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New Year, Same Old Me

Liam Lawless , Staff Reporter

Commitments to new gym memberships, diet plans, ambitious school-focused goals and hopes to improve interpersonal relationships are planned carefully near the end of each December. Like clockwork, most of these promises are broken before January ends. Two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, people around the world are attempting to reignite their pursuit of self-improvement as they map out their New Year's resolutions.

Dr. Kira Mauseth, a senior instructor in psychology at Seattle University and the co-lead for Washington State's Behavioral Health Strike Team, is familiar with the immense impact COVID-19 has had on everyone. Her work regarding pandemic fatigue has illuminated several of the ways that resolution-setters have faced additional challenges.

"Pandemic fatigue is fundamental exhaustion associated with experiencing three large-scale impacts from disasters in the last 24 months," Mauseth said. "Having an understanding of how your brain and body respond, at two years in, to multiple impacts from a large-scale disaster really helps set a foundation and baseline for why we are acting the way we are, and why it's tough."

The delta and omicron variant surges that started in late 2021 and the second and third large-scale events that Dr. Mauseth discussed compounded the tension created by the initial stay-at-home order from March 2020. Each wave brought more anxiety, distress and concern to the general public, piling onto already heightened stress levels. Even those who do not contract the virus feel detriment to their emotional baseline worsen with each wave endured.

Desperate to make a change, some people took the start of 2022 as a chance to take their livelihood into their own hands—or attempted to, at the very least. Incomplete strategies, made more strenuous by living through a pandemic, are the longstanding culprit of failed New Year's resolutions.

"Resolutions are an idea, but if they're not the right kind, size, type, or you don't set them up in a particular way, they are pretty much consistent with practicing the experience of failure, which is definitely not something people need right now," Mauseth said. "They can be helpful, [but] they're often not."

Often, the goals someone sets for themselves for the next year are focused on the big picture and the sweeping changes they would like to see in their life. Success demands a clear plan and consistent follow-through in the little details along the way. Otherwise, it becomes easy to get lost in—and inevitably disappointed by—the daydreams of one's own success.



Jordie Simpson

A reflection forward to 2022.

“I think setting goals that are very appealing but not necessarily achievable is part of what we do,” Mauseth said. “It’s not always a bad thing. It sets your sights high and lets you know the direction you want to go, but in order to actually make it there, you have to take small steps and that’s the piece that’s usually missing with a New Year’s resolution.”

Setting an achievable resolution requires more introspection than meets the eye, and can be practiced much more consistently than an annual reflection. Sharon Suh, a professor in Seattle U’s Theology and Religious Studies department, refrains from making New Year’s resolutions for this reason.

“I think it’s great to have intentions, and new intentions can start every day. Most New Year’s resolutions really are about trying to make yourself a better person, but I think mindfulness helps us see that we’re already pretty good as we are,” Suh said.

Suh reshapes the notion of a New Year’s resolution into a daily routine of mindfulness that includes meditation and external accountability from other mindful individuals. From her perspective, careful attention to one’s own inner thoughts, emotions and experiences cultivates a healthier framework for self-improvement.

“We’re perpetually on this endless cycle of wanting to perfect ourselves, but that perfection is usually something that is dictated by some force outside of ourselves,” Suh said. “Mindfulness is really about looking at not only what’s happening in the present moment, but also ‘what are the things that lead to this in the first place?’ and taking in a bird’s-eye view of [your own] kindness and compassion.”

Now in Seattle U’s third academic year of having online classes, students like Fourth-year Nursing major Madison Weng have taken it upon themselves to make the most out of what could be a dire twelve months ahead.

“You can’t help others if you can’t help yourself,” Weng said. “The year might suck, but you’re in control of yourself.”

Weng is six months away from graduating and becoming a nurse during the pandemic. She understands that taking care of herself is crucial to sustaining her career, especially during the chaos of a global disaster.

“I know what the little wins in my life will be,” Weng said. “It’s okay if your New Year’s resolution is something small because that can be really big for you.”

With no guarantee for what 2022 has in store, remaining grounded appears to be a common theme among resolutions. Having her own practice of annual self-reflection that predates the pandemic, Fourth-year Finance and Business Analytics student Bethany Lock has made “intentionality” her New Year’s theme for the second year in a row.

“At the end of each year, I reflect on the highs and lows and how I feel moving forward,” Locke said. “I set goals for myself to see more of my full potential.”

Another student wanting reprieve from the pandemonium, Fourth-year Nursing major Jolie Russell, wishes to remain centered through a potentially hectic winter quarter. Russell has a family tradition of making earnest resolutions every year. Over the years, Russell has developed a keen sense of what constitutes a reasonable goal for herself.

“What’s a small thing that might make my day-to-day life a little bit easier, a little bit better? That’s what I try to keep in mind,” Russell said.

As several students make the effort to pursue personal perfection, it is important to remember the misconceptions of self-improvement. Setting the right goals, and working toward them consistently and with informed accountability can bring anyone to the brink of success, which can alleviate pandemic-induced distress along the way.

“The pandemic is a wonderful opportunity to practice mindfulness and meditation because it can help the levels of stress and anxiety that we are all feeling,” Suh said.

Becoming the best version of yourself is not an overnight process. There is no quick and easy hack to grow or develop, no single answer for all the questions introspection raises, nor a one-size-fits-all solution to diet and exercise qualms. Real change, especially of oneself, comes one step at a time.