



Happiness@ TheSpeedofLife

Happiness@TheSpeedofLife Newsletter Edition 50: Why Resolutions Don't Work

2,216 words of content -- approximate reading time required: **8.8** minutes. And isn't your happiness worth it?

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Welcome to my e-newsletter, which focuses on defining and applying the Principles of Happiness and Positive Emotion in your life and work. SPREAD THE WORD: Please forward to a friend who needs more happiness.

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I. WHY NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS DON'T WORK

It's the start of a new year and we are bombarded with reminders that "It's time to set your New Year's Resolutions" Rubbish! Most NY Resolutions are blown or forgotten within a few weeks -- so why set yourself up for failure?

It's not that I don't believe in life- or self-improvement. I argue only with the process, not the concept of change. What I suggest instead are micro-practices, or gradual lifestyle shifts that serve to recalibrate rather than stun the system.

Programmed for Stability

We can't change who we are overnight. Crash diets, cramming for tests, radical makeovers... all of them yield results in the short-term, but rarely create lasting change. The weight comes back, the knowledge flows away, the old habits return. We are human, and characteristic of the human system is that our systems are biologically and emotionally programmed for stability.

Years ago (and still today, for 1/3 of the world's population), humans lived primarily in a feast/famine cycle. During harvest time or after a good hunt, food was plentiful and had to be eaten before it spoiled. During the winter, or when game was scarce, humans had to live on far less for months at a time. Our biological systems evolved to support this cycle -- when we eat more, our bodies metabolize faster, and when we must go for long periods with less food, our bodies miraculously slow down the caloric burn rate -- so that our bodies can 'hold' in a narrow range of weight for a long time even when the quantity of food varies greatly.



Stability, then, protects us, holds us steady. Our emotional selves also evolved to be stable over time. While we experience wide emotional fluctuations in different situations, we return to the same "base" emotion/mood once the situation passes.

Unfortunately, the same stability that protects us also "gets in the way" of change even when we desire change.

The Changes Happened Gradually

The only way to create lasting change is to do a certain thing over and over and over and over, until the physical or emotional system adjusts to a new 'normal' or new thermostat setting, so to speak. Then the system settles down to protect that new state.

Two examples -- one physical, one emotional

PHYSICAL: You did not pick up that extra 35 pounds just yesterday. Do you remember when, as a teenager, you could eat just about anything and within a day or two you'd be back to normal? It was only after you settled in to your post-schooling lifestyle that the weight gain happened. You started sitting in front of the TV after dinner instead of walking. You added a glass of wine to every dinner. That 'temporary' habit of drinking a Cola or two every morning to get yourself going in college became... a permanent part of your diet.

After a time, your body accepted that the extra 500 calories a day you were taking in was normal, and stopped trying to burn them off -- and instead began the process of storing them for the future (in what we call 'fat cells'). Year 1, you gained a pound or two. Year 2, another two. And so on. Now, your body believes that 200 pounds IS normal, and will do everything it can to protect that weight. If you increase exercise, it will slow down the metabolism. If you reduce calories, your body will slow down the rate of burn.

EMOTIONAL: You used to be pretty happy all the time. Then you became an adult:

- You finished school and entered the workforce, where it seems every year there's talk of downsizing and layoffs and jobs going overseas. Everyday, you spend part of the day in worried conversation with coworkers about whether you'll have a job next week.
- You became a homeowner, and every time you walk through the house you notice another thing that needs repair, paint, or replacement. You worry about taxes going up and your property value going down.
- On the home front, you got married and had kids. Every day, a little part of you is left behind when you go to work, to worry about how the kids are doing at day care, or in school; are they making friends? will they pass that test? will that bully bother them again? will they remember their homework?
- Your parents have aged, and if two days pass without a call from your mom, you grow concerned that something is amiss.

After a time, your body notices that you are a Frequent Visitor to the emotions of Worry and Anxiety. And your system, in its wisdom, decides that too much energy is being spent in wild emotional swings. So it recalibrates around the emotions where you spend the most time: worry and anxiety! These now become your dominant mood, and happiness becomes an emotion you only visit on rare occasions.

Your emotional thermostat's been reset, and your system will now fiercely protect that as the Norm.

SO... when you set a radical new goal for the New Year, you face a formidable obstacle: your body is going to fight to the death to protect your current weight, habits, and moods!

Micro-Practices: Adjusting Your Thermostat

Do you see now why most NY resolutions fail? Because people try to bite off too much at a time. They commit to changes so big that their systems can't handle it!

A better way to manage self-improvement is through many small changes -- little shifts adopted one at a time. Pick one thing, and practice the new behavior for a couple weeks, with focus. Once it feels normal/natural, move on to the next small change. Over the course of a year, tweaking one little behavior pattern every 2-3 weeks, you can change 17-26 behaviors. Think about how differently you could show up next year at this same time if you shifted just 17 habits?!

What's my point? Don't give up on personal change because you already lost momentum toward your Big Goal. Rather, go at it in a way that honors your body's systems using what I call micro-practices: small, incremental shifts in awareness or action that you repeat daily until they feel natural and normal.

- Start parking at the far end of the lot – whether at work or while shopping, to add a couple hundred steps to each day. Over a year you'll walk an additional 75 miles.
- If you work on an upper floor, take the stairs to the second floor and the elevator from there. One day you'll notice that you're not winded on the second floor landing, so you might walk to the third before getting on the elevator, etc...
- Spend just five minutes doing yoga. For five minutes you don't need to change clothes or get sweaty. Just five minutes. When your body starts craving more, add one new pose.
- Start a meditation practice with two minutes of simply sitting quietly to witness your breath. Over time, build to five or seven minutes. You'll benefit from even these tiny practices.
- For weight loss, try dropping just one food. Substitute water for one cola per day. Over the course of a year that one cola/day will reduce your intake by 65,700 calories, or the equivalent of 19 pounds.
- Learn one new word of a new language every day, and by the end of a year you'll be able to hold a conversation.
- Write just one page a day in your journal, and by the end of a year you'll have written a short novel.
- Take one deep breath into your body at the start of every conversation (it takes 3-5 seconds) and by the end of the year you'll notice you argue less and listen better.

Create your own list of things you want to achieve, then break them down into micro practices. Please don't try all of the above. Pick one. Just one at a time. Then do it every day until it's a habit.

Remember the fable of the tortoise and the hare. The rabbit started out fast and furious, but could not sustain. The tortoise just kept saying, "slow and steady, steady and slow; that's the only way to go!" And we all know who won the race.



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The 13 Principles of Happiness provide more ideas for increasing your happiness, and they really work – as long as you take them on one at a time!

Why not download and post a 1-page summary of all 13 as a reminder? You can do so here: <http://www.theexecutivehappinesscoach.com/happiness/philosophies.cfm>. Take care of you.

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## II. IN THE WORKPLACE: START SMALL, WIN BIG

Changing the culture.

Seems like every organization I know is always talking about culture shift to improve communication, provide better service, reduce waste, or otherwise impact the bottom line. I've seen many change initiatives fail when the grand plan is rolled out and all hell breaks loose.

I've also led and seen others lead powerful shifts in culture that succeeded. A big difference between failure and success comes down to how those successful companies integrate change into the daily routines of their people.

The leaders talk of great plans, of major shift, so people know where they're headed. But changes get introduced over the course of many months. People attend orientation programs then training begins. Teams are asked to adopt one new process at a time, adapt to one new workplace rule at a time. New language shows up in conversations; old phrases get outlawed and new common terms gradually take over. A little more training, another round of shifts.

And then, one day, in walks a visitor who's not been around for a year, and they don't recognize the place.

Change introduced in small bites can be absorbed (almost) without pain. The cultural thermostat has been reset, and the new norms are solid.

**Remember: Leadership is not about a title.** Anyone can be a leader who keeps the conversation about change in front of their team every day, so that Big Change happens in small pieces over time.

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## III. HAPPY ANNIVERSARY TO ME!

Most of you know that I make my living as a personal and executive coach and a consultant to leaders who want to shift their organizations. What you may NOT know is that I started my business on January 2, 1999, one day after I voluntarily left my last corporate employer.

I left the safety and security of a bi-weekly paycheck just before the first of my four kids graduated high school and started college. Friends and family told me I was insane: "how will you afford to send your kids to college?!" I actually did not know the full answer to that question, but I had a fundamental belief in my ability to make it work.





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Drop me a line anytime with your feedback and queries! Jim  
<mailto:Jim@TheExecutiveHappinessCoach.com>

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**Happiness is a decision, not an event.**  
**How will YOU decide today?**

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