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LIFE

Skip the diet and dating goals? You should make this your New Year's resolution

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When you think of making a New Year's resolution, you likely picture a scale, an exercise bike and a fruit and vegetable-adorned grocery list. Given the coronavirus pandemic and this past summer's racial justice protests, however, experts say new types of resolutions focused on social justice should be where people shift their energy.

"A New Year's resolution should have more substance, and something that you believe that you can make stick and actually keep and prolong," Patrice Williams Marks, an author and cultural consultant, tells USA TODAY.

Exercising and losing weight still topped the list for most common New Year's resolutions for 2021, according to a recent YouGov poll of U.S. adults.

But "even if you say you're going to lose weight, even if you say you're going to exercise or even, you know, be a good person, that's really only a small change for just one person, and it usually will not last," Renee Carr, a clinical psychologist, says.

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Experts say people should strive for tangible, meaningful tasks when making New Year's resolutions – and figure out what will stick in the process.

What types of resolutions should I make?

The key to a solid New Year's resolution? Pragmatism.

"Different people need different motivations," Carr says. "And I do believe that whether it's the beginning of a week or the beginning of a day, or beginning of a year, then sometimes having a marker like that can help give someone an extra motivation, though, as long as it's going to be able to help you. But just make sure that the goals that you're making are realistic for that time period."

Simply wanting to be a good person, for example, may be too bland and not specific enough. Think about how to make that actionable.

A protester displays wings while marching on on June 14, 2020 in the Brooklyn borough of New York City. *Michael Noble Jr., Getty Images*

Carr suggests putting that idea to use by giving out 10 bags of cereal once a month to a group of people experiencing homelessness. "It's something that you care about, you can measure it and you can see if you clearly do it or did not do it," she says.

Williams Marks says people should look to put thoughts to action: "If somebody believes that Black Lives Matter, or they believe that we should do something about climate change, or that the criminal justice system needs to be overhauled, then that should be part of a New Year's resolution," she says.

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Miranda Nadeau, a licensed psychologist, is hesitant to use the word "should." But she's seen through her clinical work that real happiness comes from people striving for a rich and meaningful life. It's "not just something related to what it might feel like when you lose or gain a few pounds, or you wake up that extra hour earlier. I think some of those resolutions can be tempting, but don't always address what's really meaningful to us," she says.

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How do I achieve these resolutions?

Coming up with the right New Year's resolution for you will require research.

Try visiting the Census Bureau website, Carr says, and look for the wealthiest and poorest zip codes around you. See where they compare and where they differ to get an understanding of problems around you. Are more children dying of pneumonia in one area? Or more senior citizens unable to afford medication?

Also, pay attention to local news broadcasts and activists speaking out. Which organization do they work for, or is there one similar to which you can contribute?

"You may not even want to actually do anything, but you may want to help learn more and understand more, then maybe look for a small social group that helps to talk about it openly and can give you information," Carr says.

Carr says that the easiest thing to do is recognize the stereotypes you engage in on a daily basis. Take out a piece of paper and for the whole month of January, write down what your automatic thoughts are when you see a certain person. "When I see someone who wears glasses, I think that; when I see someone who has natural hair, I think this about them," she says as an example.

In February, work to change at least one of those perceptions every day. Monthly or weekly you could attack a different stereotype.

"In order for you to have real thought and real belief change, you do need to have more than just a day and more than just 21 days," Carr says.

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Williams Marks says donating money regularly or volunteering time to organizations could be another way to honor your resolutions.

"There's so much you can do from home," she says. "And it's not just a one-off thing, that's something that you can work into your weekly life and continue it throughout the year."

Does this mean I can't have any weight loss goals?

People don't have to avoid weight loss resolutions.

"I don't want to tell anyone that valuing their health over others is wrong" Nadeau says. "However, I know that there are some ways that we can be harmful to ourselves through our resolutions as well, by putting ourselves in boxes, by giving ourselves ideas of should we can really limit ourselves and cause more damage than good."

Williams Marks adds, "I don't see anything wrong with trying to better yourself, or having the typical New Year's resolution." She also says there's room to have multiple resolutions; you can quit smoking and also work to combat climate change.

When thinking about dieting, try including dishes from multiple cultures into your rotation.

Carr suggests picking a culture each week and an accompanying dish. Spend time learning about what these foods mean and what what motivated groups to start

"Maybe have a research project of OK, well, this is our culture for this week," Carr says. "This is the dish, what did you learn about that culture? And what does this dish represent? Why do they have this dish? And what motivated them to start making it?"

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Try finding out what foods multiple cultures eat that are similar (i.e., flat flour- and water-based foods like pancakes, crepes and tortillas), too. You can then see the similarities between cultures, Carr says, as opposed to differences.

"Incorporate your eating in a way that's helping your fitness and health goals but still expanding on cultural awareness," she says.

Keep in mind, though, that resolutions should be something you can stick to; Carr says that working out for two hours every day may not be feasible, for example. Anything can distract you from your diet and weight loss plans, too – something as simple as your birthday or the reality of being alive during a pandemic.

Carr says it's important to choose something that goes beyond serving you. Think: "I may lose weight for a day or for a week or for bikini season. But if I can help change legislation that can help change the outcome of a whole group of people and set legal precedents for generations to come, that will last a whole lot longer than not eating a Krispy Kreme donut," she says.

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