

This year, consider ways to go someplace new – literally. Volunteering, reaching out to new people are all ways to push ourselves beyond our comfort zones, escape our default ways of doing things, and give ourselves space to be someone new.

3. Evaluate your community.

The people we surround ourselves with are crucial to our own behavior.

In one recent study monitoring students who transferred to a new university, entrenched habits like reading the newspaper, exercising, and watching television were all altered; transfer students quickly conformed to the habits of their new community.

The people we surround ourselves with have profound effects on the way we do things and the decisions we make. Even our most intimate choices might be influenced by those in our wider community. One study found that being privy to the details of a friend's divorce increased one's own chances of getting divorced by 75% - even hearing about the divorce of a friend of a friend raised one's own chances of divorce a shocking 33%.

Positive effects also flow from being part of a community. We all are stronger when we reach out to others and share in a set of values and goals.

This year, take a look at your social connections. Ask yourself how you can spend time with those whose values and lifestyle you want to share. Consider strengthening your community, and allowing the support and connectedness of your community to enrich you as well.

4. Spend more time with loved ones.

Recent research shows that spending time with people who are dear to us profoundly affects our physical well-being. In one major study, physical wounds healed faster for people who had close, positive relationships in their lives. Another study found that people who feel they have close relationships are more productive at work.

In today's hyper-busy world, it can feel next-to-impossible to carve out quality time to spend with those we care about. Disconnecting from all our gadgets makes sure we spend quality face-to-face time at home. Have device free nights, and share a meal. There's even research to back up the benefits of these weekly meals: eating regular family meals together is associated with lower levels of stress for kids and adults. For children, eating a family meal is also connected to lower levels of drug abuse, higher grades, and better health.

5. Say thank you.

Saying thank you is one of the most powerful ways we can move beyond our old habits and transform our lives. In a ground-breaking study a little over a decade ago, Dr. Robert Emmons of University of California, Davis and Dr. Michael McCullough of the University of Miami asked one group to write in journals about their daily lives and another group to work through their problems and irritations in their writing. A third group was asked to focus on writing things they were grateful for.

At the end of the study, they found something remarkable: the participants who used their journals to record what they were thankful for reported markedly higher levels of happiness and well-being. Their entire demeanor was altered by the experiment. They displayed higher levels of energy, determination, alertness, attentiveness and enthusiasm. This translated into concrete action, as well. People who kept gratitude lists were more likely to make progress towards important goals.

It isn't only writing down what we're grateful for that can have this profound effect: the researchers also found that attending religious services, praying, and studying religion also creates a feeling of gratitude that can transform our lives.

“Happy New Year”

“Everyone Goes Home”

Chief, Anthony C. Segars