

TIME FOR A BETTER YOU?



This season is ideal for setting new goals for yourself and striving to achieve them. Here, local therapists offer four tips for success.

By **Kathryne McCann**

If you're like many of us, you'll react with a groan to reminders that September has been named "National Self-Improvement Month." Improvement? Given this year's events, you may be busy enough just stumbling along in your usual imperfect way, waiting until Jan. 1 to take stock of your life, resolve to change—and then, quite likely, blow it.

But don't you see? It's not so much that we chose September as that September chose us. Temps are cooling. School's in session again, whether online or in-class. Leaves are about to turn. And while many of us are no longer sharpening pencils, there is an irresistible temptation to sharpen ourselves a bit. In this touchingly optimistic spirit, BERGEN sought out a few locals who make a professional habit of considering these matters. Their advice boils down to four key principles:

Be realistic. Yes, you'd like to fit back into your long-ago wedding dress again by Wednesday, or write a symphony by tomorrow morning at breakfast. But what if, starting today, you simply make a point of exercising twice a week instead of once every two weeks?

Choose a goal that's within your ballpark, one that's concrete enough to keep in mind and measurable enough that you'll recognize success when it stares you in the face. "If you're looking to make a major change, start small," says Nadine O'Reilly, Psy.D., a psychologist with an independent practice in Englewood. "Break it up into small, more easily achievable goals. It all comes down to making smaller, consistent changes rather than holding yourself accountable for a physical or mental makeover."

Be positive. We're not talking Pollyanna mush here, just a break from negativity. "The biggest mistake is self-judgment and questions such as 'What's wrong with me?' and 'Why am I like this?'" says Lara Maurino Donahue, a clinical social worker and therapist based in Ridgewood. "Questions like that distract you from your goal."

Donahue also has a kind word for a bit of flexibility and self-forgiveness when we stumble along the way. Suppose you're trying not to eat ice cream on weeknights, but last night, watching that grip-

ping TV drama, you weakened—and now you feel awful about it. If guilt could only burn calories, we'd all be skinny. But it can't, so give yourself a break and move on. And—this is important—don't abandon your effort because of one small setback.

Be regular. Ridgewood-based author and psychotherapist Tom Kersting, Ph.D., stresses the importance of maintaining a consistent schedule, especially when you're working from home. For some of us, the pandemic's stay-at-home period has triggered a schedule meltdown, making sleep irregular (and sometimes hard to come by), work time feast-or-famine, mealtimes erratic and family time hit-or-miss. But the experts say sticking to a routine can be a comfort, aiding productivity and helping to control stress and keep depression at bay. There's a consoling energy in making the coffee each morning by force of habit, even if no commute beckons and your yawning body pines for a retreat to bed.

Finding a suitable routine—and sticking with it—is especially important this fall, as we all adapt to a variety of "new normals." And make sure it's a routine that works for you. If you're an early riser, try to accomplish as much as you can before lunch. If you're a night owl who's most effective later in the day, know yourself and plan accordingly. Putting self-knowledge to work can help create the conditions for success in reaching your goals.

Be patient. If Rome wasn't built in a day, chances are your improved self won't be either. Focus on steady progress toward your goal. And Kersting has another slant on patience—one that defies

the instant gratification of the smartphone click. One way we can begin improving, he says, is to disconnect from tech once in a while and take the time to reconnect with one another. Whatever your goals for yourself, getting back to the basics—such as a relaxed dinner with the family or a social-distanced walk with someone in the woods—can help ground you for your long-term efforts.

"To improve our overall well-being mentally, physically, socially, family-wise and so forth, we need to come back to earth," says Kersting. He has a tip or two for your kids studying at home too; they shouldn't have their phones at hand, he says, and ideally should study in a central location rather than in their bedrooms. That will make it easier to resist temptations to surf the Internet and get lost in the depths of YouTube and Instagram.

"One of the biggest problems right now is that people are dehumanized a little bit because everyone has their heads buried in their phones," says Kersting. "If you want to improve yourself, that means you have to take actions that are humanistic." Connecting with others is essential for our personal well-being, so make sure you are surrounding yourself with positive people you know you can rely on.

Still, however close you are to others, don't let anyone else call the tune for your self-improvement. "Make sure the changes you want to make are for the right reasons," says O'Reilly. "You should only change to better yourself, not to fit into someone else's mold."

WEIGHING IN:



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Ridgewood



Tom Kersting, Ph.D.,
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Nadine O'Reilly, Psy.D.,
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