

Resource

## Next year's going to be different! Could your New Year's resolutions help your RA?

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Blog by Victoria Butler



Many people end the year hopeful that the next year will be better in some way. As the clock ticks over to 1<sup>st</sup> January, we mark the occasion with parties and fireworks, even though in reality, it's just another day. For every person saying "Next year, I'm going to..." another is saying "You don't need to wait for a new year to do that. Just start doing it now." People either love or hate a New Year's resolution, but do they work?

If we had to guess, I suspect that most of us would instinctively say that New Year's resolutions are destined to fail. According to a 2002 study published in the Journal of Clinical Psychology, you'd be right! This study found that less than 10% of people kept their New Year's resolution for more than a few months. Let's be optimistic for a moment though. Even in this study, people did make changes for 'a few months', which at any other time of year might be considered a success!

A more recent YouGov survey found that 35% of people who made resolutions stuck to their goals, with 50% managing to keep at least some of their resolutions.

So, what is the secret to an achievable New Year's resolution? Well, according to research from Stockholm University, it's down to the type of goal you set. It turns out that resolutions tend to fall into one of two categories: 'avoidance goals' and 'approach goals'. Examples of 'avoidance goals' would include: to quit smoking, drink less alcohol or stop eating chocolate. 'Approach goals' are more about forming new habits, such as: Join a gym, learn a new language, learn to play an instrument. Put simply, it's about targeting yourself with doing something, not stopping something.

Let's take a look at some of the most common New Year's resolutions, why they might be important for someone with RA and how you might find a way to stick to them.

### Quit smoking

We already know that goals aimed at breaking a habit are less likely to work than goals aimed at starting new habits, so perhaps this one seems doomed to fail. It's an important one though, as smoking is bad for your RA, as well as your overall health. [Smoking can make RA symptoms worse, make medications work less well and it even makes people more likely to develop RA in the first place](#). It is also a very difficult habit to break. The most obvious reason for this is that nicotine is addictive. Just 30 minutes after finishing a cigarette, your body might start craving nicotine. When you quit smoking, cravings are strongest for the first 2-3 days and should stop after around 4-6 weeks.

So, if people often manage 'a few months' of keeping to their resolutions, why would they be unsuccessful once nicotine cravings have passed? Habit. Maybe you always start your day with a cigarette, waking early to enjoy one before you get going with your day. Maybe you always smoke after a meal out, or while on your way to work. A number of studies have found, for example, that people who smoke within one hour of waking in the morning are less successful at quitting.

Think about when you find it hardest not to smoke and why. If you find it relaxes you to start your day with a cigarette, try replacing this with something else. If you set yourself a goal to start your day with exercise, maybe you won't feel like smoking afterwards. If you'd rather have a relaxing start to the day, maybe use that time to read, watch television or sit down with a warm drink. If you normally smoke while walking to work, could you cycle instead? Or get a train? A number of people found it easier to stop smoking when they could no longer smoke in pubs. Changes to the routine that sits around the habit may have more of an effect than just giving yourself a target to 'quit smoking'.

### Eat healthily

'Eat healthily' is probably too general a resolution for you to stick to. If what you really want is to lose weight, this is easy to measure, if hard to do. Losing weight can help your RA, by putting less strain on joints.

Perhaps the change you want is to have a more varied diet, or to use diet to improve RA symptoms. Some foods may aggravate your RA, so your resolution might be to start a food and symptom diary, to help you find the foods that work best for you.

Think about why you sometimes eat unhealthily. Do you crave sugar when you are tired or sit still for a long time? Do you eat when you feel emotional? Do you reward yourself with a 'treat' after a busy day? If so, perhaps the change you need is not about food at all. Maybe your resolution should be to be more active or find another form of comfort or reward.

"Nobody expects you to change your dietary habits overnight. Remember, any small changes you make from these suggestions are progress. You are more likely to stick to a good diet long term if you make gradual changes that suit your lifestyle." Gemma Westfold, Registered Nutritional Therapist

As Gemma, the author of our [information on diet and RA](#) says, any small change is progress. A resolution to 'eat healthily' is open to interpretation. Instead, why not set a target such as:

- Snack on fruit instead of chocolate
- Eat your meals seated at the table (to aid digestion)
- Keep a food diary
- Join a weight loss group
- Try a new healthy food once a week
- Snack on fruit instead of chocolate

#### Exercise more

Many people worry that exercise might make their RA worse. However, research shows us that the benefits of exercise outweigh the risks. Exercise improves overall health and stronger muscles help support joints.

During a flare, resting swollen joints can help to ease swelling. When not flaring, exercise is recommended.

There are many ways to exercise. You could join a gym or exercise class; swimming is a great option, as the water helps to support your joints. There are also a lot of exercises that can be done at home, including exercises that you can do from a seated position.

Walking, dancing and even shopping are all forms of exercise too. It doesn't just have to be sports-related.

Find an exercise that is easy for you to stick with and, above all else, fun for you to do! Enjoyment is a great motivator.

For more information, see the [exercise section](#) on our website.

### Be better with money

Managing finances can be stressful and disabled people often have added financial costs. Perhaps you are unable to work or have had to reduce your hours, or maybe you have had to pay for a taxi when you were in too much pain to walk home.

There are many ways to reduce overall spending, including:

- Buying items second hand
- Joining 'buy nothing' groups, where members give away items they no longer need for free.
- Smart meters
- Apps to help you manage spending and see what you spend money on

You may also be entitled to benefits. The [benefits section](#) of our website has information on the different benefits you might be entitled to and how to claim them.

### Start a new hobby

Many people aim to start a new hobby in the New Year, or get back into a previous hobby. Hobbies can be great for our mental health and they can also be a good way to increase our social circle, whether through in-person groups/ clubs or online communities. Even relatively solitary hobbies can be enjoyed through engagement with a community of fellow enthusiasts. These social connections also make it more likely that you will stick with the hobby.

Hobbies can also be expensive, so before you go out and purchase a kiln or drum kit, look locally to see if you can find places where you can give these hobbies a go. If you do decide to take it up, look for secondhand options.

So, if your tempted to make some life changes this January, here are our 3 top tips:

1. Turn your resolution into a 'thing to start doing' rather than a 'thing to stop'.

2. Find the enjoyment in the resolution. Enjoyment is the best motivator.
3. Share your resolution and progress updates with a friend or make the change with others. If you know you will be asked for an update this could help keep you on track.



2025, we have lots of walks, runs and challenge events S.

[Web link](#)

[Find an event](#)

[Find an event or a challenge to take part in and fundraise for NRAS.](#)

Did you find this blog helpful? Be sure to follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [X](#) for more useful tips and tricks for managing your RA, and lots more content going into the new year!

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