

Need a Reset? The End of Pandemic Life Can Be a Fresh Start.

Studies show that moments of disruption offer a unique opportunity to set and achieve new goals. The 10-day Well challenge will help you get started.



Credit...Nathalie Lees



By **Tara Parker-Pope**

May 11, 2021 Updated 10:55 a.m. ET

If there was ever a perfect time to make a life change, this is it.

Behavioral scientists have long known that times of disruption and transition also create new opportunities for growth and change. Disruption can come in many forms, and it happens when life knocks us out of our normal routines. It can be moving to a new city, starting a new job, getting married or divorced or having a child. And for many of us, there's never been a bigger life disruption than the pandemic, which changed how we work, eat, sleep and exercise, and even how we connect with friends and family.

"I think this fresh start is really a big opportunity," said Katy Milkman, a professor at the Wharton School and author of the new book ["How to Change: The Science of Getting From Where You Are to Where You Want to Be."](#) "I don't know when we'll have another one like it. We have this blank slate to work on. Everything is on the table to start fresh."

Much of Dr. Milkman's research has focused on the science of new beginnings, which she calls ["the fresh start effect."](#) Dr. Milkman and her colleagues have found that we're most inclined to make meaningful changes around "temporal landmarks" — those points in time that we naturally associate with a new beginning. New Year's Day is the most obvious temporal landmark in our lives, but birthdays, the start of spring, the start of a new school year, even the beginning of the week or the first of the month are all temporal landmarks that create psychological opportunities for change.

[In one study](#), Dr. Milkman found that students were most likely to visit the gym around the start of the week, the first of the month, following birthdays or after school breaks. Another study found that ["fresh start language"](#) helped people kick-start their goals. In that study, people were far more likely to start a new goal on a day labeled "the first day of spring" compared to an unremarkable day labeled "the third Thursday in March." (It was the exact same day, just labeled differently.)

Another study found that when people were advised to start saving money in a few months, they were less likely to do so than a group of people told to start saving around their birthday that was also a few months away. The birthday group saved 20 to 30 percent more money.

For many people, the lifting of pandemic restrictions and getting vaccinated means planning vacations and returning to more-normal work and school routines. It's exactly the kind of psychological new beginning that could prompt the fresh start effect, said Dr. Milkman.

"We have this opportunity with this blank slate to change our health habits and be very conscientious about our day," said Dr. Milkman. "What is our lunch routine going to look like? What is our exercise routine? There's an opportunity to rethink. What do we want a work day to look like?"

It's Not Too Late to Reset.

As the pandemic recedes, some people are worried that the past year of lockdowns, restrictions and time at home was a missed opportunity. Leslie Scott, a nonprofit event

organizer in Eugene, Ore., said she feels that she just muddled through a stressful year, rather than using the time to make meaningful life changes.

“I sometimes wonder if I squandered this gift of time,” said Ms. Scott, who is an organizer of the Oregon Truffle Festival. “I have all this anxiety that we’re just going to go back to what people think of as normal. As we come out of our cocoons, am I emerging from something and moving toward something new? Or am I just stuck?”

While some people did develop healthy new habits during pandemic lockdowns, it’s not too late if you spent your pandemic days just getting by. The good news is that the end of the pandemic is probably a more opportune time for meaningful change than when you were experiencing the heightened anxiety of lockdowns.

“Covid-19 was an awful time for many of us,” said Laurie Santos, a psychology professor at Yale who teaches a popular online course called “[The Science of Well-Being](#).” “There’s lots of evidence for what’s called post-traumatic growth — that we can come out stronger and with a bit more meaning in our lives after going through negative events. I think we can all harness this awful pandemic time as a time to get some post-traumatic growth in our own lives.”

So What’s Your Next Chapter?

One of the biggest obstacles to change has always been the fact that we tend to have established routines that are hard to break. But the pandemic shattered many people’s routines, setting us up for a reset, Dr. Santos said.

“We’ve all just changed our routines so much,” she said. “I think many of us have realized during the pandemic that some of the things we were doing before Covid-19 weren’t the kind of things that were leading to [flourishing in our lives](#). I think many of us were realizing that aspects of our work and family life and even our relationships probably need to change if we want to be happier.”

One reason fresh starts can be so effective is that humans tend to think about the passage of time in chapters or episodes, rather than on a continuum, Dr. Milkman said. As a result, we tend to think of the past in terms of unique periods, such as our high school years, the college years, the years we lived in a particular town or worked at a certain job. Going forward, we’re likely to look back on the pandemic year as a similarly unique chapter of our lives.

“We have chapter breaks, as if life is a novel — that is the way we mark time,” said Dr. Milkman. “That has implications for the psychology of fresh starts, because these moments that open a new chapter give us a sense of a new beginning. It’s easier to attribute any failings to ‘the old me.’ You feel like you can achieve more now, because we’re in a new chapter.”

Take the Fresh Start Challenge!

While the start of a new chapter is a great time for change, the pages will turn quickly. Now that we're emerging from the restrictions of pandemic life, social scientists say it's an ideal time to start thinking about what you've learned in the past year. What are the new habits you want to keep, and what parts of your prepandemic life do you want to change?

"It's time to rethink your priorities," said Dr. Milkman, who outlines more detailed steps for change [in her new book](#). "We have to ask ourselves, 'How am I going to schedule my time?' We have a limited window to be deliberate about it, because pretty quickly, we'll have a new pattern established, and we probably won't rethink it again for a while."

A good first step is to take our 10-Day Fresh Start Challenge. Sign up, and starting Monday, May 17, we'll send one or two messages a day to prompt moments of mindful reflection, build stronger connections and take small steps toward building healthy new habits. You can text us, too! The challenge will include 10 daily challenges, with a break over the weekend.

To sign up, just text "Hi" or any word to 917-809-4995 for a link to join. (If you're on your phone now, [tap here to send the text](#). Message and data rates may apply.) If you prefer not to text or live outside the United States, you can follow along on the website or app. Just bookmark [nytimes.com/well](https://www.nytimes.com/well) and join us on May 17 for the first challenge.

"I think a lot of us have realized how fragile some of the things were that gave us joy before, from going to the grocery store, to going out to a restaurant with friends, going to a movie, giving your mom a hug whenever you'd like," said Dr. Santos. "My hope is that we'll emerge from this pandemic with a bit more appreciation for the little things in life."

Tara Parker-Pope is the founding editor of [Well](#), The Times's award-winning consumer health site. She won an Emmy in 2013 for the video series "[Life, Interrupted](#)" and is the author of "For Better: The Science of a Good Marriage." [@taraparkerpope](#)