

## Happy New Year! If ...

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The new year might well be the year of the "if" resolutions. You will resolve to lose 10 pounds and get in shape, and stop having cocktails on weeknights, and not sweat the small stuff, if ...

If the economy doesn't continue its plunge into a black hole so you can afford a gym membership; if you don't get laid off so your stress level doesn't go through the roof; if you don't completely lose your mind hearing daily in the media how things are only going to get worse.

New Year's resolutions are hard to commit to at the best of times, but the worst of times?

"Don't make any! The world can end tomorrow!" jokes Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Farley is poking fun at the doom-and-gloom outlook that seems to be hanging over us as we enter a new year that should represent a fresh start.

With consumer confidence sinking to its lowest level in a quarter-century, the stock market wiping out hundreds of billions of dollars of savings, our prorogued government effectively leaving us leaderless, it's hardly the makings for great optimism.

New Year's resolutions usually represent a way of codifying our hopes for an improved life, with an old year passing in the rear-view mirror.

As for a stormy 2009, Farley believes that it's precisely in these times of uncertainty when we should seek comfort in the fact that while our world may be a global village, most of our day-to-day lives are usually lived in small circles -- with our family, in our home, community and place of work.

"Sometimes we lose track of that and think about what is happening out there in the wide, wide world, when actually a lot of our life is very close and personal," he said.

Uncertainty is a huge source of fear and anxiety, so perhaps one useful resolution is to build predictability and structure into your life.

No, that doesn't sound as exciting as, say, vowing to take up skydiving. You can make room for those types of resolutions too, but Farley advises we think seriously about what we want from our year, and be prepared.

"This is not the year for your average resolution," he says. "Just as both nations, the U.S. and Canada, are doing some heavy-duty planning in terms of the economy, I think we all have to do the same thing in our lives."

For starters, if you are concerned about money, make a household budget. Few of us actually do it because it takes time, effort and patience.

It also suggests making do with less. And that can be a positive thing, contrary to the ethos of the consumer culture.

There's a psychological phenomenon known as hedonic adaptation, which is the idea that we are very good at adapting to changes in our lives, good or bad.

Social psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky of the University of California said that while doing without luxury items may seem difficult to take at first, it does not make us any less happy in the long run. "As long as your basic needs are met ... people are very good at adapting.

"It's an automatic process over time."

Taking a different tack altogether, Theresa Rose, author and motivational speaker, says we should scrap the notion of New Year's resolutions altogether.

She says that we fail so often at them that they only make us feel worse; that these are uncertain times, so to commit to anything when our anxiety level is high, when we're not ready for change, is simply a recipe for failure.

Instead, she advises to keep your self-talk (see sidebar below) high in these turbulent times.

New York psychologist Karen Sherman says it's about controlling the information we absorb, and advises us to turn off the news altogether and stop focusing on the negative.

"Realize that you cannot control life, the best you can do is flow with it.

"Just accepting this premise will make things better."

Make the best of tough times, she advises, by focusing on the good things in your life and try to look at the world as a child would, with appreciation of the small things.

"The more you focus on the positive, the more you see positive."

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Ten ways to brave a gloomy New Year

\* Resist playing it safe.

While everyone else is hunkering down on the job, you can stand up and stand out --get noticed for your talent and contributions.

\* Skip the pity party.

It's tempting to commiserate with family, friends and coworkers. Don't. It will stoke your fears and shake your confidence.

\* Take a personal inventory.

Pundits do it with politics. Take stock, reflect and assess how you've done this year. It will help you move forward with confidence.

\* Form a posse.

Create an inner circle -- a small support group, or even one other person, whom you can trust and turn to. Take turns injecting a daily dose of hope and optimism.

\* Grow your skills.

Expanding your capabilities is the best way to bolster your job security and boost your marketability. Invest in yourself.

\* Think big.

Pick one major action you want to achieve -- the bigger, the better. Break it down into little steps and get started.

\* Take a break.

This is not the year to skip or stockpile vacation days. Use what you've got on the books to rest and recharge. You'll return to work less stressed and more productive.

\* Try something new.

Give fear a productive outlet and be adventurous in your downtime. Try a fun, new sport or activity --something you've always wanted to do, but were afraid.

\* Practice positive self-talk.

When you catch yourself worrying about what might happen, change the conversation in your head. Focus on what you have going for you.

\* Get ready for the rebound.