

New Year's best goals

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Despite the best intentions, so many New Year's resolutions flame out as empty wish lists of unrealized hopes and dreams.

Starting off the new year with a fresh focus and drive sounds like a good idea - according to a poll released Monday, 66% of those responding said they make New Year's resolutions. But only 34% said they keep them.

Seventy-nine percent blamed various obstacles preventing them from achieving their dreams, including financial limitations (39%) and lack of motivation and time (14%).

Still, the masters of self-help say New Year's resolutions are good things as long as you set reasonable goals rather than lofty ones. They should be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and based in time.

For some people, setting more modest goals can improve your life. Consider it an underachiever's guide to the New Year's resolution.

'Save more'



What exactly are you saving for? Whether it's a pair of boots, the down payment on a new house, getting out of debt or building a nest egg for retirement, saving more money can be difficult if you don't have a goal in mind.

“Saving for the sake of saving is too vague,” said Jim McGibany, associate professor of economics at Marquette University.

“The easiest thing to do to force you to save is to have an employee contribution so it comes out of your paycheck,” McGibany said. “The government takes the money out of your check, and if you don't do the same, you'll never see it.”

“Instead of just saving more, resolve to sit down with your bills and build a budget - if you haven't already - to make it easier to build some wealth. If that is too daunting, make 2009 the year you head to your bank or credit union and meet with a personal banker to get your financial house in order.”

'Get a better job'



News reports remind you daily how lucky you are to be employed at all, regardless of whether you actually like your job. Don't let an economy in shambles dash your dreams of professional progress and satisfaction - just don't set an unreasonable timetable. Keep looking, stay positive and, meanwhile, continue to get better at what you do.

"You get more recognition for what you are doing, and consequently, you are feeling better about what you do," advises Mark Amtower, a speaker, radio host and author of "Why Epiphanies Never Occur to Couch Potatoes."

In addition to making your current job more bearable, improving your professional performance makes you more confident and marketable for the opportunities that are out there.

'Volunteer'



Plenty of people find the time to volunteer, but for whatever reason, you haven't.

If you want to dedicate time to help others but continually struggle to make it happen, maybe an alternate approach would help: Promise yourself you will do good deeds on a daily basis.

They can be as simple as opening a door for someone, giving up that parking space in the shopping mall lot or shoveling your neighbor's sidewalk. Granted, it's not serving soup at a homeless shelter or teaching children to read, but it's a start.

Random acts of kindness can change how you see yourself, improve your self-image and lead to more grand acts of generosity toward others.

'Meet someone'



There is nothing quite as dysfunctional as setting a deadline for yourself to get into a relationship.

A healthier alternative, says Matt Edelman, founder of the self-improvement Web site PeopleJam.com, is to decide to "make better choices about the people in my life and to say, 'I am going to understand my needs better.'"

That approach could lead to going out more, introducing yourself to new people more often - or downsizing your social circle.

"Self-improvement and New Year's resolutions are about one primary decision - to make better choices," said Edelman, whose site covers health and fitness, personal finance and careers issues and relationships.

'Get in shape'



What does that even mean? Are you looking to lose weight? Build muscle? Boost your energy? Or maybe just eat less unhealthy food?

The daunting truth is you might need it all. But remember to take each step in

moderation.

 Karen Sherman, a psychologist and author of "Mindfulness and The Art of Choice: Transform Your Life," says New Year's resolutions are fine, as long as you keep your goals reasonable.

 "If you have to lose 50 pounds, set up sub-goals and reward yourself for every five pounds - just not with food," she said. "Know that change is not a constant upward pattern but an upward spiral. Therefore, expect slippage.

 "When it happens, don't be self-critical, which will only make things worse. Start again."

'Get smarter'



This is a great New Year's resolution, but it can fall by the wayside when you're constantly struggling to schedule that class you've always wanted to take. For people with the time, energy and discipline to keep their nose in the books, Milwaukee has lots of affordable opportunities to expand your mind, from workshops at community centers and the Y, to classes at our fine institutions of higher learning.

 But for those who see themselves making - and breaking - this promise to themselves every year, a different strategy may allow more options for learning.

 Mark Amtower, a speaker, radio host and author of "Why Epiphanies Never Occur to Couch Potatoes," encourages us to always work at getting better at whatever we do, whether that's by reading a book a month, trade magazines or sources of solid information on the Web.

 "A big part of the problem is attitude and self-image - how we see ourselves and feel about ourselves," he said. "It very much depends on the person involved.

 "Most New Year's resolutions are over-reaching. If you make a laundry list, where are you going to start? It is doomed from the get-go.

 "Pick a thing to do and do it. Then you can add a few more things. Take it slow."

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