

# Turning resolutions into habits

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Ayanna Thomas is an avid gym-goer. She works out multiple times a week, and she doesn't even really think about it—she goes because going has become automatic for her.

It hasn't always been that way. Thomas, a professor of psychology and

the dean of research at Tufts School of Arts and Sciences, used to have to push herself to make it to the gym. "Then," she said, "I set up a routine with a trainer, and I got penalized if I missed a session; it would cost me money. That helped to keep me motivated."

Thomas still works out with her trainer—"Now I just like her!" she said—but she no longer has trouble getting to the gym on the days her trainer isn't there. "I developed the habit," she explained. "That's how it works. Consistency and practice result in automaticity, a process through which we engage in things without thinking about them anymore. That leads to long-lasting behavior change."

And what better time to think about long-lasting behavior change than the start of a new year? We make New Year's resolutions, Thomas said, in part because it's helpful to pin big changes to landmark events, like that moment when the calendar turns.

Nevertheless, as some of us know probably too well, most New Year's resolutions fail, and, usually, within a few weeks. "It's hard to change behavior," Thomas acknowledged. "We break resolutions for a simple reason: it's truly hard to keep them."

But there are tried and true ways to establish new habits and understanding the [psychological mechanisms](#) underpinning habit-development might help you stick to your guns. Thomas explained some of the thinking behind the advice one often hears.

**Metacognitive monitoring provides necessary insight.** In other words, as the ancient Greeks advised, it's useful to know thyself. This is why advice columns frequently suggest keeping a journal: writing about your desires and goals can help you introspect, Thomas said, and introspection can, in turn, help you determine which goals you want to set for yourself.

Beyond that, keeping a diary can relieve a little bit of the cognitive load that [behavior change](#) entails. "Breaking entrenched behaviors takes persistence and constant awareness of how the behaviors are manifesting," Thomas explained. "That takes a lot of effort and [cognitive control](#). It's exhausting to continually be aware and keeping a diary can support you in staying cognizant and maintaining awareness."

Knowing yourself well can also help you articulate reasonable goals, Thomas said, allowing you to better set yourself up for success. "I call this being able to identify the region of proximal achievability." An example? "I'm not going to go out and get a Ph.D. in physics. That is out of my range of achievability," she explained. "But I could learn a new coding language to facilitate my research. Understanding what's in your own region of proximal achievability is key, and it requires self-knowledge."

**Conscious, controlled practice creates the mental pathways for automaticity.** "One of the things that really helps to not instill new behaviors is not enacting those behaviors regularly," Thomas said. The opposite is also true: If you want to develop new habits, you have to routinize them. As Thomas put it, "you have to make them almost automatic in your daily schedule."

This, she granted, can be painful. Often, especially at the beginning, it requires forcing yourself to do things you don't want to do—or to not do things you want to do. Imagine you've set a goal of running a marathon in the coming year. There will be days when you do not want to tackle the training run that you're supposed to do, particularly if training is not yet a habit. Or suppose you've outlined a plan for eating less sugar. You will inevitably walk by a bakery at some point and find yourself struggling internally while you stare at the pastries in the window.

"That's because you have to start in a conscious and controlled way. You

have to be absolutely consistent in your efforts. Only with consistency of practice will automaticity of the new behavior pattern emerge," said Thomas.

Often, the advice for staying conscious and controlled is asking a friend to hold you accountable. This works for many, Thomas explained. For others, there are other mechanisms of accountability that work: an app that sets up a training schedule for you, for example, a system through which you charge yourself money when you fail to take a step toward the larger goal, or a support group composed of people with a similar big goal.

The question of how to stay accountable—and therefore enable your own persistence—harkens back to the need for self-knowledge. "Know yourself at least well enough to know what form of accountability will work for you," Thomas advised.

**Remembering your reasons can fortify your motivation.** "For some folks, it helps to regularly—even constantly—revisit the reasons why you established a particular goal in the first place," said Thomas. If you set a goal to lose weight, is it because you want to increase your overall health, fit into a particular outfit, or look a certain way by a certain date? Keeping that reason front of mind can help bolster motivation when the will begins flagging.

So, those advice columns that tell you to write a note to yourself about what you're doing and why—and stick that note on the refrigerator so you'll see it every day? They're right.

**External support increases the chances for success.** This is a big one, and it touches upon all of Thomas's other explanations: You must know yourself well enough to know when you need help. Relying on help can give you the strength, and accountability you need to keep persisting

toward a goal even when you feel resistant. And having people around you cheering you on can make it easier for you to remember why you set your goals in the first place.

Another reason to seek help from others is that often the insights of friends, [family members](#), and unbiased professional mental health workers can help us get to know ourselves better—and, to Thomas's first point, [self-knowledge](#) is crucial to any resolution-making process.

Moreover, it's not uncommon for resolutions to be linked to behaviors that have a physiological component, as with, for example, addictions. Smoking, drug-taking, alcohol-consumption, overeating: if your resolutions relate to any of these behaviors, it's probably not only beneficial but downright necessary to seek help, Thomas said.

"When resolutions are tied to dependence, whether the dependence is physiological or psychological, you have to recognize that you might need external support in order to take control of the changes you want to make," she said. "Sometimes, you just can't do it alone. That is part of the battle."

Provided by Tufts University

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