



GOING FOR goals

After decades of failure to complete her many goals, writer Joanna Ebsworth gets some expert advice that helps her to finally fulfil her ambitions

It's good to have goals. When set and achieved successfully, the journey to realising a chosen achievement — whether that be completing a higher education course that enhances your career or crossing the finish line of a charity trek after months of training and fundraising — can give our lives meaning, purpose, and a sense of accomplishment: a feeling of constantly growing and moving forward every day, as opposed to being stuck in a rut and feeling like you're living the same existence on repeat.

For some of us, however, setting a new goal can feel like we're setting ourselves up for failure before we've even begun. As someone who is inherently ambitious and hungry for a happier way of living, I have spent countless years setting myself a multitude of goals to help further my career and improve my physical and mental health, only to fail miserably at 90 per cent of them at the first signs of stress, overwhelm, and fatigue — no matter how much I've desperately longed for positive change. And it's these constant feelings of failure, disappointment and self-loathing over my lack of willpower that have led me to question whether there's any point in me ever setting a new goal for myself again, especially when history tells me I'm never going to succeed.

Of course, this is a pretty sad situation to be in. When I feel resigned to the idea I'll never achieve another goal, that immediately puts the kybosh on any notions I might have about writing a novel,

running a marathon, or saving a big enough deposit for a house. And I'm not sure I'm ready to let all my dreams just curl up and die at the age of 46! Moreover, after feeling like I lost the majority of my 20s and 30s to generalised anxiety and crippling panic attacks — and coming out the other side with the help of various therapies — my self-confidence has been restored to the extent where I now feel I'm ready to get out there and embrace the best that life has to offer. So, what is the answer to reversing my dismal goal-achieving track record, then?

Well, I'm happy to report that there now, finally, appears to be a light at the end of the tunnel, in the form of clinical psychologist and Sunday Times bestselling author Dr Sophie Mort. After she wrote *(Un)Stuck: Five Steps to Break Bad Habits and Get Out of Your Own Way* (£16.99, Simon & Schuster Ltd), I recently had the pleasure of chatting to Mort, and what I learnt from her was nothing short of transformative.

Firstly, and most crucially, I chose not to set myself any New Year's resolutions for the first time since adolescence. Instead, I decided to take the first week of January incredibly easy, so I could recover emotionally and physically from a typically frantic festive season, and to only reflect on my previous year — and think about potential goals for the future — when I was ready, without a deadline.

Having chosen this path, there was absolutely no expectation on me to wake up on New Year's Day



and begin living a completely different existence by exercising five-days-a-week and following a new healthy eating plan. And thank heavens that was the case, as between my beloved dog having emergency surgery days before Christmas; my mum being admitted to hospital on Christmas Day and my dad following shortly afterwards on New Year's Eve; I had zero energy for anything that required focus, discipline and determination.

After a few days of rest and recuperation, I finally felt ready to address my intentions for 2025 on January 7th. Unlike previous Januarys, this year I had Mort's advice on the science of habit formation still ringing in my ears. And I'm happy to report I'm still using that advice today, with great success. But why is it so hard to change our bad habits and cultivate better ones?

'The short answer is that people simply haven't been taught how complex and ingrained the habits they already have are,' says Mort. 'For example, people often say they will drink less alcohol and exercise more in the new year, but they fail to look for the cues in their environment and lifestyle that are constantly triggering their not-going-to-the-gym and reaching-for-the-booze behaviour, while also failing to schedule the time specifically needed to do the new activities into their diary.'

'Through no fault of their own — and I include myself in this, before learning everything I know now — they think wanting to change is enough,' she adds. 'We tend to assume that willpower and motivation will suffice, but it usually only sticks around in the beginning. Once it dies and life starts getting in the way, it becomes easier to wake up, begin your schedule, and increasingly put off doing things you had planned to do until later.'

'Then, once things build up and you reach the end of the day, you realise it's too late to exercise, so you become stressed to the point where simply seeing someone with a glass of wine can trigger your habit loop to reach for one yourself.'

'Suddenly, you're having a sip of wine too, and the crucial bit here is it's not because you have no willpower: it's because the habit loop is playing out, which is totally unconscious. What often happens next is that the "what the hell" effect steps in, where you say, "well, I've already broken my rule now, so what the hell, I'll drink the whole bottle and start again tomorrow." Instead of recognising what is happening, pausing, and seeing it as a moment to say "no" and continue your new habit, you're suddenly reinforcing your old habit, pushing it into the next day, and continuing the cycle.'

Mort says she doesn't blame anyone for perpetuating this behaviour: 'Honestly, I have a doctorate in clinical psychology, and even



I didn't get taught what habit loops were. I had to learn about it for my book, *(Un)Stuck*, so why would anyone else know?' She's also keen to point out that this behaviour is not intentional self-sabotage because our brains are always just trying to take the path of least resistance. Always.

'Try imagining a habit you've done for years — such as picking up your phone to scroll — as walking over the same patch of grass in the garden.'

'Say you pick up your phone every 20 minutes, and you've been doing that for the last 10 years. Next, imagine walking over a patch of grass every 20 minutes for 10 years. How deep would the groove in the ground be? You'd have a trench, right?!' she exclaims. 'So whether it's reaching for the wine or sitting and scrolling or not going to the gym, your brain is slipping back into the old groove. You might be trying to walk on a different patch of grass, but your brain is saying, "no, no, no!" Because why would you walk through a field of tall grass when you can walk in the really lovely groove? It's simply your brain trying to find the smartest and most efficient way through the field.'



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If that wasn't enough, Mort says we also fail to account for the things the brain does to try keep us safe when we feel stressed, or the fact that we rarely make decisions based on our best interests because our brain uses shortcuts to make decisions, rather than facts.

'So, while habits are not impossible to shift, they take more time and effort than simply saying, "I'm going to be a gym bunny"', she concludes.

It isn't all bad news though. If you want to get unstuck from your behaviour patterns, the first thing Mort suggests you do is to think about your values rather than your goals, including the qualities you want in your life. 'Maybe you want to be a marathon runner. The question is why? What quality will this bring to your life? Maybe the qualities are a sense of commitment to something bigger than you, or focusing on your health for longevity, or training to become part of a community. Once you're very clear on your why, you then need to write this down somewhere, because this is going to be the thing that pushes you into action when the motivation disappears.'

Once you're crystal clear on your why, and what your life would be like if you didn't achieve the things you wanted, Mort says the next stage in removing old habits from your life involves observing all the internal and external cues you experience. Look at this over a 24 to 48-hour period, registering what makes you want to reach for the phone, cigarette, or alcoholic beverage, for example, and write them down. Include the things you see in your environment, the things people say to you, and the things you feel when you're bored, lonely, or stressed.

With that list complete, you then need to remove all the external environmental cues that can trigger the 'habit loop'. That might mean removing all alcohol from your house, or deliberately placing your phone in another room while you work. The point is to create as much friction between you and that action as possible. And as for the internal cues, Mort says you should create another list of things you can do instead, to occupy that part of your brain and satisfy the desire.

'I normally say something like: "the next time





I notice feeling X, I will take three deep inhales and then decide if there's a coping skill I can call upon if I'm feeling really stressed out."

'Now, if in five minutes, you find you still want to call upon that old habit, that's actually fine,' she says. 'Go ahead. Because what we're trying to do is create a break between the cue, the impulse, and the action. And in an ideal world, you would also create a replacement behaviour to add new, more positive behaviours into your life, and reward yourself afterwards for doing it.'

For me, taking the time to recognise the internal and external cues that drove me to repeat old habits and then replacing them with new ones was the lightbulb moment. For example, with alcohol: paying close attention to my impulses and the reasons why I wanted to reach for a bottle of wine in the first place — usually to help me relax after a tough day, or to celebrate a win — was invaluable for helping me to get through Dry January, especially when I made conscious decisions to reward myself or reduce my stress levels with an enjoyable alternative, such as a relaxing bath with a cup of hot chocolate and scented candles.

I am also someone who has spent years reaching for my phone immediately upon waking and losing at least an hour to checking emails, reading the news and scrolling mindlessly through social media. However, I soon found that leaving my phone on the other side of my bedroom, resisting the urge to pick it up, and using that time instead to set my intentions for the day, go for a walk, and make a proper breakfast hugely reduced my stress

levels and set me up for a more successful, energised day. It also gave me a sense of accomplishment because I was killing several birds with one stone and ticking off my goals to move more, eat healthily, and be more mindful in one fell swoop.

By the time I factored in Mort's final piece of advice — to break down my goals into the smallest, most manageable chunks I could do every day and then repeat them over and over (repetition is apparently the single most important thing when it comes to habit formation) — I was flying. This was especially the case when I scheduled time into my new productivity planner every day to perform these habits, and rewarded myself afterwards.

Case in point? Walking 10,000 steps daily for my mind and body became so much more achievable once I determined to walk after breakfast, lunch and dinner (even if it was only for 10 minutes around the block), followed by five minutes of meditation or breathwork while I waited for my reward — a lovely cup of rich coffee or my favourite herbal tea — to cool down.

Don't get me wrong, it was far from easy in the beginning, and there were occasions in the first few weeks where my phone jumped into my hand when I should have been pulling on my trainers. But with plenty of time and repetition, some of my most annoying habits lost their pull, and some new ones became instinctive. That's not to say I'm signing up for a 10k anytime soon, let alone a marathon, but the idea doesn't seem as unreachable as it once did. And that's certainly a step in the right direction!

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