Yes it’s real: there actually is research into new year’s resolutions. It began in 2007 when Professor Richard Wiseman – ‘the king of weird psychology studies’ – from the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom, made a new year’s resolution to study new year’s resolutions by tracking 3,000 people attempting to stick to their new year’s resolutions.

At the start of the study, Wiseman found that 52 per cent of participants were confident of success, but a year later only 12 per cent had actually achieved their goal.

The obvious questions: why do 88 per cent of us fail, and what can be done to help us succeed?

Wiseman thinks he has the answers.

Participants in his study were randomly placed into one of several groups and asked to follow different advice: set goals; focus on rewards; publicise your resolution; or don’t give up. He found large differences between men and women using those approaches.

Men were significantly more likely to succeed when they set goals or focused on the rewards associated with achieving their goal. Women were more successful when they told friends and family about their resolution, or received encouragement not to give up.

According to Wiseman, these different approaches often had surprisingly large effects. A promising 22 per cent of men achieved their resolution when they engaged in goal setting, while almost 10 per cent of women were successful when encouraged to persist in the face of setbacks.

That means, of course, that 78 per cent of men made a new year’s resolution without setting a goal, which sounds like a pretty neat trick. What was their new year’s resolution – this year I’m going to, um, generally resolve in a new-yearish sort of way?

You’d have to guess that the actual goals set by men were what made a difference. Absolutely no men who resolved to wash the dishes, walk on water or perform other miracles achieved their goal, while an amazing 99.933 per cent who resolved to read more car magazines did achieve their goal. A paltry 0.066 per cent of men who resolved to enlist female co-workers to teach them how to multi-task in the workplace achieved their resolution. That 0.066 per cent, the by way, also accounts for the woman who, encouraged to persist in the face of setbacks, successfully taught her male co-worker to multi-task in the workplace.

The good news is that an astonishing 100 per cent of men who resolved to write things down had actually achieved their goal, after one week, although final percentages a year later are not known since most of the guys didn’t complete the self-report survey. They were busy being, um, generally resolved in a new-yearish sort of way.

Analysis shows that fewer than 10 per cent of women were successful when encouraged to persist in the face of setbacks because more than 90 per cent of them had asked for encouragement to persist from, well, actually, men.

Go back to the finding that only 12 per cent of us actually achieve our goal and the obvious question, of course, isn’t why 88 per cent of us fail; it’s why 12 per cent of us can remember what our new year’s resolution was a year ago.

Keeping it simple, my new year’s resolution this year is this: write down my new year’s resolution. There. I just joined the 12 per cent who actually achieved their goal. ️

This month’s Last Word was written by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher and the 2008 highly commended winner in the Australian Council of Deans of Education Excellence in Education Journalism Awards in the ‘Print, Radio, Television or Online: Best commentary, opinion or critique’ category for the Last Word.

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