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Strength in numbers

Teaming up with another person can improve your odds of keeping a New Year's resolution

By Jessica Reynolds, Tribune Newspapers

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Most people enjoy setting New Year's resolutions, but keeping them? That's not as much fun, unless you treat the commitment less like a chore and more like a game with teammates who are in it to win it too.

Committing to a resolution with another person — whether a spouse, friend or family member — challenges both of you to be accountable but also lets you lean on each other for mutual support, said April Masini, a relationship advice expert who writes at AskApril.com. It can also build intimacy and strengthen loyalty and improve your chances for success.

"When you decide to make a resolution together, you've opened the door to intimacy, self-discovery and couple or group discovery that can change your life," Masini said.

Creating memories

That's what Robyn Adams, 38, of Waterford, Mich., is hoping. After a taxing few years that involved the death of a loved one, the flooding of their home's basement and subsequent illness, she and her husband, Brad, have set several goals for 2014 aimed at improving the overall happiness and health of their family.

Among their resolutions: to spend money more wisely, and to differentiate wants from needs. They also want to focus on making memories with their two sons, ages 7 and 9.

"We want to show (our boys) what's important," Adams said. "Things aren't important. People are. Relationships are."

After the Adams' basement flooded, they had to throw out years' worth of mementos. That, Adams says, is when she realized the true value of memories.

"If we have the option to take them to an event versus buying whatever the latest toy fad is, we'll choose the experience. We feel like that's more long-lasting and can't be ruined by anything," Adams said.

Masini recommends that families setting resolutions together commit to one or two that strengthen their bond or heal a rift that's already happened. Good goals may include calling an elderly relative every week or

having a mandatory weekly family sit-down dinner.

Narrow your focus

Michal Strahilevitz, 47, of Berkeley, Calif., has partnered with relatives or friends for New Year's resolutions for about 10 years. She leans toward goals that involve health or work.

A professor of marketing at Golden Gate University, Strahilevitz said she has learned that the more specific the goal, the more likely you are to stick with it.

"Just 'working out' is too vague. Specify how much you're going to work out in a given time frame," she said. "Then you know if you're cheating or not."

Strahilevitz also said it's good to partner with people whose strengths you can build from.

Last year she and a friend who's also an educator agreed to block out six hours every week just to write. No calls from students. No email.

"That's an example where you make a resolution with someone, and they're already doing a better job with it," Strahilevitz said, referring to her friend, who is able to write without succumbing to distraction. "But that same friend doesn't like to exercise as much, so if we make an exercise resolution, it's probably more helpful for her than me."

Even if your friend or spouse isn't willing to commit to the same resolution, ask if they would be willing to be your support system: your listening ear when you need to talk about your accomplishments, boast that you exercised for 20 minutes or spent an hour doing research. They can also act as a coach to check in with progress reports — but be sure to request that they not go overboard.

"At some point, it can kind of stress out the friendship if every time you're together, (they) ask, 'Did you exercise?'" Strahilevitz said.

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Duo dynamics

Relationship expert April Masini has a few tips when making resolutions with a partner:

Couples: Make a resolution to have a date night once a week, see more movies together or read more books instead of watching TV. Steer clear of goals that focus on negatives — such as not cheating or not flirting.

Families: Set goals that everyone wants to do together. For instance, create a schedule to regularly volunteer to help the less fortunate. Focus on good habits you want to start implementing instead of bad ones you want to quit.

Friends: Healthy competition is great, but don't make a resolution that ensures one of you will lose and the other will win. It will strain your relationship, not bolster it. Be advocates, not adversaries. For instance, join a gym and sign up for a weekly class together.

— J.R.

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