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## Feeling Good Blog

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### The Right Person for the Goal

You're a week into the new year—and perhaps into a new resolution. If you chose your goal well, it's specific and realistic, and you're on the right path. But there's still a long way to go. So now is a good time to remind yourself that you've got what it takes to succeed.

In the first weeks of working on a goal, that initial burst of enthusiasm and confidence can start to wane. When I hit this point, I have a favorite mental trick for getting past it: I sell myself on my qualifications for the goal, just like I'd pitch my qualifications for a job in a résumé.

To try this strategy, first ask yourself:

- What knowledge and skills do you bring to the task?
- What past experiences can you build on?

Let's say your ultimate aim is to lose 30 pounds. Your starting goals are to eat no more than 1,600 calories per day and to exercise for 30 minutes, five days a week. Those are both challenging goals, but chances are, you already have knowledge and skills that will help you achieve them. Maybe you follow three fitness blogs, know lots of healthy grilling recipes, and are a wiz at tracking calories with a phone app.

You also have life experiences to build on. Maybe you walked in a 5k last year and take part in an employee wellness program. Even past weight loss attempts that failed can count if you learned what works for you and what doesn't. Once you think about it, you may be surprised by how qualified you really are to tackle this goal.

Good luck with your resolution, and keep me posted on how you're doing!

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### Set Yourself Up for Success

Happy 2013! It's a new year and a new chance to make a wellness resolution. To set yourself up for success, it's important for your goal to be attainable. But what does that mean exactly?

To gauge whether a goal is realistic, you need to step back and look at your situation objectively, and that's difficult to do. To make it a bit easier, I recommend asking yourself a couple of revealing questions:

- **List five things that might go wrong as you work toward this goal.** Can you think of at least two ways to handle each of these problems should they arise? If you answered "no," before you tackle the goal itself, spend a little more time planning strategies to overcome any obstacles that might get in your way.
- **Imagine that you're an outside observer who has just been presented the relevant facts about you and your goal.** Would you bet \$100 that you'll succeed? If you answered "no," that's a sign you're harboring self-doubts. Take some time to explore why you think of yourself as a long shot. Are you actually lacking some skills and tools you need to succeed? Or are you being too pessimistic?

Even if you conclude that a goal is unrealistic, that doesn't necessarily mean you have to give it up. Often, you just need to work up to it gradually. For instance, if you want to run a half-marathon but aren't a runner now, you might start with the goal of running a mile. With persistence and determination, today's overly ambitious goal could be tomorrow's totally attainable one.

Looking for more help with making successful resolutions? Check out the helpful LifeWorks article on [Setting SMART Goals](#).

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### Resolving to Streamline My Life

As 2012 winds down, it's time to think about making resolutions for 2013. For many people, myself included, streamlining an overly crowded schedule is a top priority. The ultimate goal is not only to reduce stress and pressure, but also to free up more time for rest and relaxation.

To work toward any goal successfully, it's important to translate abstract aims into concrete actions. And to do that, it helps to ask three basic questions. Here's how I used the questions to guide my own resolution.

- **What exactly will I do?** Trying to change several things at once reduces the odds of succeeding at any of them for long. It's better to focus on one change at a time. In my case, I chose to focus on streamlining household chores. So the first change I decided to make is reducing the time I waste by repeatedly running to the supermarket to pick up just one or two items. Translated into a specific action, I'm resolving to create a weekly menu plan and grocery shopping list.
- **When will I do it?** Sunday is the day this fits best into my personal schedule. So my fine-tuned resolution is to create a weekly menu plan and grocery shopping list every Sunday, and then take it with me to the supermarket that same day.
- **Is my resolution realistic?** A resolution that's too overwhelming is doomed. But this seems doable, so I'm giving it a try. What's your streamlining resolution? I'd love to hear about it on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/lindawandrews> or Facebook at <http://facebook.com/healthpsychologywriter>.

I'll be on vacation for the rest of December, but I'll be back in January. Until then, have a safe and happy New Year's!

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### Appreciate Those Near and Dear

As extended families come together for the holidays, the festive mood can quickly dissolve into old aggravations and resentments. One way to prevent that is by focusing your attention on what's lovable about your loved ones. Recently, I chatted with Noelle Nelson, PhD, clinical psychologist and author of *The Power of Appreciation*, about how to cultivate greater appreciation for family members.

Although you might not be able to control a relative's perennially bad jokes or poor table manners, you can control your ability to focus on that person's finer qualities. For example, if Aunt Betty is always snoring while you're still at the table, Dr. Nelson says you might appreciate how she enjoys her meal with such gusto.

One of my favorite ways to foster this attitude at holiday meals is with appreciation place cards. Make large, folded place cards with the person's name on the front and room to write inside. Provide pens, and ask everyone to go around and write something they appreciate about each of their fellow diners before the meal.

Of course, appreciation isn't just for special occasions. It's also a reminder not to take loved ones for granted, day in and day out. Don't be shy about telling others what you value about them—in words, on cards, via texts or tweets. "Be specific, because people love to feel known," says Dr. Nelson. For example, you might say, "I love the way you hum to yourself while washing dishes."

This seems like a great time to mention how much I appreciate having a chance to share my thoughts with you in this blog—and how grateful I am to those of you who have shared suggestions in return. Happy holidays!

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## Slim Down an Over-Stuffed Home

Many of us have homes that are literally over-stuffed—filled with things that cost precious hours to pay for and take care of, but that often don't add as much value to our lives as we had hoped. I've been as guilty as the next person of buying things I didn't really need. But this year, I made a deliberate choice to slim down my possessions.

If you've been following this blog, you may recall that, early in the year, I sold not only my house, but also most of my furniture and possessions. Then I loaded up my compact car with as much as it would hold and moved to another state.

For me, the decision has worked out extremely well. Here's what I learned from it:

- **Less really can be more.** If, like me, you have to budget pennies and minutes, a scaled-down lifestyle helps ensure that you aren't wasting either on unimportant things. There's less clutter, so things stay tidier and more organized. I can quickly find what I need when I need it, and my to-do list of things that need to be cleaned or repaired is much shorter. All in all, life feels lighter and freer without so much stuff weighing me down.
- **Your junk may be someone else's treasure.** Those little-used items that I sold or donated wound up in other homes, where I hope they're being put to better use.
- **Paring down is a process.** Now that I'm settled into a new place, I'm trying hard not to over-stuff it. My partner had some essentials already waiting for me, and I've replaced a few other items. But I'm making a conscious effort to think before I buy anything new these days. I find that it helps to think about the price not only in dollars, but also in work hours required to purchase and maintain it.

Months later, I realize that I've never missed most of the things that I got rid of. Going forward, I'm determined to own my stuff instead of letting it own me. What about you? I'd love to hear your thoughts on getting stuff under control.

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## The Best Gift for Teens: Gratitude

The older kids get, the pricier their wish list for holiday gifts seems to be. But one of the best things you can give teens is absolutely free: an attitude of gratitude.

Of all the studies presented at the American Psychological Association's annual meeting this year, I was particularly struck by one that looked at gratitude in teens. Researchers at California State University gave questionnaires to 700 students, first when they were ages 10 to 14 and again four years later.

Grateful students were less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol or have behavior problems at school. By the end of the four years, students who felt the most gratitude showed an especially healthy pattern of emotional development. Compared to the least grateful students, they reported becoming happier and more hopeful, growing more satisfied with their lives, and gaining a greater sense of meaning.

How can you help teens develop more gratitude for the good things and people in their lives? Here are some ideas:

- **Be a role model.** Don't forget to voice your own gratitude: "Thank you for carrying those shopping bags in from the car. It was really a big help."
- **Space out the opening of gifts.** Opening just a few at a once lets the recipient take enough time to really appreciate the giver's thoughtfulness.
- **Make a home "thank you" box.** A shoebox with a slot in the lid is fine. This is similar to a suggestions box at work. But instead of complaints, people jot down brief notes thanking a family member who has lent a hand or brightened the day. Read the notes together once a week.

For more suggestions, check out the LifeWorks article on [Raising a Grateful Child](#).

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## Gratitude Helps You Get a Good Night's Sleep

In addition to writing this blog, I also blog about mind/body health for Psychology Today. In one of my most popular posts there, I wrote about how grateful thoughts promote a great night's sleep. In one study I described, volunteers who wrote in a gratitude journal for 15 minutes every evening worried less at bedtime and slept longer and better through the night.

Since I wrote that article a year ago, more research has come out supporting the link between gratitude and sleep. In a recent study in the *Journal of Health Psychology*, for instance, gratitude was associated with better sleep in chronic pain sufferers. And improved sleep, in turn, seemed to help keep their anxiety at bay.

How do grateful thoughts affect sleep? Gratitude helps focus your mind on the good things in your life. In this positive frame of mind, you're less prone to worry and brooding at bedtime, which can keep you awake. Instead of obsessing over a customer's rudeness, for example, you're thinking about a coworker's kindness in inviting you to lunch. As a result, you're more likely to drift off into a peaceful slumber.

So rather than counting sheep, try counting your blessings close to bedtime. You might find yourself falling asleep faster and getting a longer, more restful night's sleep.

Ready to try it? Check out the new Gratitude Journal on this website. Order one today!

### Source

"How Gratitude Helps You Sleep at Night." L.W. Andrews, PsychologyToday.com, November 9, 2011, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/minding-the-body/201111/how-gratitude-helps-you-sleep-night>. "The Differential Effects of Gratitude and Sleep on Psychological Distress in Patients with Chronic Pain." M.Y. Ng and W.S. Wong. *Journal of Health Psychology*, published online March 12, 2012.

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## Give Heart-Healthy Holiday Gifts

Cardiovascular disease runs in my family—and now it runs in my arteries, too, thanks to my recent diagnosis with high blood pressure. So I've been thinking about fun, affordable ways to give the gift of heart health this holiday season. Here are some ideas:

- **Stocking stuffers for active feet.** Instead of candy, fill grown-up stockings with goodies that get people's feet moving. Examples include a trail map, walking guide, pedometer, pair of walking socks, or quick lacing system—elastic cords that replace ordinary shoelaces. If you feel like splurging, consider a GPS, electronic fitness monitor, or gift certificate to a sports shoe store.
- **Muffin baskets instead of cookie tins.** Choose muffins made with whole grains, nuts, and heart-healthy oils. If you enjoy baking, homemade treats are always a hit—but you can find premade muffins containing these ingredients at natural food stores and many plain old supermarkets. Or, if the recipient loves to cook, just fill the basket with a muffin pan and whole grain muffin mix.
- **Gift membership to a health club.** Instead of a gift card that's used up in one trip to the mall, give a gift membership to a local gym that's good for a month (or more). If you can, throw in a session or two with a personal trainer. Too expensive? Offer to treat the recipient to the fitness class of his or her choice at the local community center.

Finally, consider making a holiday donation to a charity that supports heart health research. By opening your heart, you could be saving the health of someone you love.

Do you have any great suggestions to add to the list? I'd love to hear from you on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/lindawandrews> or Facebook at <http://facebook.com/healthpsychologywriter>.

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### “I’ve Always Been Healthy” Syndrome

Recently, I was diagnosed with hypertension (high blood pressure). I’m 55 with a strong family history of cardiovascular disease, so it shouldn’t have come as a shock. Yet it did, because I was also suffering from “I’ve always been healthy” syndrome—the misguided belief that being blessed with good health today ensures that you won’t get sick tomorrow.

My first thought—a common reaction—was, “That can’t be right; I take care of myself.” But, of course, a healthy lifestyle is no guarantee of a disease-free life. Although smart choices about diet, exercise, stress, sleep, alcohol, and tobacco can keep you healthier than you would be otherwise, factors such as genes and age make a difference, too.

For me, the diagnosis was a wake-up call about the importance of regular checkups and medical screenings, even when feeling fine. With hypertension, for example, the only way to catch it before serious harm has been done is by checking your blood pressure.

Maybe you, like me, haven’t been as diligent about this as you could have been in the past. Resolve to do better in the future. Here are two steps to take:

- **Put a note now in your 2013 calendar.** Pick an easy date to remember, such as your birthday. Then start a yearly tradition of scheduling your annual checkup and/or medical screenings for that date.
- **Learn more about what’s recommended.** A great starting place is this webpage from the U.S. National Library of Medicine: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/healthscreening.html>.

As the holidays approach, I’ve been thinking a lot about heart health—my own and other people’s. In my next post, I’ll suggest some heart-smart gift ideas.

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### How Did Your 2012 Resolutions Go?

December is a good time to look back at resolutions made in January. When I launched this blog at the start of the year, I shared resolutions to stress less and laugh more. Pursuing those resolutions turned out to be a lesson in flexibility. As my needs and circumstances changed, so did my goals and strategies for achieving them.

My first goal was to “reconnect with at least one old friend each week for two months.” I stuck with this goal throughout January and February, and it helped me get through a very hectic time as I sold my house and prepared to relocate. By the time the two months were up, I was ready to settle into a more stable routine and move on to other goals. But the relationships I had rekindled are still with me, and my life is richer for that.

The next goal I tackled was to “practice mindful walking for at least 30 minutes once a week.” I’m still actively working on that. At my new home in Wisconsin, there’s a park nearby with a nice trail through the woods, so this was an easy resolution to keep in warmer months. Now that it’s cold, however, it’s harder to motivate myself to go outdoors. Yet walking indoors on a treadmill isn’t nearly as relaxing for me.

So I bought a warmer jacket, and now I give myself a little pep talk before setting out. I remind myself that it’s OK if I don’t love those first few minutes as my body adapts to the cold, because I’ll enjoy the rest of the walk. (And I do!)

How did your own resolutions work out? Did you tweak them as circumstances changed? I’d love to hear from you on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/lindawandrews> or Facebook at <http://facebook.com/healthpsychologywriter>.

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### Coping with a Messy Office Mate

One person’s desk is so neat that it’s hard to tell any actual work goes on there. Another’s is so messy that—well, you think there’s a desk underneath there someplace. Put those two people together in the same office or cubicle, and you’ve got a breeding ground for stress and conflict.

Recently, I chatted with Sarah Riforgiate, PhD, an assistant professor of communication studies at Kansas State University, about this subject. Dr. Riforgiate has researched these types of conflicts in roommates. But I think many of her observations apply to office mates just as well.