



Make this your year!

Forget typical self-improvement resolutions—they simply don't last. What does? Harnessing one of yoga's profound formulas for setting the right intention and achieving your heart's desire.

IN EARLY 2010, creativity coach and artist Cynthia Morris made a resolution: Meditate for 10 minutes a day. Although she expected to face obstacles, such as getting restless while on the cushion or simply forgetting to sit, she figured the rewards of a regular meditation practice would sustain her through thick and thin. "It felt so good to honor myself in this way," says Morris. "For me, that was the root and reward of meditation: I had committed to something and was building self-trust each time I sat." She lasted 30 days. "Or not even," says Morris. "I just couldn't keep up."

Morris is in good company. Of the 45 percent of Americans who make New Year's resolutions, just 8 percent see them through to the end of the year, according to a University of Scranton study published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. Yet the same study also found that the people who make resolutions are 10 times more likely to attain their goals than equally motivated people who do not set resolutions, suggesting the resolutions themselves are not the problem. Instead, these people are missing other keys to success, as Morris herself realized. "I petered out because I lacked motivation and was alone," she says. "There just wasn't a sense of community or group support."

These essential achievement elements—inner drive and outer support—don't come from true grit

in the power-through-it sense, suggest both ancient yoga philosophy and recent neuroscience research on human motivation. In fact, the root of the word "resolve" means to "loosen," "untie," or "release." Through this lens, resolve is a form of surrender, a way to set our most heartfelt desire free into the world. What sustains resolution, then, is more a willingness to grow than sheer willpower. It is a discovery of how our own happiness is inextricably intertwined with the well-being of others—and that comes down to creating "bigger-than-self" goals, according to Kelly McGonigal, PhD, a health psychologist at Stanford University and author of *The Upside of Stress*. On the surface, typical goals like reducing stress or finding a better job may seem self-serving. But dig deeper and you may find a greater purpose. Maybe less stress translates to being more patient with your partner, or a better job means you're saving money for your child's college tuition. Growing your intention so that it relates to something beyond you will give you more resilience when the temptation to quit arises, says McGonigal.

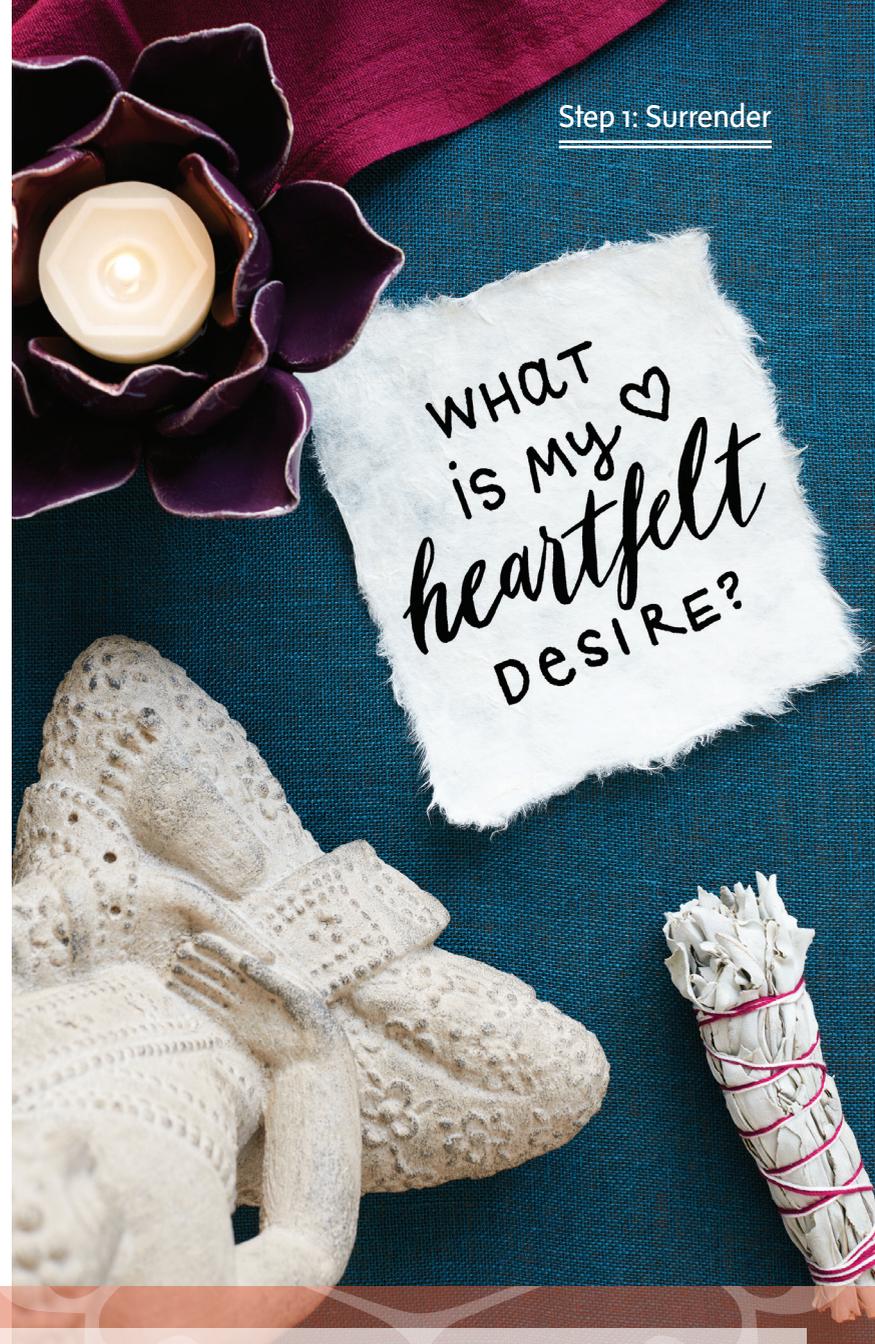
"An interpersonal resolution actually has a different neural signature or pattern of brain activity than a goal driven by self-image or self-focus," says McGonigal. A bigger-than-self goal creates what she calls the "biology of courage" by reducing the typical fight-or-flight stress response and instead boosting

STORY BY ELIZABETH MARGLIN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGIE CAO

the tend-and-befriend response. The latter is characterized by nurturance and connection and allows our bodies to release dopamine, a neurotransmitter that controls the brain's reward and pleasure centers. The result? Increased motivation; dampened fear; and enhanced perception, intuition, and self-control.

With a compassionate goal, you also more readily pull in the necessary backing—say, from your friends, family, or colleagues—to achieve your resolutions. “Compassionate goals help people see the resources that are already available to them,” notes Jennifer Crocker, PhD, a professor of social psychology at The Ohio State University, in one of her studies exploring self-worth and the costs of pursuing self-esteem as a goal. “Self-image goals make people isolated and separated from the interpersonal resources that are available to them.”

One way to create compassionate goals, according to yogic wisdom, is to reframe them as an ongoing practice of *sankalpa* (resolve)—*san* means “born from the heart,” while *kalpa* means “unfolding over time”—recommends Richard Miller, PhD, a clinical psychologist and author of *Yoga Nidra: The Meditative Heart of Yoga*. “An authentic intention comes directly from the heart,” Miller says. “It comes from asking what is it that *life* wants, which is different from what *I* want.” Because a *sankalpa* originates in the heart, it can't help but be an expression of a truly bigger-than-self goal. In the Shiva Sankalpa Suktam, a powerful six-verse hymn from the Rig Veda, the oldest of the sacred books of Hinduism, *sankalpa* is described as “the means,



Step 1: Surrender

Start from the heart

This exercise from Richard Miller, PhD, a clinical psychologist and author of *Yoga Nidra: The Meditative Heart of Yoga*, will help you look within to uncover your heartfelt desire (HFD), a first step toward creating your *sankalpa*. To recognize your HFD, choose words that inspire and accurately state what you most yearn for.

1 Sit or lie in a comfortable position where you can welcome deep ease and relaxation throughout body and mind.

2 Welcome the feeling within your body that best expresses what you most desire in life (e.g., healing, health, well-being, awakening, enlightenment, love, etc.), imagining and feeling this as already true.

3 Write down words that best reflect your heart's deepest desire, as if it is already the case. Use words that are in the present tense, and are positive and concise: *I am committed to finding inner stillness. I am at ease and at peace within, whatever my circumstances.*

4 Compose a concise statement that best represents your *sankalpa*, your way to bring your HFD into action: *I am going to cultivate a daily stillness practice by sitting for 10 minutes every morning as soon as I wake up.*

Understand that your HFD will naturally change over time as it ripens and matures, or as your life circumstances evolve. You sense the need for change by an inner impulse—some question or desire starts to nag at you. Revisit your HFD every once in a while to make sure it still feels relevant. If it doesn't, repeat this practice until an HFD emerges that feels just right.

by which a man who wants to do good,” can. “The *sankalpa* arrives with everything needed to fully realize it,” says Miller. “It informs us of the action we're willing to take.”

When Morris first started meditating, she experienced the benefits of the practice for herself. But she had not yet looked within to find the greater purpose for her resolution, which would make her daily meditation practice sustainable. “When I tried the resolution again in 2012, I made it a matter of integrity,” says Morris. “As a teacher in a virtual community called the Good Life Project, which emphasizes, among other things, the value of meditation, making a formal declaration to my ‘tribe’—the social-accountability piece—that I would meditate daily really helped. I have now been meditating daily for over three years. The sense of connection, the integrity of saying I would do it as a leader in my community—I kind of have to do it.”

To help you create your *sankalpa* and let it guide you toward a truly lasting intention, follow our five-part action plan, which asks you to surrender, inquire, commit, persevere, and envision your way to a transformation. We used the desire to establish a meditation practice as a running example, but the steps are applicable to any intention.

» Step 1: Surrender (*iswaraprandaya*)

The first part of creating a *sankalpa* is getting clear on what you want to bring forward in your life. But you don't need to get too cerebral. Instead, to find an authentic resolution, “you need to ask your soul,” says Rod Stryker, founder of ParaYoga and the author of *The Four Desires: Creating a Life of Purpose, Happiness, Prosperity, and Freedom*. “It's the answer to the question: What is essential that I become or achieve to fulfill my highest purpose?”

Answering this question requires starting with a quiet mind, says Miller, who works with students to find clarity on what he calls a “heartfelt desire”—a deep longing that leads to a *sankalpa*. (Try his exercise at left.) “The first thing I do is introduce students to the experience of what is within that feels in harmony with the totality of the universe,” says

Miller. “It moves us from separation to a feeling of attunement to all of life. I call it ‘resting in the arms of the bigger self.’” This is the surrender moment, according to Miller: “Out of that spacious, connected feeling, you can sense into your deepest longing for health, healing, deep rest, commu-

nity, or relationship; or for belonging, being seen, heard, or loved; or for awakening or enlightenment,” he says.

When Morris attempted a meditation practice for the second time, in 2012, she found that her heartfelt desire was to be more loving, including toward herself. Like before, she longed to have it take the form of a committed daily practice. “I wanted to be a person who has a deeper relationship with the Divine,” she says, “and slowing down to sit still and perhaps listen more deeply was an approach I was willing to try.”

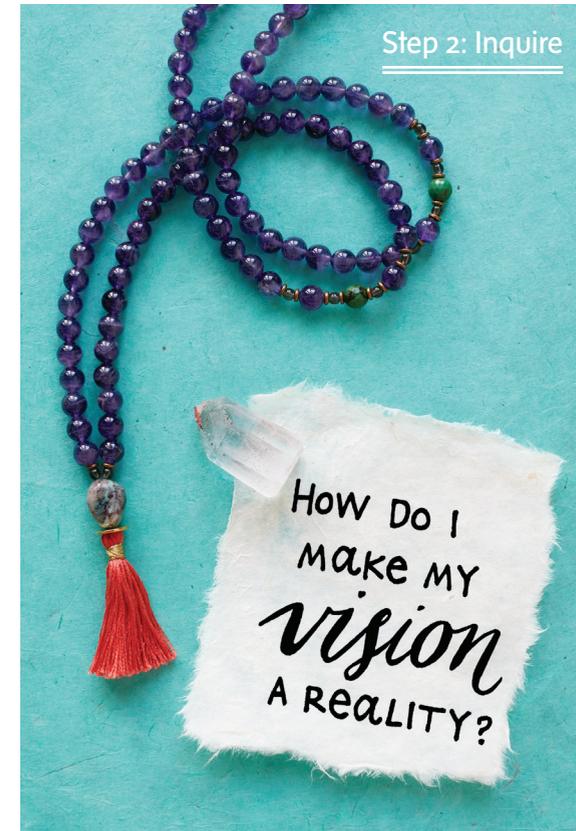
» Step 2: Inquire (*atma vichar*)

The second step of creating a *sankalpa* is transforming a desire into a clearly articulated intention, including words and actions that bring the desire to life.

To figure out how to accomplish your intention, McGonigal suggests asking yourself the following questions:

- * What do I want to experience more of in my life, and what could I do to invite or create that?
- * How do I want to be in the most important relationships or roles in my life? What would that look like, in practice?
- * What do I want to offer the world? Where can I begin?
- * How do I want to grow in the next year?
- * What actions can I commit to that are consistent with this heartfelt desire?
- * What needs to happen in the next 6 to 18 months to move me forward on my path?
- * What is the first step in this direction?

As you walk through the questions, pay attention to your choice of words: their specificity and how they resonate with you can make a big difference in your ultimate success. “It's important



Step 2: Inquire

to be true to the direction we are moving, the pace, and what fits us,” says Geneen Roth, a teacher and author of many best-selling books, including *Women Food and God*. “It’s taking aim at a target that’s concrete and achievable.” For instance, Morris tried daily meditation again only when a friend suggested she think of it as a “stillness” practice. “I had these ideas about meditation—that it meant I needed to control my mind and achieve some kind of Zen state,” says Morris. “That didn’t seem to fit who I was. I’m a bit of a rebel, so having it come in through the back door with another name felt more appealing. I didn’t feel like I had to live up to any pressure of having a quiet mind. It felt like an act of kindness to give myself permission to personalize my practice in a way that worked for me.”

» Step 3: Commit (*tapas*)

Even a heartfelt desire—that bigger-than-self goal—can be challenging to sustain. There’s just no getting around the fact that maintaining your resolve “is sometimes a swoon, sometimes a slog,” says Roth. In this battle against our own propensity for inertia, *tapas*—the willingness to undergo

great sensation in the service of transformation—is your weapon of choice. Although *tapas* has a lofty ring, it can take the humble form of habit-building. “Habits are the invisible architecture of daily life,” says Gretchen Rubin, author of *Better than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*. “They are what allow us to keep our commitments to ourselves.” Establishing a new habit takes the most discipline, because it relies on willpower to keep making the same decision day after day until it achieves the momentum of habit.

“Turning a resolution into a sustainable habit means cutting through the draining process of ‘Should I or shouldn’t I?’” says Rubin, who suggests finding a way to monitor the behavior to keep it going without extra effort. “If you want something to count in your life, you should figure out a way to count it.” For instance, Morris used the Insight Timer app to keep herself accountable. Not only does it chime to remind her to meditate, but it tracks her meditation minutes—as of now she has 250 stillness hours logged—and it instantly made her part of a worldwide meditation community.

Another way to be accountable and bolster your resolve? State your intention to a friend or community. Morris declared to her online tribe that she was a meditator—a vow she feels she can’t break and thus hasn’t. Miller thinks declarations we make solely with ourselves can be equally effective. “It’s almost like a contractual agreement with another person, but it’s a serious vow I am making with myself,” Miller says. These

arrangements we make with ourselves serve an inherent desire we all have to keep our word, to deliver on a promise, and to treat our lives as a living laboratory of both urgency and purpose.

» Step 4: Persevere (*abhyasa*)

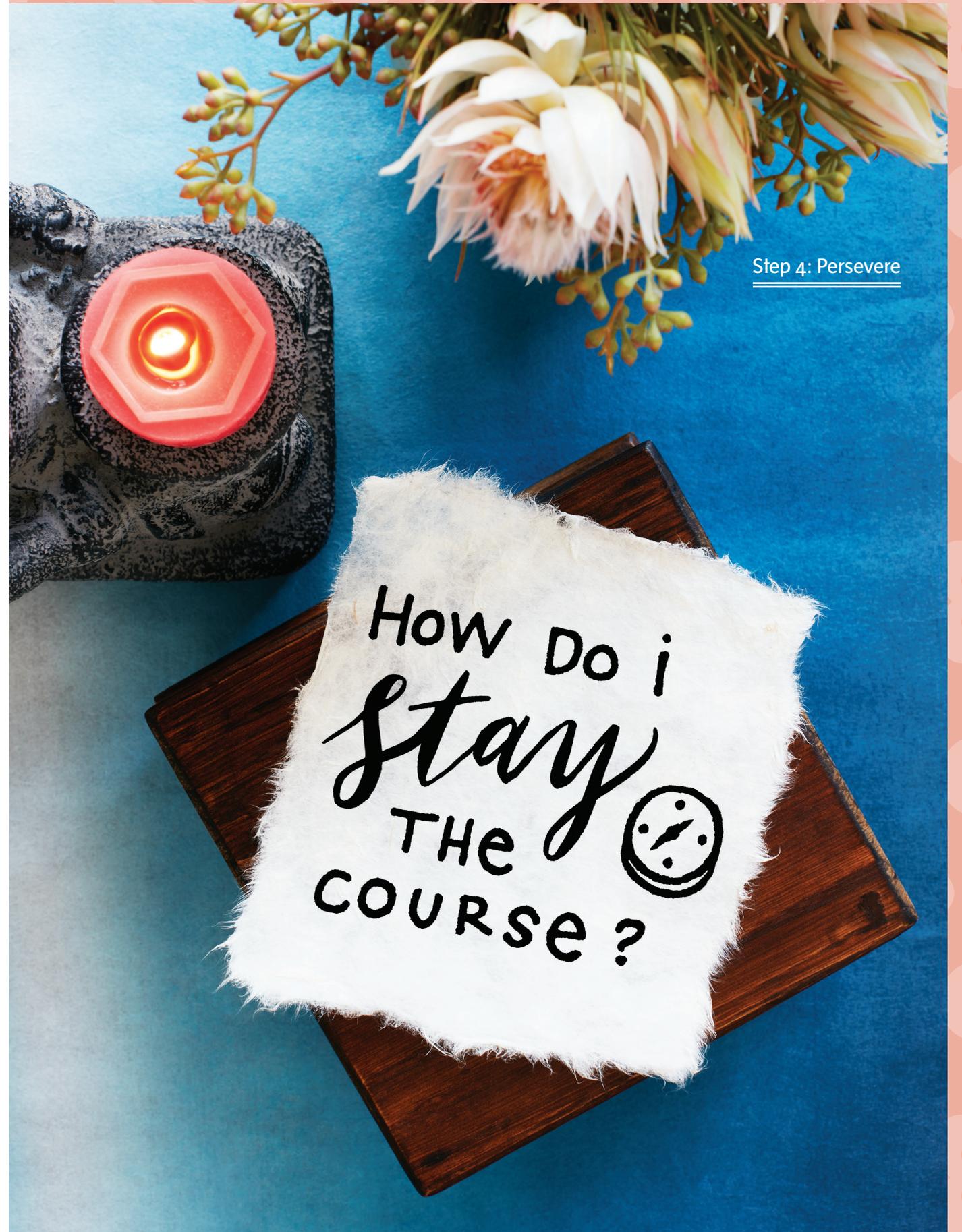
Beyond resolve is perseverance, which offers the opportunity to uncover the negative behaviors that can create roadblocks. “Any intention runs the risk that the unconscious mind is not on board,” says Stryker. “The *vikalpa*—that which takes us away from our underlying reality—is the old fear-based pattern that wants comfort and safety.” An example: We set an intention to find a fulfilling relationship, but we’re afraid of being hurt and thus unintentionally shy away from real intimacy. We won’t fulfill the intention until we

acknowledge what’s obstructing it. Opposing desires like these are common, says Stryker: One supports our negative patterns and fears; the other feeds our ultimate well-being and sense of fulfillment. “But once we see the old pattern, we have power over it,” says Stryker. “It’s really just a matter of applying awareness and understanding that any given moment is an opportunity to choose whether we honor our *sankalpa* or follow our nonconstructive desire. So in the case of relationship-seeking, we can either honor our desire for a fulfilling relationship or our desire to avoid being hurt by someone we love.”

To facilitate this often touch-and-go process, it helps to meet obstacles and learn from them, rather than collapsing with shame when you miss the mark. In other words, practice self-forgiveness rather than self-criticism when you skip your morning meditation—by doing so, you up your odds of long-term success, research suggests. With guilt out of the way, when you veer off track you can take responsibility (i.e., be accountable) and step into a willingness to make



Step 3: Commit



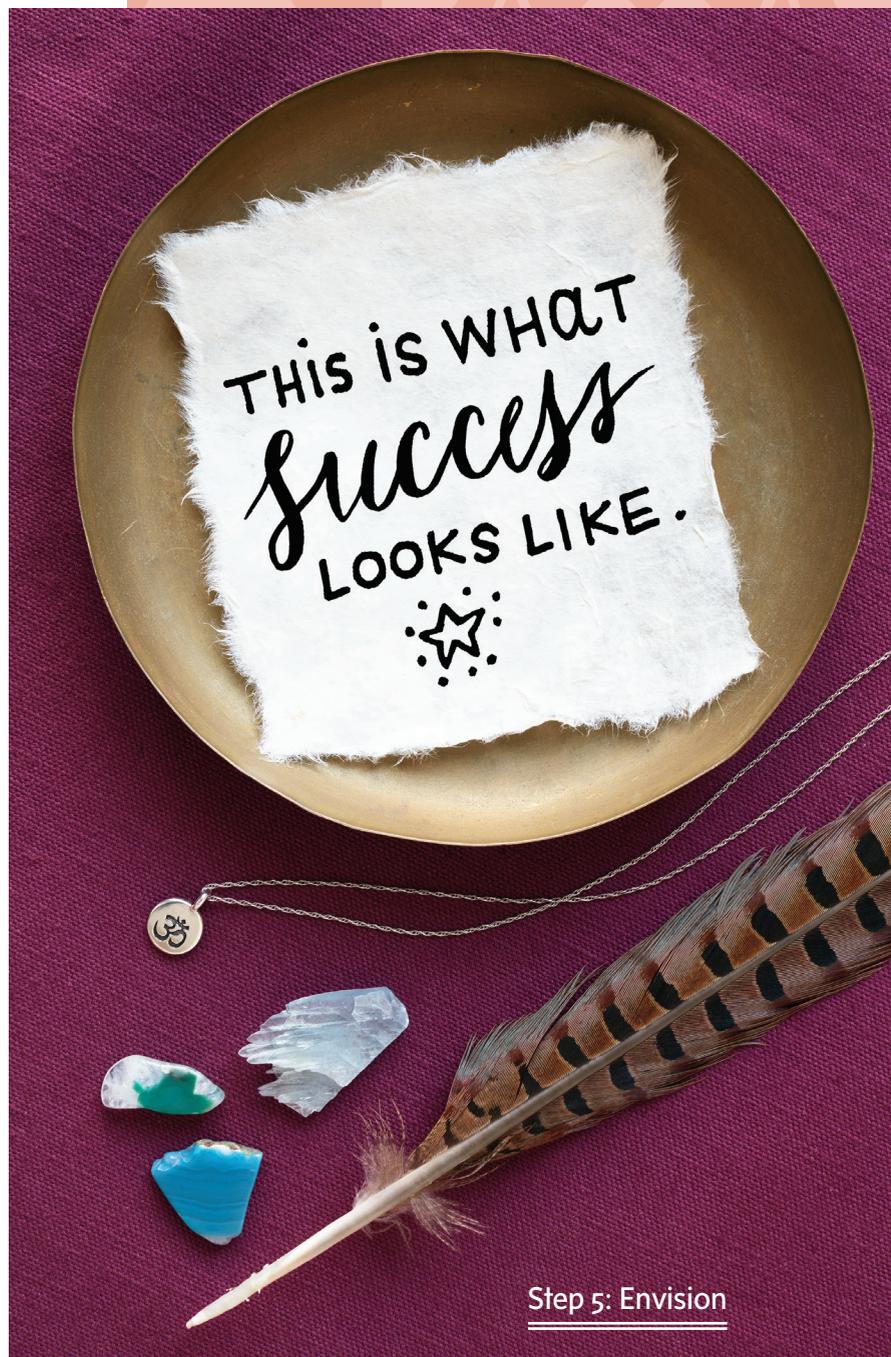
Step 4: Persevere

adjustments to get back on track. This “growth” mindset is correlated with achievement, whereas a “fixed” mindset—the belief that you can’t improve—stunts success. In her three years of sustained stillness practice, Morris forgot to meditate once while on vacation, and ran out of time one other morning when she had a plane to catch. That makes her human, not a failure—a distinction that made it easier to pick up where she left off rather than just throw in the towel.

But if you’re still falling off the wagon despite ample self-forgiveness, you can also give yourself permission to change tack. For example, try to tweak your resolution for a better fit, or find a different one that seems a more fitting expression of your desire. Say you tried one type of meditation practice and it didn’t reduce your parenting stress. You could experiment with other meditative practices like asana, taking brisk walks, or playing an instrument. “Don’t waste time on habits that are not working for you or that don’t make any noticeable difference,” says Rubin. You might also reevaluate whether the goal feels meaningful and whether you like the life you’re creating. If not, go back to the surrender process and start over.

» Step 5: Envision (*darshan*)

Sometimes being able to see the finish line makes us slow our pace (“I’m so close, I can slack a little”) instead of propelling us forward. In those moments, visualize the future you in order to get a boost over the hump. Psychologists call this exercise “encoding prospective memories.” It tricks your brain into believing your goal is a *fait accompli*—an already accomplished feat—making you more likely to make choices that fit your future self. For instance, couch potatoes who visualized their future self, regardless of whether it was a hoped-for svelte future self full of vim and vigor or a feared future self who suffered the consequences of neglect, started exercising more frequently than a control group that did not contemplate a future self, according to a study published in the *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*. The practice worked for Morris, too. “Imagining myself and my stillness goal in a positive light was a way to step past any negative self-perceptions,” she says. “I now coach my clients to imagine their books or their projects having already come to life.”



Step 5: Envision

If you have trouble picturing your future self, McGonigal recommends writing a letter to your present self from your future self that’s dated 1/1/2017. In it, imagine looking back at 2016 and thanking yourself for all the things you did or sacrificed to achieve your goals—and be sure to acknowledge how it was totally worth the effort. 🌟

Never a fan of New Year’s resolutions, writer Elizabeth Marglin plans to go big with a *sankalpa* that will make her future self proud.