

A wish isn't a plan

A short book about setting a big goal every January and
having no idea what you'll do on a wet Tuesday

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First edition

Written by AI with human guidance. It can
contain mistakes, which later editions correct.

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Before you start

This is a short book and you can read it in two or three sittings. It's about one habit, which is setting a large goal at the start of the year, feeling wonderful about it for a fortnight, losing it somewhere in February, and setting the same goal again the next January with a little less belief and a little more shame. Get fit. Lose the weight. Write the book. Learn the language. Sort the money. Drink less. See more of people. The list is probably familiar, and some of the entries have been on it for years.

I'm going to argue three things. The first is that the habit makes sense from the inside. The new year feels like a clean page, and it feels that way for a reason that researchers have measured. The goal is a picture of a better life, and looking at the picture is genuinely pleasant. And a stated resolution does help, more than not stating one, which is a finding and not a slogan. The second is that the goal as you usually set it is a wish about an outcome, and outcomes don't happen. Tuesdays happen. What you wrote down on the first of January says nothing about a wet Tuesday in February when you're tired, the meeting overran and the picture has faded, and that Tuesday is where the goal is decided. The research on this is fairly clear. Wanting an outcome more doesn't produce it, and vividly imagining it can produce less effort, not more. What moves the numbers is a plain sentence about when and where you'll do the thing, and the size of the thing being small enough to survive an ordinary bad day. The third is practical. One

wish, turned into a sentence about a Tuesday, at the smallest size that still counts, looked at for five minutes every Sunday. Chapters 18 to 20 cover how.

This book doesn't tell you to stop making resolutions or to want less. The wish is fine. It's the beginning of something. The book is about what has to come after the wish, and about why the collapse in February isn't the verdict on you that it feels like.

Two cautions. If the goal is weight, drink or money, there are earlier books in this series that take those habits apart properly, and chapter 21 names them and the NHS pages that go with them. And if the goal has been "feel better" for several Januaries running and you've felt low most of the day, most days, for a fortnight or more, the NHS says to see a GP, and no plan in this book replaces that.

The notes at the back give my sources and their limits. Where I'm giving my own reasoning and not a finding, I'll say so.

The first of January, again

It's the first of January and you feel unusually clear. Last year is behind you and it has a shape now, and the shape has some things in it you'd rather it didn't. So you write something down, or you say it to whoever's in the room, or you just decide it in the shower. This year you get fit. This year the book gets written. This year the money gets sorted. It feels like a decision and it feels good, and for a few days the feeling carries you. You go for the run. You open the document. You look at the bank app without flinching.

Then it's the third week of January. It's a Tuesday and it's raining. You got home at half past six because the last meeting ran over, there's nothing in for dinner, and someone needs a form signed for tomorrow. The run isn't happening and you know it before you've taken your coat off. You'll go tomorrow. Tomorrow has its own reason. By the second week of February the goal is a slightly sore spot you avoid pressing, and by March you've stopped noticing that you've stopped. Next January you'll write the same thing down. You may have written it down for four or five Januaries now. Each year the wish is the same, and each year the belief behind it is a little thinner.

This is an invented January, but I'd guess yours is close. Some words. **The wish** is the goal as you first state it, which is nearly always an outcome. Fit. Fluent. Published. Solvent. **The picture** is the image of yourself having got there, which is what you're enjoying on the first of January. **The good fortnight** is the first two weeks, when the picture is fresh and the days are still holiday-shaped. **The drop** is the point, usually in a wet week of February,

where the wish stops happening. **The rerun** is the same wish set again the next year. **The Tuesday** is any ordinary day, tired and full, on which the wish actually has to become an action or not. **The Tuesday sentence** is what this book replaces the wish with, a line about what you'll do, when and where, on that day. **The least version** is the smallest form of the action that you'd still count. And **the Sunday five minutes** is the weekly look at how the sentence went.

Before you go on, do one thing. Write down the wishes you've made for the last three Januaries, as best you remember them. Next to each, write what happened to it and roughly when. Most people who do this find the same wish two or three times, and a drop at about the same point each year. That repeat is the habit, and it's the thing this book is about.

Why the wish feels like the work

Before taking the habit apart, it's worth being fair to it, because it isn't stupid and it isn't laziness. Making the wish meets real needs, and if the book pretended otherwise you'd be right to put it down.

The wish gives you a clean start. The year has an edge on it, and stepping over the edge lets you put last year's version of yourself on the other side. Chapter 3 is about why this feels so real and what it can and can't do. The wish gives you a picture, and the picture is pleasant to look at. Sitting with the image of yourself at the end of the run, or with the book done, or with the debt gone, is one of the nicer things a mind can do on a grey afternoon. Chapter 5 is about what the picture costs.

The wish gives you a sense of control at a time of year when there's not much else to feel in control of. It's dark, it's cold, the money's gone on December, and a decision about the future is a thing you can make from the sofa. The wish also gives you something to say. People ask, and having an answer, a good one, a large one, is its own small pleasure. And the wish gives you hope, which after a hard year is not nothing. It's the reason, chapter 8 will argue, that people set the wish again after it failed, and the reason it fails the same way.

Underneath all of those is one belief, and it's the one the book is going to examine. The belief is that deciding is the hard part, and that having really decided, the doing will follow. It feels true

because deciding is where the feeling is. The doing, on a Tuesday, has no feeling in it at all. It's just a pair of trainers by the door and no wish to put them on.

I'm not going to argue that any of these needs is false. The clean start is real, the picture is lovely, the hope is worth having. What I'm going to argue is that none of them is a plan, and that treating them as one is what puts you back at the first of January each year with the same wish and a smaller heart for it. The needs can be met. They just can't be met by the wish alone.

"This year's different"

Every January it feels like this year is different, and the feeling is not a delusion. Hengchen Dai, Katherine Milkman and Jason Riis published a paper in 2014 with the title "The fresh start effect", and what they found in three sets of archival data is that people are more likely to start on goals just after what they called temporal landmarks. Google searches for the word diet, visits to a gym and commitments made to pursue goals all rose after the start of a new week, a new month, a new year, a new term, a birthday, a holiday. The authors' interpretation is that a landmark closes a mental account, so that last year's imperfections belong to a previous period and you can look at your life from a wider view and want more for it.

So the clean page is real. It's just not personal. It's the calendar doing to you what it does to everyone, and it did the same thing last January, when the year also felt different. That's the first thing to take from the finding. The sense that this time you mean it is a reliable feature of the first of January and says nothing at all about what happens on the twentieth.

The second thing is where the effect lives. It lives in starts. Dai and colleagues measured searches, gym visits and commitments, which are the things people do at the start of a goal. The paper isn't about February. A landmark can put you at the gym on the second of January. It has no opinion about whether you're there on a wet Tuesday six weeks later, because by then the landmark is behind you and the account it opened is filling up with ordinary days.

You can feel this in your own list from chapter 1. The wish was made in a moment when the calendar had handed you a clean page. The drop came on a day with no landmark on it at all, a Tuesday like any other. The feeling that made the wish wasn't there on the day the wish needed it.

None of this means the fresh start is worthless. It's a free push, and the method in chapter 18 uses it. The point is only that it's a push at the start, and a push at the start is not a plan for the middle. The mistake isn't feeling that this year is different. The mistake is treating the feeling as if it were the work.

"It works, people do it"

You might object that resolutions do work, that you know people who got fit one January and stayed fit. You'd be right, and it's worth being precise about how right.

John Norcross, Marci Mrykalo and Matthew Blagys followed 159 people who'd made a New Year's resolution and 123 people who wanted to change the same sorts of things but hadn't made one, and phoned them over six months. At six months, 46 percent of the resolvers said they'd been continuously successful, against 4 percent of the people who hadn't resolved. The groups didn't differ in who they were or what they wanted to change, and the most common goals were weight, exercise and smoking. Martin Oscarsson, Per Carlbring, Gerhard Andersson and Alexander Rozental ran a larger study in Sweden, published in 2020, with 1,066 members of the public who made a resolution, and at a year 55 percent of those who answered said they'd kept it. So yes. Stating the wish is far better than not stating it, and a fair share of people keep theirs.

Now look at what else those studies found, because it's the part that matters for the rerun. Norcross and colleagues found that what predicted success, measured before the first of January, wasn't how much people wanted it. It was self-efficacy, which is the belief that you can do the specific thing, skills to change, and readiness. And once the year started, the people who succeeded used more practical, behavioural methods and fewer of the methods that raise awareness and feeling. Oscarsson and colleagues found that people whose goals were about approaching

something, doing more of a thing, did better than people whose goals were about avoiding something, and that the group given some information and exercises on setting goals did better than the group given none. Interestingly, the group given more extensive support didn't do better than the group given some.

Read those two together and the shape is clear. Resolving helps. Wanting doesn't predict much. Knowing what you'll actually do, and having a goal that's a thing to do rather than a thing to stop, predicts more. Those are exactly the things the wish, as most people write it, leaves out.

So the answer to "it works, people do it" is that it does, for roughly half, and the half it works for aren't the half who wanted it most. They're the half who had, by luck or habit, turned the wish into something closer to a Tuesday. The rest of this book is about doing that on purpose.

"I just need to want it enough"

The most natural thing to do with a wish is to dwell on it. You picture yourself at the end. Fit, lighter, fluent, the book on a shelf. It feels motivating, and the feeling is the reason people believe that the trouble in previous years was not wanting it enough. If they could only want it as much on the twentieth as they did on the first, they'd get there.

Gabriele Oettingen and Doris Mayer tested this in four studies published in 2002, and the result runs the other way. They separated two ways of thinking about the future. One is expectation, which is judging that a desired outcome is likely. The other is fantasy, which is enjoying the images and thoughts of the outcome. They measured both in graduates looking for a job, in students with a crush on someone, in undergraduates facing an exam, and in patients recovering from hip replacement, and then measured effort and results weeks or months later, up to two years. Positive expectations predicted more effort and better results. Positive fantasies predicted less effort and worse results. The people who'd enjoyed the picture most did least.

The authors' interpretation, which I share, is that a vivid picture of the outcome gives you some of the outcome's reward now, and that a reward you've already had is a weaker reason to work. The study can't say the picture causes the drop, because people weren't assigned to fantasise. But it's a longitudinal finding across four different kinds of people and it points one way.

That is the January problem in one sentence. The wish is enjoyable precisely because it lets you have the picture, and the picture is what's sapping the Tuesday. On the first of January the pleasure of imagining the run is high and the cost of running is zero because you're on the sofa. On a wet Tuesday in February the pleasure of the image has been spent, several times over, and the cost of running is a cold half hour.

So wanting it more is not the answer, and trying to want it more, by picturing it harder, is likely the opposite of the answer. What Oettingen and Mayer's expectations group had was something plainer. They thought the thing was likely, which means they could see the steps. The next chapter is about why seeing the steps is a different act from wanting the end.

"Once I've decided, the how will follow"

Here's the belief chapter 2 said the book would examine. Deciding is the hard part. Once you've truly decided, the doing takes care of itself, the way it does when you've decided to catch a train. You don't need a plan to get to the station. You just go.

Paschal Sheeran and Thomas Webb reviewed the research on what they called the intention-behaviour gap in 2016, and their opening line is that both bitter personal experience and meta-analysis agree that people don't always do what they intend to. The review goes on to ask how large the gap is, when intentions get carried out and when they don't, and what closes the gap. I'll be careful here because I read the summary and not the full paper, so I won't quote figures. What I'll say is that the existence of a well-studied gap between deciding and doing is not in doubt, and that the people who study it don't think deciding harder is what closes it.

What does close it is best seen in a single experiment. Sarah Milne, Sheina Orbell and Paschal Sheeran took 248 people and gave one group a motivational intervention designed to make them want to exercise, using a well-known theory of health motivation. It worked, in the sense that it raised their sense of threat, their sense that exercise would help, and their intention to exercise. It didn't raise their exercise. A second group got the same motivation plus one more thing, which was to write down when and where they would exercise in the coming week. That group's exercise rose sharply. And the plan didn't change their intention or any other measure of motivation. It changed only what they did.

That's the train. When you decide to catch a train you already know where the station is, what time the train goes and what you'll be doing at ten to eight. The decision is easy to carry out because the how is already in it. The wish has no how in it at all. "Get fit" has no station, no time and no ten to eight. It's a decision about a destination with the journey left blank, and on a Tuesday the blank is what you meet.

The when-then form of the plan, which Milne's participants used and which this series has used in every book, is the subject of chapter 18. For now the point is only this. The how doesn't follow from the decision. The how is a separate thing you have to write, and if you don't write it, the Tuesday writes it for you, and the Tuesday always writes "tomorrow".

"The first two weeks went fine"

The good fortnight is real, and it's the most misleading part of the year. For two weeks after the first of January you do the thing. You run three times. You write every morning. You cook. And because it's going well you conclude that the plan is working, that this year you really have changed, and that the previous years' drops must have been down to something that's now fixed.

Look at what those two weeks were made of. Many people are still off work for some of them. The evenings are empty because December used all the social energy. The fridge is full of things bought with the wish in mind. The picture is fresh, and chapter 5 explained what a fresh picture does. The fresh start push from chapter 3 is still at your back. It's a fortnight built out of holiday conditions, and it tests the wish against nothing.

Then the conditions change, all at once and quietly. Work is back to full speed. The evenings fill. The weather does what the weather does in late January. The picture has been looked at so many times that it's worn smooth. And on some Tuesday in the third or fourth week you meet the first day that actually has a cost in it, and the wish, which has never been tested, fails the test.

This is my reading, not a finding, but I'd put it strongly. The good fortnight isn't evidence that the wish is working. It's evidence that the wish works when nothing is in its way, which was never in doubt. The only fortnight that tells you anything is the one after it.

There's a practical consequence, and it's the opposite of what most people do. Most people use the good fortnight to increase the wish. Three runs went well, so make it four. The morning writing is flowing, so do an hour. That's building the plan larger just as the conditions that supported it are about to be withdrawn. The better use of the good fortnight is the reverse. Use it to find out what the least version looks like, the run so short you'd do it after the meeting that ran over, and to practise that, so that when the Tuesday arrives you're doing something you've already done a dozen times on easy days.

If your list from chapter 1 shows drops in the third or fourth week, this is probably why. Nothing went wrong with you. The holiday ended.

"I'll do it properly or not at all"

Wishes are large by nature, and part of the appeal is the size. Not "walk more" but "run a half marathon". Not "write on Tuesdays" but "finish the novel". The size feels like seriousness. A small goal feels like you don't mean it.

Janet Polivy and Peter Herman wrote in 2002 about what they called the false hope syndrome, and their description of it fits the January habit closely enough that it's worth quoting the shape. People make repeated attempts at self-change despite repeated failure. The attempts are marked by unrealistic expectations about how fast the change will come, how much will change, how easy it'll be, and what it'll do for the rest of their life. When the attempt fails, they interpret the failure in a way that leads them to try again the same way. Polivy and Herman's paper is a review of their own and others' evidence, and the pattern they describe is drawn mostly from dieting, but it's the resolution cycle in four sentences. Too fast, too much, too easy, and the failure explained in a way that protects the wish.

The size of the wish is doing something specific here. A large wish is a large picture, and chapter 5 explained what a large picture does. It also sets the least version out of reach. If the wish is a half marathon, then a fifteen-minute jog after a bad day feels like a failure rather than a success, so you don't do the jog. You do nothing, because nothing is at least honest. That's how "properly or not at all" ends in "not at all". It isn't that you lack commitment. It's that the wish has defined every possible Tuesday action as not proper.

The honest objection is that small goals produce small results, and that if you only ever do the least version you'll never run the half marathon. That's true, and chapter 18 has a place for the large version. But the large version is a thing you build up to from a floor that survives Tuesdays, and the size of the wish decides where the floor is. Put the wish at half marathon and the floor is somewhere you can't stand on a bad day. Put it at "run, for however long, on Tuesday and Saturday" and the floor is under your feet, and half marathons are what happen to people who keep standing on it.

Seriousness isn't size. Seriousness is a Tuesday you can point to.

"Big goals are motivating"

You may have read that ambitious goals get more out of people than modest ones, and that's a fair summary of a real body of research. Edwin Locke and Gary Latham summarised thirty-five years of work on goal-setting theory in 2002, and the core finding of that work is that specific, difficult goals lead to higher performance than vague ones or easy ones, given commitment, feedback and the ability to do the task. So why wouldn't a big January goal be the right kind of goal?

Because of what a goal is in that research and what it is on your list. The goals in Locke and Latham's studies are targets for tasks people already know how to do. Make more calls. Cut more trees. Solve more problems. The difficulty is in the amount, and the how is settled. The wish on your list is a different animal. "Learn Spanish" isn't a hard target for a known task. It's a name for a hundred tasks you haven't chosen yet. The theory's own conditions, which are commitment, feedback and ability, are precisely what the wish lacks. There's no feedback on "get fit" because there's nothing to measure on a Tuesday. There's no ability to apply because the task hasn't been named. This is my reading of the theory and not something Locke and Latham say about resolutions, but I think it holds.

So the finding doesn't argue against this book. It argues for the Tuesday sentence, which is a specific target for a known task. "Twenty minutes of Spanish on the app at the kitchen table at eight

on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday" is exactly the sort of goal the theory says works, and "learn Spanish" is exactly the sort it says doesn't.

There's a second point in the same literature, and it's a caution. Locke and Latham note the theory's limits, and other researchers have written about the side effects of over-prescribing goals, which include narrowing attention and encouraging people to game the number. You can see a mild version in January. The person whose wish is a weight loss number weighs themselves daily and lets the number set their mood, which is a habit with its own book in this series. The number becomes the goal and the Tuesday, which is where the number comes from, gets ignored.

Big goals are motivating when they're targets. A wish isn't a target. It's a hope with a deadline of December, and December is a long way from a wet Tuesday.

"I'll do it every day"

The other thing the wish tends to be is daily. Every day, from the first. And for the good fortnight, every day it is, and then a day gets missed and something odd happens in your head. The missed day feels like the end of it. The streak was the thing, and the streak is gone.

Phillippa Lally, Cornelia van Jaarsveld, Henry Potts and Jane Wardle followed 96 volunteers who'd each chosen a new daily behaviour, eating, drinking or activity, done in the same context each day, and asked them to record how automatic it felt. Automaticity rose over weeks on a curve that flattened out, and the time to reach the plateau ranged from 18 days to 254. And missing a single opportunity didn't materially affect the process. The habit went on forming.

Two things follow for January. The first is that the wish is usually set on the assumption that a fortnight is enough to make the thing stick, and it isn't, not for most people and not for most behaviours. The good fortnight is a fraction of the way along Lally's curve. If you drop at three weeks, you've dropped at a point where the behaviour was always going to feel like effort, because that's what it feels like at three weeks. It's not a sign it wasn't taking. It's what taking feels like early on.

The second is about the missed day. Lally's data say a single miss doesn't undo formation, which means the feeling that the streak was the thing is wrong in the specific way that matters. The streak is a picture. It's a clean row of ticks, and it's pleasant in the way the

picture in chapter 5 is pleasant. The habit isn't the streak. The habit is the tendency to do the thing on the next ordinary day, and that tendency was still there the morning after the miss. What ended it was your reading of the miss, not the miss.

This is why the Tuesday sentence in chapter 18 isn't daily unless the thing genuinely needs to be. Three days a week with a plan survives a missed Tuesday, because Thursday's still there. Every day with no plan breaks the first time life is larger than the wish, and it always is, some day in the third week.

"I'll start Monday"

The fresh start effect from chapter 3 doesn't only happen in January. It happens every Monday, on the first of each month, after every holiday and every birthday. Dai, Milkman and Riis measured it in weeks and months as well as years. And that has a use and a cost.

The cost is the wait. If you believe that starts need a clean page, then a Wednesday afternoon isn't a place you can start, so you wait for Monday. Monday goes badly for the ordinary reasons, and now you're waiting for the first of the month, and then the first of the year. The clean page becomes a reason not to write on the dirty one, and the dirty one is the only page there is most of the time. I've no study of this, but I'd guess that a fair share of people's Januaries are made of Mondays that were going to be the day.

There's a deeper problem with Monday. Monday is the most landmark-shaped day of the week and the least Tuesday-shaped. It has a fresh push behind it, the way the first of January does, and it tests nothing. The day the wish has to survive is the one with no push, and Monday's push runs out on Tuesday. Starting Monday means starting on the day that tells you least about whether the plan works.

So the use of the effect is the reverse of how people use it. Don't wait for a landmark to start. Start on the Wednesday afternoon, at the least version, so the plan meets an ordinary day on its first outing. And then let the landmarks do what they're good at, which is renewing. If the Sunday five minutes in chapter 19 shows the

week went badly, the Monday is a free push to restart at the same size. If the month went badly, the first is another. The effect is real and it's free and it comes round every week. It's wasted on waiting and it's useful for going again.

The day after the drop, chapter 22 will say, is the right day to restart, whatever day it is. There's usually a landmark within a week if you want one. There's always a Tuesday.

"I've bought the kit, so I've started"

There's a version of the good fortnight that happens before the first of January, and it's spent in shops. The running shoes. The language app subscription. The notebook for the novel, a good one. The budgeting spreadsheet, set up with colours. The wish is expensive in the last week of December, and the spending feels like the first act of the new life.

Dai, Milkman and Riis's first study was of Google searches for the word diet, and searches rose after landmarks. A search is a small purchase of the picture. It costs nothing and it delivers a moment of the outcome. Kit is the same thing at a higher price. When you buy the shoes you get, for the price of the shoes, an hour or two of being a runner, in the shop, on the walk home, unboxing them by the door. I've no study of this and I'm giving you my reading, but I think buying is the most reliable way to enjoy the picture without doing the Tuesday, because it looks so much like doing.

The trouble is what the kit becomes in February. The shoes by the door were, in the good fortnight, a small pleasure. After the drop they're an accusation. Every time you pass them they say something about you, and the thing they say isn't "go for a run". It's "you're the kind of person who buys the shoes". Which makes the shoes a reason to look away from the door, and the door is where the run starts. The kit that was bought to make the wish easier is now making the Tuesday harder.

I'm not going to tell you not to buy the shoes. Some kit is needed and having it removes a real obstacle. The test is simple. If the thing changes what happens at ten to eight on Tuesday, it's a plan. If it changes how you feel on the twenty-eighth of December, it's the picture. Shoes you'll run in on Tuesday are a plan. A watch that measures a run you don't yet have a Tuesday for is the picture with a strap on.

And if the kit is already there, by the door, being an accusation, here's what to do with it. Take the accusation off it by using it at the least version, once, this week. A ten-minute walk in the running shoes is enough to turn them back into shoes.

"One slip and it's over"

The drop is usually a single day. You missed the run, or you ate the thing, or you didn't open the document. And then something happens that isn't in the missed day at all. You decide the whole thing is over. It wasn't one Tuesday. It was the wish, and the wish has failed, and there's no point going on Thursday because the year is now the year you failed at that.

Chapter 10 gave Lally's finding that a single miss doesn't materially affect a habit that's forming. What turns the miss into the drop is your reading of the miss, and the reading is nearly always a verdict about yourself. Wohl, Pychyl and Bennett followed 134 first-year students across two exams and found that those who forgave themselves for procrastinating before the first exam procrastinated less before the second. That's a correlational study of students, so hold it loosely, but its direction is the one I'd expect. The verdict after a miss doesn't prevent the next miss. It makes the next one more likely, because the wish is now a sore place and you'll avoid pressing it, and the way to avoid pressing it is not to think about Thursday.

Here's what I think is going on, and it follows from chapter 8. The wish is all or nothing because the wish is a picture, and a picture is either intact or spoiled. A run that was missed spoils the picture of the person who runs every day. But a Tuesday sentence isn't a picture. It's a line on a week, and a week with two ticks and one gap is a week with two ticks in it. The Sunday five minutes, in chapter

19, looks at the two ticks and the gap and asks what the gap was made of. It doesn't have a place for a verdict because nothing in it is about who you are.

There's an honest objection here, which is that some slips are the start of the drop and pretending otherwise is how the drop happens. That's fair, and the answer is the Sunday. One miss is noise. Three in a row is information, and the information is almost always that the sentence is too big for the Tuesday it's meeting, not that you're the wrong sort of person. Chapter 22 is about what to do with three in a row. The short version is that you shrink the sentence. You don't retire the wish.

"I don't have time"

By the third week of January the honest account of the drop is usually that there wasn't time. The evenings filled up. Work came back. Something needed doing every night the run was meant to happen. And this is true, in the sense that the time the wish assumed doesn't exist in an ordinary week. That's not a failure of the week. It's a failure of the wish to look at the week before it was made.

Go back to Milne, Orbell and Sheeran's study from chapter 6. The plan that lifted exercise sharply was made by people who wrote down when and where in the coming week they'd do it. To write that sentence you have to look at the week, and looking at the week is where the time question gets answered before it's asked. If Tuesday evening has nothing in it that could reliably take fifteen minutes, then Tuesday evening isn't the day, and you find out on the Sunday before rather than on the Tuesday itself, standing in the hall with the form to sign.

The other half of the answer is size. "I don't have time" is nearly always "I don't have time for the version I imagined". The version imagined on the first of January was an hour, because the picture was an hour and January's evenings were empty. The least version from chapter 8 is fifteen minutes, or ten, and ten minutes exists on most Tuesdays, even bad ones. The question isn't whether there's time. It's whether the sentence has been written at a size the time can hold.

The honest objection is that some things really can't be done at ten minutes. You can't write a novel in ten-minute pieces, you might say, or learn a language in ten-minute pieces. I'd say you can, and a fair number of novels have been written on trains, but that's an opinion. What isn't an opinion is that you can't write a novel in zero-minute pieces, and zero is what the hour becomes on a Tuesday that can't hold an hour. Ten minutes on a Tuesday, an hour on Saturday when the week can hold one. That's a plan. An hour every day was a picture.

If time is the reason, then the time is the plan, and the plan is made on Sunday, looking at the actual week, and not on the first of January, looking at the year.

"I failed, so it's me"

The last belief is the one the rerun is built on, and it's the most damaging because it feels like humility. The wish failed, so the problem is you. You lack discipline. You're not a finisher. Other people can do this and you, for some reason of character, can't.

Polivy and Herman's description of the false hope cycle, from chapter 8, includes what people do with the failure. They interpret it in a way that lets them try again the same way. The interpretation "it's me" does exactly that. If the problem was a lack of willpower, then the answer is more willpower, and the way to get more willpower is to want it more, and wanting it more is the picture, and the picture is what chapter 5 showed sapping the effort. The verdict on yourself protects the wish from any change. It sends you back to the first of January with the same wish and the instruction to try harder, which is the one instruction that has failed every year so far.

Look at the evidence from this book instead. Norcross found that success wasn't predicted by how much people wanted to change but by whether they believed they could do the specific thing and had the skills. Milne found that motivation, raised on purpose, didn't change behaviour, and a plan did. Oettingen found that the people who enjoyed the picture most did least. Lally found that habits take weeks longer than a fortnight to settle and survive a missed day. None of these findings has a place in it for a type of person who can't. All of them have a place for a plan that wasn't made.

So the honest reading of the drop is not "it's me". It's "I set an outcome, enjoyed the picture, ran on holiday conditions for two weeks, met the first real Tuesday with no sentence written for it, missed once, read the miss as a verdict, and stopped". That's a long sentence and every clause of it is about the plan. Change the plan and the person who couldn't turns out to be a person who hadn't been told what to do at ten to eight.

This is the change in understanding the book most wants you to have. The rerun isn't proof that you can't. It's proof that the wish, set the same way each year, produces the same February. And a wish is the one thing in the whole cycle that's entirely in your hands to set differently.

What the rerun costs you

It's worth being plain about what the habit costs, because from the inside it feels cheap. A wish that fails is just a wish. Nothing was lost but the picture.

The first cost is years. If a wish has been on the list for five Januaries, that's five years of a thing you wanted not happening, and the not-happening had a price each year that has nothing to do with the January in which it was set. Five years of not running is five years less fit. Five years of not sorting the money is five years of the money as it was. The wish was free. The five years weren't.

The second cost is the story you tell about yourself, and chapter 15 was about that. Each rerun adds a line to it, and the line is always the same, and by the fourth or fifth year the story is settled enough that you set the wish already expecting the drop, which is not a good state in which to meet a Tuesday.

The third cost is quieter. It's what the drop does to the ordinary version of the thing. Someone who has failed at "run a half marathon" three years running often stops walking. Someone who has failed at "write the novel" stops writing anything. The wish set the least version out of reach, and when the wish went, it took the least version with it, and the least version was the part that would have been worth having. A person who walked every Tuesday for five years is fitter than one who trained for a half marathon three Januaries in a row. That's my arithmetic and not a finding, but I don't think the finding would surprise anyone.

The fourth cost is the people who heard the wish. You told them, in the good fortnight, and they asked in March, kindly, and you changed the subject. It's a small thing. It's just that the wish, having been said out loud, now has a small audience for its failure, and next year you'll say it more quietly or not at all, and a wish said to no one has one less reason to become a Tuesday.

None of these costs is large in a single year. All of them are paid again each January. That's what a rerun is.

What it does to the wish

There's one more thing the cycle does, and it's to the wish itself.

Each rerun makes the wish larger. Not on purpose. It's that the wish has to make up for the year in which it didn't happen, and a wish that has three failed years behind it needs to be big enough to justify a fourth attempt. So "walk more" becomes "get properly fit" becomes "run the half". "Write on Tuesdays" becomes "finish the novel by summer". The size that makes it feel worth trying again is the size that, chapter 8 argued, puts the floor out of reach. The wish grows and the Tuesday doesn't, and the gap between them is where the drop lives.

And at the same time the wish gets sore. It starts as something you're happy to say and ends as something you flinch from. The running shoes by the door in chapter 12 are a small example. The wish as a whole becomes the same thing, a place in your head you avoid, and you can't plan for a thing you avoid looking at. By the fifth year the wish is both the largest and the least examined thing on your list, and those two facts feed each other.

I'd put it this way, as my reading. The first time you set the wish it was a hope. By the fourth it's a debt. You owe it to yourself, you're behind on the payments, and January is the day the demand arrives. That's a bad thing to feel about a run.

The way out isn't to want it less. It's to take the wish off the list of things you owe and put it back among the things you'd like, and then, separately, to write one Tuesday sentence about it. The wish

can be as large as it likes once it isn't the plan. Half marathon, novel, fluent Spanish, all fine, as pictures to have on the wall. The plan is fifteen minutes on Tuesday. The wish and the plan are different objects, and the whole trouble came from using one as the other.

The three chapters that follow are the method. It's short, because the method isn't the hard part. The hard part was believing that the wish was one.

Turn the wish into a Tuesday

Pick one wish. Not the list. One. The people in Norcross's study who succeeded had a specific thing, and the whole argument of this book is that a Tuesday can hold one sentence, not five. If choosing between wishes is itself where you get stuck, there's an earlier book in this series about that, *Pick one*, and its advice holds here.

Now write the Tuesday sentence. It has four parts and it fits on one line. What you'll do, in the smallest form you'd still count. When, as a day and a time. Where. And what you'll do when the ordinary thing gets in the way. So not "get fit" but "on Tuesday and Saturday at ten to eight I'll go out of the front door and run for fifteen minutes, and if I get home after seven on Tuesday I'll walk for ten instead". Not "write the novel" but "on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at half past six I'll write for twenty minutes at the kitchen table before anyone else is up, and if I sleep through I'll do it at lunch on my phone". This is the form Milne's exercise group used and the form that Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran's 2006 review of 94 tests found to have a medium to large effect on whether people did what they intended. It works, the review's authors suggest, because it hands the decision to the situation. When ten to eight on Tuesday arrives, the decision has been made already, on a Sunday, by someone who wasn't tired.

The least version is the part people resist, so I'll say it again. The size in the sentence is the size that survives the worst ordinary Tuesday you can imagine. Not the best one. If the sentence is one you'd only do on a good day, the good fortnight will do it and

February won't. Fifteen minutes is a run. Two hundred words is writing. One page of the bank statement is sorting the money. You can always do more when a day is generous, and the Sunday five minutes will let you raise the size when three weeks of Tuesdays say it's safe.

And write down the wish too, somewhere else. Large, as large as you like. It's the picture and you're allowed the picture. It just isn't the sentence, and the sentence is the only thing that's going to be at the door on Tuesday.

If you're reading this on the first of January, good, there's a push behind you. If you're reading it on a Wednesday in June, better, because chapter 11 said the ordinary day is the honest place to start. Write the sentence today. Do the least version tomorrow.

The Sunday five minutes

The sentence is written once and looked at weekly, and the weekly look is what stops the sentence going the way of the wish.

On Sunday, at a time you'll keep, take five minutes and look at the week. Not the wish. The sentence. How many of the planned days happened? For each one that didn't, what was in the way? Then decide one thing about next week, and write the sentence again with that one change in it. That's the whole of it.

There are three findings behind this. Locke and Latham's summary in chapter 9 says feedback is one of the conditions under which specific goals work, and the wish gives none, because nothing on a Tuesday measures "get fit". The sentence gives feedback every week in a form a child could read, done or not done. Milne's participants planned for the coming week, not the coming year, and a week is the horizon over which you can see what's coming. And the fresh start effect, from chapters 3 and 11, gives you a free push on Monday, so a Sunday decision arrives at the start of the week with the calendar behind it.

What the Sunday look decides is size, day and time. If three weeks of Tuesdays went well, raise the size a little. Twenty minutes, not fifteen. If Tuesday failed twice and Thursday worked twice, the sentence moves to Thursday and the question is what Tuesday has in it that Thursday doesn't. If a whole week went, the sentence was too big for the week you actually had, and the first move is to shrink it, not to try harder at the same size. Trying harder is the picture's advice and chapter 5 explained where that leads.

What the Sunday look doesn't do is issue a verdict. It's five minutes about a line on a week, and it has nothing to say about what kind of person you are. If you notice a verdict forming, the earlier book in this series *You wouldn't say it to a friend* is about that, and its test applies. Would you say it to someone else who missed a Tuesday? Then don't say it to yourself.

Keep the five minutes short. It's a look, not a review of your life. The point is that the sentence gets adjusted before the next Tuesday, every week, for as many weeks as Lally's curve needs, which is more than you think and fewer than you fear.

The decision

Here's the rule, and then what to expect.

The rule. One wish at a time, written as a Tuesday sentence at its least version, looked at for five minutes every Sunday. The wish can be as large as you like. The sentence is what you'll do, when, where, and what you'll do instead when the day goes wrong. The size is the size that survives a bad ordinary day. The Sunday look changes the sentence, never the person.

Three when-then plans. These are the form the sentence takes, and they're the same form Gollwitzer and Sheeran's review found effective. When it's the first of January and I feel the clean page, then I'll enjoy it, and I'll write one sentence about next Tuesday before I write anything about the year. When I miss a planned day, then I'll do the least version on the next planned day, and I'll bring the miss to Sunday and not to bed. When three planned days in a row don't happen, then I'll shrink the sentence on Sunday and start again on Monday at the smaller size.

What to expect. This is my expectation and not a finding, because the rule hasn't been tested as a package. Expect the sentence to feel too small. It's meant to. Expect the good fortnight to tempt you to enlarge it, and don't, until three Sundays say so. Expect the third and fourth weeks to be where the ordinary Tuesdays start arriving, and expect the least version to hold on them where the wish didn't, because that's what it was sized for. Expect the thing to feel like effort for longer than a fortnight, since Lally's volunteers took anywhere from three weeks to eight months to reach the point

where it felt automatic. Expect misses. Expect that a miss followed by the least version on the next planned day is what the habit forming looks like, not what failing looks like.

And expect something you may not have had before, which is a March in which the thing is still happening. Not in the size of the picture. In the size of the sentence, which by March has probably grown once or twice on a Sunday, and which is, unlike the wish, actually there.

The rule has one job. It moves the decision from a day with a push behind it to a day with nothing behind it, and it makes the decision small enough for that day to carry. Everything else in this book was the reason for that move.

The weight goal, the drink goal, the money goal, the big life goal, and when it's more than a wish

Most Januaries hold a handful of the same wishes, and some of them need a word more than the rule.

The weight goal. This is the most common resolution in both studies in chapter 4, and it's the one where the wish does most damage, because a number on a scale is a picture and the Tuesday is a meal. Two earlier books in this series, *Eat when you're hungry* and *Breakfast isn't the problem*, take the diet cycle apart in full, and their argument is close to this one. The rule is the same. A Tuesday sentence about one meal or one walk, not a number for June. The NHS Better Health pages on losing weight are plain and free and say that eating habits, sleep, activity and how you feel all play a part, which is a list of Tuesdays, not a number.

The drink goal. "Drink less" is an avoidance goal, and Oscarsson found approach goals did better, so write the sentence as a thing you'll do, the alcohol-free days named, the drink you'll have instead named. The earlier book *The drink didn't do that* covers the habit itself. And if stopping or cutting down makes you shake, sweat or feel sick, that's a reason to see a GP before going further, because withdrawal from heavy drinking can be dangerous and needs medical advice. No sentence in this book replaces that.

The money goal. "Sort the money" is a wish. The sentence is one statement opened on one day, or one standing order set up on payday, and two earlier books in this series, *Open the envelope* and

Pay yourself on payday, are about those two Tuesdays. If the money is debt you can't pay, the charities named in those books give free advice, and the Tuesday sentence is a phone call.

The big life goal. Change career, move, leave, start the business. These aren't wishes in the way "get fit" is. They're decisions, and the trouble is usually not the Tuesday but the deciding. Pick one, from this series, is the book for that. Once the decision is made, though, it turns into Tuesdays like everything else, an application sent, a course booked, a conversation had, and the sentence works on those.

When it's more than a wish. If the wish has been "be happier" or "feel like myself again" for several Januaries, and you've felt low most of the day, most days, for two weeks or more, the NHS says to see a GP. That's not a resolution and it isn't a plan you can write for a Tuesday. It's a conversation, and it's the one thing on the list that should come before the sentence, not after it.

When the drop came

It's February, or it's May, and the sentence has stopped. Three planned days went and you haven't looked at it since, and the old feeling is back, that the thing is over and you're the sort of person it's over for.

The first thing to say is that this isn't the rerun. The rerun is a wish set the same way and dropped the same way. What's happened is a sentence that was sized for a week you don't have any more, and that's a different event with a different fix. Lally's data said a missed day doesn't undo a habit. Three missed days is not nothing, but it's three days, and the thing that ends a habit at three days is the reading of them, chapter 13 said, not the days.

So do the Sunday look now, whatever day it is. Look at the three days. What was in them? Nearly always it's one of three things. The week changed, a new job, a child ill, a house move, and the sentence was written for the old week. Or the size crept up on the good days and the sentence quietly became the wish again. Or the day and time were wrong from the start and the good fortnight hid it. Each of those is a sentence problem. None is a person problem. Shrink it, move it, or rewrite it for the week you've got.

Then do the least version tomorrow. Not Monday. Tomorrow. Chapter 11 said the ordinary day is the honest day to start, and it's also the honest day to restart. If tomorrow's a Monday, fine, there's a push behind it. If it's a Thursday, there's a Thursday.

The honest objection is that you've restarted before and this is starting to feel like the rerun with extra steps. The difference is that the rerun restarted the wish and this restarts the sentence, smaller. If the run was fifteen minutes and it stopped, the run is ten. If the writing was twenty minutes and it stopped, it's a paragraph. The thing that survives a restart is the least version, and if the least version keeps failing, it isn't the least yet.

And put the verdict down. Wohl's students who forgave themselves procrastinated less the next time. That's a small correlational study and I hold it loosely, but I'd hold the opposite idea much more loosely, that a hard verdict on yourself makes next Tuesday easier. Nothing in this book suggests it does, and five Januaries of trying it probably suggest it doesn't.

The wet Tuesday

It's a Tuesday in February and it's raining. You got home at half past six because the meeting ran over, there's nothing in for dinner, and a form needs signing. This is the day. It's the same day as the one in chapter 1.

The difference is that on Sunday you wrote a sentence for it. Ten to eight, out of the front door, fifteen minutes, and if you're home after seven, a ten-minute walk instead. You're home after seven. So it's the walk. You sign the form, you put something in the oven, and at ten to eight you put on the shoes that were an accusation last year and are just shoes now, and you go out into the rain for ten minutes, and you come back, and it wasn't much, and it happened.

Nothing about that evening had a push behind it. No clean page, no picture, no January. It was a plain wet day with a plan small enough for it, and the plan held because it was built for a day exactly like this one. That's the whole of the argument. The wish was never going to be there at ten to eight on a wet Tuesday. A sentence can be.

On Sunday you'll look at the week. Two runs and a walk. You'll notice that the walk was on the day with the late meeting, and you'll leave the sentence as it is, because it worked. In three weeks you might make it twenty minutes. By March it'll still be there, which the wish never was. The half marathon, or the novel, or the language, is still on the wall where you pinned it, as large as ever, and for the first time there's a line of Tuesdays running towards it.

One action, today. Take the biggest wish on your list, and write one sentence about the next ordinary day. What, when, where, and what instead. Then close the book and do the least version tomorrow.

Notes

These notes give the sources behind each chapter and say where the text goes beyond them. The book isn't medical advice. Where it mentions low mood, drinking or weight, it points to NHS pages and to a GP, and those pointers stand above anything else in it. The January in chapter 1, the running shoes, the form, the late meeting, the kitchen table and every person and week described are invented for illustration. No study is reported that wasn't read at least in summary, and where only a summary was read the notes say so. No person's forename is given unless the published record gives it.

Chapter 1. No sources. The exercise and the terms are the author's.

Chapter 2. No sources. The account of what the wish provides is the author's.

Chapter 3. Dai, Milkman and Riis, "The fresh start effect: temporal landmarks motivate aspirational behavior", *Management Science* 60, 2014, pages 2563 to 2582. Three archival field studies of Google searches, gym visits and goal commitments. Read in summary. The claim that the effect lives in starts and not in February is the author's reading of what was measured.

Chapter 4. Norcross, Mrykalo and Blagys, "Auld lang syne: success predictors, change processes, and self-reported outcomes of New Year's resolvers and nonresolvers", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, 2002, pages 397 to 405. 159 resolvers and 123 non-resolvers, telephone follow-up over six months, self-reported outcomes.

Oscarsson, Carlbring, Andersson and Rozental, "A large-scale experiment on New Year's resolutions: approach-oriented goals are more successful than avoidance-oriented goals", PLOS One 15, 2020. 1,066 participants randomised to three levels of support, one-year follow-up, self-reported, 58.9 percent success for approach goals against 47.1 percent for avoidance goals among responders. Both read in summary. The Swedish setting is from the authors' affiliations. The reading that the successful half were the half with something closer to a plan is the author's.

Chapter 5. Oettingen and Mayer, "The motivating function of thinking about the future: expectations versus fantasies", Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 83, 2002, pages 1198 to 1212. Four longitudinal studies, effort and performance measured weeks to two years later. Read in summary. The study is correlational and the causal reading is labelled as the authors' and the book's interpretation.

Chapter 6. Sheeran and Webb, "The intention-behavior gap", Social and Personality Psychology Compass 10, 2016, pages 503 to 518. Read in summary only, and no figures from it are given. Milne, Orbell and Sheeran, "Combining motivational and volitional interventions to promote exercise participation: protection motivation theory and implementation intentions", British Journal of Health Psychology 7, 2002, pages 163 to 184. 248 participants, three groups, two weeks. Read in summary. The train is the chapter's one analogy.

Chapter 7. No sources. The account of the good fortnight is the author's.

Chapter 8. Polivy and Herman, "If at first you don't succeed: false hopes of self-change", *American Psychologist* 57, 2002, pages 677 to 689. A review, drawing mostly on dieting. Read in summary. The application to resolutions in general is the author's.

Chapter 9. Locke and Latham, "Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: a 35-year odyssey", *American Psychologist* 57, 2002, pages 705 to 717. Read in summary. The distinction between a target for a known task and a wish is the author's reading, not the authors'. The remark about the side effects of over-prescribing goals refers to a 2009 paper by Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky and Bazerman, "Goals gone wild", of which only the title and authors were verified, so no finding from it is reported. The book on daily weighing is *The scale is a poor judge*, in this series.

Chapter 10. Lally, van Jaarsveld, Potts and Wardle, "How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world", *European Journal of Social Psychology* 40, 2010, pages 998 to 1009. 96 volunteers, 82 with usable data, 12 weeks, time to plateau 18 to 254 days. Read in summary.

Chapter 11. Dai, Milkman and Riis as above, whose landmarks included weeks and months. The claim about Januaries made of Mondays is the author's guess and is labelled as one.

Chapter 12. Dai, Milkman and Riis as above, for the searches. The rest is the author's reading.

Chapter 13. Lally and colleagues as above. Wohl, Pychyl and Bennett, "I forgive myself, now I can study: how self-forgiveness for procrastinating can reduce future procrastination", *Personality and Individual Differences* 48, 2010, pages 803 to 808, as verified for the earlier book *Start it badly*. 134 first-year students, correlational.

Chapter 14. Milne, Orbell and Sheeran as above. The claims about novels and trains are opinion and are labelled as such.

Chapter 15. Polivy and Herman, Norcross and colleagues, Milne and colleagues, Oettingen and Mayer, and Lally and colleagues, all as above. The long sentence is the author's.

Chapters 16 and 17. No sources. The arithmetic and the reading are the author's.

Chapter 18. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, "Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38, 2006, pages 69 to 119, as verified for earlier books in this series. 94 tests, medium to large effect. Milne and colleagues, and Norcross and colleagues, as above. The book on choosing is *Pick one*, in this series.

Chapter 19. Locke and Latham, Milne and colleagues, Dai and colleagues, and Lally and colleagues, as above. The book on self-criticism is *You wouldn't say it to a friend*, in this series.

Chapter 20. Gollwitzer and Sheeran, and Lally and colleagues, as above. The rule hasn't been tested as a package and what to expect is the author's expectation.

Chapter 21. Norcross and colleagues and Oscarsson and colleagues as above for the most common resolutions and for approach goals. The NHS Better Health "Lose weight" page, read on 26 September 2026. The NHS line about low mood for two weeks or more is as verified for earlier books in this series. The line about alcohol withdrawal follows the guidance in the earlier book The drink didn't do that and isn't a substitute for it. The other books named are Eat when you're hungry, Breakfast isn't the problem, Open the envelope, Pay yourself on payday and Pick one.

Chapter 22. Lally and colleagues, and Wohl and colleagues, as above.

Chapter 23. No sources.

Looked up and not used. Kappes and Oettingen, "Positive fantasies about idealized futures sap energy", Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 47, 2011, title and authors verified but no abstract available from any free source, so it isn't cited. Buehler, Griffin and Ross, "Exploring the planning fallacy", 1994, the same. Fishbach and Dhar, "Goals as excuses or guides", 2005, the same. Ordóñez and colleagues 2009, title only, as noted under chapter 9.