What doctors wish patients knew about effective New Year's resolutions

DEC 10, 2020

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This year has been different from any other in our lifetimes, 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. 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.

Two AMA members took time to discuss what they wish people knew about making New Year’s resolutions during the pandemic. They are:

- Joanna Bisgrove, MD, a family physician in Madison, Wisconsin.
- Frank Clark, MD, a psychiatrist in Greenville, South Carolina.

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.

Here is what these physician experts had to say.

Make time for self-care

“I can see a lot of New Year’s resolutions here revolving around being more hopeful. Put one foot in front of the other, work on being more kind to yourself and others—things that revolve around mental health,” said Dr. Bisgrove, who is also member-at-large of the AMA Women Physicians Section Governing Council. “There should be at least a lot more about self-care, about survival, about giving, cutting yourself some slack and forgiving yourself.”
“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

With 2021 being so uncertain, “the 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.”

“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.”

Discover the six things doctors wish patients knew about masks.

Find ways to remain connected

“Reaching out and helping other people by connecting in some way ... are things that have really been cut off this year,” 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.”


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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.”

Learn more about what doctors wish patients knew about physical distancing.

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.

Discover how patients can start—and stick with—key lifestyle changes.

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

“Even though we are physically distancing ourselves and taking all the safety precautions to help decrease the transmission of this deadly virus, I don't want people to give up hope on those resolutions that they have,” said Dr. Clark. “We might just have to be a little bit more creative during these unprecedented times.” 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.”

“This year is 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.”


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