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Chaired by Dr. Michel Woodbury-Farina, the role of this board is to develop initiatives and communications to serve the stress management needs of all people.

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“New Year’s is a harmless annual institution, of no particular use to anybody save as a scapegoat for promiscuous drunks, and friendly calls, and humbug resolutions, and we wish you to enjoy it with a looseness suited to the greatness of the occasion.”

- Mark Twain

The origins of New Year’s resolutions have been traced back to ancient Babylonia about 4,000 years ago. The Babylonians celebrated New Year’s Day in March to coincide with the planting of crops in the spring. New Year’s resolutions came about as a consequence of the Babylonians’ belief that what a person does on the first day of the New Year will have an impact throughout their entire year.

**Looking Back, Looking Forward**

The ancient Romans initially celebrated the beginning of the New Year on the 1st of March. However, when the Roman Emperor Julius Caesar changed the Roman calendar, New Year’s Day fell on the 1st of January in honour of the Roman god Janus.

Janus was the god of beginnings and the guardian of doors and entrances. He was depicted with two faces, one on the front of his head and one on the back. Consequently, he could look backward to the past, and forward to the future, at the same time. It is said that at midnight on December 31st the Romans imagined Janus looking backwards at the old year and forward to the new.

**Empty Promises**

The word resolution comes from ‘resolve’ and means to make up one’s mind or decide firmly. Usually, New Year’s resolutions are promises to break bad habits or start good ones. According to tradition, we should make resolutions on New Year’s Day. The vast majority of resolutions, however, are broken by February. Consequently, they are often synonymous with empty promises.

**Goal Setting**

Making a New Year’s resolution is like setting a goal for the year. In the sphere of business and management, I am a keen advocate of the goal-setting
theory. The goal-setting theory lies at the heart of performance-based motivational programmes such as ‘management by objectives’ and plays a central role in facilitating business effectiveness. The basic premise of the goal-setting theory is that a person’s goals and intentions are a primary determinant of his or her behaviour.

In business, goals are often set using the SMART criteria, i.e. goals should be: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic / Rewarding, and Time-framed (a date is set for their achievement). When business people make New Year’s resolutions they often incorporate some of these criteria into their resolutions, leading to those oh-so-familiar resolutions such as:

• “This year I am going to work out in the gym for an hour three times a week.”
• “I am going to lose 10 pounds by February 1st.”
• “I am going to quit smoking by the end of January.”

The last example brings to mind another quotation attributed to Mark Twain:

“Quitting smoking is easy. I’ve done it a thousand times.”

We make New Year’s resolutions to help us focus on positive changes we want to make in our lives. Although our intentions are good and honourable, we usually end up repeating past failures. This can create tension by undermining our self-worth and making us feel guilty because once again we didn’t achieve a goal we had set for ourselves.

STICKING TO YOUR RESOLUTIONS

The following are some suggestions to help you stick to your resolutions:

• Remember that you can resolve to make positive changes at any time during the year, not just on New Year’s Day.
• Make only one or two resolutions at a given time.
• Choose one(s) that you’ve been thinking about for a while.
• Rather than trying to shake off an ingrained bad habit, resolve to adopt a new good behaviour.
• Be reasonable with yourself in relation to what you want to achieve.
• If you don’t succeed, don’t blame yourself. Instead, determine the obstacles that blocked you and try again. Think about how you can do better next time by making a better plan to succeed.
• Pay attention to your ‘self-talk’ and counter negative self-talk like “I’ll never succeed” with positive self-talk like “Today I made some progress.”
• Tackle the process of change one step at a time.
• Have coping strategies to deal with obstacles and problems that may arise.
• Consider forming a support network of family/friends who will encourage and support you in sticking to your resolutions.
• Be aware that new habits take a while to learn and don’t be discouraged by this.
• Rather than just focusing on the end goal of a resolution, try focusing on the process, i.e. the means by which you will achieve your goal.
Relax Your Resolutions

If you’ve made New Year’s resolutions that triggered feelings of tension and guilt because you’ve made the same resolutions year after year, and not delivered on them, then maybe it’s time for a different kind of resolution.

Unlike business or management goals, perhaps it’s better to have New Year’s resolutions that do not focus on achieving a specific goal by a specific date. It might be better to focus on making subtle and important changes in your everyday lifestyle. This could involve making resolutions such as:

• “This year I’m going to take better care of my body,”

• “This year I’m going to replace my impatience with patience.”

Resolutions such as these do not satisfy the SMART criteria. They are vague and not time-framed. These very characteristics, however, are probably their greatest asset. Instead of setting a very specific time-framed goal, which makes you feel bad if you don’t achieve it, they provide a gentle guiding light that helps point you in the right direction.

Resolving to Relax

A good way to improve your health and well-being in the New Year is to take more time to relax. If you want to resolve to relax more, then try not to word your resolution as: “This year I must relax more.” Such a resolution is a stress-inducer waiting to happen. It forces you into thinking of the resolution as something you must do, not something you want to do. It sounds like you are going to force yourself to relax by sheer willpower alone.

Word your resolution in a more gentle way. For example: “This year I will explore and try out different relaxation techniques.” A resolution worded in this way, suggests more of a plan. You’re likely to fulfil your desire to relax more, simply by experimenting with relaxation techniques.

Making it Happen

Write your resolution down and put it somewhere you’ll see it on a regular basis - on the fridge door, on your bathroom mirror or on your wardrobe door. Make a list of all the relaxation techniques that interest you. Pick one of these techniques, for example, diaphragmatic breathing, imagery, progressive relaxation, autogenic training, or meditation, and try it for a month. Try a different technique each month until you find one you particularly like.

There are many difficulties you may encounter in trying to practise any relaxation technique on a frequent or regular basis. You may start out enthusiastically, setting aside time to practice every day. After a week or so, however, you may find yourself “forgetting” to practice. In a fast paced
society that rewards us for speed, efficiency, and productivity, it’s difficult to stop everything and simply relax for 20 to 30 minutes. We are so used to “doing” that it may seem like a chore just to “be.”

If you find that you break your personal commitment to practice relaxation on a frequent, regular basis; take time out to examine carefully what you say to yourself and what excuses you make on those days when you don’t make time to relax. If you just don’t feel like relaxing, there is usually some more specific reason for feeling this way that can be found by examining what you’re telling yourself. Some common excuses for not practicing relaxation include:

“I don’t have time to relax. I’m too busy.” - What this usually means is that you haven’t given relaxation sufficient priority among all the other activities you’ve crowded into your busy schedule.

“I don’t have a place where I can relax.” Try creating one. If you have young children, you might let them watch their favourite television programme or play with their favourite toys while you go into another room, with instructions not to interrupt you. If your children are too young to be left on their own, then you need to practice at a time when they are asleep or are being looked after by another adult.

“When I try to relax, it makes me feel more anxious.” - For a small percentage of people, deep relaxation may surface feelings that are accompanied by sensations of anxiety. If this happens to you, you should begin with relatively short periods of relaxation, working up gradually to longer periods. The moment you start feeling any anxiety, simply open your eyes and stop whatever technique you are practicing until you feel better. With time and patience this particular problem should diminish. If it doesn’t it would be helpful to consult a psychologist or psychotherapist who has experience and skill in treating anxiety disorders.

“I don’t have the discipline required.” - Usually, this means that you haven’t persisted with practicing long enough to internalize relaxation as a habit. You may have made similar statements to yourself in the past when you were attempting to acquire a new behaviour. Flossing your teeth didn’t come naturally when you first started. It took some time and diligence to reach the point where it became a regular healthy habit. If you expend a similar, albeit more time consuming, effort to practice deep relaxation on a regular basis for a least a month, it will more than likely become so ingrained that you’ll hardly need to think about doing it. You’ll do it almost automatically.

And Finally

Practicing deep relaxation is more than just learning a technique. It involves making a basic shift in your attitude and lifestyle. It requires a willingness to give priority to your health and internal peace of mind over work productivity and making money. To quote Mohandas ‘Mahatma’ Gandhi:

“There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

About the Author

Alan Ruth PhD, MBA, MA, FAIS, FRSB holds a PhD in Psychology and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Biology. Prior to entering the stress management field, he was Managing Director (Ireland) for an American multinational pharmaceutical company.
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Dear Santa,

All in all, I think I have been very good this year.

I have tried to hang in there, processing 400 billion bits of information/second, day in and day out, occasionally under some pretty harsh conditions. I try to keep going when I am hungry and tired or lonely, but sometimes I make a few mistakes. And sometimes, when my pre-frontal cortex wears down, my judgment can be a little off. I am sorry.

I can get a little stuck on some old stories or feelings. And I certainly seem to forget more these days, but I do remember some really weird stuff. Sometimes I let that mean inner critic lady get out of control — I know, she’s kept me out of danger in the past, but she can be a pain, too. And I know more than a few of my 100 billion cells have quit lately, but I’ve been working to wire together some others.

I work so hard to do my job well, constantly monitoring the external and internal world, to keep my person safe, even when she has wine and chocolate for dinner, or hangs out with that “negative Nancy” person, or decides to run a marathon and solve world peace in one weekend, or even when she goes on one of those crazy lemon-water diets. It’s hard! And sometimes it makes me a little negative or I start that over-thinking thing when my frontal lobe brakes wear down. I am sorry.

Once she’s safe, I try to keep my person aware of what she needs to be satisfied, even when she ignores me. I know she only processes 2000 bits of information/second, but she gets slower when she forgets to eat, sleep, laugh, or hug people enough. When she finally gets quiet, it’s my turn to remind her of what really matters... I so love it when she takes a break from her “busy” mode.

Once I make sure she is safe and satisfied, I try to get her to connect more — to her friends, her family, her values and beliefs, and her community and world. Sometimes this is the hardest part. She can forget how important this is, and how healthy and happy it keeps her. I will work harder on that this year.

I want you to know I can always change and learn to be better! Really! So here’s my big list of what I would like this year. I know I won’t get it all at once, but any small gift is very much appreciated!!!
1. **OXYGEN.** This sounds sort of simple, but sometimes my person forgets to take a few deep breaths or move around to get the blood flowing. Just a few deep breaths can help me reboot or get unstuck.

2. **WATER.** Again, sounds simple, but just 1% dehydration reduces my cognitive performance. Sometimes I remind her with a headache, but that’s usually not until I’m really thirsty.

3. **REST.** Actually, I need 2 kinds: SLEEP and PAUSES. When I don’t get a break to do my processing and repairs, I have a hard time doing my job to keep her healthy and smart. My person is one of the 1/3 of Americans not getting enough sleep and putting her at risk for so many chronic conditions. After she has been working away for 90 minutes, I have a hard time keeping up with neurotransmitters and fuel. When she takes just a little break, maybe even a few nice deep breaths and a stretch (LOVE both of those!), I get to replenish, connect ideas, and make stronger memories. She could try the Pomodoro method. It’s fun!

4. **ACTIVE RELAXATION.** I’m not sure she gets how powerful this one is. I just love it when, instead of surfing the internet or plopping in front of the TV, she meditates or does deep breathing or progressive relaxation (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXokq1uaPio). All those renewing parasympathetic signals and chemicals feel so good, help me repair my broken connections, and make me less over-reactive or irrational. It’s the bomb!

5. **SOME GOOD STUFF TO EAT.** I make do on anything, but I really love omega-3’s, colorful fruits and veggies, and nuts. I really like whole foods and variety! Since I don’t have any fat or sugar storage, I don’t do as well when she skips meals. Of course, a dark chocolate treat in my stocking would be awesome!

6. **EXERCISE.** When my person goes to yoga or takes a brisk walk or goes dancing, I feel those chemicals come flooding in! It’s like Miracle Grow for my wires. I don’t want her to overdo it, and I like variety, even stretches. I just wasn’t designed to sit still all day in front of that computer thing.
7. **FUN!** I love when we do new stuff, especially when we do it with curiosity and playfulness. That helps me explore new ways to wire up and get creative. When my person gets too serious I get lazy and use a lot of old wiring.

8. **REFLECTION.** Time to ponder and review what’s working, what’s not, to think about cool stuff I’ve seen or learned, and daydream about what might be is all so wonderful! It let’s me do my best tricks!

9. **POSITIVITY.** I don’t mean everything should be rainbows and roses, but I just love when my person seeks out ways to remind us to stay positive and focused on what really matters. That gratitude journal helps me use emotions more wisely.

10. **LOVING.** Babies who are loved and touched grow more complex neural wiring to grow up smarter and healthier. I still feel that way! When my person hugs someone, it’s so good for all my 100 billion cells. When she focuses on her connection to the world, I get motivated and help keep her on task.

Santa, I know this is a long list. And of course, I promise I will make the most of every little gift I receive. I will make new connections and help my person make good choices. She has no idea how much power one tiny present has to help me live longer, work harder, play harder, and keep my person’s body humming along. I love to help her use her smile wiring more!

Thank you for all you do!!!

Xoxox,

_____’s Brain

**About the Author**

Cynthia Ackrill M.D. is a leader in the field of stress management and an expert in the critical relationships between lifestyle choices, performance capacities, and leadership effectiveness. The rare deal– a physician trained in neuroscience and wellness and leadership coaching, she travels the world to teach better ways to lead and thrive in the face of stress and constant change. Learn more at www.cynthiaackrill.com.
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**REFERENCE**
If life were a Hallmark card, we’d all be energetically bounding into the holiday season with grace and joy. Unfortunately, decades of marketing the magic of the season has elevated our expectations to unreachable heights, making feelings of being overwhelmed even worse. This holiday season, don’t bypass the blessings that exist in precious time spent with family and friends. With a few simple shifts, you can recharge your energy, slow down enough to appreciate what’s good in life, and refocus your attention on what matters most.

1. **Take a digital detox.**

In the “off season”, work demands subside as companies realize attention is often elsewhere. But our hard-wired need to stay connected and productive can keep us leashed to our technological devices even more as things slow down. Notice the pull and just like lifting weights at the gym, resist it. Without judgment, shift your attention to the present moment and experiencing what’s right before you, or use the time to truly decompress with one of the recharge strategies on the next page.
2. **Prioritize sleep.**
It’s natural to want to hibernate a bit when our surroundings become cold and dark. So why not follow nature’s perfect rhythm and allow yourself to rest? Set an alarm to start your unwinding process and aim to go to bed 30 minutes earlier each week to nudge you towards more consistent slumber. Use relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, aromatherapy, peaceful music or guided meditation to quiet your busy mind and allow your body to drift off to sleep.

3. **Power-up your plate.**
Remember, sometimes less is more. Focus on increasing the value of what you eat rather than the volume to keep you feeling energized and engaged. If 80% of what you eat consists of whole, natural, health-promoting foods then the occasional indulgence that you really enjoy and appreciate won’t throw you off track. When you do splurge on dietary delights, eat slowly and mindfully to fully enjoy the experience.

4. **Move it, move it.**
Movement not only stimulates energy production, but it also helps to dramatically decrease stress hormones while boosting feel-good chemicals in the brain. One way to make it easier to incorporate physical activity into your already-busy schedule is to gradually increase the general movement you get throughout the day. Simply standing instead of sitting can double metabolism, and walking can multiply resting metabolism five-fold. Set goals for yourself and make it more fun by including friends and family in a challenge, such as tracking steps or doing a silly circuit-training workout with your kids during commercials.

5. **Laugh out loud.**
While most people don’t play games with the intent of improving their health, recent studies have demonstrated that having fun and laughing can have tremendous impact on all dimensions of our health: physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Our physical body cannot differentiate between “real” laughter in response to something we genuinely find funny and the unconditional laughter that is merely brought on by one’s intention to laugh. Experienced with a group, this laughter quickly becomes contagious and the impact is substantial.

6. **Remember your purpose.**
Try to start each day by setting your intentions for priorities and purpose. Instead of focusing on what needs to be done, spend a few minutes thinking about why the holiday season is important to you, and how you want to experience your time so you can stay mindful of what matters most.

7. **Treat yourself.**
Tis the season for giving, so why not do something special for yourself? Taking time to nurture your own spirit will help fuel the energy and attention you need to be fully present with those you care about. Schedule a massage or other spa treatment, buy a nice candle or aromatherapy diffuser, take a long bubble bath, or treat yourself to a movie. Remember to bless your stress, it means you’re alive. Besides, a simple shift in perspective can make stress your friend instead of your frenemy.

**Author**

Dr. Heidi Hanna is a health and performance consultant, NY Times bestselling author, and global speaker on topics related to stress, brain health, and personal and organizational energy management.
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