

What doctors want patients to know about effective New Year's resolutions

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With the COVID-19 pandemic came reevaluation of what is important for people, which means making the same old New Year's resolutions is unlikely to work. Many people will opt for eating healthier or working out more, but with the COVID-19 pandemic altering how everyone lives, it may be time to choose a different resolution. Additionally, how we prioritize our lives and our health will look different as well. As we gear up for the new year, physicians want patients to know how to take a new route for creating and sticking to New Year's resolutions during a pandemic.

The AMA's What Doctors Want Patients to Know™ series provides physicians with a platform to share what they want patients to understand about today's health care headlines.

In this installment, two physicians took time to discuss what they want people to know about making New Year's resolutions during the pandemic. These AMA members are:

- [Joanna Bisgrove, MD](#), a family physician and assistant professor at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, and member of the [AMA Council on Science and Public Health](#). She is also an AMA delegate for the American Academy of Family Physicians.
- [Frank Clark, MD](#), a psychiatrist at Prisma Health in Greer, South Carolina, and associate clinical professor at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine-Greenville. He is also an American Psychiatric Association delegate to the AMA Section Council on Psychiatry.

Drs. Bisgrove and Clark are also members of the [AMA Ambassador Program](#), which equips individuals with the skills and knowledge to confidently speak to the AMA's initiatives and the value of membership. The program also increases overall awareness about what the AMA does for physicians and their patients.

Make time for self-care

"If there's one thing that the pandemic has taught us, it's that prioritizing one's mental health is just as important as prioritizing one's physical health," said Dr. Bisgrove. "Self-care in the form of recognizing your limits, building in even just a few minutes of time each day to recenter yourself, cutting yourself some slack when things aren't perfect, and connecting with others—particularly in person if it is safe for you to do so, but over the phone or internet if not.

"Being active is also great for mental health—even a brief walk outdoors can lift you up," she added, emphasizing that "anything you do to put yourself first on a more regular basis is important."

"Whatever you choose, make sure that it is focused on self-care, because we can all argue that we all need to do better," said Dr. Clark. "As we approach the holidays, it's about being realistic—don't bite off more than you can chew—and remember the importance of self-compassion."

Set smart goals

"Sometimes people ... become upset if they're not accomplishing their goals, because they're not realistic," said Dr. Clark who uses the SMART goals mnemonic, which stands for specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based.

Instead of saying, "I'm going to exercise," using the SMART criteria, try committing to 30 minutes or an hour for three days a week. "That way, now I have something that's specific," he said. "We become less frustrated with ourselves if we can make goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely."

Dr. Clark recommends finding an “accountability partner” to help you stay on track with meeting these goals.

Focus on what you can control

“Your focus should be about what you can control,” said Dr. Bisgrove. For example, “a New Year’s resolution could be making sure you’re [wearing a mask](#) when sick or in crowded spaces instead of lamenting that life isn’t the way it once was.”

“We sound like a broken record, but it’s about making sure you’re washing your hands, your family is staying safe, you’re wearing a mask and you’re checking in on your loved ones,” she said. “If you’ve been feeling really down this year, just make a resolution to do something nice for someone one day a week.”

Find ways to remain connected

“Reaching out and helping other people by connecting in some way ... are things that have really been cut off” throughout the pandemic, said Dr. Bisgrove. “Everyone [feels so alone](#). They feel so isolated. That’s what we hear about—when people are getting together—is that they crave that connection.”

But [physical distance](#) should not equate to social isolation. Be creative with trying to connect in virtual ways. Your New Year’s resolutions can “focus on creating that community, that sense of belonging, but staying safe,” Dr. Bisgrove said. “We need to get through this together.”

Make small changes

“Encouraging people to make changes is about making the small change,” said Dr. Bisgrove. “I have two things I always say to my patients, in general: The tortoise always beats the hare, and slow and steady wins the race.”

“Anytime we’re working on [habit changes](#), the way they’re going to do that is not by picking up some new trend or starting off on a massive exercise routine. It is by making the small changes,” she said. “Start with something that seems easy to you, and work on that one change for at least a month. “Once it feels easy, then choose a new one,” Dr. Bisgrove added, recommending that patients “try to avoid changing more than one habit at a time.”

Let go of guilt

“You can always restart. Don’t feel guilty,” said Dr. Bisgrove. “It’s hard to change habits—period. That’s why you take the baby steps and if you falter, you catch yourself and go, ‘OK, let’s do it again.’”

“It doesn’t mean that if you didn’t exercise three days a week, that you’re a failure,” added Dr. Clark. “It just means that this week was a week that things got busy. Next week is an opportunity to hit the restart button.”

Celebrate your wins

It is important for people to not “give up hope on those resolutions that they have,” said Dr. Clark, noting that “we might just have to be a little bit more creative” [amid an ongoing search for a new normal](#) with COVID-19.

For example, if someone’s resolution is to travel more, “maybe you travel virtually and explore a new country online,” he said. “We must be mindful of all the resources we have at our fingertips.”

The past couple years have been “harder for everybody in so many different ways,” said Dr. Bisgrove. “Every step you take, no matter how small—it should be celebrated as a victory.”