Why do so many of the resolutions we make fail? There are many reasons, says author Caroline Arnold, a Wall Street tech leader. These reasons range from making the wrong resolutions, to being too impatient, to underestimating our emotional resistance to change.

A major reason big resolutions fail is that they don’t take into account our entrenched habits and behaviors. Arnold calls these attitudes and behaviors our “autopilot.” Our autopilot directs our daily decision making and activity. It’s an efficient way to operate, since it saves our brain power for learning, generating ideas and solving problems but it has its drawbacks. When we want to make a change – to lose weight, or to be more organized, for example – we have to fight against our autopilot, and the effort can be exhausting. Most of us don’t have the willpower that’s required to hold out against our autopilot, day in and day out, until a new behavior is established. That’s why most big resolutions don’t work.

A microresolution, on the other hand, requires a lot less willpower. It’s aimed at changing a specific autopilot behavior. “Big” resolutions take a top-down approach, starting from a self-improvement goal and expecting our attitudes and behavior to re-shape themselves to fulfill it. Conversely, a microresolution starts at the bottom, zeroing in on changing a specific behavior and putting that change on autopilot.

There’s also a spillover effect from successfully achieving a microresolution. Once you’ve managed to turn a specific microresolution into a habit, it’s easier to alter similar, related behaviors. When you’ve altered your behavior so that you’re now always on time for meetings with your boss, it’s not such a fight with your autopilot to make sure you’re on time for other meetings too.

*Small Move, Big Change* is structured into two parts: The Seven Rules of Microresolutions; and Microresolutions in Action. The first section spells out the hows and whys of making microresolutions. The second part focuses on microresolutions relating to specific areas of our lives: work, sleep, fitness, diet and nutrition, clutter, relationships, spending, punctuality and organization. Arnold offers examples and suggestions on how to successfully achieve microresolutions in these areas.
In this summary, we’ll go over the rules that make microresolutions succeed, and then look specifically at how to apply the microresolution approach to make positive changes in the areas of fitness, relationships and organization.

**How To Make A Microresolution**

When we think about how we want to improve our lives, statements like “I’d like to be thinner” or “I wish I was more organized” often run through our minds. But the state of being thin, or neat, or more organized, is the result of multiple behaviors, not just one or two.

To start, break your goal down into specific behaviors. List all of the behaviors that contribute to the desired state, or goal. For example, if your goal is to be neat, list all of the ways in which you’re currently messy. Maybe you don’t make your bed every day, or you wash dishes infrequently, or perhaps you leave clean clothes in the dryer all week – or maybe all of these, plus others.

Once you’ve listed all the behaviors that contribute to the desired state or goal, choose one or two changes to focus on. Instead of leaving your cast-off clothes on a chair, commit to hanging them up every evening.

Or give yourself a deadline to take those clothes out of the dryer – decide that they can only be in the dryer for 24 hours once they’re dry.

Often, it’s our entrenched habits that hold us back from making changes. The key here is changing your mindset. Your mindset, as it relates to any self-improvement goal, is made up of your values, preferences and attitudes.

So how do we change our mindset? Through messaging. If you repeatedly give yourself a microresolution message, in time it will change your thinking – and your behavior. When you get changed after work, and are just about to throw your clothes on a chair, you could say to yourself: “It’s just as easy to hang them up now.” This disrupts your autopilot, and if you keep repeating it, over time the new behavior – hanging the clothes up right away – will become automatic.

The key is repetition. And you have to remember to give yourself the microresolution message at the relevant time.

Big resolutions almost always fail, but microresolutions are surprisingly successful. Crash diets are notorious for failing, but making a single, specific change in your eating habits can cause you to lose weight, and keep it off permanently.

Arnold describes this as “working the margin.” The smallest changes can lead to the biggest results. A change in your spending habits can earn you a lot more savings; a change in your attitude at work can open up new opportunities. The reverse is also true: small changes in your behavior can damage a relationship; could cause you to lose money; or if you start treating yourself to a cookie or two every afternoon, would likely result in weight gain.
So when it comes to successfully making a change, the margins are where the magic happens.

**Rule #1: A Microresolution Is Easy**

A microresolution has to be so reasonable that you know you can stick to it. When we make big resolutions, like resolving to give up desserts, or to eat healthier, we’re likely to fail. But it’s not because we lack discipline, or because we’re just lazy. It turns out that constantly re-negotiating our resolutions is a form of decision making. (“I know I said I’d cut out desserts, but I skipped lunch, so I’ll eat a muffin today”; “I was going to go for a run, but it’s starting to look like rain, so I’ll do it tomorrow.”) And it draws on the same mental power we use for self-control. As we make more and more decisions about keeping or not keeping our resolution, our resolve fades away and then disappears entirely.

The more unrealistic a resolution is, the more decisions you’ll have to make relating to it, and the more you’ll tax your limited resources of self-control. (“It’s still raining, so I’ll skip the run again today, but I’ll run three times as far tomorrow”; “I don’t think a croissant is a dessert anyway, so I guess I’ll eat it.”)

The idea with microresolutions is to incorporate behaviors that can run on autopilot, and don’t involve decision making at all. So instead of deciding to walk to work instead of driving, start by committing to walk to work one day each week. If you feel like walking more, by all means do it – the microresolution doesn’t limit you, but simply spells out what you’ve committed to do. Because the microresolution is reasonable, you’re likely to keep it, which will give you a jolt of success and break the cycle of making and then failing at resolutions.

**Rule #2: A Microresolution Is An Explicit And Measurable Action**

Microresolutions describe an action, rather than a desired state of being. Spell out the action of your microresolution as precisely as possible, including how, what, why and when. Make it as easy as possible to meet your objective.

Let’s look at ways to reduce calories. One approach would be to decide to reduce your daily intake by 100 calories. This sounds easy and measurable, but it actually requires a lot of thinking about what you’re eating, how many calories each type of food contains, how hungry you are, and the current state of your self-control. Instead, resolve to enjoy your 3 p.m. cup of tea without your usual cookie. This is very easy to measure (did you eat the cookie or not?), very easy to implement (you don’t decide each day, the decision not to eat the cookie has been made), and easily becomes part of your autopilot.

Our habits are triggered by specific cues. At 3 p.m. each day, if your habit is to prepare a cup of tea – that’s the cue for the cookie. It might be that the behavior was
initially caused by a need (hunger), but with repetition, it went on autopilot.

Cues can also be created to trigger a new action, or behavior. Arnold describes how she uses a priority list to help her stay focused on her most important projects at work. The problem was when she'd get sidetracked by day-to-day meetings and discussions, she'd forget to keep the list – and those projects – top-of-mind. So she connected her resolution to review her priority list to a frequent action – checking e-mail at her desk – so she'd be sure to review her priority list several times throughout the day. This also had the benefit of emphasizing her strategic priorities right before facing a slew of mostly tactical requests.

Rule #3: A Microresolution Pays Off Up Front
Microresolutions deliver tangible benefits – including gratification – from the first time you achieve them. Those big, vague resolutions, on the other hand, like “I want to lose weight” or “I want to be more neat” tend to bring us down. Each day that we don’t act to achieve them, we feel a sense of failure, and eventually that feeling builds up and we give up on them completely.

Instead of thinking “I want to be more neat,” resolve to make your bed each morning. Presto! Your bedroom looks neater instantly. Instead of a vague yearning to impress your boss with your ambition and capability, make a microresolution to ask for feedback at the close of your weekly one-on-one meeting. From the first time that you ask, you’re initiating a new kind of dialogue that establishes you as a person committed to improve.

Rule #4: A Microresolution Is Personal
Those old-style resolutions (to lose weight, get along better with your partner, be more active) are one-size-fits-all. Microresolutions are customized to you. Choosing a microresolution requires a deep, introspective look at your own habits, to identify the one change that will deliver the biggest impact.

Being more active means something different for everyone. What does it mean to you? Assess your current level of activity. Take a look at your daily routine. Find that one small step that fits with your personality and perspective, and take action.

Rule #5: A Microresolution Resonates
The way you frame your microresolution is the difference between “Don’t snack between meals” and “I enjoy meals more when I’m hungry.” The first is a negative admonishment, and the second is a positive reminder of your goals and the enjoyment of a good meal.

It’s important to frame your microresolution so that it resonates with you. From the example earlier about asking for feedback from your boss, let’s say your boss was happy to provide feedback. The problem now is that you find it hard to take. You might resolve to not be defensive when receiving feedback. But you could frame a
microresolution relating to your response more positively. Why not resolve to listen, acknowledge and consider all feedback instead?

Also consider zero-tolerance framing. This is a great way to frame resolutions for those areas where a small step can result in a disproportionately negative outcome. Resolve to have zero tolerance for eating bread at restaurants. Or resolve to have zero tolerance for internet surfing after 10 pm.

Rule #6: A Microresolution Fires on Cue

To succeed, your microresolution action needs to be closely linked to the right cue. You don’t need to create the cue – it exists already, you just need to identify it. Many cues are tied to the clock, or calendar. If you’ve resolved to walk to work every Wednesday, when that day rolls around, you’ll know just what to do.

For behaviors that happen in a certain context, you can “piggyback” your cue on a habit that’s already established. This is what Arnold is doing when she uses the cue of sitting down to check e-mail, she reminds herself to review her priority list.

This doesn’t work to disrupt an entrenched behavior, however. You might discover multiple triggers, but you’ll need to choose just one to act as your cue. If you want to snack less, list all the cues that trigger this wish. Cues could be food served at meetings, free samples at the supermarket, or exhaustion. Focus on one specific cue at a time.

Sometimes it’s helpful to drill down to discover the real root of a cue. Arnold used to eat fast, and serve herself second helpings. It turned out that the cue wasn’t hunger, but the empty plate. Leaving a mouthful on the plate interrupted the cue to take a second helping.

When interacting with people, cues can be more challenging. They can be more subtle, and fleeting – before you know it, you’ve reacted with anger or defensiveness. But once you start thinking about cues, you’ll be more aware of them and better able to act appropriately.

Rule #7: Make Microresolutions Just Two At A Time

Don’t try to change too much too fast. It’s hard work to turn an action into a habit – to ensure that it becomes “neurologically embedded.” In four weeks, your microresolution will begin to feel less awkward. In six to eight weeks it will start to feel natural. Don’t rush it – once your microresolution is in place, it’ll last forever.

Microresolutions succeed because they’re so narrowly defined. If you try to take on too many, you won’t feel as accountable and you’re likely to “let yourself off the hook.” You can add a new microresolution once the first one is entrenched.

If you work on one or two microresolutions at a time, giving each four to eight weeks to take hold, you could make up to 20 changes in your behavior in a year. There’s
nothing micro about that rate of change.

Microresolutions In Action

Fitness
Is there anyone who hasn’t resolved, at some point in life, to spend more time at the gym? We all know that sitting at a desk all day is unhealthy. But the good news is that even small amounts of activity can make us healthier. Just as in other areas, the fitness changes that we make at the margins can have a significant impact. One of the mistakes we make is to think of fitness as something we need to book time to do, like visiting the gym after work, or getting up early to run. But microresolutions that we fit into our regular schedules can provide substantial benefits and help shift our mindset towards being more active.

Why not make a resolution to stand during your bus ride to work, one or two days per week? Or jump up and down whenever a particular commercial comes on while you’re watching TV? These are good add-ons even if you are already exercising regularly. “The point is that any increase in physical activity has a positive fitness impact,” says Arnold.

Arnold shares the example of Marissa. She works in a building with offices spread over multiple floors. She made a microresolution to take the stairs to all meetings. At first, she had to stop and rest when climbing up the 10 flights from the cafeteria, but after a while she built more stamina and lost four pounds.

The key is to make a resolution that’s realistic. For some reason, the area of fitness is one where we often over-pledge, probably in response to feeling out of shape or lazy. But, as we know, those ambitious pledges (to visit the gym every day, to lose 40 pounds) most often fail. But the smaller, realistic resolutions are the ones we can actually keep, and that bear results. Make only the resolutions you know you can keep, and commit to them fully until you succeed.

Relationships
When it comes to relationships, it’s important to remember that you can’t change the other person, but you can change yourself. And a change you make to your behavior within a relationship will affect the other person. Preventing a negative relationship dynamic from being triggered – by not saying something, or by not responding in the usual way, or by doing something differently – can improve a relationship, both at home and at the office.

Arnold shares the example of Christine. Christine’s new boss tended to interrupt her during their weekly one-on-one meetings, even finishing her sentences for her. If his interpretation of what he thought she was going to say was wrong, he’d be offended by her correction. Meetings were tense, and not very productive. Rather than call him out on his behavior, Christine decided to start submitting a written summary before each meeting, outlining all the key points she wanted to make. Her boss loved
the new approach, and from then on the meetings went very smoothly.

Perhaps you have a colleague whose frequently-shared opinions raise your hackles. Instead of being drawn into the discussion, resolve to thank her for her feedback, and leave it at that.

We can also use microresolutions to strengthen the relationships that are most important to us. Paying attention is an easy one to change. Resolve to put your phone away during dinner with the family, or to really listen to your spouse when they talk about their workday, rather than giving them a fraction of your attention.

You can bring about significant, positive changes in your relationships by focusing on your own behavior. Simple changes that you make at the margins can have surprisingly impactful results.

**Organization**

To succeed, personally and professionally, you need to be organized. It’s what ensures that you’re on time, that you’re prepared, that you can prioritize and that you can stay on top of urgent projects and demands. Whether you’re naturally organized, or have to rely on organizational systems to support you, the benefits that you derive are the same.

The best organizational systems run on autopilot, meaning you have to first build the habits to support them. If you’re not that organized to start, begin with a simple system, and add on to it as you become more organized. If you begin with an overly-complex system, you’re likely to abandon it when it starts to overwhelm you.

The microresolution approach is ideal for becoming more organized. This is an area where it’s very easy to choose a single habit where making a change will make you more efficient, and save time.

Once again Arnold shares some examples. Cindy, a mid-level manager, found her meeting-filled days never left enough time to catch up on e-mails and calls. She made a microresolution to shorten the meetings that she organized, reducing all one hour meetings to 50 minutes, and all half-hour meetings to 25 minutes, leaving her with enough time to stay on track.

Derek often felt overwhelmed by a long list of action items and to-dos. He decided to maintain separate lists, one for his top three priorities for each day, and another list to capture all of the other items. He updated his lists at the end of each day, so that he was able to start each day with a fresh focus on his top three priorities.

You can also make **nano resolutions** to tackle those small jobs that keep getting put on the back burner. Keep a list of jobs that take 10 minutes or less to complete, and when you need a break, choose one of your nano jobs and complete it.
Concluding Thoughts

Take on one or at most two microresolutions at a time. It’s much better to make sure you can succeed at one than it is to take on a half dozen and risk failure.

Remember, if you work on one, or even two microresolutions and you give each one a month or two month to take hold, you could make up to 20 changes in a year.

And that’s how small moves make big changes!