

For Your Health: Make A Health Goal /As Relaxed As Summer – One Small Change

by Dr. Graham A. Colditz
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ALTON - Siteman Cancer Center

In our social media-driven world, it's the big stories and the spectacular images that can often grab the most attention. And it's not just in topics like news, politics or sports, but also in areas that are more personal, like health and wellness. Spend just a few minutes scrolling through our phones, and we may see popular posts about 1,000-mile bike rides, jaw-dropping yoga poses and eight-course vegan gourmet meals.

While such stories can certainly be inspiring, they also need to be kept in perspective. Because, really, when it comes to our health, it's not big changes and one-time efforts that are often most important, it's the day-to-day, steady steps we take over time.

And that's great news for those of us who juggle work, school, kids, pets and any number of other commitments. There's real power and real health benefits in making small, achievable changes to our behaviors. Such changes are easier to get started and easier to keep up than large, daunting challenges. And that also makes them more likely to become ingrained, healthy habits that we can then further build upon in the future.

So, as we settle into these long, and hopefully enjoyable, mid-summer days, it can be a naturally good time to pick one relaxed health goal to work on through the rest of the season. And it can be anything, really. Just try to be specific about what you want to accomplish, and make it something you feel you can keep up over time.

"One of the most common pitfalls in setting goals is making them too broad or unrealistic," says Liz Salerno, a biobehavioral scientist at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. "I don't pressure myself to go from being inactive to running a marathon in two months!"

While keeping your goal focused, you can also be as creative as you want. There are many different paths to improving health and well-being. Start by thinking about something general you may want to work on – like your food choices, how active you are or how you deal with stress – then pick one small goal that can help you get there. And don't be afraid to keep it fun. It's summertime after all, and we're coming out of a long and stressful pandemic.

Some ideas to get started:

Tend a plot in a public garden two days a week

Roller skate or ride bikes with friends once a week

Take a dance class two days a week

Take a meditation or stretching class two days a week

Volunteer to help maintain local parks and paths once a week

Drink one fewer sugary drink each week

Eat an extra piece of in-season fruit two days a week

Grill veggie or meat-alternative burgers rather than hamburgers at summer barbeques

Make appointments for you, or your kids, to get caught up on doctor visits and vaccinations (not fun, but very important)

Try to keep your goal up through summer. If you get off course, don't worry. Just try to get back on track, and if you need to, modify your goal. Likewise, if you need to add a little extra to a goal to keep up your motivation, that's great, too.

Adjusting along the way can be key to being successful with a new behavior, says Salerno. "Our progress towards a goal is almost never linear, so we have to be patient with ourselves as we work toward it."

The relaxed energy of summertime offers a great opportunity to make some low-stress strides toward improving our health. And even though they may not trend on social media, they can still have important benefits.

"Oftentimes the small baby steps we make don't feel groundbreaking," says Salerno. "But they are."

It's your health. Take control.

Dr. Graham A. Colditz, associate director of prevention and control at Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, is an internationally recognized leader in cancer prevention. As an epidemiologist and public health expert, he has a long-standing interest in the preventable causes of chronic disease. Colditz has a medical degree from The University of Queensland and a master's and doctoral degrees in public health from Harvard University's T.H. Chan School of Public Health.