



WAYS TO KEEP A PROMISE

Improving our ability to keep promises is a skill that can be learned. Experiment with the following strategies for aligning words and behaviors.

Make promises challenging and realistic

Promising is a daring adventure. Testing our skills and determination by making a promise can be enlivening. If the promise involves no risk, then it's not much of a promise.

We can monitor our promises by avoiding two extremes—laziness and outrageousness. Realistic promises are those we have a reasonable chance to accomplish, even as we stretch ourselves to meet them. If our promises are too audacious (“I’ll become a world-class athlete in six months”), we set ourselves up for failure. If they are too easy (“I promise to *try* to get up five minutes earlier tomorrow morning”), we insult ourselves.

Effective promises move us to meet our potentials. At the same time, they represent results we can actually achieve.

Examine intentions

When we break a promise, we can examine our intentions. We might want to keep the promise (“Going back to school would be a good idea”), even while another part of us resists it (“Taking classes will strain my schedule and my budget”).

When we genuinely and completely choose to do something, internal resistance often disappears. All aspects of ourselves—thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—stand ready to make good on the promise.

Include conditions of satisfaction

One way to increase the power of a promise is to clearly specify the conditions of satisfaction. When you meet these conditions, you and others know that you’ve fully kept your promise.

To prevent confusion, specify observable conditions. Compare the following two promises:

- “I promise to work harder.”
- “I promise to contact at least three more potential clients each day and to keep a log of my contacts.”

The first promise contains no conditions of satisfaction. The second specifies exactly what you’ll do to keep the promise—observable behaviors that anyone could verify.

The first promise can easily lead to a wide variety of interpretations, questions, confusions, and disagreements. The second promise is clear. In making such a promise, you’re far more likely to recognize and produce an effective outcome.

Prevent self-sabotage

When making promises, we can anticipate possible self-sabotage. The idea is to look for ways that we might consciously or unconsciously undermine our intentions.

For example, I might promise to start keeping a personal journal on my laptop computer and to make daily entries in that journal at home, after work. I can look for a personal behavior that might sabotage that promise, such as my habit of leaving my laptop computer at work.

Be gentle with yourself

Everyone breaks promises. The only way to be absolutely certain we keep promises is not to make any—or to just make those we're certain we can keep. Either way leads to playing it safe.

We can choose to perceive broken promises as feedback, not failure. Until we stretch ourselves to the point of occasionally breaking a promise, we're probably missing our full potential.

Be gentle with others

At some point in our lives, nearly all of us will be on the receiving end of a broken promise. Examples are many: People fail to show up at key events. They leave us in the lurch when we count on their presence. They persist in an old habit, even after promising to quit it. They even leave us for good after promising to stay a lifetime.

Faced with such facts, we can keep score and stockpile resentments. That's sure to give us a lot of emotional baggage to drag around. Another option is to love and accept people who break their agreements.

Caution: Forgiving broken promises does not mean setting ourselves up to repeatedly suffer broken promises. If there are people in our lives who consistently break promises, we can forgive them, release resentment, and still protect ourselves from repeated exposures to their lack of responsibility.

Examine consequences

Promises come with different stakes involved. Promising to go to a movie tonight is different from promising to pay taxes on time. The stakes become higher when we sign legal documents or when we declare marriage vows.

Knowing the consequences of breaking a promise can help us choose whether or not to *make* the promise in the first place.

Ask other people to hold you accountable

Many of us are more likely to keep promises made to other people than promises we make only to ourselves. This points to a powerful strategy. We can ask people we trust to accept our promises and hold us accountable.

For example, you could ask key people in your life to accept your promise to exercise three times this week. These people can check on you periodically, and you can report to them when your promise is fulfilled.



Keep promises visible

There's probably some truth to the old saying "Out of sight, out of mind." Think of unusual ways to display your promises, and have fun with this strategy.

Some possibilities include:

- Write promises on 3x5 cards and put them on your desk.
- Tape the cards to a mirror in your home.
- Put notes on the dashboard of your car.
- Write promises in calligraphy on fancy paper and frame them.
- Create bookmarks that display your promises.
- List your promises in a letter to yourself and mail it. Or ask a friend to mail the letter back to you in two weeks (or two months or two years).

Design a detailed action plan

To reach a goal or fulfill a promise, break it down into smaller steps. Often you can divide a large goal into small actions to complete in one hour or less. List these actions on separate 3x5 cards and sort the cards by timeline or priority.



Chart your behavior

Charting your behavior can be one piece of a detailed action plan. If you promise to lose 25 pounds in the next 6 months, for example, then graph the number of pounds you lose each week. If you want to save up for next year's vacation, set aside some money each month and note the amount in your calendar. Creating ways to make our progress visible can help us generate enthusiasm, manage our efforts, and experience success.

Create a ceremony to make the promise

If the promise you are about to make is significant, you can honor it with a ceremony. Invite friends and relatives to a formal event during which you declare your promise.

We already use ceremonies to celebrate and give more significance to a wide variety of promises—weddings, confirmations, bar mitzvahs, and more. When rituals, ceremonies, and official public declarations accompany our promises, we are more likely to keep them.

Report breakdowns early

If you become aware of potential barriers to keeping a promise, report them early. This gives everyone time to adjust and to create strategies for helping you keep the promise.

Early reports also minimize the chances of unwelcome surprises: “What do you mean, you’ll need another two weeks for that report?” “I thought you were planning to pick me up.” “Aren’t you taking care of the kids tonight, like we planned?” “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Reporting that the promise will not be kept *as soon as we become aware of that likelihood* is key. Perhaps there are ways to minimize the damage. Then everyone involved can make alternative plans. And we can know that we handled the situation with integrity.

When appropriate, negotiate changes

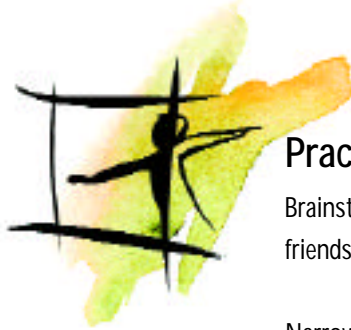
After making a promise, you might want to change it. Perhaps you’ll want to suggest a new timeline for a project you promised to complete. Perhaps you’ll want to put the project on hold or cancel it altogether.

At any time, we can meet with the people involved and request to renegotiate a promise. We can point out that we are still willing to keep the original promise, and that new information suggests a modification. We can even ask to be released from the promise.

Make more promises

If we break a promise, we might be tempted to throw in the towel. That’s not necessary. Even if we break long-term promises, we can acknowledge our mistake and recommit to the promise. While admitting that we’ve broken promises in the past, we can declare our intention to keep them in the future.





Practice total transparency

Brainstorm a list of important people in your life. Possibilities include co-workers, friends, family, customers, competitors, and lovers (current or former).

Narrow this list down to five and brainstorm a list of secrets—things you've avoided telling these people. Then write each person a letter revealing the appropriate secret.

After making this list, you have several options. One is to send the letters. Another is to meet with each of the people involved and reveal your secrets. Or you can throw the letters away and continue to keep the secrets.

Please do not judge yourself if you choose the last alternative. There are no right or wrong choices in this exercise. If you have genuinely searched for the option that contributes most to yourself and others, trust your choice.

Please make your list in the space below and write your letters now.

Practice making and keeping a promise

Make a promise that you can keep within the next 24 hours. Make it both challenging and realistic. After doing this, come back and write about your experience with promises.

Complete these sentences:

In doing this exercise, I discovered that I ...

I intend to ...

Keep a promises journal

For one month, keep a written list of all the promises you make. Also set up regular times to review this list. Leave space for noting whether you fulfilled each promise. Add any comments about what stops you from keeping promises or what helps you fulfill them. After the month, return to your promises journal. Reflect on your experience with promises by completing the sentences below:

When reviewing my promises and record of keeping them, I discovered that I ...

When it comes to making promises in the future, I intend to ...



