

New Year's Irresolutions

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"A lie, spoken to oneself, that goes in one year and out the other." -Unknown

Sadly, this statement rings true: Over half of us who start the year with good intentions will fall back into our bad habits within six months (Norcross et al., 2002). The superior strength of old habits and memories over new ones has been a principle of psychology for over 100 years (Jost, 1897).

Why do old habits spontaneously recover over time? At least part of the answer may reside in relatively automatic, unconscious forms of memory. We asked people to first learn one set of cue-response pairs (e.g., *coffee-cup*, *knee-bend*), followed by a second set (e.g., *coffee-mug*, *knee-bone*). People asked to use deliberate, conscious memory to choose responses from a particular set were usually successful in doing so, both on an immediate test and after a one day delay. Something quite different happened for people asked to give whichever response came to mind automatically: On the immediate test, they split their responses equally between the two sets. However, after a day, their response patterns shifted, so that they gave the first response (e.g., *cup*) much more often than the second (e.g., *mug*). The second response seemed to fade from memory, while the first response grew even stronger than it had been on the first day.

These data may be bad news for those of us with New Year's resolutions. They suggest that when we let down our control – as is likely to happen when we are tired or under stress – our old habits have an unfair advantage in determining which behavior patterns we fall into.

What gives old habits such an advantage? The reasons still are not clear, although it has been suggested that we use our best learning strategies for the first response, or that this response becomes a default strategy used across many different situations (Bouton, 2004; Hasher et al., 1977).

Of course, the situation is not hopeless. People do lose weight, stop smoking, and get their papers written on time. A better understanding of how old and new habits interact in memory, and why old habits are so strong, may help find ways to help move towards success stories and away from broken promises repeated year to year.

Lustig et al. appears in the November 2004 issue of *Psychological Science*, which can be found at www.psychologicalscience.org/journals.