



If you're one of the 45% of Americans who make a New Year's resolution, you may be thinking, "It's a new year! Time for a fresh start. Let's get to it and make a change!" On the other hand, you might be thinking, "I need a change, but there's no way I can do anything different. Too many responsibilities. I barely have enough time to get things done." The fact of the matter is that people who make resolutions are 10 times more likely to achieve goals than those who don't.¹

As a family caregiver, I have a natural tendency to place the needs and interests of others before my own. I recall on many occasions I would even talk myself out of pursuing things I enjoyed because "other" things were the priority. There was the "I need to get in shape first" excuse, followed by, "Things will settle down soon and then I'll do it." Like many people, and particularly family caregivers who are strapped with balancing work and personal responsibilities, I was full of excuses. My bucket list was getting longer and longer and I had no plan in place or belief that I could make life better.

Research shows that prolonged family caregiving can actually lead to developing poor eating habits, weight gain, bouts of depression, and social isolation.² For many family caregivers, losing touch with knowing what they like to do for fun or how to keep doing it are not uncommon feelings. This is true for anyone who doesn't pay attention to setting goals with a plan to achieve them. That's why the start of a new year is so great. It gives us a chance to get back on

track. It could be to lose weight, get organized, spend less or save more. You may even stretch yourself to learn something new or help others and give back to the community. If your daily responsibilities have gotten the best of you, it's important to know that you have an opportunity to make a change for the better. Start by giving yourself permission to explore new and old interests and then take action to make this happen. It's easier than you think, as long as you're honest with yourself.

I've worked with people with a vast array of health conditions — stroke, brain injury, and spinal cord injury survivors, children born with disabilities, young adults living with neurological disease to wounded veterans. I've seen people with the most extraordinary life challenges who move on to reinvent themselves and live in purposeful ways. All of them routinely remind me that success is all about attitude. I believe this because I've seen stories of achievement that would turn your head, but as much as a positive attitude is important, a key factor to reinventing



yourself is wanting to make the change. Face it: if you really don't want to make a change, nothing will change. That's where genuine intention comes to play.

Take time to have an honest to goodness talk with yourself. Reflect on all of the things you love to do that you haven't done for a while. Or, if there are things you've never done but have been putting off because of caregiving, add them to your list. Then ask yourself, "If you were to take all limitations and excuses away from the picture, what would be different? What will it take to make it possible for you to participate in these once again?" Money may be a factor, but push yourself to really get to the root of what is keeping you from doing something other than your excuse of "being a caregiver." If you've lost contact with people whom you used to do an activity with, what opportunities may there be to connect with a new group that shares the same interest? If you're not sure how to get involved, what places, groups, or people can point you in the direction of making this happen? Do you like physical activity? Are there programs at the park district, health club, or school that support these interests? If you enjoy creative work, like art, music, or poetry, are their clubs, church groups, or special classes that can connect you with others doing these things? Or, if you find intellectual activity or projects your main interest, are there opportunities to write articles, lead committees, or volunteer? Taking time to explore options is an important step in helping you identify your interests and come to know yourself outside your role as a family caregiver. Knowing yourself, and making a point to pursue your interests all adds up to helping you keep a healthy outlook on life and stay healthy as well.

I recall meeting with a neighborhood mom when I dropped off our twins for a sleep over. I had help for my dad that evening and happily joined her for a glass of wine. Within the first hour she said, "I think you'd really enjoy yoga!" I was shocked and laughed. "I've never done yoga in my life! Do I look that stressed?" She politely said, "No, though with all that you have going on with caring for your kids and dad and working it seems like you'd appreciate some time to yourself." After I pushed my reservations to the side, I accepted her invitation to try a yoga session. I resisted my negative self-talk that I wasn't flexible enough, that I would be bored, or wouldn't be able to find someone to cover for my dad or kids so I could

have an hour to myself. Surprisingly, I found a new interest that actually made a difference in my overall wellbeing. It also helped me have conversations with other people about a fun and healthy activity that had nothing to do with caregiving. Now, I didn't go as far as reinventing myself to become a yoga instructor, but it did launch me into figuring out how to sign up for other activities in the midst of caregiving. From there I began to set small goals for travel, even if it was to visit a distant relative with Dad or by myself, and began to look at new opportunities with my work and professional path. I soon acquired the habit of approaching each New Year with intention. I identified and followed through with one thing I wanted to make happen. Focusing on one thing instead of five or six made it much more manageable and achievable. It also led to doing more than I had originally set out to do. Likely this was possible because with one goal, I didn't feel pressured and had a better likelihood of sticking with it. Setting small goals gave me a new focus and helped me regain my personal identity and sense of purpose outside of caregiving.

If you want to start the New Year with a renewed sense of spirit, energy, and feeling of life purpose, setting goals with a plan to make things happen can lead you down an exciting path of personal reinvention. Have fun with the process! You may find that you'll rediscover the old you or create an entire new path to explore. Either way you'll take charge of reinventing yourself and have stories to share with your loved ones.

1 Statistic Brain. University of Scranton. Journal of Clinical Psychology. October 27, 2016.

2 AARP, Caregiving in the US, June 2015.

In her former role as Founding Director of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago LIFE Center, Kristine Cichowski developed an award-winning education center for families and people faced with physical disabilities and chronic illness. Kristine currently provides education and training to businesses, schools, and community groups on family caregiving, disability inclusion, self-advocacy, and leadership through her company Power To Be. To learn more, visit www.powertobe.net.

