

# 2 Words to Help You Stick to Your Goals



Changing your behavior—especially when doing something different basically means saying no to something you normally do—is really hard.

Most people trying to change their diet and exercise routine slowly chip away at their own resolve until they wind up doing something they didn't want to do...because they eventually couldn't say no to themselves.

That's one of the toughest parts of following a process, or creating a new habit, or simply trying something new and difficult: saying "no" to yourself. You want to take a day off and you can't say no to yourself.

You want to have dessert and you can't say no to yourself. You want to run farther but you feel tired and you give in and don't say no to yourself.

And you end up doing what you didn't plan to do—or not doing what you planned to do. So what is the best way to say no to yourself? It's easy: Stop saying "can't" and start saying "don't."

It works. Science says so. Researchers conducted a study: One group was given a simple temptation and told to say, in the face of that temptation, "I can't do (that)." The other group was told to say, "I don't do (that)."

What happened?

- Participants told to say "I can't" gave in to the temptation 61 percent of the time.
- Participants told to say "I don't" gave in to the temptation 36 percent of the time. Pretty cool, right? It gets better.

The same researchers conducted a further experiment: Participants were told to set a personal long-term health and wellness goal. When their initial motivation flagged—as initial motivation inevitably does—one group was told to say, "I can't miss my workout." Another group was told to say, "I don't miss my workouts." (The control group was not given a temptation-avoidance strategy.)

Ten days later the researchers found:

- Three out of ten control group members stuck to their goal.
- One out of ten "I can't" group members stuck to their goal.
- Eight out of ten "I don't" group members stuck to their goal. Not only was "I can't" less effective than "I don't"; "I can't" was less effective than using no strategy at all.

Why? According to the researchers, "The refusal frame 'I don't' is more persuasive than the refusal frame 'I can't' because the former connotes conviction to a higher degree...Perceived conviction mediates the influence of refusal frame on persuasiveness."\*

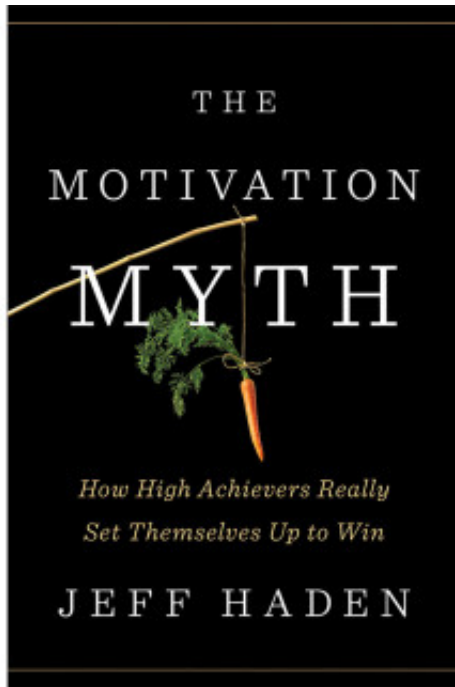
Or in language the rest of us understand, when we say "I can't," we give ourselves a way out. "I could, sure, but this time I'm choosing not to. You know, because I can't. Wait. Hmm. I probably shouldn't, but you know, maybe just this one time . . ." Which of the following sound more powerful and affirmational?

- "I can't skip my workout today" or "I don't miss workouts"?
- "I can't give you a discount" or "We don't discount our products"?
- "I can't make time for that, so sorry" or "I don't have a single open slot in my calendar"? "I can't" sounds tissue-paper thin because it's a decision based on external reasons or causes. "I don't" sounds like a brick wall because it comes from deep inside you. It's part of your identity. It's who you are.

The power of "I don't" extends both to your mind-set and the impression you make on others.

\* Vanessa M. Patrick and Henrik Hagtvedt, ["I Don't versus 'I Can't': When](#)

[Empowered Refusal Motivates Goal-Directed Behavior,"](#) Journal of Consumer Research, 39, no. 2 (August 2012): 371–381.



*This is an excerpt from [The Motivation Myth](#) by Jeff Haden. Jeff Haden is [Inc.com](#)'s most popular columnist and one of LinkedIn's most widely-followed Influencers. His work has also appeared on Time, The Huffington Post, Fast Company, Business Insider, Entrepreneur, Yahoo! Small Business, MSNBC, and CNBC.*