

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Here I go again. This New Year, like every other one, I have made a resolution to lose weight (thirty pounds) and begin a regular exercise routine. It's not even a week into 2006 and already I've blown it. With this kind of failure, I feel like giving up. Do you have any words of advice?

-- Just Can't Do It

Dear Mr. or Ms. Can't,

Yikes! You're right! It's only the first week of the New Year and you're quitting already?! You have not yet failed on reaching your goals, but if you continue to embrace the 'stinking thinking' strategy that you are using now, you certainly will fail. You are wimping out simply because you haven't yet gotten into the routines that you desire in order to live a more healthy and fit life. So start over. Plan your work and work your plan. Get the word "can't" out of your vocabulary. You may not be able to control every aspect of your life, but you certainly have the power to decide whether you will walk on your treadmill for thirty minutes or hit the couch with a boxful of doughnuts while watching television for hours after work.

First, set rational goals. Make these 1) specific, 2) attainable, and 3) forgiving. If you are expecting that you will lose thirty pounds and run a marathon during the first month of your new lifestyle, you are setting yourself up to "fail." Instead, think about what you can reasonably accomplish: "I will exercise for fifteen minutes three days a week for the first month" is a goal that you could achieve right now and one that is specific, attainable, and forgiving (e.g., there's some wiggle room here about exactly what days you will exercise). Signing up for the Ironman, at this point, may be a specific goal, but it is not attainable nor is it forgiving. Besides, it would probably kill you. It's always a good idea to talk with your health care provider before starting an exercise program especially if you are older than thirty-five. But unless you have some critical health issue that precludes physical activity, most doctors will cheer you on in your pursuit of fitness.

Second, write down your goals and a schedule for each of your new behaviors. Leave a space where you can add a check mark, a sticker, or some other notation that shows that you accomplished your goals for that day. There's something powerful about making our goals and dreams tangible by writing them down. But, of course, all the best planning in the world doesn't mean a thing unless you take action.

Third, plan ahead. Have a fitness program in place by purchasing exercise equipment (this could be as inexpensive and simple as a jump rope), joining a health club, participating in an aerobics class, or signing up for yoga instruction. If you choose an outdoor venue for your exercise, think about how that will work in all kinds of weather. "Oops, can't walk today, it's raining," puts too much power in the hands of elements you can't control. Reflect on the kind of physical activity that you enjoy most. Would you rather swim? Walk? Work out with exercise equipment? Hire a coach or personal trainer? You'll be more motivated to exercise if you choose an activity that appeals to you. It should go without saying that your planning should include changes in

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your food shopping patterns. A basic rule of life is this: “If there are chocolate chip cookies in the pantry, they must be eaten.” Get rid of them.

Fourth, reward yourself for your accomplishments (but not by doling out those chocolate chip cookies). This reinforcement need not be expensive or outlandish. It’s not necessary to buy yourself a new Lexus because you’ve met your exercise and diet goals for a month. Instead, think about fresh flowers for your table or a new pair of running socks that strike your fancy. It will be self-reinforcing for you to see your weight go down and your fitness level improve but until those changes are tangible, find ways of rewarding small steps in the right direction.

Fifth, engage your family and friends in your goals. Let them know how important your goals are to you and ask for their support. Work out with a buddy if possible. This can be more fun and you can encourage each other in your mutual pursuit of fitness and good health.

Finally, and most importantly, remember that each moment offers an opportunity for a new decision about following your plan. You may have missed your goal yesterday, but you do not have to do so today. The only place where “success” comes before “work” is in the dictionary. Good luck and, remember, you can do this!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.