but I guarantee that when you define measurable milestones along the way, your New Year's resolutions will become a lot less vague and a lot more understandable and relatable.

Creating goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-based is one of the most powerful strategies I know of to define and stick to your goals. I'll be honest, defining SMART goals can be a tedious process, but if you're serious about sticking to your resolutions, you absolutely have to include a SMART definition of your goals in your New Year's plan.

MAKE YOUR GOALS SMALL

One of the biggest lessons I learned from a productivity experiment [where I was a complete slob for a week](#) was that the best way to make positive, lasting changes to your life is to start small. *Very* small.

That may sound like counterintuitive advice, but the reasoning behind it is simple: the smaller the changes you try to make to your life, the more likely you'll actually make them.

Interestingly, the more of a slob I became during the experiment, the more resolved I became to become more productive, but ironically the less energy, willpower, and focus I had to actually make changes to my life. The deeper I fell into the experiment (as much as I could over a week, that is, which ended up being surprisingly quite a bit), the more I wanted to make huge changes to my life, and the more unreasonable I became with what I wanted to accomplish.

I think the key to making successful changes to your habits, behaviour, and routines is to start small—very small, because that way the changes will actually stick. I've been playing around with making changes to my habits and routines for the better part of eight months with AYOP, and when I make changes to my habits I still try to make them as small as possible so they'll actually stick. Small resolutions take less time, willpower, and motivation, which means you will actually keep them, and become more confident in your ability to change.

Smaller resolutions will also make you delightfully anxious. For example, if you make a New Year's resolution to lose one pound a month for four months, create a plan to reach your goal and then only visit the gym once a week to start. If you care about making the resolution (that is, it's aligned to your values), you will be incredibly anxious to ramp up how many times you hit the gym a week as the year rolls on.

It's counterintuitive. But when you only have so much willpower, time, and energy to make changes to your habits, if you want your New Year's resolutions to actually stick, make them as small as possible.

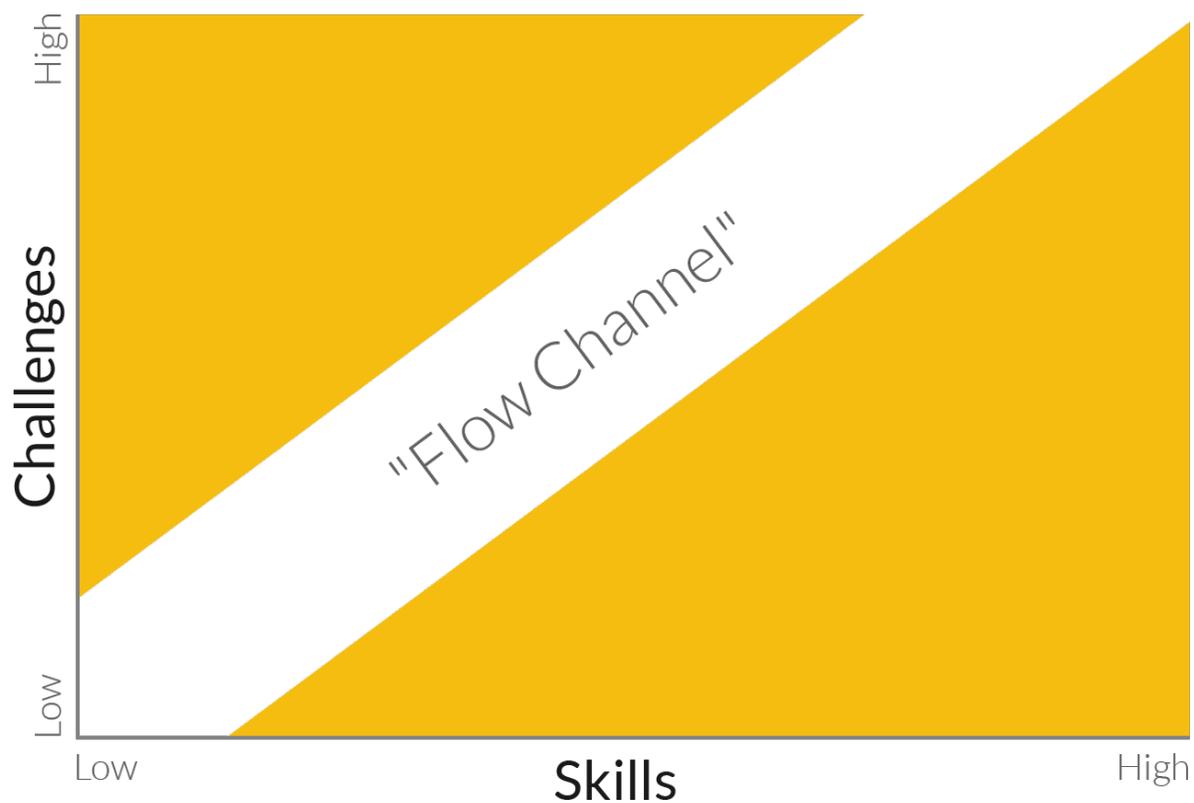
One of the biggest ideas we'll talk about in Part Three is that you should go easy on yourself when you make resolutions. There is no sense being overly hard on yourself when you make your New Year's resolutions, and when you respect yourself when you make them, I believe you're a lot likelier to actually achieve them. Making smaller resolutions is a great way to show more respect for yourself in the new year.

MAKE YOUR GOALS CHALLENGING

Just because your New Year's resolutions should be small doesn't mean that they should be easy. Especially if your resolution is to learn a new skill (or you need a specific skill to achieve your goal), activities that pose a challenge roughly equal to your skill level will allow you to experience "flow", and according to research, will make you a lot happier.

Flow is that magical place where you're completely absorbed in what you're doing, where time seems to pass so fast it's like it doesn't exist at all.

The book [Flow](#) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is somewhat dry and academic, but it contains several golden nuggets, my favorite of which is the chart below:

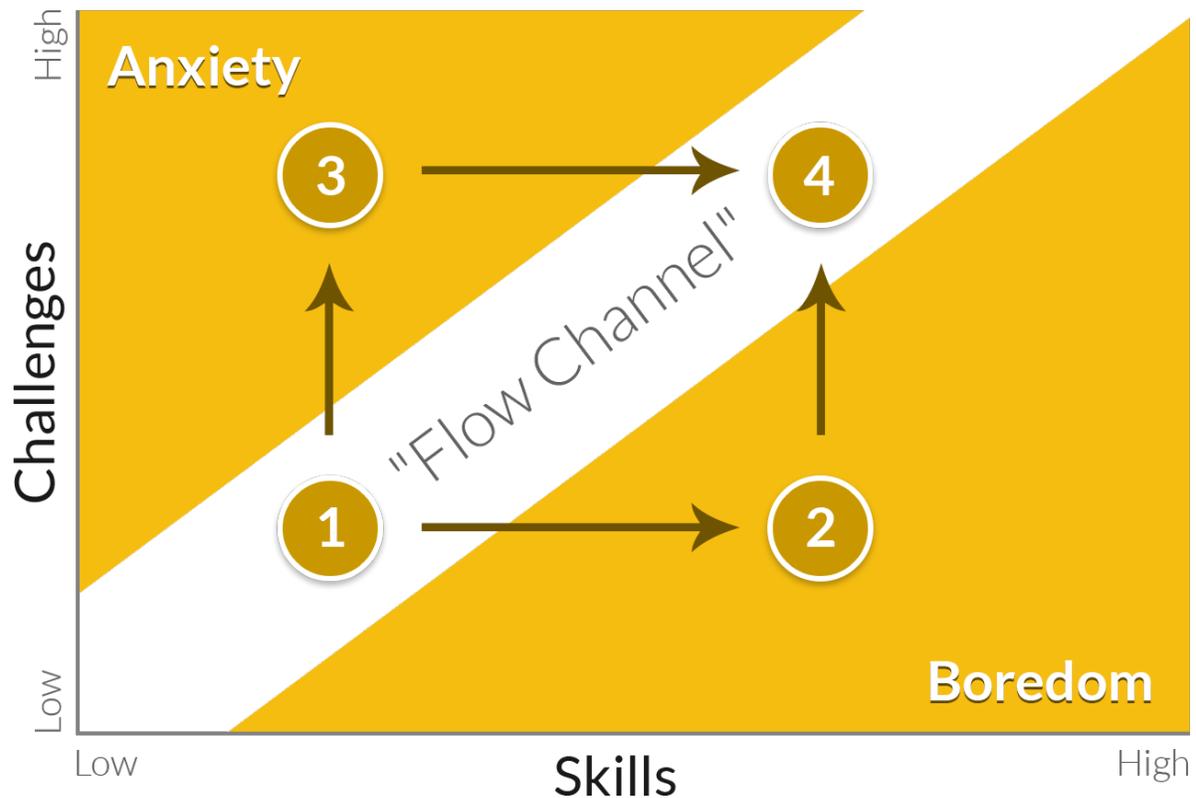


If you have no idea what's going on in the chart, I don't blame you. Here's what the chart is about, in a nut:

- Every activity that you do falls somewhere on this chart, depending on how challenging it is (to you), and how many of your skills it utilizes.
- The ideal place to be is, you guessed it, in the "Flow Channel". In the Flow Channel, the challenge of what you're doing is roughly equal to the skills you have to do that thing. Especially when you're motivated to get something done, according to Csikszentmihalyi, this is where you'll experience flow, and be the happiest. For example, spelling 'Csikszentmihalyi' is a

task that is pretty challenging, but it doesn't require a lot of skill, which places the activity in the "Anxiety" corner of the graph.

Let's say you make a New Year's resolution to learn how to play tennis. In *Flow*, Csikszentmihalyi uses learning tennis as an example to illustrate how you can experience flow. I've added four numbered circles to the chart to illustrate his example.



Here's what the numbers mean.

1: Your starting point. Here, you're playing tennis for the very first time. You're practicing serving the ball over the net (which is tricky, but manageable at first), and trying to hit the other side of the court from your side (or something—I'll admit, I have no idea how to play tennis). At this point, you're experiencing flow, because the challenge of what you're doing is roughly equal to your skill level, and you're having fun.

From this starting point, one of two things can happen:

You move to "2". You improve your skills to the point where you get bored of just hitting the ball over the net. The challenge of playing is now lower than your skill level, and you no longer experience flow.

You move to "3". You challenge yourself at a level that stresses you out – for example, you decide to play a tennis-loving friend of yours, and she kicks your ass. Here, the challenge of playing is greater than your skill level, and you no longer experience flow.

Depending on where you're at, there are two ways to get back to the Flow Channel.

If you're bored ("2"), you will need to find a way to increase the challenge of playing, like by finding an opponent whose skill level is roughly equal to yours.

If you're anxious ("3"), you will need to work on improving your tennis skills to get back in the Flow Channel. (You could also decrease the challenge, but that's more difficult in practice.)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, this "explains why flow activities lead to growth and discovery. One cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level for long. We grow either bored or frustrated; and then the desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills, or to discover new opportunities for using them."³

I think one of the reasons people fail to keep their New Year's resolutions is they become either bored with them because they're not challenging or interesting enough, or they become anxious because their resolutions feel out of their reach. Though you have already made your New Year's goals measurable and attainable, when it comes time to hunker down and actually do your New Year's resolution, continually reflect on whether your efforts are in the "flow channel".

Every single activity you perform falls somewhere on this diagram, and according to Csikszentmihalyi's research, the activities that let you experience flow are the ones that will make you the happiest. If you make a New Year's resolution that requires skill on your part, make sure you balance the skill required to do it with about the same amount of challenge so you can be the most motivated. Just make sure you're kind to yourself in the process, by setting smaller goals, and by clearly defining your goals in the first place.

³ Source: [Flow](#) book.

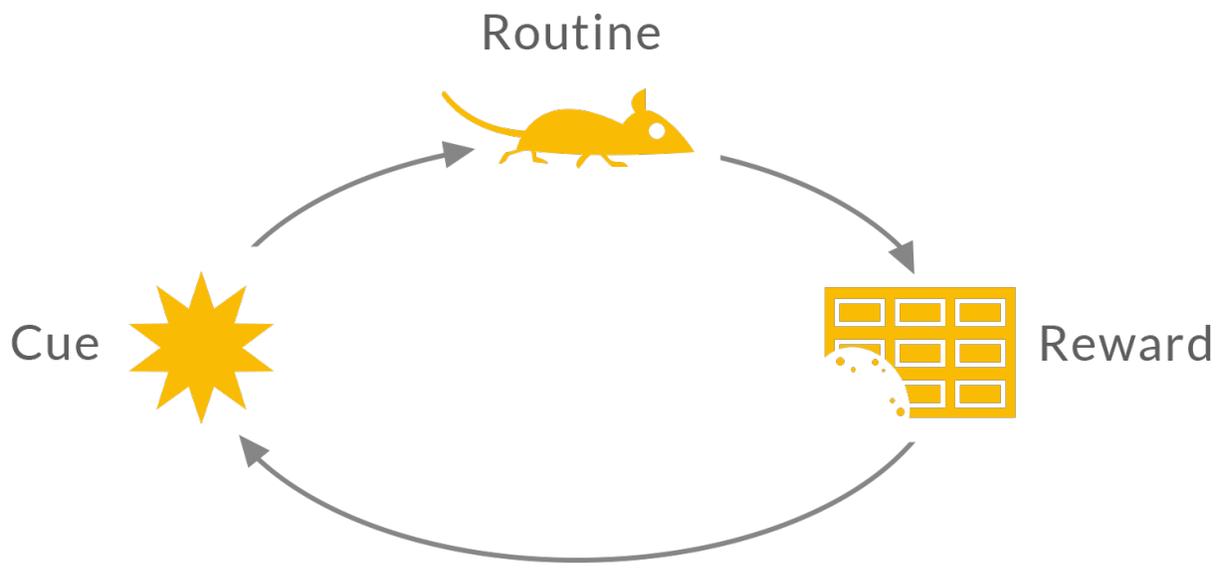
Charles Duhigg on keeping your New Year's resolutions

I recently had the opportunity to interview Charles Duhigg about how you can use habits to stick to your New Year's resolutions. Charles is a Pulitzer prize-winning reporter for the New York Times, and the author of the bestselling book, [The Power of Habit](#).

After you define your goals for the new year, developing good habits is absolutely essential if you want to keep your New Year's resolutions. Work habits determine how productive you can be, eating habits determine how healthy you become, exercise habits determine how much weight you can lose, and habits in general determine how you live your life. In fact, according to Charles Duhigg, the author of [The Power of Habit](#), as many as "40-45% of our daily activities are habits" which means that "if you don't get your habits right, you won't reach your goals."

THE 'HABIT LOOP'

When I spoke with Duhigg, he talked about how you can break down every single habit into three components. "There's the cue, which is the trigger for an automatic behaviour to start, and then the routine, which is the behaviour itself, and then finally a reward." And there has been quite a bit of neurological research to back that up. "When cue and a behaviour and a reward become neurologically intertwined, what's actually happening is a neural pathway is developing that links those three things together in our head." That's why habits are so sticky, and why bad habits are so hard to break.



Even though it's difficult to break a habit (research has shown that it's way easier to *change* an old habit instead of trying to extinguish it—more on that in a bit), it's possible to use the science of habit change to your advantage to either introduce new habits into your life, or change existing, hard-wired behaviours you're tired of.

Here's how to do both.

HOW TO ADOPT A NEW HABIT

I personally think that one of the first things you should do after you make a New Year's resolution is convert it into a habit. For example, instead of making a New Year's resolution to work out more, form a habit to go for a 15-minute walk to a coffee shop and back every lunch hour. Or instead of making a resolution to lose weight, make a resolution to swap out your sugary morning latte with a green tea.

But that's way easier said than done, and so one of the things I asked Charles was how to form a brand new habit. The answer, it turns out, is to define a few "cues" to trigger the habit, and then to reward yourself after you follow through with the habit "routine".

1. Define a few cues

To adopt a new habit, Duhigg recommends that you "think deliberately about the cues and rewards you want to establish in your life that will encourage good behaviour".

According to Charles, cues that trigger a habit sequence can fall into one of five categories:

1. A certain time of day
2. A certain place
3. The presence of certain people
4. A particular emotion
5. A preceding behaviour that's been ritualized

Duhigg recommends you start off by introducing a few cues from a few different categories of triggers. "Your brain will ultimately latch onto one of them, but you want to throw out a bunch of candidates."

It's easiest to illustrate that with an example, like making a New Year's resolution to exercise more. "Let's say you put your running clothes next to your bed so you see them when you wake up in the morning, and you schedule to go running on Wednesday's at 8:30 in the morning with one of your best friends." That example includes a few triggers, including a time of day, a certain place, and the presence of certain people.

2. *Reward yourself*

After you define a few cues to trigger your new habit, you should then establish a way to reward yourself for completing the routine.

Charles touched on how difficult it can be to routinize new behaviours. "Even if you *think* you want to start exercising, your brain essentially thinks that you're a liar and that you don't actually like exercise. So what you have to do is train your brain so it knows that exercise is linked to something you know that you enjoy, like a piece of chocolate, taking a nice long shower, or spending 15 minutes on Facebook. It doesn't matter what the reward is. *What matters is it's genuinely rewarding*, and that you allow yourself to enjoy that reward.

"Now contrast that with how most people end up starting an exercise routine. They wake up one morning and they go for a run, they come home, and they're running late because they just spent 20 minutes running. And their kids need to get out the door, so they're stressed out and rushing through their morning routine. What they're doing there is effectively punishing themselves for exercising. They're making things harder after they work out, and that's exactly the wrong thing to do, because we know that our neurology will latch onto rewards."

Rewarding yourself after you go through with a routine is how you should solidify the cue, routine, reward sequence in your head. For example, Duhigg suggested that "when you start an exercise habit and you get home from your workout or your run, you should eat a small piece of

chocolate". That may sound like counterintuitive advice on the surface, but when a genuine reward helps you so much in solidifying a habit, it's no doubt sound advice in the long-run.

After you plan a few cues that will trigger a habit sequence, as well as properly reward yourself afterward, over time you will have to invest less time and willpower into keeping your resolution. Though you may need to be patient while you form new habits, with sufficient cues and a satisfying reward, over time your behaviour will become much easier, and increasingly automatic.

DON'T TRY TO EXTINGUISH OLD HABITS—*CHANGE* THEM INSTEAD

In [The Power of Habit](#), Duhigg talks about how you can burn through a lot of willpower trying to force yourself to adopt resolutions. Willpower is one of your most valuable resources, and a slew of studies has shown that it can be depleted, which makes forming automatic habits even more important. Rather than trying to extinguish an old habit, Duhigg mentioned that research has shown that "what's much easier, and much more successful ... is to *change* a habit."

"As the reward releases more and more neurotransmitters, the neurological connections in that pathway get slightly thicker and thicker, and that makes it easier for impulses to travel down that pathway. So when someone's trying to extinguish a habit, what they're trying to do is, through willpower, destroy a neural pathway. It's pretty hard to will ourselves into changing our brains."

Just like adopting a new habit, to change an old habit you should start by identifying a cue and a reward, but you should "find a new behaviour that seems to correspond to them" (a new routine). Duhigg recommends that you keep the cue and the reward as similar as possible, because habits can be so ingrained in your brain.

Cues are pretty easy to identify (because they fall into one of the five aforementioned categories), but rewards can be trickier to identify. For example, let's say you have a habit of walking to a vending machine at work every afternoon. Your cue is likely the time of day, but the reward your brain is seeking out is more difficult to pinpoint. For example, are you craving some food because you're hungry? Or are you craving a break from your work, or a way to make your afternoon more interesting?

According to Charles, it's only "once you identify what reward you're genuinely craving [that] you can change the behaviour." Depending on what reward you're actually seeking in this example, your best substitute behaviours could range from eating an apple if you're hungry, to taking a walk outside if you need a break, to surfing Facebook for 15 minutes if you're looking for some novelty.

Once you identify the deeper reward, you can make sure that "the cue and the reward remain pretty stable", and that "it's just the behaviour itself that actually changes."

ANTICIPATE OBSTACLES

Charles talked about how one of the most important parts of keeping habits is "anticipating where the breakdown will occur", and anticipating any obstacles you will face along the way to achieving your goals.

"Very frequently people will start an exercise routine, and at the end of the month they're about to go running and something that's totally anticipated occurs, like they're going on a trip. In that situation, they forgot to bring their running clothes, or it's hard when you're in a hotel to figure out where to go running. You don't know where the gym is. And these small roadblocks become major impediments, and all of a sudden the pattern gets thrown off and it never reemerges."

"An obstacle often is very easy to deal with ahead of time, and very hard to deal with at the moment it occurs. Study after study shows that if you [use the habit loop and anticipate obstacles], you're much more likely to successfully build a new habit".

THINK DELIBERATELY

Towards the end of our interview, when I asked Charles Duhigg what one productivity tip he would give to someone in the new year, he talked about how important it is to think deliberately about how your life works.

"The truth of the matter is, much of what we do everyday we don't pay attention to, and that's a good thing, because it's not mentally taxing". But on the other hand, "being more aware of what is driving your behaviour tends to empower you to actually change those behaviours, and that seems to have a significant impact on how you change on a day-to-day basis."

Understanding your habits is no doubt one of the best ways to become more aware of, and take control over what is driving your behaviour in the New Year.

[The Power of Habit](#) is now available in paperback pretty much everywhere. I highly recommend it.

4 more things to include in your plan

Now that you've clearly defined your goals and come up with a plan to use habits to your advantage in the new year, here are four more things to seriously consider including in New Year's plan, including: peer pressure, a way to avoid the "progress trap", a message from yourself (from the future!), and structure.

PEER PRESSURE

The behaviour of your friends, family, and coworkers is incredibly contagious. Take obesity, for example.

One (massive) study wanted to determine just how contagious obesity was, so researchers analyzed the weight and social relationships between 12,000 people over 65 years (everyone in the study lived in the same small town). What they found was incredible:⁴

"When a friend became obese, a person's own future risk of becoming obese increased by 171% percent. A woman whose sister became obese has a 67 percent increased risk, and a man whose brother became obese had a 45% percent increased risk."

In other words, obesity is pretty similar to an infectious airborne illness like the flu. Other studies have also found similar effects for habits like drug use, sleep deprivation, and depression.⁵

What can you do about it?

Kelly McGonigal, the author of the terrific book, [The Willpower Instinct](#), offers up a few suggestions of things to be aware of:

- Pay special attention to the habits of the people you like more. Their behaviour will be much more contagious to you.
- Look for friends, family members, and coworkers that have the same social 'infections' as you.
- Ask yourself: are there certain friends you're more likely to indulge with?
- Think hard: did you pick up a bad habit from a friend or family member?

⁴ Source: [The Willpower Instinct](#).

⁵ Source: [The Willpower Instinct](#).

McGonigal also offers up a few awesome, practical tips to use peer pressure to stick to your goals:

1. Look for people in your network who have tried to rewire the same habits you're struggling with, or have mastered better ones already. And if you're serious about using peer pressure to stick to your resolutions, spend more time with those people.
2. "Spend a few minutes at the beginning of your day thinking about your own goals, and how you could be tempted to ignore them" because of the people around you.
3. Look for a tribe of people that shares your goals, like a running club, book club, or a Stop Snacking Club. (Okay, maybe that last one doesn't exist.)
4. Look for a magazine (or blog!) that shares your goals.

We adapt our behaviours to the environments we put ourselves in, which is why social 'infections' spread so fast. Being mindful of that effect, while changing your environment to better fit your goals will turn the tables on peer pressure, and let you use it to stick to your New Year's resolutions.

I think creating a plan for how you will use peer pressure to your advantage is something that belongs in almost every New Year's resolution plan, especially if your resolutions will require a lot of willpower to achieve.

A WAY TO AVOID THE "PROGRESS TRAP"

Tracking your progress on your goals can be surprisingly counterproductive.

Need a little proof? Take these two studies:⁶

- Researchers at the University of Chicago ran a study where they reminded successful dieters of their progress, and then offered them a choice between an apple and a chocolate bar as a reward. When dieters were reminded of their progress, 85% of them chose the chocolate bar over the apple, compared to just 58% with participants who weren't reminded.
- A second study reminded students of how much they studied for exams, and found that students who were reminded of their progress were much likelier to spend the night partying.

Why is this the case? According to Kelly McGonigal, "[w]hen you make progress toward your long-term goal, your brain – with its mental checklist of many goals – turns off the mental processes that were driving you to pursue your long-term goal". Then, it becomes more focused on getting satisfaction from indulging, because your brain feels like it has met its goal, and "any temptation will become more tempting".

⁶ Source: [The Willpower Instinct](#).

Even your to-do list isn't safe. When you write up a to-do list, you feel productive because you're capturing all you need to do, but research has shown that you're less likely to actually do it because capturing everything you need to do *feels* like you're making progress.

What can you do to combat The Progress Trap?

Just like with using peer pressure to your advantage, McGonigal offers up a few suggestions in [The Willpower Instinct](#):

- "View your actions as evidence that you are committed to your goal."
- Always remind yourself why you want to reach your goal, especially as you reach milestones along the way.
- Look at your accomplishments to see that you really do care about your goal, "so much so that you want to do even more to reach it".
- After you make positive steps toward a goal, ask yourself: "how committed do you feel toward that goal?" Don't ask yourself how much progress you've made toward it.

Tracking your progress toward your goals sounds like a great idea on the surface, but it can be detrimental to your productivity if you don't do it right. It's important to track progress on your goals to know when you've reached your milestones, but **make sure you view your actions as signs that you're committed to your goal, and constantly question why you want to reach your goal in the first place.** When you do so, research has shown that you'll be a lot more successful in sticking to your resolutions.

YOURSELF, FROM THE FUTURE

You've likely made the mistake of thinking future-you will be a lot stronger than your present-you: that future you has unlimited self-control, doesn't procrastinate, and has boundless energy for all tasks, regardless of how gruelling or boring they will be. (*Why* wouldn't *I* buy this collection of Jane Austen novels for \$20? *I'm bound to read them someday!*) And if you're like me, future-you is also a lot more rested and relaxed than the tired, stressed out version of you that's reading this book right now.

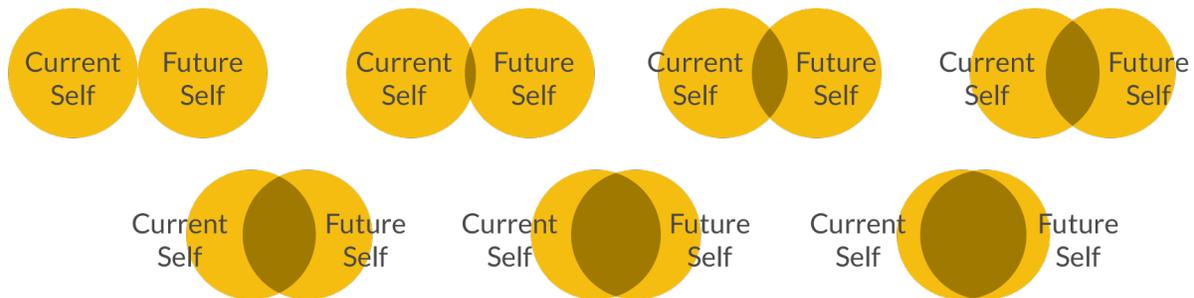
One study even found that when we think of our future selves our brain activity is nearly identical to when we think of another person!⁷

This has consequences, of course. People who see their future-selves as stronger, better versions of their present-day selves make bad decisions that compromise their future happiness and success. Research has shown that people with lower future-self continuity are later for appointments, make less ethical business decisions, save less for their retirement, lie more often,

⁷ Source: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2656877/>

are more likely to pocket money they find in a coworker's office, and are also more likely to leak information that would ruin a coworker's career.⁸

A man by the name of Hal Hershfield devised a measurement of how closely a person identifies with their future-self, named their "future-self continuity".⁹



It's totally worth pausing for a few seconds to think about where you fall in the spectrum above. According to Hershfield, "what our research has [shown] is that if people think of their future selves as a different person altogether ... then that has deep implications", particularly with saving money.¹⁰

In a nut, having a low future-self continuity makes you more impulsive, and less mindful of the consequences of your actions, while having a high future-self continuity lets you be the best version of yourself now.

If you think you have a low future-self continuity, here are a few proven ways to get in touch with your future-self that you should include in your New Year's plan:

- **Send an email to your future self.** Seriously, do it. FutureMe.org lets you send an email to yourself in the future at a date you specify. A great way to bridge the gap between your present and future selves is to tell your future self how your current actions will benefit yourself in the future.
- **Imagine your future self.** Research has shown that all it takes to increase your future-self continuity is to imagine yourself in the future. The more vivid the future feels, the better.
- **Download [AgingBooth](#),** or a similar app that shows you what you will look like down the road. That might sound like a funny suggestion on the surface (even though the app *is* a lot of

⁸ Source: [The Willpower Instinct](#) book.

⁹ Source: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749597811001294>

¹⁰ Source: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/learnvest/2013/07/11/how-to-visualize-your-way-to-a-better-financial-life/>

fun), but it's been shown to increase your future-self continuity. "Hershfield and his colleagues found that when computer simulators were used to show people what they might look like 20 or 30 years from now, participants who were shown the photos allocated 6% of their hypothetical paycheck to retirement, while those who didn't see "future self" photos only saved about 4%—a seismic difference since the earnings on your retirement savings compound over time."¹¹

STRUCTURE

The final element you should seriously consider including in your New Year's resolution plan is a way to structure your time.

According to researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (CHEEK-sent-me-hi-ee, for those of you playing along at home), noon on Sunday is the “unhappiest hour in America”, and it’s not because you’re hungover or have to work the next day.¹² According to his research, people are the unhappiest then because they are the least productive.

According to Winifred Gallagher, the author of [RAPT](#), a book about managing your attention, the “antidote to leisure-time [boredom and unhappiness] is to pay as much attention to scheduling a productive evening or weekend as you do to your workday”.

Gallagher says that although people say that they enjoy being at home more than they do being at work, on the job they are “much likelier to focus on activities that demand their attention, challenge their abilities, have a clear objective, and elicit timely feedback”, all conditions that “favor an optimal experience”. Csikszentmihalyi’s research has also found that at work, people feel “more creative, active, concentrated, and involved than they do in domestic life”.

Scheduling your free time like you schedule your work time may seem backward on paper. After all, spontaneity is freedom—why plan out your free time as regimentally as you do work? Free time isn’t work!

While Winifred and Mihaly agree that free time is free time, they both agree that your become much more focused and motivated in your free time when you structure it somewhat. According to Mihaly, “if left to their own devices and genetic programming”, most people just do stuff like “worry about things or watch television”. According to him, it’s times like these that people become unfocused, unmotivated, and unhappy, and begin to “ruminate and feel like their time is being wasted”.

¹¹ Source: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/learnvest/2013/07/11/how-to-visualize-your-way-to-a-better-financial-life/>

¹² Source: http://books.google.ca/books?id=a57TKMkmP-cC&pg=PT84&lpg=PT84&ots=Us7E6s_EUJ&dq=However,+by+Sunday+noon+not+coincidentally,+the+unhappiest+hour+in+America

Being happy, creative, active, and focused are characteristics nearly everyone wants to have. The next time Sunday afternoon rolls around (or any other solid block of free time, really), a better-structured day, even if it's loosely structured, may be just the ticket to help you stay focused, disciplined, and happy.

Set minimums/maximums for how much time you'll spend in each of your hotspots

One of my favourite ways to structure my time works well with the 'hotspot' way of looking in your life that we talked about in Part One.

Once you've prioritized how important your hotspots are to you, act on how important they are to you by setting limits (minimums and maximums) on how much time you'll devote to each activity. Here's an example of some 'timeboxes', taken straight from the terrific book [Getting Results the Agile Way](#):

Hotspot	Minimum/Maximum
Mind	
Body	Minimum of 3 hours
Emotions	
Career	Maximum of 50 hours
Finances	
Relationships	Minimum of 8 hours
Fun	Minimum of 3 hours

To make sure you effectively timebox each hotspot, **actually schedule every minimum and maximums in your calendar** (especially ones where you have a lower limit of how much time you want to spend).

Minimums force you to not neglect some hotspots when you invest your time in others, and maximums force you to use your time better, because it pushes you to use the time you have more wisely. When you schedule time caps (maximums) for getting stuff done, your mind will be motivated to work harder, because you have less time to get the same amount of work done.

Setting minimums and maximums is also a terrific way to set limits for how much or how little time you'll spend on your New Year's resolutions. For example:

1. To achieve more of a work/life balance, set minimums and maximums for how much time you'll spend with your loved ones and at work
2. To keep a New Year's resolution to help others more, set (and schedule) a weekly minimum for how much time you'll spend looking for places to volunteer, and actually volunteering
3. If you've made a resolution to enjoy life more, set a minimum for how much time you'll spend relaxing (while loosely structuring your time, of course)
4. To stick to a New Year's resolution to exercise more, don't only create habits that will get you to the gym, but also schedule (in your calendar) a minimum amount of time you'll work out every week

SUMMING UP

To sum up, your plan to keep your New Year's resolution should include:

- Clearly defined goals that are: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-based, small, and challenging
- A habit plan for how you are going to convert your New Year's resolutions into habits by either adopting new habits, or by making changes to the habits you have already
- A plan for how you're going to use peer pressure, avoid the "progress trap", get in touch with your future self, and add additional structure to meet your goals

Creating a detailed plan for exactly how you're going to keep your resolutions may seem tedious, but I can't think of a single better way to achieve them.

When I interviewed Charles Duhigg for this guidebook, something he said stuck out at me—that "people tend to focus on the goal of a change without giving a lot of thought to the logistics of how they actually need to change".

I couldn't agree more, and if you want to stick to your resolutions, you absolutely have to make the jump from thinking about how great it would be to make a change to your life, to actually creating and following through with a plan to make that change.

Now, it's time to act

So now that you've thought about the potential costs of your New Year's resolutions, stepped back from your life to look at it from an elevated perspective, and formulated a plan to keep your resolutions, it's time to actually act on the plan you created.

At the end of the day, the only way to achieve your New Year's resolutions is to act on them. You should calculate their costs to see if resolutions are worth making, step back from your life to see if you're picking the right ones, and come up with a solid plan to follow through with them,

but if you don't eventually act on your plan, you'll never achieve it. That is what the next part is about. Part Three is broken down into five chapters.

- 1. David Allen on New Year's Resolutions**
- 2. Clear your mind**
- 3. Cut out distractions**
- 4. Get things done**
- 5. Go easy on yourself**

Chapter one is my interview with David Allen. One of the central ideas in David Allen's *Getting Things Done* system is how important it is to clear your mind so you can focus on your task at hand. David described how he accomplishes this with his GTD system in my interview with him, and he also touched on topics like his ritual of making New Year's *recollections* instead of resolutions, and why you should set shorter-term goals.

Chapter two will provide you with a few of my favorite habits for clearing your mind, including starting a "waiting for" list, having a "maintenance day", "clearing to neural", and starting a ritual to capture everything that's on your mind.

I also think that in order to get things done, it's just as important to clear out any distractions that you might have. Chapter three will provide you with some practical tips for taming your distractions so you can focus on your resolutions.

Then, it's time to actually get stuff done. In the fourth chapter I'll guide you through several solid, proven tools and techniques that will help you accomplish your resolutions in the new year.

Finally, we'll end by talking about how important it is to respect yourself while you work to keep your resolutions. That might sound a little hippie-dippy, but it's not. A lot of people like to beat themselves up when they make resolutions, and this chapter will talk about some ways to make sure you're not too hard on yourself in the process.

Before we jump in, though, if you've made a resolution to get organized, save more money, eat better, or quit smoking, make sure you digest the tips in the next section!

How to get organized, save money, eat better, and quit smoking in the new year

There are a few resolutions that require more tailored advice (in particular: getting organized, saving more money, eating better, and quitting smoking), and in those cases I've invited an expert on those topics to provide a few quick tips to help you achieve your goals.

Before we jump into doing the plan you have created, if you're making a New Year's resolution to quit smoking, get organized, save money, or eat better, make sure you digest the tips in this section! If your resolution has to do with something else, you can safely skip these tips.

GET ORGANIZED

BY: [LAURA WITTMANN](#)

You've decided that this is the year it's finally going to happen. You want to get organized once and for all. Set yourself up for success by putting these three tips into practice and you'll be well on your way to an organized and peaceful home in no time.

1. Set up a donation station ~ This can be as simple as adding a cardboard box to your closet or garage. **The idea here is to find somewhere to collect your purge pile each day.** At the end of the week, cart that box off to the thrift store so you aren't tempted to take some of your stuff back out.

2. Make a commitment to add a set number of things to your donation station each day ~ **Determine a reasonable amount of stuff you can purge each day based on the time you have available.** You might want to start small and work your way up. Whatever number you decide on, whether it be one item or ten, don't go to bed that evening until you've added that number of items to your bin.

3. Let go of the guilt ~ With every purge pile comes a small (or large) amount of guilt. We beat ourselves up over the money spent and maybe even the unfulfilled dreams we had attached to it. What's done is done. **Those unfilled dreams you are hanging onto are keeping you from living right now in the present.** Instead of feeling guilty, decide instead to learn something from the experience. Use what you have learned to make more conscious decisions the next time you go shopping or say yes to a kind friend wanting to unload her stuff on you. Don't

get hung up on the past but instead look to your future. What do you see? Chaos and clutter or sanity and order? Only you can decide and make it happen.

Laura Wittmann is the author of [Clutter Rehab](#), and blogs regularly at [I'm an Organizing Junkie](#).

SAVE MORE MONEY

BY: J. MONEY

There are a ton of experts giving advice when it comes to money, specifically saving it, but if you're anything like me you need this stuff to be fairly fun, or at least actionable, to get you going. And even better - a challenge. So I've whipped up a few of my favorite ways to save money in this new year, and I hope one of them gets you to do exactly that: act. Good luck!

Saving challenge #1: Track every single expense for the next 30 days. That may sound funny as you're focusing on money going out rather than coming in, but I guarantee you after the first few days you'll start double-thinking all those purchases you're about to make. And by the end of the 30 days you'll have saved a lot more than you would have without tracking! (Plus, a bonus is you'll get a much better understanding of your money the longer you keep it up.)

Saving challenge #2: The "No Spend" challenge. Similar to idea #1, the deal here is to consciously get you to pay attention to each and every transaction you're making. With the "no spend" challenge, you're only allowed to pay for things that are necessities (rent, mortgage, utilities, etc), and your goal is to stay away from anything out side of that such as eating out or shopping, or even going to the movies. Depriving yourself of these luxuries will not only give you a better appreciation for your money/life, but it'll save you a ton in the process!

Saving challenge #3: The 52 Weeks Savings Challenge. This one is pretty popular with people because it only requires you to put some cash in a jar once a week - no other work required! All you do is put \$1.00 in a jar on Monday of week #1, and then up it by another dollar each consecutive week. So, for week #1 it's \$1.00, then week #2 it's \$2.00, then week number 3 it's \$3.00 and on and on until you reach the 52nd one (which you'd have placed \$52 aside). Doing this for 52 straight weeks will net you a whopping \$1,378 at the end of the year! Pretty cool, right? And, super easy.

Saving challenge #4: The Spare Change/Dollars Challenge. This one's also a fun and easy one. All you do is throw your spare change at the end of every night into a jar and watch it pile up! Some days you'll have a ton of it to add to the pot, while others nothing at all (especially if you're doing challenge #2! :)). And if you don't find that quite challenging enough, up it a level and put all *single dollar bills* into the jar instead every night. By the end of the year you will have one plump bucket!

***BONUS* Challenge:** Set up a new savings account and automate a monthly transfer. This is the easiest challenge of them all as it only requires you to do a couple of steps once, and then step back and let the system work for you! Step #1 is to create a new savings account at any bank of your choice - preferably one outside of your current bank so there's less temptation to

pull from it. Then step #2 is to set up an automatic transfer to it once a month! It could be \$25, \$50, or even \$100. Whatever you can comfortably squirrel away without worrying about anything. And it can be done by logging onto your bank account to set up the transfer, or by contacting your human resources at work and asking them to divert it through your paycheck. Whatever the method, it all goes to siphoning away money without any extra thoughts on your behalf. And the longer you leave it be, the bigger your stash will get!

Any of these challenges can help you in the long run, but it only works if you pick one and **take action**. So start today! Which challenge will it be?

J. Money is the creator of the popular finance blog, [Budgets Are Sexy](#), where he has been writing about budgeting and saving money for more than five years.

EAT BETTER

BY: [RACHEL CAVEN](#)

So you've decided that you want to eat healthier in the new year.. what should you do next? Here are three of my favourite tips to help you eat better in the new year!

1. Drink more water

Most people don't realize how little water they drink. A lot of people use the excuse that they don't want to be running to the bathroom on a regular basis, however, that's a good thing! Your kidneys and liver need water to help filter your blood. Not drinking enough water can cause numerous symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, hunger (your body can mistake thirst signals for hunger), and bloating! Yes, that's right; not drinking enough water can cause your body to retain water. Dehydration is also stressful on your body, which can cause your body to store fat. How do you know if you are getting enough? Your urine should be clear and odourless throughout the day (with the exception of first thing in the morning and after taking a vitamin supplement). Tips to drink more water:

- Always drink water first thing in the morning before coffee or food. Keep a glass by your nightstand to help you get in the habit.
- Purchase a stainless steel or glass water bottle and take it with you everywhere!
- Limit other beverages (coffee, sodas, juice) and drink water instead. Flavour your water with lemon, lime, orange slices, or herbal tea bags.
- Eat lots of fruits and veggies—they're full of water!

2. Eat your greens

Leafy greens are the most nutritionally dense food you can get! They are full of nutrients, fibre, and chlorophyll (which helps your body filter your blood). Greens are also a great source of iron which keeps your energy up. Tips to eat more greens:

- Purchase a tub of organic spinach every week and make it a goal to go through it by the end of the week.
- Put a handful of greens in every meal, like in smoothies, omelettes, soups, stir fries, stews, chilis, and salads (obviously). When greens are cooked they become very small and you won't even notice them.
- If fresh greens aren't an option, keep a powdered greens supplement or liquid chlorophyll on hand to use in a pinch.

3. Eat every colour every day

Study after study has shown that the more fruits and vegetables you eat, the healthier you are. Fruits and vegetables are full of vitamins, minerals, fibre and antioxidants. Every colour is responsible for a different antioxidant, so try to eat the entire rainbow everyday! For example:

- Red: cranberries, pomegranates, red apples, raspberries, strawberries, beets, red peppers
- Blue/purple: blueberries, blackberries, purple cabbage
- Orange: oranges, grapefruit, carrots, squash, sweet potatoes, yams
- Green: leafy greens, spinach, kale, arugula, broccoli, Brussels sprouts
- White: cauliflower, onions, garlic

Tips to eat more colour:

- Start your day with a mixed berry smoothie (strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, blackberries) and add a handful of greens to get most of the colours in before your day starts.
- Try to make your meals as colourful as possible by using a variety of vegetables. This is the healthiest and most visually pleasing way to eat.
- It's ok to use frozen veggies in the winter (especially if you live in a northern climate where fresh produce isn't seasonal). Purchase pre-cut mixed veggies and stir fry mixes for a quick, colourful meal.

If you've made a resolution to eat better in the new year, start by drinking more water, eating your greens, and eating every color every day!

*Rachel Caven owns a [private nutritional consulting business](#) in Ottawa, Canada, and is also a contributor to *Chatelaine Magazine*, *Alive Magazine*, *CTV Morning Live*, and *the Ottawa Sun*.*

QUIT SMOKING

BY: [TERRY MARTIN](#)

"Quitting smoking is easy; I've done it hundreds of time. It's staying quit that's tough."

So it goes with nicotine addiction, a wily opponent that hammers away at our determination to quit for the long term almost as soon as we stub out the last cigarette that signals the start of smoking cessation.

If you'd like to make this quit attempt the one that sticks for good, use the tips below to build a strong foundation for the smoke-free life you're dreaming of.

1. Read, Read, Read. From what to expect physically and emotionally when you stop smoking, to ways to deal with the challenges that come with recovery from nicotine addiction, education is vital and empowering.

2. Seek out Online Support. When it comes to quitting tobacco, there is no better medicine than hearing from those who have walked the path before you and alongside of you. Online support connects you with hundreds of ex-smokers at all stages of quitting, and that support is available 24/7. If you're struggling at 1am, you can log on and usually get immediate feedback because people from every time zone are involved.

3. Start a Quit Journal...and use it every day. Start your journal with a list of reasons for quitting and leave space to add more as time goes by. A few sentences describing how the day went, good or bad doesn't require much time, but it will pay off days or weeks down the road when you're having a bad day. A quick look back through your journal will help you see just how far you've come.

4. When cravings hit, shift gears mentally by changing your activity on the spot. If the urge to smoke grabs hold, get up and take a quick walk around the house, office or block. Drink a glass of water. Eat a healthy snack. Read through your quit journal. Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing for 3 minutes. The idea is to jolt yourself out of the unhealthy thought pattern that is responsible for the craving, thereby disabling it. It only takes seconds to break a negative thought cycle and pull yourself out of a downward spiral.

5. Relax and let cravings wash over you. Rather than bracing for a fight when a strong smoking urge hits, relax and lean into it. Think of each one as a sign of healing because that is exactly what it is. Successfully overcome, you are teaching yourself how to manage life without a cigarette in your hand, one urge at a time.

6. Smoking cessation is a process, not an event. Most of us spent years developing associations between the activities in our lives and smoking, and we can't expect them all to dissolve overnight. Give yourself the benefit of the time it takes to heal without any preconceived notions on how long that should be.

7. Remember your reasons and be proactive. Once we get a little distance from smoking, it's normal to lose sight of just how bad smoking made us feel, or how much we hated it. From there, most of us start to think of smoking as an old love we let slip away. This is junkie thinking, and while it comes with the territory early on in cessation, it can derail a quit program quickly if left unchecked. Pay attention to your thoughts and when you find yourself wandering into dangerous territory, use the tips in item #4 to head it off.

8. Did I mention online support? I cannot emphasize enough the importance of this valuable quit tool, even if posting is not your style. Simply reading how others are managing will fortify your resolve more than you know.

Smoking cessation is hard work at times, especially early on, but dig your heels in and go the distance. It won't be difficult forever, and the benefits you can look forward to far outweigh the work it takes to achieve.

Terry Martin smoked for 26 years before she quit. She is the author of the [About.com Quit Smoking page](#), and is a regular on the [About.com Quit Smoking forum](#).

Part Three: Do the Plan

David Allen on keeping your New Year's resolutions

David Allen is widely recognized as the world's leading authority on personal and organizational productivity. He's also the bestselling author of my favourite book on productivity, [Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity](#). If you want to become more productive and focused in the new year, I can't recommend his book highly enough.

I recently had the opportunity to interview David Allen about how you can become more productive in the new year and keep your New Year's resolutions. Our interview covered a wide gamut of topics, but all of David's points hammered at essentially the same nail: in order to keep your New Year's resolutions, you've got to be kind to yourself. David isn't a motivational author in the traditional sense, but in an interesting way, everything he writes about centres around showing more respect for yourself.

I've pulled my four favourite nuggets from our interview, including: why you should make *recollections* in addition to resolutions, how you can make changes more automatic through habits, why you should set shorter-term, 'process' goals, and how you should capture and deal with all of the open loops in your life. All of these approaches will get you to show more respect for yourself in the new year, and they're below!

IN ADDITION TO MAKING NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS, MAKE NEW YEAR'S *RECOLLECTIONS*

After I spoke with David, I couldn't stop thinking about one statistic he mentioned: that 80% of what you say to yourself in your head is negative. "From the stuff I've read, about 80% of a typical adult's self-talk is negative. 'I can't do this, this is hard, this is going to be difficult', etc. That matches another statistic that I saw years ago where if you were brought up in a healthy home in the U.S., about 80% of your feedback was negative and critical. 'Don't do that, you're going to hurt yourself,' etc. It's understandable that we internalize most of the critical thinking and instruction is we could."

That's the basis for David's New Year's ritual of making New Year's *recollections*, instead of resolutions. "Anything we can do to affirm and say, hey, I'm an okay person, I can actually make things happen, will really serve you in good stead. I think that kind of inner strength is really what you need if you're trying to make some changes and trying to install new habits."

Every New Year's, David and his wife Kathryn take about an hour and go over things that they had some conscious effort in making happen that hadn't happened before, like what they accomplished, places they traveled to, and things they did that they hadn't done before.

According to David, people need to acknowledge their efforts a lot more than they do. "I think most people don't realize that we need a lot of self-acknowledgement. We're all starved for that. It's really nice to pull up the rear guard, and get some completion on a lot of those things." Recalling all of the things you accomplished throughout the year is the perfect way to do that.

SET SHORTER-TERM, 'PROCESS' GOALS

David also talked about how important it is to set shorter-term goals. "I think there have been a lot of studies over the years [that show that] when you set a long term goal, it's demotivating. Because with a long-term goal you say, 'oh, that's years out. I don't have to do anything today', so your energy will tend to crash and burn. I might be initially motivating, but it's not ultimately motivating.

"Then they discovered, if you set some shorter term objectives to your longer term goals, they found that will create a lot more motivation if you have a shorter term goal toward your bigger one."

But not only should your goals be shorter-term, they should also be directly tied to what you need to physically do to accomplish your goal. David recommended creating 'process' goals; goals that deal directly with what you have to do to accomplish a goal. For example, if your New Year's resolution is to lose 15 pounds, you could create a process goal to run for 15 minutes at a 5mph pace. As David put it, "motivation will die if you don't have the actual activity that you need to engage in that will improve your golf score, lose weight, or run faster".

MAKE CHANGES AUTOMATIC THROUGH HABITS

When I asked David why so many people fail at their New Year's resolutions, he touched on how hard it is to make real, lasting changes to your life. "I think most people aren't that aware of how difficult it is to change a regular habit and behaviour. We're really creatures of habit, and if you don't have the habit already, it can take a while to build it so it becomes automatic. ... One of the things most people don't realize is that your willpower and your focus on a new behaviour is only as good as you can consciously hold onto it."

"That's what slips most people up. They don't realize that most of the day you're going to be running on automatic pilot, so the whole idea is: how do you build little incremental changes and habits that start to change that automatic pilot thing internally so that when you let go of your conscious focus and willpower, you don't slide all of the way back to something else."

To understand and change your habits, David highly recommended Charles Duhigg's book, *The Power of Habit*. You can deplete a lot of your energy and willpower to make changes to your life, so making new habits and behaviours automatic is the key to making them stick.

GET STUFF OUT OF YOUR HEAD AND INTO AN EXTERNAL SYSTEM

David created the *Getting Things Done (GTD)* system of personal productivity around a core principle: that the more to-dos you move out of your head, the less you fill your short-term memory with useless crap that prevents you from focusing on bigger and better things throughout the day.

David mentioned that the GTD methodology is powerful for a simple reason: your brain sucks at keeping a lot of things in your head at once. "As soon as you have more than one or two things in your head, you've created instant failure and stress because you can't do them both at the same time, but a part of you psychologically is trying to. That part of you will wake you up at 3 in the morning and remind you of something you can't do anything about while you're laying in bed."

"What we're learning is that your mind is not for holding ideas, it's for having ideas. People are still trying to use their psyche as their office and their reminder system, and it doesn't work—it's not designed for that. In an evolutionary way, your brain is brilliant at being able to look at things and recognize patterns and tie that into long-term memory, but it can't remember worth a hoot."

David's GTD methodology tackles this problem head-on. It's difficult to summarize the GTD system in a few paragraphs (it spans over 200 pages in book form), but on a very basic level the GTD method has two stages: first, get all the to-dos in your head into an external system, and second, deal with that stuff.

1. Capture all the stuff in your head

To capture all of the tasks and projects you have floating around in your head, David says that you don't have to go far. "Capture whatever's on your mind, aside from what you're currently doing. Get a pen and paper and just start jotting it down: that you need cat food, your strategic plan, the next holiday you're going on, changing the oil in your car. Just start to dump it all out. I've never met anybody who at one point didn't feel overwhelmed or confused and sat down and made a list and didn't feel better, and more in control and more focused."

2. Deal with it

After you capture everything, you have to deal with it. "You can't leave it there. If you leave it there, then you become sort of a compulsive list maker and you've got lists everywhere and things will still crawl back up into your head and bother you."

"What you need to do is take all of those things and one at a time, discipline yourself and ask yourself: is this something I'm actually going to do something about? If yes, then what's the very next thing you need to do to move that forward?"

"That decision doesn't necessarily show up by itself. You have to think to decide what the next step is, whether it's to surf the web, make a phone call, [or] draft a document on your computer."

"That granularity—getting it down to the next physical, visible action, is a really powerful thing to do." It's also the basis of the GTD system. The more you get out of your head and into an external system, the more head space you will have to think about bigger and better problems throughout the day, instead of bogging down your mental RAM with distracting bullshit.

When I asked David what one productivity tip he would give to someone making New Year's resolutions, he told me: "empty stuff out of your head, decide sooner than later the actions and outcomes embedded in them, and step back and trust the intuition of your choices". I can personally vouch for the methods behind David's madness. The more to-do's, tasks, projects, and other stuff you empty from your head, the freer your mind is to think about much more important things.

MIND LIKE WATER

In the very first chapter of *Getting Things Done*, David Allen talks about his "mind like water" way of thinking about productivity. "Imagine throwing a pebble into a still pond. How does the water respond? The answer is, totally appropriately to the force and mass of the input; then it returns to calm. It doesn't overreact or underreact. ... Anything that causes you to overreact or under react can control you, and often does. Responding inappropriately to your email, your staff, your projects, your unread magazines, your thoughts about what you need to do, your children, or your boss will lead to less effective results than you'd like."

A lot of people are incredibly hard on themselves when New Year's rolls around, and vow to completely overhaul their life and change into a completely different person through sheer willpower alone.

But that doesn't work. Especially when an astounding 80% of your self-talk is negative, there has never been a better time to show more respect for yourself. The kinder you are to yourself, by making making recollections in addition to resolutions, making changes automatic through habits, setting short-term, process goals, and capturing and dealing with all of the open loops in your head, the more productive you'll be in the new year.

Clear your mind

One of the most effective ways to clear your mind is to get everything bouncing around in your head (things you're waiting on, things you have to do, things you have to clean up) out of your head, and into some sort of system.

This chapter contains a few of my favorite methods for clearing my mind of things I have to do or think about. If you like this little taste, I highly recommend you read my interview with David Allen if you haven't already!

CLEAR TO NEUTRAL

When you walk into the kitchen and see 50 dishes in the sink, you're a lot less likely to cook. The same holds true when you come back to your computer and there are a ton of windows open, when you wake up and there are things to get ready before you head out for a run, or when you have to clear a pile of stuff off your desk before you start working.

Enter the idea of “clearing to neutral”. Clearing to neutral is a ritual where, “whenever you finish an activity, you [move] everything so [its] is in neutral position.”¹³ According to Thanh Pham, a writer on the blog [Asian Efficiency](#), when you return to an environment that is neutral, you are much less likely to put off what you want to accomplish. Returning an environment to neutral eliminates all of the friction you would have otherwise had to get started later.

Pham also lists a few other examples of returning to neutral:

- Resolving issues with family, friends, and your partner
- Setting everything up for the next morning after you finish your morning ritual
- Getting enough sleep tonight to be ready for tomorrow

The bottom line: if you find yourself procrastinating, it might not all be in your head – it might be that you don't return your environment to “neutral” to be ready for the next time you need to get stuff done. Clearing to neutral is a great way to clear your mind and focus on your New Year's resolutions.

START A 'WAITING FOR' LIST

One of the important elements of David Allen's *Getting Things Done* system is keeping a list of everything you're waiting on, so you don't have to think about it while you work. You likely have a to-do list because if you didn't, you would have a thousand commitments bouncing around in your head everyday. But it's just as mentally taxing to keep track of everything you're waiting for.

¹³ Source: <http://www.asianefficiency.com/habits/clearing-to-neutral/>

The 'Waiting For' list is one of my favorite parts of the GTD system, and it's also very simple. The list is exactly what it sounds like—it's a complete list of everything you're waiting on at a given time.

Whether you're waiting on an email, letter, phone call, text message, response to a voicemail, or even a package from eBay, after you add it to your Waiting For list, you can stop thinking about it and clear up valuable brain cycles to think of better things.

Then, and this part is crucial, you review your list a few times a week so nothing slips through the cracks. When you schedule reviewing your Waiting For list, you don't have to think about it while you work, which will clear your mind of a lot of things you would normally think about. I recommend that you review your Waiting For list when you review your hotspots every week.

The list is simple, but it's amazingly effective at reducing your stress and clearing your mind of things you have to remember.

Here are two tips to level up and make your Waiting For list even more powerful:

1. **Group the items by context.** I divide my list into categories like: email, Internet things, texts, phone calls, and paper mail. Grouping items by what they are (or by location, like "home", "office", and "cottage") significantly reduces the time it takes you to process and organize stuff in the list.
2. **Keep track of how long you've been waiting for something.** I always jot down the date I started waiting for something. That way I know whether someone is late to get back to me when I look at the list, and I can use that information to politely remind that person to get on top of things.

I see the Waiting For list as the to-do list's sexy, secret lover. Sexy, because it works so well; secret, because hardly anyone knows about it or uses it; and lover, because the two lists work so well together. The Waiting For list lets you stay on top of your work, and it will make you infinitely more productive. Still not convinced? Here are a few more benefits.

- **The Waiting For list helps you focus.** After you routinize adding items to the list after you send an email or leave someone a voicemail, the list essentially stays on top of things for you. You can be confident that you will stay on top of everything when it's on the list (and you review the list frequently), and you can focus better on whatever you need to be working on in the moment.

- **Nothing will slip through the cracks.** When you track all of the stuff you're waiting for, and review that list regularly, it's pretty much impossible to not keep tabs on stuff.

- **People find it pretty damn impressive when you stay on top of stuff so well.** Every boss at the desk jobs I have had have been impressed with how much I remembered and got done. This list is largely the reason I was able to keep tabs on everything, while reducing my stress at the same time.

- **The list doesn't take much time to update.** I keep my Waiting For list as a text file on my computer (though I've kept physical copies too), and it takes about five seconds to add an item to the list. That's a tiny price to pay for the mental load and stress you'll save!

Keeping a Waiting For list is one of the most valuable tools I know to clear your mind and focus on your goals.

START A 'MIND CAPTURE' RITUAL

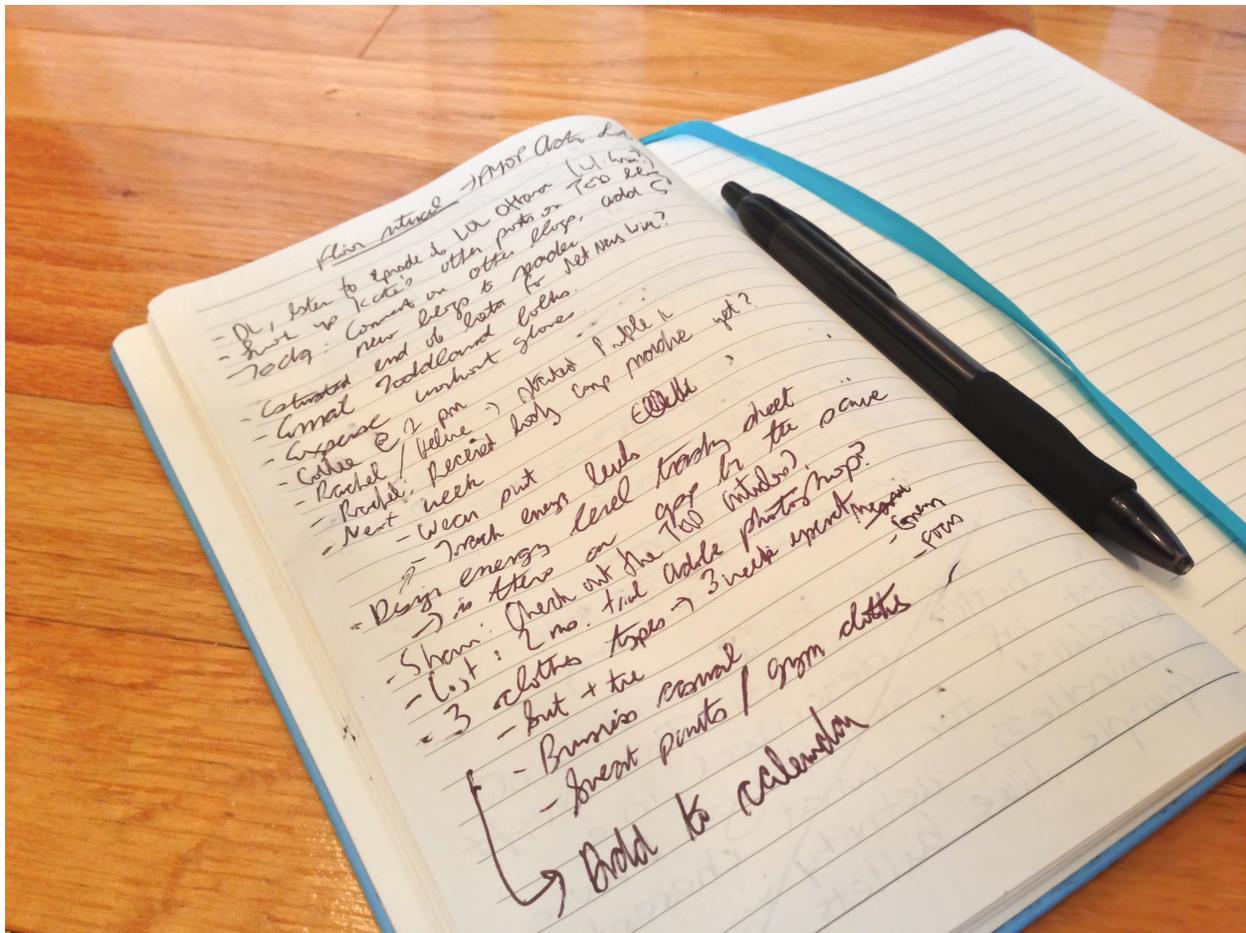
Every once in a while when I find 15 minutes of quiet time, I shut everything off (my computer and cellphone included), set a timer for 15 minutes, and lay down with a blank notepad and no distractions.

I'm always surprised what I capture.

When I shut everything off, I find that my mind still runs at 10,000 RPM, churning out things like: things I have to do (but haven't captured), things I'm waiting on, ideas for A Year of Productivity, long-term ideas and plans, and a lot more.

Most of the things I capture are valuable and actionable, and I wouldn't have thought of them otherwise, bouncing around between so many distractions.

Here's a picture of everything I captured the other day:



Our minds are often an arcade of thoughts that we don't get the chance to step back and observe. When you force yourself to step back for 15 minutes with nothing more than a notepad and a pen, the thoughts bouncing around in your mind have no choice but to defragment and organize themselves while the best ones bubble to the surface.

This method is also invaluable for sticking to goals, because all of the open loops that are bouncing around in your head (things you have to do, schedule, and plan to stick to your goals) bubble to the surface.

Another similar ritual: walk around your house (or office) with just a notepad and a pen. Don't do anything that needs to be done, no matter how small it is; just capture everything that needs to be done so it's all in one place and out of your head.

Both of these methods capture everything you need to get done so it's all in one place. This not only helps you organize everything you need to get done, but it also helps you clear your mind of everything you need to do, regardless of how small it is.

Next time you have a spare 15 minutes (or even if you don't), try shutting everything off and laying down, or walking around with only a notepad. You'll be surprised at what what you capture.

CREATE A 'MINDLESS' LIST

One of the experiments I've done for A Year of Productivity was [watch 70 hours of TED talks in a week](#) (to experiment with information retention). During that experiment I made a wicked discovery: I could easily do mindless activities (cooking meals, cleaning, doing yard work, working out, etc.) while I listened to a TED talk. After the experiment ended I played around a bit more, and realized that even with podcasts, audiobooks, and phone conversations, I always had enough spare brain cycles to dedicate to something mindless and mechanical.

Researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi found that our minds are able to process 110 'bits' of information at once, and listening to a conversation (or TED talk/podcast/audiobook) takes about 60 bits of our attention. This is great news, because it means that even if you're listening to a dense TED talk about dark matter, you still have spare brain cycles left over for something mindless while you listen.

Enter the mindless list.

Since you have so many spare brain cycles while you listen to a talk, podcast, audiobook, or something similar, you can easily tackle mindless activities while listening to something productive. That's where the idea of a mindless list comes in. Your mindless list contains everything you need to do that you can do mindlessly (without thinking about it). A mindless list contains:

- Tasks that require a good amount of time, but little attention
- Tasks that require no thought to complete
- Tasks that you can lean on your habits to get done

To create a mindless list, simply collect all of the mindless activities you need to do in one place (I diary them in a note on my phone), and when enough of them accumulate, do them all while listening to a podcast, audiobook, TED talk, or anything else that requires a good amount of attention that you can do passively.

My list usually includes stuff like:

- Washing and folding the laundry
- Sweeping the front walkway
- Raking the yard
- Cleaning and putting away dishes
- Sweeping the floors
- Shovelling the driveway
- Putting away all of the crap on my desk

Activities like these require almost no thought, which means you can listen to something productive while doing them.

My favorite part of keeping a mindless list is how simple and effective the idea is. I'm not a huge fan of multitasking, because multitasking compromises your focus and attention, and ultimately your productivity.

Mindless activities are different: they require very little of your attention, but often a lot of your time. And since you can lean on your habits to get them done, you can easily do them while you consume something more meaningful and productive, whether you consume something on your phone, the radio, or the TV.

Crossing things off of your mindless list while listening to something productive feels great and lets you get more done in less time. Plus, creating a mindless clears your mind of everything mindless that you have to do, allowing you to focus on bigger and better things. Most people keep a to-do list of all of the involved activities they want to do, but I think capturing mindless activities (while doing something productive with them) is another incredible way to clear your mind so you can focus more on your goals.

Tip: Another great way to be productive with your mindless list: lump all of the boring, maintenance tasks you do throughout the week into one solid block of time on one day. That will leave you with time for things that are much more important for the rest of the week

Cut out distractions

If you want to focus on your New Year's resolutions, it's important that you cut out as many distractions as you can. I could probably write an entire book on cutting out distractions, but I'll instead talk about two things you should cut out of your life to focus on your New Year's resolutions: "springy" life elements, and multitasking.

One of my favorite ways to cut out distractions is to tame the "springy" elements in my life—elements that, like watching TV and checking email, expand and contract to fit the amount of free time you have available for them.

I also think another huge way to cut out distractions is to stop multitasking. Multitasking is a weird beast, because it has been shown to make you *feel* more productive, even though trying to focus on more than one thing at once has been proven, time and time again, to make you less focused and productive.

TAME YOUR 'SPRINGY' LIFE ELEMENTS

Springy life elements are elements of your life that expand and contract to fit the amount of free time you have available.

They're part of the reason many people still have no free time even after they retire, go on vacation, or when the week is over. Springy life elements take many forms, like:

- Surfing Facebook
- Watching TV
- Cleaning up around the house
- Hanging out with friends
- Checking email
- Reading the latest news about Rob Ford
- Listening to music
- Playing video games

While some springy life elements are very valuable, I'd argue that all springy life elements need to be tamed. **Springy life elements aren't inherently bad, but if you don't deal with them properly they can zap you of your time, energy, focus, and motivation,** which will make it a lot more difficult for you to keep your New Year's resolutions.

Why you should tame springy life elements

- **They leave you unfocused, unmotivated, and unhappy.** Springy life elements are like water in your schedule; they fill the gaps between your scheduled commitments, expanding and contracting to fit the free time you have available. Springy life elements are usually unstructured, so according to Csikszentmihalyi's research on [flow], by their very nature they will zap you of your focus, motivation, and even your happiness.

- **They rob you of your time.** Since you don't often consciously structure spending time on your springy elements, and they expand and contract to fit the free time you have available, springy elements rob you of your time—arguably the most important and valuable resource you have. Take watching TV, for example. If you're average, you'll spend a whopping 13.6 years of your life watching TV.¹⁴ Relaxation is important, but is it that important?

- **They have a large opportunity cost.** Many springy elements have another huge cost, in addition to your time and energy—what you could otherwise be doing with your time. After all, most springy life elements are low-return, and every hour you spend on Facebook is an hour you could be spending on something much better, like sticking to your New Year's resolutions.

Identify springy life elements

I think the best way to identify springy life elements is to track how you spend your time. How can you do that? Here are a few ways that have worked for me:

- **Keep a time diary.** I prefer a good, old fashioned paper diary. A time diary lets you calculate what activities you spend the most time on. I find that keeping a time diary allows me to not only see patterns and trends in how I spend my time, but it also forces me to second-guess spending time on some activities in the first place. I'd recommend paying special attention to how you spend your unstructured time.

- **Download [RescueTime](#).** RescueTime is a free app for your computer that tracks which applications and websites you spend the most time on. The app naturally won't account for your whole life, but if you spend a lot of time on the computer, it will cover a good chunk of it.

- **Be *mindful* of how you spend your time.** The most productive people I know have a 'double loop', where they constantly check and reflect on how they spend their time, energy, and other resources. When you constantly reflect on and are mindful of how you spend your time, it is much easier to separate the elements of your life that expand to fit the time you have available for them from the ones that don't expand.

How to tame springy life elements

¹⁴ Source: <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/consumer/the-cross-platform-report-a-new-connected-community/>

Springy life elements are unstructured, which is why they can expand so easily. Therefore, I think the best way to tame them is to provide them a structure to exist inside of. In practice, this basically means limiting how much time you spend on them.

First thing's first, though—there are no doubt springy elements in your life that are very valuable that you're not as interested in taming. Every single person has valuable springy elements (like hanging out with friends and family, and relaxing). These activities are valuable, fun, high-leverage, and productive. If you have time to dedicate to these elements, there's naturally no reason for you not to do them, though I would constantly be mindful of how you spend your time, and think about how much time you're devoting to each element and the opportunity cost of that time. It is also worth structuring that time (even if that structure is relatively loose), because even loosely structuring your time has been proven to provide you with more motivation, focus, and happiness.

For springy life elements that are less meaningful and productive, the key is to compartmentalize and limit the amount of time you spend on those elements. Here's how:

Hotspot	Minimum/Maximum
Mind	
Body	Minimum of 3 hours
Emotions	
Career	Maximum of 50 hours
Finances	
Relationships	Minimum of 8 hours
Fun	Minimum of 3 hours

- **Create minimums/maximums for how much time you'll spend on specific springy life elements, like in the chart above.**¹⁵ Limit how much time you'll spend on a springy element of your life (for example, how much time you spend reading the news every day). After you create a time box around a springy life element and force yourself to stay within those limits, something magical happens—you force yourself to expend more energy over less time to get as much done as you need to. Make sure you schedule spending time on those hotspots after you set minimums/maximums for them.

- **Remove them from your life entirely.** If you can, and want to, removing certain springy elements from your life (like cancelling your cable subscription, downsizing your

¹⁵ This chart was taken from the book [Getting Results the Agile Way](#).

smartphone, selling your game console, or deleting your Facebook account) is a great way to make room for bigger and better elements to take their place. Just be careful that other unproductive springy elements don't take their place!

- **Say 'no' to them in the first place.** This may go without saying, but the best way to tame springy life elements is to not introduce them into your life in the first place. Run more interference against taking on low-return bullshit.

- **Remember: perfect is the enemy of good.** Many springy life elements are springy because you try to make them perfect. For example, your house will never be exactly 100% clean—no matter how hard you try, something will always be out of place, and there will always be a few specks of dirt on the floor. While it might take you 1 hour to get your house 85% clean, it might take you another 3 hours to get your house 95% clean.

- **Disable access to certain websites.** Two great apps that will help you avoid distracting websites: [SelfRestraint](#) (for Windows); [SelfControl](#) (for Mac).

Even though some springy life elements are important, finding ways to structure them, compartmentalize them, or remove them from your life entirely will, at the end of the day, eliminate a lot of useless distractions so you can focus on accomplishing your New Year's resolutions. Plus, chances are doing so will make you a lot more productive, happy, focused, and motivated.

STOP MULTITASKING

According to recent studies, when you multitask, you are not being more productive, you just feel more emotionally satisfied with your work.¹⁶ That's why multitasking is so fun. You *feel* like you're getting a lot done because you jump between a large number of things, but you're really being less productive than if you just focused on one thing at a time.

"If you're, say, trying to listen to someone on the phone while typing an email", says cognitive psychologist David Meyer at the University of Michigan, "something has to give".¹⁷

Multitasking can hugely impact how much you get done. Here are five of the main ones I've come across in my experiments and research:

1. **It makes you more prone to errors**, because you devote less focus to all of the balls you're trying to juggle at one time. When you do more than one thing at once, you don't focus on anything to your full capacity,

¹⁶ Source: <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/multitask.htm>

¹⁷ Source: [RAPT](#), by Winifred Gallagher.

2. **It actually takes longer.** When you switch from one activity to another, it takes time “to re-immense your mind in one topic or another”.¹⁸ These are called “switching costs”, and you incur them every time you switch from one task to another.

3. **It severely affects your performance.** For one example, in a study with young students, multitasking led “to spottier, shallower, less flexible learning”.¹⁹

4. It affects your memory. Studies have shown that when you try to focus on too many things at one time, you are less likely to be able to differentiate between what’s important and what isn’t.²⁰ Maybe that’s why you forgot why you just walked into the kitchen.

5. **It adds stress to your life.** Your electronics should exist for your convenience; not the convenience of everyone else in the world. Allowing other people to shatter your focus by constantly interrupting you may be stimulating and entertaining, but it will make you less productive since you have less control over your environment.

From everything I’ve read, multitasking will almost always make you less productive. That said, there are a few ways to use multitasking to your advantage:

Only multitask with simple, habitual tasks, like while you cross off items on your mindless list. Your mind can lean on your habits to get the mechanical stuff done while your mind focuses on something more productive.

- **Minimize distractions.** According to attention researcher Winifred Gallagher, multitasking “creates a major expansion of the targets for your focus and a potential drain on its finite resources”.²¹ By minimizing the distractions around you (instant messaging alerts, text message vibrations, email notifications, and so on), you can improve your focus and become better at unitasking.

- **Meditate.** Meditation works out your “attention muscle”, which lets you focus better on the task at hand when you’re trying to unitask. I wrote a [comprehensive guide on how to meditate](#) if you're interested in taking up the practice. I think meditation is the single best way to work out your attention muscle.

- **Check your email on a schedule.** Especially if you receive a high volume of email, checking it on a schedule means that you won’t be inundated with alerts and notifications all day. People can always wait an hour or two for a response.

¹⁸ Source: <http://redtape.nbcnews.com/news/2013/05/18/18322435-students-cant-resist-distraction-for-two-minutes-and-neither-can-you?lite>

¹⁹ Source: <http://anniemurphypaul.com/2013/05/the-epidemic-of-media-multitasking-while-learning/>

²⁰ Source: <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/august24/multitask-research-study-082409.html>

²¹ Source: [RAPT](#), by Winifred Gallagher.

- **Know that your brain can't actually multitask.** You may feel like you're doing more than one thing at once, "but what you're really doing is switching back and forth between activities". According to one brain researcher, "there are fundamental biological limits to what the brain can pay attention to. This is a problem built into the brain".²²

- **Music is a-okay.** According to Stanford professor Clifford Nass, music is different. "We have a special part of our brain for music, so we can listen to music while we do other things".²³

It's very difficult to stop multitasking—every day I have the urge to check my email, twitter feeds, and text messages when I'm doing something productive (like writing this book), just for the emotional stimulation it will give me. That said, I think it's worth pushing back against it in the end because of how much unitasking will allow you to focus on your goals and resolutions.

I think the answer to cutting out distractions is to simplify, both in the moment with not multitasking, and in general with taming your springy life elements. Springy life elements can easily get out of hand, and worst of all they can suck up your time, motivation, energy, and even happiness, all of which detract from your ability to keep your New Year's resolutions. Similarly, when you stop multitasking, you regain control over your attention in the moment, and over time you will be able to transfer your focus to whatever you're working on in the moment, including your New Year's resolutions.

²² Source: [RAPT](#), by Winifred Gallagher.

²³ Source: [RAPT](#), by Winifred Gallagher.

Get it done

In theory, this section should be the biggest part of the book. But it isn't, because after you've made a plan for your New Year's resolutions, the only way you're going to achieve your resolutions is to simply act on your plan. No matter how great your plan is, you absolutely have to put in the time and the effort if you want to achieve your resolutions.

But I have good news for you. Since you have already calculated how much time, willpower, and motivation your resolutions will cost you, as well as figured out which resolutions are aligned with your values, when you hunker down to get your resolutions done, you will absolutely be able to muster the motivation you need to achieve them. And since you have already developed a plan to keep your resolutions, you have a detailed path set out before you with exactly what you need to do to keep them.

When you act on your resolutions, I think it's very helpful to have a few strategies for not only picking what you should focus on, but also for actually structuring your time on a day-to-day basis. That's what this section is about. I'm not much of a motivational writer, but if you bring the motivation, I promise I'll give you with the tools you need to get the job done. Here are five of those tools and techniques.

THE RULE OF 3

One of the simplest, most powerful time management techniques I've come across is the "Rule of 3"(from the book *Getting Results the Agile Way*).

The rule is very simple:

- First, write down three things you want to accomplish **today**.
- Second, write three things you want to accomplish **this week**.
- Third, write three things you want to achieve **this year**.

That's it.

The book has four recommendations for when you implement the rule:

1. Start every day by figuring out what to focus on for the day.
2. Test yourself throughout the day – do you remember what your three priorities are?
3. Improve your estimates – pay attention to how long you think things will take, and improve your estimates as time goes on.
4. Feel good about your results! Pat yourself on the back after you achieve what you set off to, for the day, week, and year.

The Rule of Three is a great system to implement if you're not looking to overhaul how you manage your life. Every morning you think about the main three things you have to do, and then you do them. It's a great technique to figure out what you need to focus on.

The best part of the rule is it lets you connect your daily goals to your weekly goals, and your weekly goals to your yearly goals. New Year's is a terrific time to step back from your life and set goals, and the Rule of 3 is a method to filter those goals down to your daily life.

THE POMODORO TECHNIQUE

The Pomodoro Technique is a simple time management technique that breaks your time down into chunks. For 25 minutes you turn off all possible distractions, and then work on only one thing for that time. After your first "pomodoro", you take a five-minute break, then wash, rinse, and repeat two more times. After that, you work for another 25 minutes and take a 15-minute (or longer) break. Here's what one pomodoro cycle looks like:

ONE POMODORO CYCLE



WORK



BREAK

The main benefit of the Pomodoro Technique (named after the pomodoro tomato kitchen timer) is that it reduces the ugly, ambiguous tasks on your to-do list down into something you do in a series of easy-to-manage, 25-minute chunks of time. This means you don't have to go at something blind, which will stop you from pushing back the things you don't know how to start.

Here's why the Pomodoro Technique is so great:

- It gets you unstuck because it completely changes how you think about your work and your time
- It forces you to sit your ass down and focus for a solid 25 minutes at a time—something that's pretty hard with so many distractions buzzing around

- It plays with your subconscious mind. If you have an actual timer, winding it up confirms your determination to start a task, the ringing lets you know there's a break, and you will begin to associate focus and flow with your timer (or iPhone app, in my case)

- It creates a structure for otherwise ambiguous tasks

Not only is the pomodoro technique a great time management technique, it's also really easy to integrate it into your workflow. First, make a simple list of the stuff you need to get done. Second, fire (or wind) up your pomodoro timer (my favorites for iPhone: [Focus Time \(\\$4.99\)](#), [Simple Pomodoro Timer \(free\)](#); for Android: [Pomodoro Timer Lite \(free\)](#), [Pomodoro Timer Pro \(\\$1.99\)](#)), and work in 25-minute chunks. Make sure you turn off your outside distractions during each work cycle. Finally, after you finish each pomodoro, put an "X" next to each task you dedicate them to! It's that simple.

THE TWO MINUTE RULE



However you manage your schedule, it's easy to get caught in a trap of adding absolutely everything to your to-do list because, man, that feeling of crossing something off of that list just feels so good.

But there is a quick and dirty rule in GTD that will spoil all of that fun – the Two Minute Rule. I love this rule because even though it will ruin the fun of crossing a bunch of little things off of your list, it's like a shield that defends your to-do list from unimportant things, and it gives you less things to do in the first place!

The Two-Minute Rule: The moment you realize you have to do something (like when you receive an email you have to action), if it will take less than two minutes, do it. If it will take more than two minutes, schedule completing it later.

In practice the rule works incredibly well, because it takes the thinking out of prioritizing tasks and picking which one to do. It's very easy to lose a ton of time scheduling tasks, organizing your emails, and so on. When you just do something, you eliminate all of that cruft. As Allen put it in my interview with him, "it will take you longer to stack and track [some tasks] and remind yourself than if you finish it the first time it's in your face".

The rule is quick and simple, but it's also really freaking effective.

THE FOUR-CRITERION MODEL

The "four-criterion" model isn't the wildest name for a time management technique, but it's a damn effective way to determine the very next thing you need to do. Taken straight from David Allen's *Getting Things Done*, the method is quite simple, and it involves four steps:

1. What **context** are you in? If you're at work, it's going to be pretty hard for you to clean the kitchen. The context you are in narrows down your list of possible actions considerably.
2. How much **time** do you have available? How long until your next meeting or commitment? Having a meeting in an hour or in ten minutes will drastically change what you can do.
3. How much **energy** do you have? After you determine your context and time available, look at how much physical and mental energy you have to get something done.
4. Finally, what are the **highest priority tasks** that you'll be able to accomplish with how much time and energy you have?

The great thing about this model is it reduces decision-making from a tedious chore to a systematic process. The model works best with the GTD system, but it can truly be applied by anyone, at any time. All you have to do is look at what context you're in, how much time and energy you have, and what your priorities are.

MAKE BAD HABITS MORE “EXPENSIVE”

According to the book [Nudge](#), "[r]oughly speaking, losing something makes you twice as miserable than gaining the same thing makes you happy", people hate losing what they have, but that's not entirely a bad thing, because you can use the power of "loss aversion" to keep your New Year's resolutions.

My girlfriend and I live together, and one of the things we try to do is train each other help each other change for the better. We both read way too many books about productivity, and have experimented with a lot of stuff that works and doesn't work. Nothing has been better for changing our eating habits than having penalties for eating junk food. Below is a picture of our fridge with our penalties for eating foods we want to cut out.



The penalties work because of the power of loss aversion. You won't want to lose money so much that you won't do (or in my case, eat) what's on the penalty list.

To use 'loss aversion' to help you keep your resolutions, you'll need two things:

1. A friend who is willing to make a list of their own bad habits that they want to change

2. An awareness of the bad habits you already have that you want to change. (You can try to go at it yourself, but doing it with a friend is much easier—trust me on this one.)

Then, come up with a list of penalties. Each time you do something on the penalty list, pitch in a predetermined amount into a pool that goes toward a charity, or give the money to your friend. Or for a bit of extra motivation donate the money to a cause you *hate*! It's a good idea to plan out how often you're able to "cheat" so you can let some air out of your tires later on.

If you live with someone or have a friend who's willing to help you kick the bad foods out of your diet, use the power of loss aversion to your advantage. It works.

ONE FINAL KICK IN THE BUTT

If you plan to run a marathon, and then buy expensive running shoes, a subscription to Runner's World, a fancy new water bottle, and a bunch of books about running, you'll definitely be more prepared for your marathon. But the only way to actually complete a marathon is to physically put one foot in front of the other, and then continually invest a substantial amount of time and energy into running, day after day, until you're able to run a marathon.

You can't escape the effort it will take you to run a marathon, or stick to your New Year's resolutions. At the end of the day, the only way to keep your New Year's resolutions is to act toward them.

Go easy on yourself

Even though this chapter is the final one in the book, it's one of the most important.

I think a lot of people have the tendency to be hard on themselves when they make changes to their lives. They set unrealistic expectations for themselves, don't reward themselves when they reach milestones on their goals, and many people (myself included) have the tendency to constantly push their goals just a little beyond their reach, so they're never quite able to achieve them.

If you have the tendency (like I do) to be hard on yourself when you're in the process of reaching your goals, this section is for you. Here are six great ways to go easy on yourself while you keep your New Year's resolutions.

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

Productivity tips and hacks are useful, but most of them are useless if you're not honest with yourself. For example:

- Is your to-do list doable, or do you keep putting things off to another day?
- Do you tend to make New Year's resolutions that are too ambitious and give up a few weeks in, instead of setting more realistic goals from the start?
- Are you reading this book because you like productivity porn, or are you reading it because you want to make real, substantial changes to your life? (Actually, if you made it this far, it's probably because you want to make real changes to your life.)
- Do you hit the snooze button 5 times every morning instead of setting an alarm for when you'll actually get up?
- Do you ignore your body when it tells you that it's full?
- Do you ignore your mind when it tells you it's overworked?
- Do you ever tell yourself "I don't have time for that"? We all get the same number of hours every day, and if you were having a heart attack you would magically find time to go to the hospital. When you're saying you don't have time for something, you're really saying it's not important enough to you.
- Do you spend several hours in front of the TV, and then try to forget about where your time went?

Something I've discovered over the course of *A Year of Productivity* is that self-honesty is invaluable when it comes to becoming more productive. Reaching your New Year's goals should

be a fun challenge, and it's okay to tell yourself when (and why) you succeed and fail. Doing so will also help you adapt your goals along the way.

ASK YOURSELF FOR ADVICE

There's one person people usually don't ask advice from: themselves. I have found that asking myself for advice has worked well with my self-honest approach to productivity, and that it might even go a step further than self-honesty.

When you give yourself advice, you:

- Become accountable for what you need to change
- Own the changes you make to your life, which lets you own your accomplishments
- Are happier and more motivated, because you have control over the changes you're making
- Feel more confident, because you let yourself be heard
- Are more likely to follow your advice, because it comes from you

Like with practicing self-honesty, giving yourself advice might seem a bit hippie-dippy on the surface, but it works. When you're deciding which New Year's resolutions to make, and how you're going to find the motivation to keep them, don't forget to ask yourself for advice.

TAKE MORE BREAKS

Some of the best productivity tips out there are counterintuitive. For example, it's hard to imagine that eating chocolate after you run will make you fitter, but according to the science behind habit formation, it does.

I think the same is true with taking breaks.

Working straight through fatigue and tiredness to try to get as much done as possible feels more productive, but like with multitasking, you're not actually more productive. Your mind simply creates the illusion that you're more productive because you don't stop working.

During my productivity experiment to watch 70 hours of TED talks in a week, I had the chance to not only watch some great TED talks on the importance of taking breaks, but to also test my hypothesis that taking more breaks makes you more productive.

A quick experiment, and its results

For two straight days during my Week of TED experiment, I took as few breaks as possible, and tried to watch as many TED talks as possible. For two days after that, I listened to my mind and body, and took breaks when either my body or mind was getting restless, while still trying to watch as many talks as possible. On average, I took a five-minute break every two TED talks (they're 18-minutes long each).

Here's what I found:

- **I was 22% more productive on days where I took frequent breaks** (I watched 22% more TED talks)

- I had more energy, and didn't fatigue as quickly when I took frequent breaks
- I had the chance to chew on the information I consumed a lot more when I took breaks, which added meaning to the experiment, and allowed me to learn more

This experiment is far from scientific, but I was blown away by my results. And research on how taking breaks affects productivity seems to conclude with my findings: a recent study in the journal *Cognition* found that taking breaks significantly improved participants' focus and productivity, and allowed participants to focus on a task for longer periods of time.

5 more benefits to taking breaks

Here are five more benefits I've come across, and observed myself:

1. **Breaks let you step back from your work and life**, to see it from an elevated 10,000 foot perspective.
2. **Breaks help you rev down your brain, and slow down.** This helps you reflect and do better work. According to Carl Honoré, who wrote a book on slowing down, "conventional wisdom tells you that if you slow down you're roadkill, [but] the opposite turns out to be true. By slowing down at the right moments people find that they do everything better: they eat better, they make love better, they exercise better, they work better, they live better."²⁴
3. **Breaks give you better ideas.** Every seven years Stefan Sagmeister [shuts down his New York design studio](#) to take a year-long sabbatical so he can experiment with new designs, and every sabbatical he comes back more inspired than ever. His years off have even made his firm more profitable, *even if you account for the year off*. Even though Sagmeister takes year-long breaks, I think his results speak strongly for how important breaks are in general.
4. **Breaks give you time to reflect**, which adds meaning to what you do.
5. **Breaks are preventative.** When I first started *A Year of Productivity*, I only took breaks after I felt tired, fatigued, or exhausted. I think when you're fatigued or tired, it's usually too late to salvage your productivity, but breaks prevent you from becoming fatigued and exhausted in the first place.

Breaks prevent you from becoming fatigued and tired, and they help you slow down, step back from your work, reflect, and come up with better ideas. If you want to get more done, taking more breaks is a no-brainer.

²⁴ Source: http://www.ted.com/talks/carl_honore_praises_slowness.html

LOWER YOUR EXPECTATIONS

I recently watched [a talk](#) by a Buddhist monk named Ajahn Brahm where he explored how productivity and happiness are impacted when you lower your expectations. In his words, when you lower your expectations "you're confident, and you can have fun, relax, and not worry about proving yourself to others". This stops you from second-guessing yourself, and helps you blaze your own trail instead of conforming to what you expect from yourself or what other people expect from you.

I'm often hard on myself when I'm trying to be productive, and I can say first-hand that high expectations cause stress and unhappiness. Strive to be great at what you do, but don't be hard on yourself when you're not.

This is much easier than said than done, of course, but lowering the expectations you have of yourself (and ignoring the ones that come from other people) is a great way to find more motivation to reach your New Year's resolutions.

5 HABITS THAT LEAD TO MORE HAPPINESS

Happier people get more done. *Way* more done.

[According to](#) psychologist (and happiness researcher) Shawn Achor, when your brain is happy, it "performs significantly better than it does at negative, neutral, or stressed. Your intelligence rises, your creativity rises, [and] your energy levels rise".

Achor has deeply explored the topic, and has uncovered that happy people:

- Get 31% more done
- Have 37% better sales figures
- Have better, more secure jobs
- Are better at keeping their jobs
- Are more resilient
- Have less burnout

And more. Happy doctors are even "19% faster, [and] more accurate at coming up with the right diagnosis at positive instead of negative, neutral, or stressed".

According to Achor, "if we can find a way to become positive in the present, then our brains work even more successfully as we're able to work harder, faster, and more intelligently." Luckily, there are a number of scientifically-proven ways that you can rewire your brain to become happier. Achor suggests five of them you should do every day:

1. **Recall three things you're grateful for.** In Achor's studies, after doing this for 21 days, people's brains begin to "retain a pattern of scanning the world not for the negative, but for the positive first", making them much happier.
2. **Journal one great experience you had.** "Journaling about one positive experience you've had over the past 24 hours allows your brain to relive it."
3. **Exercise.** "Exercise teaches your brain that your behavior matters", and it helps you solidify the connection between your actions and their rewards. Exercise is also a great way to focus better.
4. **Meditate.** Achor: "We find that meditation allows your brain to get over the cultural ADHD that we've been creating by trying to do multiple tasks at once. It allows our brains to focus on the task at hand."
5. **Perform a random act of kindness.** It doesn't matter if your act of kindness is buying a coffee for the person after you in line, volunteering, or sending a positive email. Achor gets "people, when they open up their inbox, to write one positive email, praising or thanking someone in their social support network."

According to Achor, these activities done "in just a two-minute span of time, [for] 21 days in a row, [can] actually rewire your brain, allowing your brain to actually rework more optimistically and more successfully. Happiness also "turns on all of the learning centers in your brain, allowing you to adapt to the world in a different way", which is particularly helpful if you're making a New Year's resolution to learn a new skill.

Even though two minutes a day appears to be enough to rewire how you think, I personally think that's the least you can do, particularly when happier, positive people achieve 31% more.

9 STRESS RELIEF STRATEGIES THAT ACTUALLY WORK

Weird things happen when your mind is stressed out. Recently, "neuroscientists have shown that stress .. shifts the brain into a reward-seeking state. You end up craving whatever substance or activity your brain associates with the promise of a reward, and you become convinced that the 'reward' is the only way to feel better."²⁵

In other words, whenever you feel stressed out, your mind craves "quick fixes", like the treat table across the hall, the temptation to go shopping after work, or the sexy new intern that started last Monday.

But quick fixes do not actually reduce the levels of stress hormones in your body.

The American Psychological Association has done extensive research to identify the ways people deal with stress, and it's safe to say that any activity that provides you with a quick fix is a crappy way to deal with stress. The organization specifically names nine of the *least* effective ways

²⁵ Source: [The Willpower Instinct](#).

people deal with stress: gambling, shopping, smoking, drinking, eating, playing video games, surfing the Internet, and watching TV and movies for more than two hours.²⁶

Luckily, there are a number of proven stress-relief strategies that actually work. These strategies shut down your brain's stress response, help you relax, reduce the level of stress hormones in your body, and also release feel-good chemicals and hormones like serotonin, GABA, and oxytocin. These strategies are also highly recommended by the APA.

Here are 9 stress relief strategies that actually work!²⁷

1. Exercise, or play sports
2. Meditate
3. Read
4. Listen to music
5. Go for a nature walk
6. Spend time with friends and family
7. Go for a massage
8. Invest time in a creative hobby
9. Pray, or attend a religious service

Investing in stress relief strategies that actually work, like the ones above, is a much better way to reward yourself compared to looking for immediate fixes that don't do much at the end of the day.

SUMMING UP

In a weird way, this guidebook is a bit lopsided, since it has only one relatively short chapter devoted to how you should act on your resolutions. After all, after you create a plan to keep your resolutions, on a day to day basis, the only thing left for you to do is to act on the plan you created, which is what will take up most of your time and energy.

But it's absolutely essential that you clear all of the brush out of the way to make it easier to act on your plan. Clearing your mind and cutting out distractions will allow you to focus on your resolutions by dealing with anything that might get in your way. Following a few proven strategies to act on your resolutions will allow you to get more done in less time. And taking it easy on yourself will force you to loosen up and be kind to yourself while you make positive changes to your life.

²⁶ Source: [The Willpower Instinct](#).

²⁷ Source: <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/>

When it comes to making real, substantial changes to your life, it's essential that you create a plan to follow because that is what will provide you with a detailed path to travel down. But at the same time, there is absolutely no substitution for action.

Conclusion

One of the most memorable productivity experiments I have done for A Year of Productivity is [meditate for 35 hours in one week](#), and throughout that experiment I couldn't stop thinking about an old Buddhist parable that goes, "your actions are your only true belongings, and they're the ground upon which you stand".

This guidebook contains everything you need to keep your resolutions, but only if you actually do what's written in these pages. When it comes to making real, substantial changes to your life, there is absolutely no substitute for action.

The reason most people fail to keep their resolutions is that it's relatively easy to focus on the goal of a change instead of the logistics of what you'll actually need to do to make the change in your life. The moment you begin to romanticize about what a change will be like more than you plan and then hunker down to actually make that change, you've transitioned from doing to dreaming, and you likely won't keep your resolutions.

Don't get me wrong—when the new year rolls around, it's always fun to romanticize about ways to make your life better. But unless you act on a concrete plan to keep your resolutions, changes are you won't keep them.

In my opinion, your plan should include everything written in these pages, like:

- A way to understand the hidden costs of your resolutions
- A breakdown of the elements that your life is comprised of, so you know exactly where your resolutions come from, and how important they are to you
- A concrete plan to keep your resolutions that includes:
 - "SMART", small, and challenging goals
 - A habit plan
 - A way to use the "progress trap", peer pressure, your future self, and structure to stick to your resolutions
- Ways you can clear your mind and cut out distractions to focus more on your goals
- Several concrete methods you can follow to act on your goals
- A way to take it easy on yourself and have some fun in the process

Less than twelve months from now, when you reflect on the coming year next December, you will mainly see two things in your rearview mirror: your actions, and the accomplishments that they led to.

Let's make it a good one.