

New Year's Resolutions: How Turtles Succeed

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If you're like me and many people that I know, I find myself setting the same New Year's resolutions year after year. Maybe I'll stick to it for a while, but as the year moves on, I end up in the next January with the same plan of action. This year has been different though. I'd love to share how I've learned that the slow and methodical turtle can beat the speedy and impulsive hare when it comes to attaining our goals.

I have recently read *The Four-Day Win* by Martha Beck, PhD, who is a Harvard educated life coach, monthly columnist for the Oprah Magazine and a best-selling author. Whether your goal entails adding a new behavior to your routine, or ceasing a behavior, the Four-Day Win strategy can work for you.

Step 1: Think of the behavior that you'd like to change.

- Make the goal quantifiable or measurable; e.g., if you want to exercise more add a number – "I'd like to exercise for 30 minutes a day."

Step 2: Reduce your goal by halves until you can guarantee its ease in attainment. Beck describes this goal as needing to be "ridiculously easy." If you don't feel that it's guaranteed that you can do it, cut it in half again.

- If we look at the exercise goal above, you could reduce the minutes from 30 to 15, then to 7.5, then to 3.75.

Step 3: Think of a tangible prize or activity based prize that you can access each time you complete your goal.

- If you reward yourself with a cookie after you exercise you may be defeating the purpose. Play a quick game on the Wii or your phone, look at an Avon catalogue or a funny U-Tube posting, do a crossword puzzle, do some yoga, shoot some hoops, or paint your nails. Take time to do whatever you may normally feel guilty for stopping to do in the middle of the day, something that brings you pleasure.

Step 4: Next, decide on a more substantial reward that you will receive after you've completed your four days.

- Make sure that this special reward is linked only to your goal attainment, i.e., not something that you were planning to do anyway. Make it fun and frivolous, e.g., get a manicure, go to a hockey game, rent an old favorite movie, buy yourself some "me time" and book a babysitter for a few hours, etc.

Step 5: Create a chart listing your goal, your daily prize and your larger reward. List the dates of the four days that you will commit to this goal and check them off as you complete them.

- Post this chart on your fridge or at your desk. Post reminders of your goals on your bathroom mirror and your dashboard. Send yourself text reminders or quick emails with the goal.

Your goal chart may look something like this:

Four-Day Win #1
Goal: I will walk to the mail box once a day (1.5 minutes there, 1.5 minutes back)
Daily Prize: I will read my current novel for 10 minutes
Four-Day Reward: I will go for coffee at Chapters with a friend and browse the new releases for 1.5 hours.
January 5 ✓
January 6
January 7
January 8

Step 6: One you have completed your first Four-Day Win, you may “up the ante” again at a level that is easy enough to ensure you’ll succeed.

- e.g., I will walk past the mailbox to the end of the block and back.
- On the other hand, if you don’t succeed with your first goal you could go halvesies on it and try again; e.g., I will walk for 45 seconds up the sidewalk and walk 45 seconds back to my home.

So the pattern will continue with turtle steps as you increase your goals by “ridiculously easy” amounts, four days at a time. Beck suggests via her research that “the 4-day repetition is necessary to fully install a skill into the hardwiring of your brain. Four day iterations break through the feeling that you’re a novice and make you think of the skill or activity as ‘something I do’” (Beck, 2007, p. 11). Once you have reached your goal to exercise for 30 minutes a day, the “linking” of five Four-Day Wins (20 days) should solidify your goal into a new behavior.

This may seem time consuming and just as slow as that turtle in the race with the hare. But consider this...the above example could be calculated to take 60 days or two months (if you were to add three minutes per Four-Day Win, and then link five Four-Days Wins at 30 minutes). Thus, by March 1st you may have achieved your goal and developed a healthy habit. In contrast, the hare that begins the New Year by racing to the gym and exercising for two hours a day may be hobbling home sooner and not going at all by February 1st!

As a mother and a Coach, I know that this strategy of taking a big goal and breaking it down into “do-able steps” can be a hugely beneficial tool to use with our children as well. If you’re thinking of working towards instilling some new skills or behaviors in your child, or of decreasing the frequency of a less preferable behavior, try a Four-Day Win with the following tips in the forefront of your mind:

- Be conscious of, or seek knowledge surrounding, James Prochaska's and Carlo DiClemente's Stages of Change model. Briefly, these psychologists suggest that during Stage One, "Pre-contemplation," we are literally not thinking about change. It is only in Stage Two, "Contemplation," that we begin to think about change. If you are going to be introducing change to your children, give them a "head ups." Begin a dialogue about current choices and consequences; empathize with how they feel about the skill or lack thereof. Talk about what change may entail before starting it.
- Model the behavior – start your own Four-Day Win and show them your materials. Share your feelings about what you're succeeding with and what is challenging for you.
- I like to use the term "new habit" with my kids. It is neutral and can apply to increasing or decreasing a behavior. Normalize for your children how hard it can be for any of us to create new or break old habits; share your experiences.
- Read the turtle and the hare fable with them.
- Have fun! Create the Four-Day Win charts with your kids and let them check off their Four-Day Wins with stamps, stickers, or drawings. Let them be active in choosing their rewards – try any dollar store to seek out easy and affordable prize items.
- Think of all the positive self-talk and encouragement that you should give yourself when you achieve a goal, but often don't, e.g., "Good job me! I'm really sticking to this." Try to triple that amount of encouragement towards your kids. If that's hard to do...there's your first Four-Day Win to try.
- And, if you're struggling to do this on your own, consider contacting Eckert Centre for support. We would be happy to help!

Beck, M. (2007) *The Four-Day Win*. New York, NY: Special Markets Department, Rodale, Inc.

Shivaun is a Cognitive Coaching Specialist, providing coaching services to individuals with developmental disabilities, social, and/or behavioral challenges, and their families. Shivaun is a mother of two who actively works with other parents towards developing personalized, realistic and tailor made parenting strategies. Shivaun's "areas of expertise" in coaching surrounds the Autism Spectrum and AD/HD. She also provides cognitive training programs (including PACE) to those with Learning Disabilities and/or AD/HD.