

## **To Be or Not To Be:**

### **Breaking the Cycle of Abandoned Health and Fitness Resolutions**

If you have decided to lose weight, go to the gym regularly, do a medical check-up, walk often, drink less alcohol, stop smoking, and perhaps do something selfless like donating to charity... be rest assured that you are not on the small and narrow path. You belong to the over five million Ghanaians who resolved to do something similar a few days ago.

Unfortunately, many of us never get started; some strive for a couple of weeks and then give up the ghost; and the heroes may still be on course by 31<sup>st</sup> March. As far as we humans know, there is no magic wand to ensure that you stick to your New Year Resolutions, be they about health, spirituality, morality, or something else. However, together, we will work on a blueprint that may help our new choices to eventually become habits.

#### 1. Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

How true it is that ‘When we fail to prepare, we prepare to FAIL’. The first of January is no fairytale day. If we wish to make changes from that day, we have to work at it. You must note:

- We have to psyche ourselves up to believe that we will hang in there, no matter what.
- You can't stay healthy if you don't even have the right attire to exercise. If you plan to use a gym, get your clothes, trainers, towel and water bottle, and pack them in a bag ready for the action. Even if you plan to walk, get a good pair of footwear. It is worthwhile to invest some money in your basic requirements.
- Knowledge definitely is power – we have to know well ahead of time what we plan to do, and why. If it's walking, map out your route before the 1<sup>st</sup> of January. If you intend to sweat it out in a gym, choose one before 31<sup>st</sup> December (oops, we're late, but it's better late than never!).
- Sometimes, it's vital to get a professional to help you. The plan is to improve your health, and not to harm yourself. Learning to do things right is essential.
- Choose the time and days you plan to exercise. You may not be able to have a single stretch of thirty minutes at a time, so do the next best thing: put in three ten-minute sessions each day.
- If eating well is a problem for you, seek help. Even if you think you are in control of your meals, you can still seek professional help (so that you can show off!).
- If you are forty years and above, pregnant, have multiple disease states, get tired easily, or have not exercised in more than one year, get clearance from a healthcare professional well before the Christmas season. We want to hit the New Year running.

## 2. Be Patient

Patience, my dear reader, is a virtue. It can move even mountains, so improving your health or flattening the mound around your midsection is not beyond its capability.

- Start slowly. No need to squeeze all that you should have done over the past five years into your first workout.
- Pushing yourself too hard may end up causing you so much pain that like many people I have interacted with, you spend the next few days – or weeks - nursing injuries. That could be the end of your new year resolution.
- No need complicating matters with ‘I will lose 50kg by 31<sup>st</sup> December’ The risk? You may lose focus by mid April. What if we say ‘.....1kg by 28<sup>th</sup> February” (I hope you know by now that I am not a big fan of the scale: this example is purely to explain the point). Better still, we could have a fuzzy objective like: ‘By March 1<sup>st</sup>, I should be able to go up two flights of stairs without stopping to catch my breath’ (by the way, here’s a word to our dear sisters: trying to run up the stairs in high heels may make life uncomfortable for your knees. Unfortunately, there are no spares for your knees. I am a great fan of wedge shoes - excellent for the back and knees).
- Finally, you are a unique individual. You may start your health quest on the same day with someone else who will appear to be making faster progress. Remember, we are all different. The important factor in this case is to keep breaking your own records.

## 3. Write it Down

The smart people in research have discovered that whenever we write down our goals, we are more likely to succeed. No need re-inventing the wheel: let’s write down our goals and go a step further - discuss your goals with someone whom you will hate to disappoint. This person may check up on you during the year, and the ‘fear of losing face’ will keep you on track long after the NEW YEAR tunes have died down.

Your written goals should be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time bound (SMART), and they will act as a blueprint for you to follow throughout the year.

Log or write down what you do each fitness day, e.g. ‘I ran for 10 minutes and had to stop twice to catch my breath. My thighs and calves ached so badly I had to get a cold compress and take some painkillers (not a smart thing to do)’. Imagine what you do to your ego when three weeks later when you run at an even faster pace for 30 minutes; do some strength training; and take a quick shower so that you can get to work before 8am. Plus, no pain at all!

Logging your workout is good. It boosts your ego, alerts you when you slack, and if you hit a plateau, your instructor may be able to help you by simply analyzing your log book.

For your meals, don't forget to chart when (the time); where (the location); who you ate with; your mood during the meal; and whether you ate with or without alcohol. You will have to include two weekend days in the recommended 4-day initial Diet Log.

#### 4. Choice Is King

'Variety is the spice of life'. It is a rule of thumb that you pick exercises, sports or fitness quests that you love or enjoy. When we love something, we tend to keep doing it. Always remember, though, that we need to spice things up a bit and sometimes challenge ourselves with those activities we may dislike at first sight.

You may love walking. Keep walking, but vary this exercise: use weights sometimes, or even resistance bands. Intersperse brisk walking with short bursts of jogging. Walk in a hilly area and sometimes on level ground. Occasionally, ride a bike, swim, play tennis, or even join an aerobics class.

#### 5. Identify the Limiting Factors

A limiting factor is that demon that prevents you from getting the result you expect or should achieve, even though you are doing everything else right.

- **Nutrition** is often our enemy numero uno. You will be short-changing yourself if you do not get your nutrition right. Seek professional help.
- **Motivation.** Sometimes we need to have an exercise buddy. We tend to workout longer as we chat, or make more effort to go to the gym or meet outside to walk together. We just hate to disappoint our buddy.
- **Time.** If only we could set aside a few minutes each day, to take care of our health. 'Time and tide wait for no man', but how true it is that by failing to invest in our health now, we may be hit by an illness that may leave us like the river bird '...sitting all day long...' A stroke, for instance, may leave us in this state. Time is scarce: if you have to use the gym, do not go there more than five days in a week. You will only be setting yourself up for gym fatigue/burn out, and alas! a lost dream.

#### 6. Reward Yourself

No matter how little you may think your achievement is, give yourself a pat on the shoulder. Buy yourself a smaller size dress or belt. Go out with your exercise buddy to celebrate. Make a big fuss. Your brain just recognized your excitement, and will help you attain more milestones.

If through sheer coincidence, you find that in June you are back to your old ways, this is no time for blame games. You need not wait till January; your new calendar starts on that day.

You have what it takes to make it. Get going NOW!!!!

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Sources:

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