

## SELF-IMPROVEMENT SEPTEMBER

BY MARI BRAND

September isn't just about back-to-school and changing leaves—it's also Self-Improvement Month, a chance to reset and refocus. Whether your New Year's resolutions fizzled out or you're simply ready for a fresh start, this month offers the perfect reminder that it's never too late to grow.



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hen you think of the time of year meant for self-improvement, your mind probably jumps straight to January 1st and the widely celebrated tradition of New Year's resolutions, but did you know September is self-improvement month? The history on who first created that designation and when isn't clear, but various organizations have been acknowledging self-improvement for at least several decades now. Of course you can commit to bettering yourself at any point throughout the year, but it's nice to have a dedicated starting point, and September is the perfect time to start fresh, especially if your New Year's resolutions for this year have fizzled out (as many of ours do).

Undertaking a self-improvement journey can be daunting, but it shouldn't be! If it makes it more approachable, you can even think of it more as self-care September instead, as the two phrases are often synonymous. Bettering yourself can look like a lot of different things, so let's dive into a few different approaches to self-improvement, with options that will appeal to everyone—no matter your interests, goals or desired level of commitment—plus tips on how to stick with whatever you decide to try.

### MORE HEALTHY HABITS (OR FEWER "BAD" ONES)

Some of the most obvious options under the self-improvement umbrella fall into the healthy habits category. Goals like exercising more, eating a healthier diet, reducing your screen time and ensuring you're getting quality sleep every night are all examples, and chances are that almost everyone would like to improve in at least one of those areas, if not multiple. But while healthy habits might be what you naturally gravitate toward when thinking of how you can better yourself, they're also famously hard to stay committed to. After all, who hasn't confidentially declared an exercise or diet related New Year's resolution only to quietly fall off track a few weeks or months into the year? That's an experience many can relate to, but there are ways to make new healthy habits more likely to stick.



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There are a couple of ways people unintentionally set themselves up for failure from the get-go: setting goals that are too broad and/or framing the goal in a negative light instead of a positive one. Let's take the two most common

healthy habit aspirations as examples. Just telling yourself to "exercise more" or "eat healthier" sounds great, but it doesn't give you any sense of direction or starting point. Instead, try getting more specific. If you want to focus on exercising more, choose a specific type of workout, sport or activity that appeals to you. Now your goal could be to take weekly Pilates clas-



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ses, join a local recreational soccer league or go for a hike every weekend. When it comes to your diet, try identifying specific categories of foods that you want to eat more or less of. Maybe your goal is to eat more plant-based meals (or less meat), more fiber-rich foods or less sugary desserts. Or you could try to stick to a new, specific diet, like pescatarian, Mediterranean or vegan, all of which would have plenty of recipes already developed and easily available to help you get started. And if exercise or diet related goals aren't your thing, try committing to journaling or looking into practicing mindfulness, meditation or good sleep hygiene.

### EXPLORE NEW HOBBIES

Adopting a new hobby or practicing a new skill is another great way to celebrate self-improvement. And it's a potentially more fun and relaxing option compared to taking on a full lifestyle change.

There are pretty much endless options here, from common hobbies like painting or reading to more out of the box choices like juggling or candle making. With so many hobbies to choose from, there's guaranteed to be an option that will appeal to everyone. You could go the creative/artsy route and pick up drawing, painting, photography, scrapbooking, knitting or crocheting. Or a musical hobby like learning to play an instrument or practicing

singing. If part of your goal is to spend more time outdoors, you could try hiking, gardening or birdwatching, or you could go for a hobby that's more applicable to everyday life like cooking, baking or sewing. Some hobbies, particularly those that involve learning a new skill from scratch or expensive startup costs, might sound more stressful than fun, but things like reading, writing, coloring or ready-to-go craft/art kits are pretty easily accessible and can be a good way to wind down after a long day at work.

### GET BACK IN THE CLASSROOM

Education is also another common area of self-improvement, and there are plenty of ways to pursue further education, even as a busy adult. Professional development or education that's relevant to your work is one avenue you could pursue, whether it's earning a new certificate or credential to add to your resume or taking an online course tailored to people in your field. There are plenty of free or paid resources available for school nutrition professionals, including SNA's own resources such as the live or on-demand webinars available in the Training Zone (*training.schoolnutrition.org*) or the SNA Certificate in School Nutrition or School Nutrition Specialist (SNS) credential. There are also a variety of school nutrition-focused education opportunities from other organizations like the Institute of Child Nutrition (*theicn.org*).

Of course, you could always literally head back in the classroom by enrolling in courses at a college or university. Getting a full degree may be too time consuming or expensive for many people, but did you know several universities in the U.S.—including Harvard, Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and many more—offer free online courses that are open for anyone to take? You can find courses in all subject areas, ranging from some that are more practical and others that are more fun and unique. If you want something that's school nutrition adjacent, you could enroll in Introduction to Food and Health at Stanford University or Food Fermentation: The Science of Cooking with Microbes at Harvard. Or you could delve into something that might be entirely new to you, like Introduction to European and Latin American Fiction



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at MIT, Defining the String Quartet II: Beethoven at Stanford or Backyard Meteorology: The Science of Weather at Harvard. Most courses are available on-demand (though many are only available for a set period of time) and you can find those courses on the respective university's website. Another great resource is Coursera which hosts hundreds of free college courses from universities around the world ([coursera.org/courses?query=free](https://coursera.org/courses?query=free)).

## FOR A GOOD CAUSE

Volunteering is maybe one of the most rewarding ways to celebrate self-improvement. It's a way to better yourself and give back to your community at the same time. Finding a cause that's important to you is the best way to ensure your volunteer work is fulfilling and something you'll want to stick with long term. You could volunteer at a local animal shelter, food bank or homeless shelter, or join a volunteer conservation or litter clean up event or tutoring program. In addition to opportunities posted online, local libraries or churches are often good places to look for volunteer opportunities in your community. If in-person volunteering doesn't fit into your schedule, you can also find virtual volunteer opportunities online ranging from historical research or archival work for museums to wildlife photography to crisis hotlines.



## HOW TO STICK WITH IT

Whenever you set a new goal for yourself or decide to commit to a new project, sticking with it is sometimes the most challenging part. Choosing something that genuinely interests you or framing something you're less enthusiastic about in a positive light are important factors in staying committed, but there are also other tricks you can use to help maintain the excitement of something new. Convince your friends, family or coworkers to join you on your particular self-improvement journey to create a sort of positive peer pressure for all of you, or if they're unwilling, you could join a group of strangers with the same interest, like a workout class, book club or local volunteer orga-

nization. You can also set challenges for yourself, such as reading five books in a month, practicing your new hobby for 30 minutes a day or cooking or baking a new recipe at least twice a week—just keep them attainable and relatively low stakes to make sure you're still having fun and don't get burnt out.

Regardless of what healthy habit, hobby, learning opportunity or volunteer work you decide to take up, remember that self-improvement doesn't have to be all hard work and overly serious—it should be fun too!





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