

RESOLUTIONS SPECIAL

The lo-fi way to LIFE-LONG HAPPINESS

At the heart of every New Year's resolution is the thought that, somehow, achieving it means a shortcut to a better life. But what if the real key to happiness is to banish the three negative thinking habits we're all guilty of? **Sally Brown** reports

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What have you resolved to change this year? Maybe you've decided that a flatter stomach, a bigger house or learning a new skill is the key to your happiness. And maybe it is. But unless you've already learned to banish negative thoughts, you're not only more likely to fail to reach your goals, but you'll also find it harder to enjoy them if you do. 'Modern life has set us up to be particularly hard on ourselves,' says clinical psychologist Dr Mary Welford. 'If we don't make ourselves immune to the negative mindsets that today's culture encourages, it's impossible to feel truly satisfied and content, however successful we are.'

Not only do we live in incredibly critical times (just switch on the TV any night of the week and you'll see a panel of judges berating some poor hopeful's performance) but we're also being sold increasingly hard-to-reach dreams. Yes, we're grown →

up enough to know that we can't all live A-list lives, but hands up who hasn't felt a pang of jealousy on spying pictures of a friend's seemingly glossy life on Facebook?

'Everyone's an armchair critic these days, from off-the-cuff tweets to morphing into the Fashion Police over coffee,' says psychotherapist Rachel Shattock Dawson (therapyonthames.co.uk). 'We might not realise it, but that rating-and-slatting culture can quickly slip in to our own thought processes - leading us to harshly critique our own efforts and believe that everyone else is more successful.'

Not only does this hamper your attempts to achieve your goals, it upsets your happiness balance, too. And it's not just self-criticism that's holding us back. 'There are three main negative mindsets that today's society encourages, which are particularly bad for us,' says Rachel. 'Learn how to overcome them, and you'll eliminate the chance

of giving up on your goals, feel far more positive about your new resolutions, and find it easier to celebrate your success - no more undermining your 10K run because "I should've done a half marathon".'

In fact, experts claim, simply changing your mind-set in three areas will have a far bigger effect on your year ahead than any other resolution you make. 'We have the idea that we can be whatever we want to

be, and that everyone can have the life they want, and that's a wonderful, empowering philosophy,' says John

Parkin, author of *F**k It Therapy: The Profane Way to Profound Happiness* (Hayhouse, £10.99).

'But we've forgotten that it's also possible to be happy without changing anything about yourself and just appreciating who you are.'

So if you only decide to make one positive change this year, make sure it's to ditch these negative mindsets. We promise it will be the best resolution you've ever made.

Stop self-criticism

Whether it's *I'm a Celeb*, *X Factor* or *Strictly*, for the past few months, barely a day has gone by without an invitation to criticise the good, the bad and the bonkers. What starts on the sofa spreads across the Twittersverse via coffee-break chat-chat, and negativity seeps into our thoughts and becomes almost second nature.

And like most bad habits, passing judgement is difficult to give up. "Hearing other people being put down can soothe insecurity - we think 'at least it's not me,'" says psychologist Professor Paul Gilbert. "But that thought is quickly followed by anxiety, as you start to question, 'What if people do talk about me like that?' Anxiety and insecurity are breeding grounds for self-criticism, and that's a real barrier to happiness and wellbeing." And no matter how motivated you feel, sticking to a resolution is almost impossible if there's a niggling voice inside you telling you that you're going to fail.

The key is to be more accepting of ourselves, but how can we do that? "Keep a diary of your thoughts for a day and see if you're supporting yourself, or continually putting yourself down," says Rachel. Once you've identified your recurrent critical thoughts, try challenging them by filling in the chart below:

CRITICAL THOUGHT	RATE HOW MUCH YOU BELIEVE IT (1-10)	CHALLENGE IT	RATE YOUR BELIEF NOW (1-10)
I can't cope, I'll never get this finished in time.	8	I've faced tight deadlines before and been OK. I just need to stay calm and focus.	2

**'IT'S POSSIBLE
TO BE HAPPY
WITHOUT
CHANGING
WHO YOU ARE'**

HOW TO SILENCE YOUR INNER CRITIC

Next time you're about to criticise someone, think:

Who needs to hear this? Are your comments helpful? To anyone?

Learn that you can't control everything. Do actually /tend to shake your shoulders and roll your back on a trip.

Remind yourself that the person is probably just doing their best.

You don't benefit from talking on their parade, do you, critical?

Replace thinking time with productivity. If you feel the urge to judge, try and swap those thoughts for some other activity. Get it on.

Eliminate your critical triggers. You don't have to watch Big Brother, switch off the TV and avoid the frizzy office gossip.

Practice! Get used to biting your tongue before you launch into a critical rant →

2 Don't look back

It's natural to go over unhappy times in our lives with a view to learning lessons from them, but reliving a scenario over and over again is more likely to distort it in your mind. Our love of social networking has also made 'looking back' an emotional minefield, with a recent survey finding that a third of us are unable to resist using Facebook to keep tabs on an ex.

'We're a curious species by nature and unique in our ability to think about the past and the future,' says Dr Wellford. 'But what's changed in recent years is that now we can follow up on a passing thought - about an ex, an old friend or somewhere we used to work - and feed the thought with information from the internet.'

It means we're more likely than ever before to be plagued with thoughts of 'what if', and to update the memories via our online networks by seeking out new information about that ex, old company or friend you've left behind.

Going over old ground can also trigger a 'blame' mind-set, says Dr Wellford. 'Blaming yourself for things that have happened in the past can hold you back from trying new things because you start doubting your abilities - and that includes your New Year's resolutions,' she says.

Try these exercises to help you leave the past behind:

RELIVING A SCENARIO OVER AND OVER IS MORE LIKELY TO DISTORT IT IN YOUR MIND

WRITE IT OUT

1 Find a quiet place and write down everything you feel about the situation that still has a hold over you. Keep writing until you feel all written out.

2 Add a final paragraph that comprises a one- or two-sentence answer to each of the following statements.

I still feel angry that.....

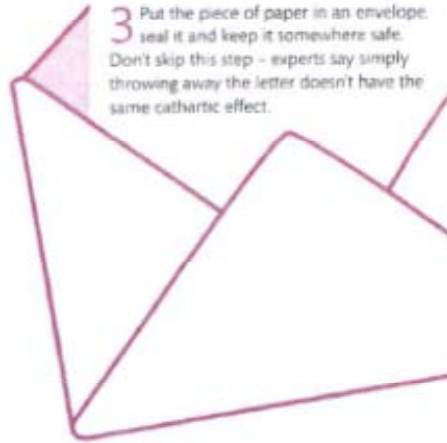
I feel sad that.....

I felt afraid that.....

I now regret that.....

I love.....

3 Put the piece of paper in an envelope, seal it and keep it somewhere safe. Don't skip this step - experts say simply throwing away the letter doesn't have the same cathartic effect.



MAKE REGRET YOUR SPRINGBOARD

You can't change the fact that the job you turned down with that web start-up 10 years ago would have made you a millionaire. But next time you think 'what if' - for instance if you always wish you'd done a round-the-world trip or run a marathon - write down three things you would have got from the experience. Instead of mourning them, make them your new goals. →

RUN A MARATHON			
1 The satisfaction of setting myself a training goal and sticking to it	1 _____	1 _____	1 _____
2 A fitter, more toned body	2 _____	2 _____	2 _____
3 A sense of achievement crossing the finish line	3 _____	3 _____	3 _____

3 Make time for fun

So, when did we forget to have fun?

According to a recent study, three in four of us view the weekend not as two days off to enjoy, but as an extension of the working week, filled with the boring chores we don't usually have time for. And work is merging with leisure time, too - who bats an eyelid when the boss emails at 10pm and expects a response?

The assumption is that by working harder we're safeguarding ourselves from the unhappy effects of the recession - redundancy or low pay - but in fact by taking emails late at night and eating meals at our desks, we're compounding our unhappiness in different ways. Cutting fun out of your life can impact on your mental

health. Women who devote 11 hours or more a day to work are the most prone to depression, according to a recent study.

'When you're putting in long hours, it's easy to fall into the trap of using spare time as 'recovery', collapsing in front of the TV or heading for the nearest bar,' says positive psychology coach Miriam Akhtar (positivepsychologytraining.co.uk). 'But chilling out isn't the same as having fun, and it's having fun that can boost your happiness.'

'Spending time with loved ones and cultivating your hobbies broadens your thinking capacity, encouraging you to take a more creative and flexible approach to life, which can increase your chances of finding other things that make you happy.'