New Year’s Success
By Amy Stanley

We may only be hitting the second full week of the New Year, but have you already started re-framing those resolutions you swore blind you’d stick to as casual promises you are under no legal obligation to honor? Has your non-appearance at the gym or your hoovering up of the Christmas cheese (so you can finally start eating more healthily) mean that 2017 is starting to feel a bit like the past? There’s simply no point in punishing yourself for your lack of self-restraint. Step away from the major overhauls, pick yourself up, and instead create a celebration of smaller wins toward small goals. The science says it’s far more likely to work for you - and it’s definitely not too late to start.

There is a science to setting goals. Our brains are wired to love rewards, so we often set simple goals that make it easy to check off boxes. For example, did you go to the gym today? Check. Did you write in your journal? Check. It feels really good to set a goal. People often set them just for the burst of optimism they get when they vow to make a change. But if that’s all our New Year’s resolutions are about, no wonder we end up abandoning them so quickly. A meaningful goal — one that truly inspires you to change, requires going deeper. Give yourself permission and time to think about what it is you want to experience in your life this year, why it’s important, or what’s getting in the way. Make it personally important to you and that motivation can bolster you as you work toward the goal. How you describe your goal makes a big difference. Focusing on what you want to bring into your life — not what you want to avoid — will make you more likely to actually pursue it. That’s basically just brain chemistry. Any sort of avoidance is going to trigger inhibition systems, whereas positive goals are going to trigger approach and reward motivation which equals action toward improving your life.

What if the goals you set at New Year’s don’t pan out? Moments of failure are inevitable, and naturally most of us abandon the goal entirely when minor failures and setbacks start piling up. In that moment when you fail, often the first instinct is to push the goal away. The physiological reaction is feeling uncomfortable to be in that place of self-doubt or self-criticism and guilt. Shake it off and try setting them again at another obvious milestone. Research has shown that other natural breaking points such as starting a new job, or even just the start of a new week, month, or financial quarter can also be effective for motivating us to make progress on our goals quickly. Remember to allow yourself to make mistakes and enjoy the process as much as reaching or even surpassing your new goals. Prepare for failure by creating a mental plan for how you’ll react to things that might trip you up. For example, if you’re likely to choose unhealthy meals when you’re hungry, carry a light snack that can tide you over. Psychologists call this an if/then contingency plan.

A new year can bring a wonderful sense of renewal. For many of us, it is a symbolic opportunity to turn over a new leaf, restart the clocks, and set some new goals for the year ahead. When we set goals, it’s easy to fixate on that magical ending of when we’ve reached the goal and everything is better. But we need to realize that we can’t control outcomes and we certainly can’t will them into existence. We have to inch toward them, one choice at a time. People often get lost thinking they have to change everything all at once. Keep it simple and remember that the
small changes can pave the way for bigger changes. When detours and roadblocks come up, remind yourself why your goal matters to you. Those simple reminders about why it’s important can buoy your motivation once again and keep you headed in the right direction. Who knows, you might just make it past Valentine’s Day this year.