

# Small Move, Big Change

Using Microresolutions  
to Transform Your Life  
Permanently

Caroline L. Arnold



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VIKING

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for Helen

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## Preface

It's late at night as I head up the steep drive to my parents' house, the house I grew up in. I'm just off the plane from New York, and as soon as I cut the engine on my rental car I can hear the crickets chirping in the warm California night. My long day of travel at an end, I let my head fall back against the seat and I listen for a moment. I'm home.

An outside light illuminates the pathway to the front door; inside, the house is dark, my parents asleep. I roll my bag along the pebbled path and slip inside. I'm thirsty, hungry, and tired; my plane was two hours late getting in. But I don't stop for a glass of water or to check what's in the fridge. I go straight to the pantry, open the door, and hang up my car keys on an old brass rack where two other key rings dangle in the dark.

Becoming a licensed driver is a rite of passage in the California suburbs, where you can't really go anywhere without a car. I counted the days to my sixteenth birthday and couldn't wait to get behind the wheel. I learned to hang up the car keys as soon as I came home on the day I passed my driving test—over twenty-five years ago. My new California driver's license meant there would now be three drivers sharing two cars. Keys hidden in purses or pants pockets or tossed onto a bureau meant frustration and lost time. "Hang up the keys!" my parents would shout as soon as I stepped in the door.

But tonight I've arrived in a rental car only I am authorized to drive. My parents each have a car parked in the driveway. We aren't going to share cars, so why hang up the keys? Why beeline for the hook in the dark?

The answer holds the secret to achieving continuous and sustainable self-improvement. If only I had known the answer all those years ago, every one of my resolutions since would have succeeded.

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## Introduction: Why Resolutions Fail

**I will lose weight.**

**I will be neat.**

**I will be on time.**

**I will get out of debt.**

**I will be thin by summer.**

**I will get ahead at work.**

**I will be more loving.**

**I will be assertive.**

**I will get in shape.**

**I will get organized.**

**I will quit smoking.**

**I won't be defensive.**

**I will be a better person.**

**W**hy is it so hard to keep our resolutions? We begin with enthusiasm and determination, yet our will falters and our resolutions fizzle. And every time we break a resolution—a promise we make ourselves to improve our lives—we feel demoralized, powerless to make progress and realize our goals.

Even highly disciplined and successful individuals—*winner*s—fail at self-improvement initiatives. We're all losers when it comes to the New Year's resolution, our collective failure rate a spectacular 88 percent. We run in place like hamsters on a wheel, renewing and forsaking the same resolutions in an annual cycle, telling ourselves that if we only had more resolve, more willpower, more *character*, we could force a breakthrough to a better self. We begin each year (or birthday or season or Monday morning) with fresh determination, muster our willpower, tweak our resolutions, and try again. Over time, the pattern of making and breaking resolutions becomes familiar and demoralizing. We go on making resolutions, *but we expect to fail*.

What if instead of failing annually at our New Year's resolutions, we made strategic and targeted resolutions year-round that were guaranteed to succeed and transform us permanently? What if our resolutions brought us immediate rewards, raised our self-awareness, and energized our self-improvement efforts? *What if every time we made a resolution we actually expected to succeed?*

*Small Move, Big Change* is about making resolutions that succeed every time. By rethinking willpower, and refocusing your resolutions, you can master the art of instant and sustainable self-improvement, achieving personal goals that once seemed out of reach. Transparent successes will take the place of mystifying failures, optimism will replace hopelessness, confidence will replace

helplessness. You will learn how to succeed instead of fail; indeed, you will learn to *expect* success.

The purpose of this book is to teach you how to translate broad personal goals into *microresolutions* that can be managed, measured, and kept. A microresolution is a compact and powerful commitment designed to nail a precise behavioral target exactly and deliver benefits immediately. Rather than suffering a collapse of willpower after weeks of exhausting effort, you will learn how to overpower your objective through strategic focus and targeted self-control. Your resolutions will pay off the day you start and are sustainable for a lifetime. Microresolutions succeed in every self-improvement category, whether your goal is losing weight, improving a relationship, or saving money.

For most of my life I lived the common experience in resolution making—I failed nearly all the time. These personal failures were a mystery to me, as I was very successful in my career on Wall Street and in nurturing a happy and rewarding family life. I put in long hours running a global department numbering nearly five hundred people, meeting demanding deadlines, and coaching careers; I was devoted to my family, to the needs of my young daughter, husband, and aging parents; was engaged in charities and active in my community. But despite my capacity to deliver for others and the *take-no-prisoners* attitude I brought to the most challenging career assignments, I struggled to keep the personal commitments I made to myself, from going to the gym regularly to spending more time with my family. With all my energy and determination, I wondered why my resolutions had succeeded only a handful of times.

Finally, after a particularly painful resolution flop, I tried something different. I assigned myself a small but meaningful behavioral change—a *microresolution*—and I succeeded in changing myself immediately and permanently. Yet it was only after succeeding at several more microresolutions modeled on the first that I realized I had stumbled onto a method for making targeted commitments that succeeded virtually every time. I began reaching goals that had been years deferred: I lost weight and got in shape; I became tidier and better organized; I improved my relationships and my finances. Excited by my progress, I began to share my system with business colleagues, friends, and family who in turn passed the system on to others. My thriving test lab led me to a simple conclusion: *Microresolutions work.*

We live in the age of the small and powerful, where micro computer chips, tablets, iPods, smart phones, and their apps drive productivity at work and at home. Microfinancing is eliminating poverty one family at a time. Nanotechnology is revolutionizing medicine. Critical communications arrive in 140-character tweets, hitting global distribution lists in microseconds. These tools are targeted, designed to fill a specific need exactly and deliver value immediately. So it is with microresolutions—each is designed to hit a specific personal-improvement target exactly and deliver benefits immediately.

Our fast-paced, multitasking days are packed so full that the thought of adding one more to-do, meeting one more need, or pursuing one new personal objective can be overwhelming. Microresolutions slip easily into our crowded lives, quietly working their magic while we go on juggling schedules and meeting endless obligations. Indeed, microresolutions make it possible to achieve continuous self-improvement without breaking a sweat.

Microresolutions are fun and easy and take effect immediately. But before plunging into the mechanics of microresolutions—how and why they work—we should first ask ourselves, why do traditional resolutions so often end in defeat?



# Why Resolutions Fail

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We all know someone who transformed himself through an act of will—went from flabby to fit, from spendthrift to investor, from slob to house-proud neat freak. At one time or another, nearly all of us succeed in reaching some ambitious personal goal such as running the marathon or finishing a degree. But more familiar are the resolutions we make on New Year's Day and abandon in March, the midnight champagne a distant memory and our forsaken resolutions a lingering and dispiriting hangover. The broken New Year's resolution is a cultural staple, fodder for countless punch lines poking fun at the universal folly of self-improvement. We laugh along, in on the joke, yet the promises we make ourselves are serious, not silly. With so much on the line, why do we fail so often?

## *We Make the Wrong Resolutions*

Google “New Year's resolutions” and you'll turn up dozens of links devoted to popular and worthwhile personal goals. Most of these are what I call *wannabe* resolutions: *I will be fit, I will be organized, I will be assertive*. These iconic resolutions are very much like wishes in disguise: *I wish I were buff, I wish I were on top of my game, I wish I weren't such a doormat*. These resolutions focus on *being*, not *doing*.

Years ago in drama class I learned from a master that *to act* means *to do*, not *to be*. Many young actors make the mistake of trying *to be* onstage, playing “I'm angry,” “I'm sad,” “I'm tough.” But impersonating the qualities and emotions of a character—“I'm an angry tough guy with a heart of gold”—leaves these actors little *to do* onstage. In assuming a persona, they miss out on the real action of the drama, the process by which their character grows and becomes emotional. Great actors understand that the secret to behaving and feeling like a character is to focus on what the character *does*. They analyze how the character's explicit actions reveal his objectives, attitudes, and values. They concentrate on playing each action fully, and the sequence of actions adds up to an authentic characterization, a true experience, and an emotional response from themselves and from the audience. The acting lesson? *If you focus on doing what the character does, being the character will follow.\**

The same lesson applies to the resolutions you make and hope to keep. If you resolve to *be organized*, you'll likely find yourself flashing a virtual BE ORGANIZED! sign in your head every time you pick up the mail or sit down at your desk. But browbeating yourself to “be organized” every moment of the day will soon exhaust your will to change. Like an actor onstage trying to impersonate *an angry tough guy*, your focus is in the wrong place. Rather than commanding yourself *to be* what you are not—an organized person—you must define explicit actions to practice, one by one, until you begin to do what an organized person does *automatically*.

*Microresolutions focus on doing, not being. Being different follows, rather than precedes, deliberate action.*

## *We Depend Solely on Willpower to Succeed*

*Wannabe* resolutions are stimulated by powerful fantasies of a future self. Imagining ourselves happier, fitter, or more financially secure inspires us and ignites our will to change. If our goal is *to be slim and fit*, we visualize ourselves looking svelte on the beach come summer and stick a buff pinup

on the fridge to bolster our resolve. Our dream self is so inspiring that we feel certain we can sustain our will no matter how demanding the regimen we adopt to reach our goal. But before opening day at the beach our will collapses, thwarted by the long-established behaviors that sustain our everyday lives. We chastise ourselves for our lack of self-control, but in fact our willpower was simply outmatched by the tenacity of our habits, attitudes, and routines.

We are each driven by a system of unconscious habits and preferences nurtured early in life and entrenched through repetition. These established behaviors and attitudes form a kind of *autopilot*, which quietly and efficiently manages most of the routine tasks and decision making that we perform each day, preserving precious mental energy and initiative for new learning, problem solving, and idea generation. We don't have to concentrate to tie our shoes—autopilot ties them for us. Autopilot makes the coffee, locks the door, and drives the car. But your autopilot may also skip the gym, binge on sweets, overspend, or snap at your spouse. Operating largely unnoticed, the deeply rooted habits of autopilot drive individual outcomes, both good and bad. New behavioral research confirms that we are neither aware of nor in control of the routines that govern our lives. As British researchers summarized in a recent study published in *Health Psychology*, “[habit] automaticity may be broken down into a number of features: lack of awareness, mental efficiency, lack of control and lack of conscious intent.”\* In other words, we don't think about what we're doing; we just do it, unaware of how our autopilot drives us toward success or failure.

When we decide to improve ourselves—to shake things up—we run straight into resistance from autopilot. While the autopilot system in a car can easily be switched off so that the driver can resume control, disabling any part of your personal autopilot requires real effort. Autopilot likes routine and resists change. The more change we impose on ourselves, the more resistance we must overcome. And yet we nearly always shoot for an instant transformation, resolving *to be slim*, *to be neat*, *to be on time*. Such *wannabe* resolutions require changing scores of behaviors and put us broadly at war with autopilot. Resolving *to be slim* means changing your habits in almost every eating circumstance: what you eat, how often you eat, how much you eat, the way you eat. Suddenly every action, every choice demands scrutiny, conscious effort, and *willpower*.

In a seminal 2000 study on the dynamics of willpower, researchers Mark Muraven and Roy Baumeister demonstrated that self-control is a limited, physiological resource that is easily exhausted.

We found that after an act of self-control, subsequent unrelated self-control operations suffer. . . . After resisting temptations, people perform more poorly on tests of vigilance and are less able to resist subsequent temptations.\*

The more we draw on our willpower, the sooner it gives out. The broad resolutions we favor place unreasonable demands on our self-control. In order to muscle through a behavioral change, our willpower has to wrestle autopilot all day long—no wonder we cry uncle before we make it to the beach! Despite our determination to succeed, after a few weeks of valiant battle our willpower collapses, outmatched by the entrenched habits and preferences that quietly rule our lives.

The willpower-driven resolution is a top-down approach to self-improvement—we command ourselves to be different and try to force our behavior and attitudes into line. The microresolution system is a bottom-up approach, focusing relentlessly on one or two significant behavioral changes until they are driven into autopilot, where they require no deliberate effort—willpower—to sustain. A ground-level perspective offers visibility for the long run; the top-down perspective—the bird's-eye view of the treetops, not the trees—obscures the path and seldom produces insights that lead to

success the next time. But working from the ground up we can see in detail exactly what is in our way. By focusing closely on fundamental behaviors and attitudes, we increase our self-awareness and accelerate our progress.

*A microresolution is designed to reform a precise autopilot activity and requires little willpower to succeed.*

### *We're Too Impatient*

The new year is a time of restless spirits. After so many holiday months filled with self-indulgence—eating more, drinking more, spending more, letting go—we're eager to jump on the wagon and reform ourselves straightaway. We seek out shortcuts and gimmicks that promise to speed our transformation, convinced there is some magic formula to make us what we *wannabe*. Fueling our impatience is the fear that if it takes us too long to achieve a goal, we will give up before we succeed. Our mindless rushing blurs our vision, and we fail to observe how quiet habits and hidden attitudes keep us from succeeding. The next time we try to self-improve, we make exactly the same mistakes.

Transformation is a process, not an event. (Even with the help of a fairy godmother, Cinderella ended up stranded on the road from the palace when her coach turned back into a pumpkin.) And why would you want to skip the process? Consciously nurturing change makes us smarter, more self-aware, and builds a powerful foundation for continued growth. Being able to repeat our steps from A to B is the magic formula for making our achievements permanent.

*The key to lasting transformation is not speed or force but nurture.*

### *We Underestimate Our Mental and Emotional Resistance to Change*

Familiar habits and behaviors sustain and comfort us in our daily lives. Our mental, emotional, and physical habits are closely tied to the family values and routines we learned in childhood. All that early conditioning—your parents pestering you to hang up your coat, chew with your mouth closed, clean your plate, and be a good sport—established behaviors and preferences that allow you to operate on autopilot with respect to many of the actions and decisions you make each day. Disturbing these routines creates awkwardness, mental fatigue, emotional stress, and a strong impulse to revert to what feels *right*—to autopilot. The more change we take on, the more mental and emotional resistance we arouse in ourselves, such resistance brewing often just beneath the surface of our consciousness.

The intense focus of a microresolution helps expose our veiled mindset and the subtle interplay among habits, attitudes, and values that block progress. Like a scientific experiment that alters a single variable at a time in order to precisely observe cause and effect, the single-minded focus of a microresolution exposes the source of our resistance to change. Once identified, a negative mindset can be addressed, undone, even turned in support of our objectives.

*Microresolutions foster self-awareness and expose the hidden attitudes that thwart success.*

### *We Expect to Fail*

Sadly, having bailed on so many self-improvement missions, we've come to anticipate the inevitable moment when our will to change collapses and we revert to the comfort of our previous routines. The ghosts of failures past haunt each new endeavor, making it harder for us to believe in our ability to

sustain progress and influence outcomes. As our willpower wanes, we are oddly consoled by the familiar sensation of giving up and giving way. *Yes, let's have that milkshake.*

The way to free ourselves from cynicism and reverse our expectation of failure is to learn how to make resolutions we can sustain.

*A microresolution is easy to keep.*

• • •

It was only after discovering the microresolution that I began to understand why so many of the pledges we make faithfully each year fail over time. Desperate and frustrated in the wake of one such disappointment, I made my first microresolution and thereby stumbled onto a system for making resolutions that succeed on the first try and are sustainable for a lifetime. But I don't want to get ahead of myself—as I said, it all started with a broken New Year's resolution.

### *My First Microresolution*

New Year's Day. Resolution time again. What did I resolve last year? Oh, yes, I remember—to lose weight and exercise more. How did that turn out? *Let's see . . . do the math . . . wait for it . . .* a net gain of three pounds one year later.

It wasn't hard to remember my resolution or the one from the year before. Like that hopeless self-reformer Bridget Jones, who begins her eponymous diary with a list of New Year's resolutions that includes “Losing three inches from thighs,” only to acknowledge her failure by March 21 with the entry, “Right: for coming year will reactivate New Year's Resolutions,”\* my weight-loss pledge had become perennial. On this New Year's I still needed to lose ten pounds, but I shrank from renewing my pledge, because I couldn't face failing at it again. *No point in wasting yet another precious New Year's resolution on that intractable ten pounds*, I reasoned. I had other self-improvement goals to pursue and I wanted to make a resolution I was sure I could keep—that is, one that didn't require eating less or going to the gym. So I picked a new category of self-improvement and resolved:

### **To be organized**

My resolution seemed straightforward and achievable, much easier than losing weight. I was energized and determined to succeed. I went out and bought organizers for my desk at home, with slots for bills pending and bills paid, items to file and items to read (not surprisingly, container and organizer stores do their biggest business just after the New Year). I created new files with color-coded labels, cleaned up my work space, and caught up on old business. But soon the organizer slots were overflowing and my work area piled up again. I felt weary every time I looked at my desk. After three months of trying, I had failed.

I was so horrified to realize that I had failed at my *easy* resolution that I refused to concede complete defeat. If I couldn't achieve *be organized* in three months, what could I achieve that would make a difference? *To be organized* was, finally, an abstract goal. What was one concrete and specific action I could take that would make me *more* organized in a meaningful way?

I examined all the ways in which I was disorganized that caused me stress. One issue was that I couldn't always find notes when I needed them. For most of my life I had been able to rely on my

memory alone, recalling discussions, research, important details, upcoming meetings, and to-do lists with near-total accuracy. As I approached forty, I needed to supplement my memory with notes, but I wasn't systematic—my note taking was sporadic and incomplete. At home and at work, I had multiple notebooks of varying sizes that I would randomly grab when I needed to write something down. Often I would write my notes and follow-ups directly on the agenda or presentation for a meeting. I collected notes throughout the day, with some ending up in my handbag, some on my desk at work, some on my desk at home. I lost valuable time hunting for meeting notes, an important phone number, or a reference. I decided to focus my resolution solely on this single organizational issue. I resolved:

### **To put all my notes in one notebook**

I bought a small, serious-looking journal to capture my notes. I was determined to succeed and break the curse of the failed New Year's resolution and considered my new resolution so modest that it would be a snap to keep. I was wrong. Because my habit was to depend on my memory, I didn't automatically reach for my notebook before meetings or phone calls; I just plunged in. Once I realized I didn't have my notebook in front of me, I didn't want to break the flow of conversation to fish it out of my bag because I preferred to give myself to the dynamism of the moment. I'd sit down at my desk to take a phone call and realize that my notebook was on a table across the room. With paper right in front of me, did I really need to trot around my desk and retrieve it? A team member would grab me with a request as I was heading out the door in a hurry—wouldn't I just remember all the details without stopping to make notes? I found my resolution both boring and irritating to keep.

But because my resolution was obviously feasible, I felt tremendous pressure to succeed. Because my resolution was reasonable, I couldn't throw up my hands and say, "This is just too hard. The timing is bad. I'll try again in a few months." Because my resolution was specific, success was easy to measure—every time I ignored the notebook rule I could see my failure immediately and correct myself. Because my resolution was limited, I wasn't overwhelmed and was able to dedicate focus and willpower to achieving my goal. The modesty of my resolution also forced me to face the fact that if I couldn't follow through with one very reasonable change in behavior, then my hopes for greater self-improvement were simply fantasies.

I stuck with it. I forced myself to put all my notes in my little red book. If I had an idea for a client, I wrote it in the book. Confirmation numbers—in the book. Recommended articles, Web sites, events—in the book. Random contacts I might never need again—in the book. Packing list—in the book. Priorities and to-do lists—in the book. Bullet points for my next presentation—in the book. Recipe from a friend—in the book. After weeks of reminding myself to use the notebook, I noticed my feelings of resistance and awkwardness fading as the notebook became second nature—I just did it without thinking, like brushing my teeth. As soon as I sat down in a meeting or at my desk, I reached for the notebook. Now I could locate what I needed almost immediately, without stress or drama. Notes I once would have deemed throwaways proved significant weeks on. The notebook rule that I had at first found intrusive and constraining I now experienced as empowering and liberating. My stress level declined. *I had become more organized.*

Moreover, I had succeeded in keeping a resolution, building a good habit, and improving my life. Unlike the resolution *to be organized*, where I could have declared success only after sustaining multiple behavioral changes over time to reach some ideal definition of *organized*, my notebook resolution brought me an immediate and obvious benefit, as specific and concrete as the resolution

itself: All my notes ended up in one place. Succeeding at my resolution and experiencing its rewards energized me, and I lost my sense of helplessness.

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Now I reexamined my initial resolution—to *be organized*—and understood better why it hadn't succeeded. I had made a project of it—a big, one-off project—to clean my desk, catch up, and reorganize my files. I had had a burst of organizational zeal that resulted in some progress, similar to going on a crash diet. But I had failed to develop systematic behaviors—habits—to maintain my organizational gains over time. I had tried to supersede my ingrained and unconscious behaviors and attitudes by willing myself to be organized without really asking myself what exactly I needed to do differently—*forever*—to succeed. The notebook resolution worked because I had focused exclusively on a single area of disorganization until I had formed a new habit and mindset that allowed me to sustain my new behavior without mental energy. My relentless focus on the notebook habit had driven it into autopilot.

Experiencing my resistance to the notebook rule exposed aspects of my mindset that had never been clear to me before. For the first time I realized that I had unconsciously associated strict administrative systems with dull bureaucracy, at odds with dynamism, creativity, and the naturally logical and organized mind. It didn't feel right to me that something as humdrum as taking notes should require tenacity and energy. Experiencing the benefits of my new habit caused me to place a higher value on systematic behavior and upgraded my organizational instincts. As a result of my reformed mindset, some of my other organizational behaviors began to improve spontaneously.

Inspired by my success, I decided to revisit the challenge of losing weight and see if I could successfully apply the lessons I had learned from my notebook resolution. What if, instead of resolving *to be thin by summer*, I examined my eating habits and targeted one specific behavioral change that would be achievable and impactful?

At that time I was working at a Wall Street firm that offered abundant snacks in conference-room settings. During meetings we passed around china plates lined with doilies and piled high with delicious brownies, blondies, oatmeal and chocolate chip cookies. Eating just one of these rich treats produced a sugar high so powerful that it could outlast the longest meeting. But it was hard to eat just one. Sometimes I would eat two (or three), and each cookie was probably 350 calories. I often left the conference room in a food coma, overfull and facing a sugar crash later in the day. I resolved:

### **Never to eat a conference-room cookie again**

I didn't resolve *never to eat a cookie again* or *never to snack again* or *never to eat food in a conference room again*. Instead, I kept my resolution *reasonable* and *limited* and resolved only to forswear the ubiquitous and addictive conference-room cookies. Because my resolution was specific, success was easy to measure: I was in the conference room; the cookies were passed; if I passed on the cookies, I had succeeded. It was hard the first few times the plate came my way; over time it became automatic. I was glad not to leave the meeting feeling terrible about myself and mildly sick to my stomach. Eating the cookies in the conference room had been a habit, something I anticipated every time I entered a meeting. My targeted resolution broke that bad habit forever. I never ate a conference-room cookie again, and my resolution arrested the slow but steady upward climb of my weight (actually losing weight required more microresolutions, as we shall see).

Experiencing the power and benefits of microresolutions taught me that significant and permanent behavioral change can be achieved with intense, targeted focus; that targeted focus leads to valuable

and actionable personal insights; that limited resolutions can produce immediate and sustainable benefits; and that succeeding at a reasonable resolution daily is more transforming than failing at an unrealistic resolution annually.

As my understanding of the dynamics of microresolutions grew with experience, I learned how to identify the best resolutions, frame them, tune them, and keep them. I established rules and strategies for making successful microresolutions that are detailed in the next chapters. Most important, I learned that to sustain progress over time, a resolution must create habits that become part of personal autopilot.

## Habits Rule

Powerful indeed is the empire of habit.

—Publilius Syrus, 42 BC

Habits. *Groan.* Sounds dull and boring, doesn't it? Habits are, well, routine. And the part that isn't routine is negative, as in, "I have a bad habit of biting my nails." But a habit is any behavior or attitude you practice without conscious decision, and that's just about everything. Yes, habits are routine, but they are anything but boring.

Each of us has a unique system of habits nurtured over a lifetime. What you do by habit takes very little mental energy. If you brush your teeth every morning, you do it without thinking, and if you don't do it, you don't feel right. The routines we learned in childhood support us throughout our lives for better or for worse. It's work to unmake a habit—healthy or unhealthy—once it's part of a routine. Writing in a recent issue of the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, researchers Wendy Wood and David Neal defined habits simply as "psychological dispositions to repeat past behavior."<sup>\*</sup> Repeating and perfecting behavior is efficient—mindlessly performing routines conserves critical mental energy for initiative and decision making.

The habits learned in childhood require little or no mental energy to maintain. A very neat person likely learned the dozens of behaviors that we think of as *neat* in childhood, each desired behavior drilled relentlessly until it became a matter of unconscious habit. Thus, aspiring *to be neat* means doing the work of childhood—drilling one *neat* habit at a time until it takes permanent hold. Yet most of us stay stuck in our *wannabe* fantasies, discounting the effort required to build even a single habit—such as making the bed every day—to advance our goal.

For those who grew up making the bed every morning, bed making is as simple as breathing; the minute they're out of bed, they make it. Years of repetition have fostered such efficiency and skill that the bed practically makes itself. But if you did not grow up with this habit, acquiring it takes some effort. You might feel oppressed from the moment you even start to think about making the bed. It's a dull task. It takes too much time. It doesn't come out looking nice. You're already late for work. But you've signed up to a microresolution *to make the bed each morning before breakfast*, you'll figure out how to get it done, because it's absolutely doable, unlike a resolution *to keep the house neat all the time*. You'll get better at it every day, so that it takes less time and comes out looking better. You'll become expert at cornering sheets and plumping pillows simply by doing it over and over. Finally, after making your bed every morning for a couple of months, you won't be able to stand the sight of an unmade bed. This is how habits are formed, standards raised, and progress achieved.

In addition to demonstrating and drilling behavior patterns, childhood authority figures also instill

in us a *mindset* of values, attitudes, and preferences that constantly reinforce those patterns. Thus does our very character get tied up with our habits, making even a small change in routine stressful. Improving oneself by altering any long-standing behavior pattern is a breakthrough, a liberating experience that leads to personal insight and an appetite for greater personal growth.

Habits also serve as experiential paradigms for minting similar habits more quickly. For example, if you are generally late and you resolve to be on time for a weekly event, say, an exercise class, once you nail being on time for that class, your on-time experience will change your mindset and provide a model for improving your punctuality in other areas. Thus, a successful microresolution is like laying a behavioral cornerstone to support dozens of good habits to follow. Some of these new habits will be the result of conscious effort, but others will emerge spontaneously in response to the fresh perspective and revitalized mindset that come from new experience and the rewards from making a single change in personal behavior.

What gives habits their lasting power is that they are automatic, mindless. Thus, to change ourselves we must cultivate autopilot's opposite—mindfulness. The more aware we are of the habits that manage our lives, the more control we have over our future. Habits aren't boring; they are the very stuff we're made of—just ask Western civilization's most celebrated philosopher:

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.

—Aristotle

And what is self-improvement but the search for excellence? Let's begin.



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## **PART 1**

# **THE SEVEN RULES OF MICRORESOLUTIONS**

## How to Make a Microresolution

**A**re you ready to make a microresolution?

Start by asking yourself what you'd like to improve about your life. Sticking with the example we explored in the last chapter, the first expression of your goal might be framed in broad terms—"I'd like to be neat"—and that's a reasonable place to start. Yet *neat* is not a state you can adopt; rather, it's a set of distinct behaviors that add up to *neat* according to *your* definition—there's neat and then there's *neat*. Every personal-improvement goal within your power can be reduced to a list of behaviors, whether your ultimate objective is to be neat, lose weight, get fit, be nicer to your spouse, become organized, be on time, save money, advance your career, or get more sleep.

So taking *neat* as our example, the first step is to deconstruct what you mean by *neat*. Your most pressing neatness issues might be to keep clothes hung up and to stay on top of laundry; or perhaps every drawer is crammed and the bed never gets made; or maybe you leave dishes overnight and let items pile up on surfaces. Don't bother compiling an exhaustive list; just pinpoint one or two behavioral changes you think would make a difference. Remember, you're not trying to solve for *neat* overall; you're just looking to identify a discrete behavioral change that will move the neat dial in the right direction.

If your neatness target is focused on managing clutter, your first resolution might be as simple as resolving to allow only certain items on certain surfaces. It's hard to keep a surface organized when it's littered with items that have nothing to do with its utility—*e.g.*, coins and a comb and keys on a desk; magazines and bills on a bureau; mail stacked up on a kitchen island. If every surface you have is just a parking lot for *whatever*, dedicating surfaces might be a good first resolution (you might even want to start with just one surface). Once items are segregated in logical groups it's much easier to see what's required to keep a particular surface orderly.

For example, if your desk is overflowing with piles of unopened and unsorted mail, making a microresolution to sort and discard mail before you place it on your desk will probably eliminate three-quarters of your pileup (neatness) and allow you to see at a glance what really needs handling (organization). If clothes sit in a heap on the bedroom chair all week, resulting in a mind-numbing weekend session of hanging up (now very wrinkled) clothing, you might consider a resolution to hang up your clothes as soon as you take them off or start with a resolution allowing any set of clothes only twenty-four hours on the chair.

### Mindset Messaging

What about the mental habits that keep you from succeeding in your goals? In the present case, how might you improve your neatness *mindset*—values, preferences, and attitudes—to advance your objective? For example, a neat mindset might include the attitude *it's more productive to work at a clean desk*. Such an attitude can be taught through practice, just as one can teach oneself a physical behavior through repetition. You can do this by resolving to give yourself a *microresolution message* designed to improve your governing mindset. A change in mindset will drive behavioral change, just as a successful behavioral change ultimately alters your mindset through experience. As the nineteenth-century psychologist and pragmatist William James observed, “The greatest revelation of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.”

The mechanism for changing your mindset through messaging is the same as for changing a physical behavior: a targeted and limited resolution practiced relentlessly until it becomes automatic. The success of a microresolution message is measured solely by your remembering to give yourself the message in the circumstance you've selected, and that's it. It's like a mental tweet synchronized to a specific trigger.

For example, someone working on *neat* might resolve to send himself the message *It's really just as fast to hang it up* when removing his coat. Using the removal of the coat to *cue* the message will disrupt the autopilot attitude *I don't have time to hang it up right now* and likely lead, over time, to a preference for hanging up the coat. To once again quote James, “The mere thought of a behavior tends to lead to the performance of it,” or as Sigmund Freud put it, “The thought is father to the deed.”

Some of my most successful microresolutions have been mindset targeted. I once resolved to send myself the following message when I was tempted to snack in the late afternoon: *I enjoy dinner so much more when I'm hungry for it*. My resolution didn't prohibit an afternoon snack; it simply posited the greater pleasure of sitting down to dinner with good appetite. Repeating this message to myself when I was tempted by a treat in the late afternoon led me to manage my snacks more closely and to give up noshing while preparing dinner (you know, that little piece of French bread, that extra glass of wine) and did indeed result in deeper enjoyment of the family meal I prepared each night. Repeating this message ultimately changed my mindset; I realized that by *choosing* to snack richly I was *choosing* to enjoy dinner less. I began selecting lighter snacks and timing them to result in greater appetite. Never before had I “saved” my appetite; I had always been an indiscriminate snacker. So much so, in fact, that every diet plan I had ever drawn up for myself had been focused on how many calories I could carve out for my snack allowance. Today I so prefer to save my appetite for meals that I seldom snack at all, and it's all due to the mindset shift created by faithfully repeating my *hungry for dinner* message when tempted by treats in the afternoon.

## Living on the Edge

Microresolutions helped me to discover that the real action in self-improvement happens around the edges, at what we might call *the vital margin*. Drastic actions that try to get at the red-hot core of behavioral change (such as crash diets) nearly always end in failure, but a discrete and meaningful shift in behavior will always succeed if given enough focus. A single change in eating habits can result in permanent weight loss; a shift in a spending pattern can yield substantial savings; a subtle change in communication can enhance a relationship; a change in attitude can create new opportunities on the

job. To prove this you need only see that the reverse is true: A small but negative shift in behavior will take you further from your goals. Although you may not realize it in real time, a slight change in habit can cause you to gain weight, take on debt, poison a relationship, or hold you back at work. It turns out that the marginal is, *in practice*, the very epicenter of behavioral change. Making a microresolution is about applying yourself with single-minded purpose to an action at the margin that will propel you forward and make a positive difference in your life. In self-improvement, it's working the margin that gives you the edge.

So this is the work: Identify a discrete change in behavior that will make a difference, and drill that behavior with single-minded purpose until it becomes second nature. The chapters that follow are devoted to teaching you how to use microresolutions to target and effect a change in habit at the vital margin. If you stick to the microresolution rules, you'll be able to make instant progress in any self-improvement category, from weight loss to achieving a more loving relationship. The more you succeed, the more you'll understand yourself and the smarter your next microresolution will be. A microresolution is a self-improvement adventure that pays off—every time.

## Don't Make Resolutions You Can't Keep

**Y**our microresolution must be a pledge you are sure you have the power to keep—a *no excuse* resolution. To be absolutely achievable, it must be limited. Resolutions to *walk everywhere all the time* or *never eat sweets again* or *give up online shopping* don't qualify. Put aside that familiar temptation to try to fix everything all at once by tomorrow and focus instead on making a resolution that is so reasonable you are sure you can make it stick. Your microresolution should target a limited behavioral change that is reasonable enough that you can force yourself to keep it—don't overreach.

### Rule 1: A Microresolution Is Easy

Let's take a common resolution, *to get in shape*, and define a fitness micro that is limited, achievable, and impactful—easy. Let's say you'd like to increase your fitness by walking to work once a week. Your resolution could be to walk the entire way (thirty minutes), to get off the bus or train two stops sooner (fifteen minutes), or to park farther away (ten minutes)—whatever your circumstances, just start with the resolution you are sure you can keep. If you're sedentary and your settled routine is to ride to work, suddenly resolving to walk every day wouldn't be reasonable. Once you begin your walking resolution, you're going to discover internal and external obstacles that you must resolve to make it work. Overcommitting at the outset to walk all five days just multiplies the obstacles you'll need to overcome each week in order to succeed.

The weather, your mood, your energy level, additional clothing demands, the growing boredom of your route, and the pressure of your schedule will present themselves as reasons for not following through on your five-day pledge. You'll begin to bargain with yourself over the scope of your commitment, renegotiating your resolution on a daily basis. Maybe walking five days is too much; how about three days? Maybe you weren't able to walk today, but how about tomorrow? If tomorrow is as good as today, why not the day after tomorrow? If any day is as good as today, pretty soon you will find yourself at the weekend wondering how it was that you didn't manage to walk a single day. It is by this kind of mental calculus that most traditional resolutions devolve and finally expire. Constant mental renegotiation—not today but tomorrow, not this week but next (*I'll gladly pay you Tuesday for a hamburger today*)—puts you in debt to your resolution until at last you are hopelessly behind in your commitment. Your shifting resolution loses all credibility as a priority, and soon you slip back into your old routines.

Repeatedly pressing the snooze button on your commitment turns out to be more than just demoralizing. Choosing to defer or renegotiate your resolution is *decision making*, and it turns out the

decision making is a very expensive psychological activity. A 2007 willpower study conducted by Kathleen Vohs and Roy Baumeister found that making decisions taxes the same limited mental resource as exercising self-control. The more decisions we have to make, the weaker our resolve becomes, a phenomenon the two researchers dubbed “decision fatigue.”\*

Vohs and Baumeister conducted several experiments in which participants were required to make a series of choices and were then tested for remaining levels of self-control. In one of these experiments, participating university students designated “Group 1” arrived at the test site and were each given a series of class choices to make from the university course catalog and a response sheet on which to formally record their selections. Subjects designated “Group 2” were instructed to familiarize themselves with the course catalog but weren’t asked to make choices or given a response sheet. Each participant spent eight minutes on his assigned catalog activity and was then told that he would next take a math test predictive of success in the real world. Each participant was given a packet of study material, advised that fifteen minutes of study had been shown to increase the test score, and then left to study for fifteen minutes in a room that included magazines and video games. Participants were allowed to read the magazines and play the video games if they finished preparing before the study period had elapsed.

The researchers found that the students in Group 1, who had undergone the decision-making activity, “spent more time playing video games, reading magazines, and doing nothing than did non-depleted participants.” Considering this and other similar experiments, the researchers concluded:

The present findings suggest that self-regulation, active initiative, and effortful choosing draw on the same psychological resource. Making decisions depletes that resource, thereby weakening the subsequent capacity for self-control and active initiative.\*

In other words, the more decision making your resolution requires, the less resolve you’ll actually have left to follow through, because decision making and self-control draw on the same limited mental resource. Making unrealistic commitments inevitably leads to frequent decisions about trade-offs, deferrals, and makeup sessions that deplete precious self-control reserves. Decisions are constantly required in carrying out a classic *wannabe* resolution such as *I resolve to be organized*. If you’re disorganized and then suddenly command yourself to “be organized,” every activity you engage in will require you to decide on the best, most organized approach, how to carry out the approach, how organized is organized enough, etc. Each time you stop yourself and ask, *Okay, what should I be doing here to be better organized?* you’re engaging in decision making and depleting the limited resource of “self-regulation, active initiative, and effortful choosing” defined by Vohs and Baumeister and accelerating toward the moment when you just give up. *Small Move, Big Change* is focused on building behaviors that run on autopilot, where decision making is rarely involved.

The more challenging your resolution, the more likely that you will bargain yourself out of it altogether. The more feasible your commitment, the less tempted you’ll be to talk yourself out of it and the more self-control you will conserve for actually performing the action of your resolution. Limit your commitment to what you are sure you can accomplish—there is no partial credit for (or value in) a half-completed microresolution.

An easy microresolution would be to walk to work one day a week. Walking one day is reasonable and achievable, and a significant step toward becoming fitter and building the habit of walking. Besides, what you believe is easy will be harder than you think. Any change to established routine takes focus

to achieve. You may still be tempted to ignore or defer your resolution, but because it's limited and reasonable (just one day) you'll be highly motivated to manage obstacles out of your way. Part of the magic of a microresolution is that you end up looking for solutions, not excuses. Because if you can't stare down one very reasonable self-improvement resolution, you'll have to face the fact that only a miracle or fateful cosmic jolt can alter the way you live every day.

*But isn't it a smarter strategy, you might ask, to resolve to walk five days a week and let it slip to two days rather than succeeding on just a single day?* You mean, trick yourself into a two-day commitment by failing at a five-day one? Absolutely not! Your most important goal is to learn how to make realistic commitments you can keep, so you can hold yourself accountable and count on progress every time you make a resolution. Don't try to fake yourself out; just set an expectation you can meet.

A resolution to walk one day a week doesn't mean you can't walk more than once. A microresolution doesn't limit what you want to do, only what you commit to do. If you're enjoying your once-a-week walk and you decide you want to walk more often, go ahead and walk more; just don't expand your resolution to more days until your one-day walk is an established habit.

The benefits of sticking with your microresolution will be anything but limited. Small changes bring big benefits. If you keep your resolution to walk to work once a week, you'll be fitter, arrive with a clearer head, rev your metabolism for the day, burn some calories, refresh your perspective with the change of seasons, and maybe find you enjoy it so much that you become an avid walker. You'll experience the satisfaction and empowerment that come from targeting an action, following through, and building a positive new habit. Experiencing success builds confidence and motivation and lifts the jinx of repeat defeats. Instead of anticipating failure, you'll learn to expect success, and the cycle of making, forsaking, and remaking resolutions will be broken forever.

Keep your resolution limited, reasonable, and achievable—*easy*.

## Doing It

A microresolution is an action: not something you commit to be but something you commit to do. A microresolution is not a wish, a philosophy, or a result; its straightforward purpose is to build, change, or eliminate a specific behavior or attitude. The action of your resolution is something you resolve to do or not to do or a message you resolve to give yourself in a given circumstance.

### Rule 2: A Microresolution Is an Explicit and Measurable Action

Your microresolution must be explicit, so there's no guessing about what to do, when to do it, or how to carry it out. Resolutions such as *I will exercise more* or *I will snack less* are worthless. Exercise more than what? Snack less than what? Resolving not to be defensive when you get feedback at work. You'll need to think about the specific circumstances under which you become defensive, the form your defensiveness takes, and what explicit message you can send yourself that will stop you from justifying yourself with your first breath. Pledging to do something twice a week? Which days? What time? Is online shopping eating up your time and your wallet? Take a look at how your present behavior leads you into unwanted purchases and zero in on a specific change in habit that could save you money, such as establishing a "no shopping" period during the hours you're most vulnerable to mindless browsing and impulse buying because your self-control has already been depleted by a day of initiative, decision making, and exercise of willpower.

The more explicit your resolution, the easier it will be to measure success, identify obstacles, and fine-tune your commitment for greater effectiveness. For example, if you resolve to handle personal administrative work once a week without specifying the day, you won't be able to measure your success until the week has ended, and all week long your undone resolution will loom over you, portending failure. And if you do fail to make time for your session, it will be difficult to see exactly what went wrong, since *any* day might have been *the* day. If your resolution requires a schedule, don't keep yourself guessing, *Will I or won't I today?* Settle on a day and time and stick to it. It's not until you get specific about *when* that you can get a handle on your own resistance to change or observe other obstacles that need to be addressed.

Explicit commitments do not constrain; to the contrary, they create certainty and comfort. Flexible or fuzzy resolutions, escape clauses, and loopholes result in stress, not greater freedom. Returning to the "walk to work" example discussed in rule 1, a commitment to walk on Monday mornings establishes a clear benchmark, freeing you from anxiety-provoking decisions and deferrals. Likewise if you resolve to take care of personal administrative work on Wednesday nights, when you see items collecting in the in-basket, you won't worry about losing track because you'll *know* you're going to



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