

# New Year ... New Me?

## ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Every December, many people feel a palpable sense of excitement regarding the start of the upcoming new year. After all, new beginnings come with new opportunities for change as well as new opportunities to relegate any mistakes to “the past.” From my vantage point, these sorts of sentiments were never stronger than at the end of the crisis-filled 2020.

The irony is that the division from one year to the next is largely psychological. Does anything *truly* change when the calendar ticks over from December 31 to January 1? Or, when spring rolls around on March 21, can we suddenly put away our winter clothes and step into our spring wardrobes? (As if, in the current work-from-home era, that’s not just a different pair of sweatpants...but I digress).

Despite the artificial nature of these temporal divisions, recent research co-authored by my UCLA Anderson colleague, Professor Hengchen Dai, has indicated fresh starts hold a certain sway over people’s motivations and actual behavior.<sup>1</sup>

I’m going to guess that this idea of our behavior changing with the onset of a fresh start resonates with you. When, for instance, was the last time you told yourself you were going to modify a behavior that needed changing? Did you decide to start a new diet, workout plan or financial budget on a random Wednesday in August? No, of course not! If you’re like most people, you probably decided to make a change when some sort of “fresh start” rolled around.

In fact, in earlier work, Professor Dai and her colleagues found that Google search terms for “diet” increased following dates easily construed as fresh starts (e.g., New Year’s Day, the start of a new week or new month).<sup>2</sup> And, they found the same pattern for visits to gyms as well as sign-ups for a website that aims to help people create and stick to goals.



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I should note these results are merely correlational, leaving open the question of whether a fresh start can cause someone to pursue a positive goal, or if this isn't just some coincidence. In follow-up work, though, Dai and colleagues induced a fresh start type of mindset by asking research participants to think about an upcoming date in fresh start terms (e.g., the first day of spring), versus just another date (i.e., March 20).<sup>3</sup> The participants reminded of a fresh start were almost four times more likely to sign up for reminders about personal goals they were pursuing.

These findings are fascinating because any time we find evidence that subtle environmental cues can change motivation, it means we might be able to harness these cues to make changes in our own lives. And that's exactly the notion Dai and her colleagues recently reported in an unpublished experiment.

Working with human resources departments at four universities, the researchers generated a set of mailers sent to employees who weren't enrolled in their university's retirement savings programs. One employee group was asked whether they would like to start saving now or at some future time (e.g., in two months). Another group was asked if they would like to start saving now or after some future event (e.g., after Thanksgiving). And a third group received the experimental treatment: They were asked if they would like to start saving now or "after your next birthday." Because the framing of this last message directly invoked the mindset of a fresh start, it produced the biggest uptick in actual savings behavior among university employees!

Why, though, would these fresh starts and the promise of their arrivals have such impact? One possible reason is that big temporal landmarks like a new year, new season or new decade can serve to create a mental separation from who we once were and who we are now. Such divisions in time can allow us to put our past failures solidly into the past, thereby increasing our optimism about all we can accomplish now that we have shed those old identities.

Fresh starts, then, can prompt us to finally go for it and step into the shoes of our more desirable selves. The evidence thus far, however, has primarily come in the form of messages that make fresh starts salient, messages sent by marketers and researchers. This begs the question of whether we can fully employ fresh starts in our own lives to help us make desired changes. I certainly think so.

When it comes to our finances, we are quite good at creating mental accounts for losses and gains even though all money is fungible. I think we're similarly skilled at creating mental accounts for our old selves and our new selves, making fresh starts that much more powerful.

There's a chance fresh starts may backfire if we put too much pressure on ourselves, though. For instance, I could imagine telling myself that I'm finally going to start working out five times a week because, hey, it's a new year! That guy who used to work out only twice a week is the "old me," and that's not me now. But if I failed in week 3 of the new year, would that negatively impact my self-esteem such that I'd be more likely to abandon the pursuit altogether?

Alternatively, as Professor Dai recently told me in an email, when it comes to fresh starts, "People may be so excited about pursuing new goals that they become overly optimistic about what they could do afterwards (e.g., in a new year). If they set too high a goal due to overoptimism, they may fail too soon and not be motivated to try again." Because of these possibilities, I speculate that fresh starts may work *even* better when coupled with a healthy dose of self-compassion for any potential failures that arise when pursuing new goals. Sure, it's a new year, but despite my best intentions, the old me may still be present. If I want to truly move past his mistakes, I may need to acknowledge that I'll continue to make some of the same ones.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Hengchen Dai and Claire Li. "How experiencing and anticipating temporal landmarks influence motivation." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 26 (April 2019): 44-48.

<sup>2</sup>Hengchen Dai, Katherine L. Milkman, and Jason Riis. "The Fresh Start Effect: Temporal Landmarks Motivate Aspirational Behavior." *Management Science* 60, No. 10 (2014): 2563-2582.

<sup>3</sup>Hengchen Dai, Katherine L. Milkman, and Jason Riis. "Put Your Imperfections Behind You: Temporal Landmarks Spur Goal Initiation When They Signal New Beginnings." *Psychological Science* 26, No. 12 (2015): 1927-1936.

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