

## Reaching your goal one step at a time

■ BY RACHEL KELLY

**I**T'S THAT time of year. Resolutions, or our failure to keep them, loom large. Is it possible to lose weight, eat more oily fish, quit smoking, spend more time with our families, take up yoga, adopt mindfulness, go to church every Sunday *and* keep up that Pilates class – or achieve even one of these classic New Year resolutions?

Sadly, research suggests that many of us abandon our resolve and settle back into our old patterns. A 1988 American study from the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania found that only 19 per cent of those who make resolutions actually fulfil them within two years, and more recent studies find a similar pattern.

How then do we stick to our resolutions? There are three vital ingredients to making meaningful change. First, psychologists suggest we focus on “subordinate” rather than “superordinate” goals: the first refers to specific and concrete goals, while the second type of goals are more abstract or vague. Decide that your aim is lose ten pounds over the next six months (a subordinate goal), instead of saying to yourself “I resolve to get in shape” (a superordinate goal).

Dr Jamie Arkell is a consultant psychiatrist at the Charter Nightingale Hospital. When working with patients on making resolutions and forming new, healthier habits, he says he has learned to be

really specific with his patients in this way. “I ask them, when in the day will you do it? Before or after you brush your teeth or on a bench between the underground and your office?”

The second trick is to Make. One. Change. By adopting just one clear resolution, we are more likely to succeed than if we spread ourselves too thin (pun intended) on multiple goals. Focussing on one goal at a time starts a virtuous circle: I’ve kept to one resolution, so I can keep to another.

The third key is to approach



your goals in a compassionate and kindly way, especially when you fall off the wagon, which we all will from time to time.

Perhaps you’ve temporarily lost your yen for Zen. Maybe you’ve become frustrated with meditation or gobbled a packet of biscuits (McVitie’s Dark Chocolate Digestives are my favourite).

When I find myself in that situation, I try not to berate myself. Sometimes I try and imagine talking to myself as if I were a child. I would talk to a child in a loving and forgiving way. Being kind and self-compassionate is just as important as picking a subordinate goal and focussing on just one thing.

Wishing you all the happiest of New Years and love and luck in keeping your resolutions.

**Rachel Kelly** is a mental-health advocate and adviser to Compassion Matters, a charity which supports schools, teachers and young people to explore compassion.