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Looking Back ... And Ahead

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Assuming that the world doesn't end on December 21 as predicted by the Mayan calendar—personally, I'm betting on another five billion years or so—this is the time of year when many of us look back at what happened during the previous 12 months. Through the media, for example, we're reminded of important events that took place, major milestones that were achieved and significant people who passed away.

This is the time of year when it's also good to look back at what happened with your fitness lifestyle. But besides looking back, there's great value in looking ahead.

When looking ahead, many people make New Year's resolutions. According to a statewide Rutgers-Eagleton Poll that was conducted in February of this year, for example, 223 of 914 registered voters in New Jersey (24.4%) said that they made New Year's resolutions. Among those who made resolutions, the two most popular goals were getting and staying healthy and losing weight. (Alas, saving money came in third.) About 44% of them found it easy to keep their resolutions; the other 56% had some degree of difficulty.

So, although many people make resolutions, many people break resolutions. More often than not, people who fail to keep their resolutions do so because of ineffective or non-existent goals.

Effective goals are SMART: Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Realistic and Timed. Let's take a look at these five elements of goal setting in more detail.

Specific: One of the main reasons why people fail to achieve their goals is because they're not specific. The truth is that those who have specific goals in mind are more likely to reach them. A general goal is to get fit; this is abstract and has numerous interpretations. A specific goal is to increase the number of reps that you do in the bench press with your bodyweight (or a percentage of it); this is concrete and has one clear objective.

Measureable: If a goal can't be measured, it can't be assessed. Indeed, how do you know if you've achieved a goal if there's no way to measure it? So rather than have an ambiguous goal to exercise more, a measureable goal is to do strength training an average of two days per week; rather than have an ambiguous goal to eat better, a measureable goal is to consume three servings of vegetables a day. Goals that can be measured are more likely to be met.

Attainable: Although some people have goals that are specific and measureable, they're often far too difficult to attain. A goal of losing 25 pounds of fat in three months, for example, cannot be attained (at least not in a healthy manner). An attainable goal is to lose one pound of fat per week for the next two months. Remember, too, that a successful outcome is more likely when a goal is within reach.

Realistic: Having realistic goals is closely related to having attainable goals. Don't set your sights on running a six-minute mile if the last time that you did so was 10 years and 20 pounds ago. Don't think about trimming your midsection by a few inches if you get your three daily servings of fruit from a blueberry muffin, an apple pie and a banana split. In making realistic goals, it's important to be honest with yourself. Take into consideration things like your age, ability and motivation.

Timed: There must be a time requirement or target date for achieving goals. A goal to gain five pounds of lean-body mass has good intentions but when is it supposed to be attained? In one month? Six months? Whenever? The point is that it's easy to put off goals unless a deadline is attached. The deadline could be weeks or months or a specific date. For instance, a timed goal might be to gain five pounds of lean-body mass by June 30. Or it might be to run a marathon by your next birthday.

Bottom line: When looking ahead, set goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timed.

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