TV psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw talks about why so many people make and fail to keep New Year's Resolutions; he argues that the key to success is not willpower, but changing one's schedule and routine.

**Keywords**

Transcript

How to Make, Keep New Year's Resolutions

MATT LAUER, co-host:

Well, Christmas and Hanukkah are behind us, but New Year's Eve is around the corner, making it that time of year when we start taking stock of our lives. TV psychologist Dr. Phil McGraw is hosting a weeklong series about making and keeping resolutions on his show. And this morning he joins us on our show to share some goals for making those resolutions actually stick.

Dr. Phil, good to see you.

Dr. PHIL McGRAW (Psychologist): Good to see you.

LAUER: Why are people so interested in resolutions, do you think?

Dr. McGRAW: Well, I think everybody picks this time of year to say, 'All right, it's a new year, new you. I'm going--I'm going to really turn the corner this time.' It's a time of reflection. And, you know, the most popular resolution is weight.

LAUER: Right.

Dr McGRAW: And you've just finished the holidays, and the average weight gain is seven to 12 pounds, and so they're panicked. And—and again, it's just kind of an arbitrary time we say, 'I'm going to start off fresh.'

LAUER: Do you make resolutions?

Dr. McGRAW: I really don't. I set projects, and--but they don't time themselves with the year. So I just kind of work on projects and deadlines.

LAUER: What's al--what's always interesting to me is it seems at this time of year people set themselves up for failure. Because there was a recent study that said 88 percent of people make a new year's resolution and only 20 percent of them keep them. So clearly people are doing something wrong.

Dr. McGRAW: Yeah. The big mistake they're making is it's all emotion. See, one of the biggest myths in
human functioning is willpower. Willpower's a myth. We think we've got to be tough, we've got to get pumped up. We're going to do this. But willpower is fueled by emotions, which are fickle. They're changeable. You're all pumped up the first week of January. Second week of February, you're supposed to get up and exercise, the wind's blowing, it's cold, it's warm in bed. We don't do it. You can't do this by willpower.

LAUER: That's why you always hear people say, 'You're making a new year's resolution?' They say--they say, 'Yeah, it's the same one I've made for the last four years.'

Dr. McGRAW: Yeah.

LAUER: Why do people tend to give up so easily? Is it because of the emotion?

Dr. McGRAW: It is because of the emotion. And they never really get out of the emotional phase. You know, you've got to do some things. If you're really going to do it, it takes a big behavioral component. And it's not about willpower, it's about programming. You have to change your life. You can't--for example, I've said before, you can't be overweight if you don't have a lifestyle to support being overweight. So the idea is you've got to change your lifestyle or you won't change what you're wanting to resolve to do.

LAUER: It might be goof if--you have some tips for this, and so let's take them one at a time. And maybe we should use the weight as a good example...

Dr. McGRAW: Sure.

LAUER: ...in all these, or you can pick another example. Up to you. But your tips for keeping your resolution, one, get right in your thinking.

Dr. McGRAW: Yes. If you're lying to yourself--look, everybody has a personal truth, and it's what we really believe about ourselves, and we generate the results we believe we deserve. So stop lying to yourself. You've got to be honest in your thinking. You're not a bad person because you're overweight, for example. You're--you're not weak because you're overweight. You just haven't programmed yourself right.

LAUER: When you say, for--so take the emotion out of it, which is tip number two. When it comes to weight, what might be a typical way that a person attaches emotion to a weight problem?

Dr. McGRAW: Well, they get excited about it. They feel guilty about being overweight, they get emotional about it. And so the--the idea is, 'I'm--I'm excited so, I'm going to stay with it.' You're not going to be excited six weeks from now. You're going to be in the drudgery. So don't let it be an emotional thing. It's got to be a lifestyle thing. It's got to be where you change your environment, you change your routine, you change your pattern.

LAUER: Which leads perfectly to the next one, set up your life differently. So what would be a piece of advice for someone who's trying to lose weight, in terms of setting up their life differently?

Dr. McGRAW: Schedule, appointments, and accountability. Set up a schedule. If you just say, 'Oh, I'm going to do it sometime,' no. Make an appointment with yourself. Set it up where 6:00 every day I just won't even go home. I'll from work to the gym, work to the track, work to the mall and walk, if you live in cold country. Whatever you need to do. But make an appointment. You wouldn't fail to go to work because you respect that. Respect yourself. That's very important.
LAUER: And if you're one of these people who from 7 to 9 every night is sitting in front of the TV, and if during the time you're sitting in front of the TV the chips come out and the donuts come out...
Dr. McGRAW: Exactly.
LAUER: ...do something besides sit in front of the TV at that time.
Dr. McGRAW: That's what I mean about change your lifestyle. Turn the television off. Join a gym. Get--get a treadmill in your house. Get a jump rope. Do something different. And--and, Matt, you've got to have accountability. Have somebody you got to go look in the eye...
LAUER: But aren't you...
Dr. McGRAW: ...your mom or a friend.
LAUER: At the end, aren't you accountable basically to yourself?
Dr. McGRAW: You are. But for some reason, we respond well to having to admit to somebody else if we didn't do it. Other--it's like, 'I don't want to go face my friend. She did it, and I didn't.' So it's good if you have some external accountability.
LAUER: Got a couple of e-mails I want to get to, but how about this?
How do you handle--when it comes to a resolution--how do you handle the little setbacks?
Dr. McGRAW: You're going to have setbacks. Life is not a success-only journey. The idea is not that you're going to be perfect, the idea is that you're going to be different, that you're going to be better. If you have a bad Wednesday because you just go home and pig out, that's OK. The next day, you're back on track.
LAUER: Here is an e-mail from Sue in Texas, and you may have heard this one a few times on your show. "I have been dieting off and on for 18 years. I lose weight, but can't keep it off indefinitely. I feel that my emotional eating is the cause of love missing in my childhood--or is caused by love missing in my childhood. Is this true? Can I heal this and be free of dieting forever? How do I go about it?"
Dr. McGRAW: You know, you and I've talked before about the fact that behaviors often start for one reason and continue for another.
LAUER: Right.
Dr. McGRAW: You may love yourself with food when you're a child or when you're younger because you're lonely, and a baked potato never rejects you. Ice cream never rejects you. It's always accepting. But you—you have to recognize that you make choices now. The problem is if people are using food for other than nutritional reasons, of course they're going to get overweight. If you're entertaining, celebrating, medicating, companionsing yourself with it, that's what I mean. You've got to change your thinking, you've got to change your emotions, you've got to change your lifestyle. But when you make this resolution, work out a program. And if your life doesn't look different by some--from somebody else's point of view, you haven't made enough change.
LAUER: Dr. Phil McGraw. As always, good information.
Dr. McGRAW: Matt, thanks.
LAUER: Happy New Year.
Dr. McGRAW: Same to you.