

# Your New Year's Resolutions Fail Because You're Not Listening

If you are like me, you've resolved to make changes in your life only to experience the frustration of sliding back into old habits.

Knowing you need to make a change, you've set your goal. On Day 1, all goes well. By Day 2, the pull of old habits is strong. By dint of willpower, you keep your resolve. Little did you know, you have placed yourself on thin ice. [Willpower is a limited resource](#) and [relying on willpower to change habits](#) won't get you as far as you hoped.

On Day 3, you're battling uncomfortable feelings, doubt or anxiety or impatience or self-pity. You give yourself a break from the new routine and give in to a misguided attempt to calm yourself with a sugary snack or worse. Misguided because you are trying to solve a problem—uncomfortable feelings—by trading temporary relief for long-term misery. By week 2, your resolution is almost forgotten.

It's not only around the New Year we resolve to do better, but regardless of the calendar, our resolutions mostly fail. Only [8% of us feel we're successful](#) in keeping our New Year's resolutions.

## The Big Lies We Tell

Here is one big lie we tell ourselves – tomorrow, the external circumstances I face will improve, I will feel better emotionally, then I'll keep my resolution.

If you are waiting for life's circumstances to align with your

resolution, forget it; stars never line up for long. Like the weather, circumstances change. When everything seems to go right, wait a moment, and something will go wrong. Those uncomfortable feelings surface again. You may feel unappreciated and beleaguered; anxious in the present and fearful for the future. Stress seems to mount.

Most of us are sure that our circumstances and other people are causing our uncomfortable feelings and stress. Most of us say we slide back into old habits when we feel stressed. Given that false explanation, we think a lot about how to cope with circumstances and how to mitigate our feelings.

In the moment we experience our feelings, we are receiving a signal to gauge the quality of our thinking in that moment.

You are not responsible for how others behave; you are, however, 100 percent responsible for your interpretation of your experience and feelings. Even when it seems otherwise, within each of us is the human freedom to choose. “Man is ultimately self-determining,” wrote psychotherapist Viktor Frankl in his seminal work [Man’s Search for Meaning](#). “Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.”

## Stop Coping

When we experience uncomfortable feelings and stress, mindlessly we turn to our coping repertoires – we reach for our smartphone, surf the Internet, eat something, binge-watch Netflix, you name it, to gain relief.

Are we making too much of our feelings? Is peaceful coexistence with uncomfortable feelings possible?

You can exercise even though you don’t feel like it. “Not feeling like it” often fades away after you begin.

You can be kind to others when you think they don’t deserve

it. The more kind you are, the more deserving others seem to you.

You can be courteous on the road, even when other drivers are aggressive. Your own angry feelings fade as soon as you stop ruminating over them.

There is nothing special about your feelings. To some degree, they are shared by every human being who walks this planet. Mark Twain observed in his [autobiography](#),

*I am the entire human race compacted together. I have found there is no ingredient of the race which I do not possess in either a small or a large way. When it is small compared with the same ingredient in somebody else, there is still enough of it for all the purposes of examination. In my contacts with the species, I find no one who possesses a quality which I do not possess. The shades of difference between other people and me serve to make variety and prevent monotony, but that is all; broadly speaking, we are all alike.*

## How to Lowly Listen

There is a better way than coping or resisting uncomfortable feelings. Simply do this: notice what you are feeling. Notice how you are scanning the world for an explanation of what you are feeling – who or what is to blame. Then, consider the possibility that your interpretation is wrong. If you are ready to doubt your interpretation, perhaps you are ready to “lowly listen.”

In his essay [“Spiritual Laws,”](#) Ralph Waldo Emerson was concerned with giving practical guidance to his readers. Emerson affirms that Divine Love and Intelligence are the fabric of the universe. Obedience to a Wisdom greater than our own is not a sacrifice of our own best interests; instead, it is a way to transcend personal desires not in keeping with our

highest nature.

Emerson assures, "There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word." Thus, Emerson advises, "Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment."

We don't have to be feeling peaceful to lowly listen. When uncomfortable feelings arise, instead of engaging in coping behavior, doubt your thinking, and allow yourself a little willingness to listen for the "right word" without your personal agenda getting in the way.

Please don't underestimate how unsettling "lowly listening" can initially feel. For years, I gave this assignment to my MBA leadership students: Sit in a chair for 15 minutes with no print or electronic media. Simply, do nothing. Many would come back the next week and report how uncomfortable they felt. Alone with the chatter in their head, every fiber in their being wanted to reach for something to distract themselves.

Lowly listening is uncomfortable because our personal agenda is strong. Our ego wants its interpretation, its judgments and grievances to be correct. Our ego is sure that other people and circumstances have caused our feelings. Our ego tells us we are not responsible and that we have been victimized.

## **We Are More than Our Ego**

Our ego personality is not capable of dropping our judgments and grievances. Judgments and grievances are the fuel that keeps our ego alive.

Fortunately, we are more than our ego, and we need that part of our mind, Wisdom and Love, to make better choices.

A decision to cope with uncomfortable feelings is a decision

to rely on one's ego. If we insist on listening to our ego's interpretations should we be surprised with the results? If we are unwilling to listen and unwilling to connect with something larger than our ego personality, should we be surprised when we fail to keep our resolutions?

The change we want to make doesn't require heroic efforts and constant struggles. Change does not require willpower to overcome what seem to be overpowering urges. What is needed is a little willingness to be a lowly listener.

Lowly listening doesn't require that we be perfect; following Emerson's advice, the voice we listen to will offer us compassion as we work to rise above our imperfections.

In January, I am resolved to cut back on my use of social media, as well as how much time I spend on the Internet. I've observed how much my day is disrupted each time I stop what I am doing to check Facebook, email, or the latest news at my favorite sites. [Research shows](#) task-switching may be costing me 40% of my productive time and is at odds with what Cal Newport calls [deep work](#).

Excessive use of the Internet has been a coping mechanism for me, so I'll likely experience angst as I stop coping and treat less seriously my uncomfortable feelings. To get me through the urge to fall back into my old habits, I will be counting on the stillness that lowly listening provides.

Were I to rely only on willpower, no doubt my resolve will falter. My ego is clever; it is ready with many rationalizations to justify my old habits. Were I to follow the ego's guidance and stop my work to check one thing, I'd be sabotaging myself. With the practice of lowly listening, I hope to walk gently past the rationalizations by reaching a truer version of who I am.

*This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#).*

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