

MAKE **2024**
your BEST
YEAR YET



If you want to change your life and fill the future with fun, laughter and positivity, you can. **Louise Atkinson** finds out how to introduce new goals and must-dos in 2024 – and actually make them happen

Are you someone who trots out a few half-hearted new year's resolutions each year and then abandons them before the last strains of Auld Lang Syne? Or do you set harshly optimistic self-improvement goals and berate yourself if they fizzle out halfway through January? Whatever your approach, it can be hard to make resolutions stick. But adopt a different mindset and frame your resolutions differently, say experts, and the turn of the year really can help you flush out unhelpful habits and introduce a few sparkly new ones. This is particularly true from midlife and beyond, when we are more aware of the clock ticking and opportunities we'd love to take being kicked to the sidelines... again.

With a confident expectation of living well into our 90s, there's every reason to be winding things up in midlife, rather than down, says Dr Julie Hannan, a chartered psychologist and psychotherapist. 'True contentment can come from living the second half of life differently to the first. Instead of another list of resolutions, see this January as a time to start prioritising yourself and

diverting all the love and energy you put into being a mother or a daughter into finding new meaning, purpose, direction and passion in your life.'

Julie is one of many experts who believe the new year is a great opportunity to release yourself from unwanted life scripts and rules that no longer serve you, and instead focus on how you want to live your life from now on. The really good news is that the ageing process has been thoroughly modernised and – hallelujah! – the rules of 'age-appropriate behaviour' have been thrown out of the window. Avoid falling into the trap of 'thinking old', says Julie, and instead start formulating a 'grand plan' which sets out what you want this next stage of your life to be like, and what dreams you wish to fulfil.

Unsure of your bucket list must-dos, or about the new, exciting direction you might head in? Ask yourself what core values are important to you now (Julie says they are unlikely to be the same as the values you've previously lived by) and take a bit of time to think about who you want to be in this next phase of life. Note down what you love, what you're good at, and what you feel strongly about. Is there anything you always said you'd do when you had more time? Any adventures you always wished for, or creative projects you've ➤

always wanted to start? If your nest is empty and work is winding down, now is the perfect time to plan experiences and adventures, to develop talents and skills, or to be of service to others. Take advantage of the natural sense of renewal that comes with waving goodbye to one year and welcoming in the next. Throw your energies into setting plans in motion, pushing your boundaries, filling your heart with joy and making 2024 your best year yet... here's how!

PLAN A BIG ADVENTURE

When you're musing on holiday destinations for the coming year, upgrade your search options to 'adventure' instead. This doesn't have to mean white-water rafting or jungle trekking (unless you want it to!), but this is the time to start thinking like a traveller rather than a tourist.

Flick through the travel sections of the weekend newspapers, or turn the pages of an old-style atlas, and pick out the destinations that fascinate and intrigue. And if you're no longer working, how about a 'grey gap year'? Recent research by Norwegian Cruise Lines shows that almost 37% of the over-60s are throwing caution to the wind and booking an extended trip of a lifetime. Don't be thwarted by the prospect of travelling alone. There are a wealth of opportunities for 'solo travel', which is, it turns out, a completely different concept to 'singles travel' (no expectation of match-ups, just like-minded people travelling alone).

- Finding a good travel consultant is key – the depth of knowledge and experience (plus the fact that they'll be covered by insurance, which will protect your whole holiday in case of cancellations) makes them worth the slightly higher price.
- Intrepidtravel.com offers adventures and small group holidays for families, couples and solo travellers, plus women-only expeditions (to Jordan, Peru, India and Pakistan).
- Silversurfers.com is aimed at the over-50s, with a section on adventure holidays, and you'll find plenty of inspiration at exodus.co.uk, adventures.com and holiday.saga.co.uk.

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PERFECT A TALENT

Once you hit midlife, it can feel as if your mental and physical prowess is slipping, but many important skills actually increase with age, making this a great time to foster dormant talents. A 2015 Harvard study found that vocabulary rockets at around 50; the ability to recognise and interpret other people's emotions rises at 40 and remains high as long as you work to hone your interpersonal skills. This crystallisation of intelligence explains why some people can bloom spectacularly when they're older. Annie Proulx published her first novel at the age of 56, Raymond Chandler at 51 and Frank McCourt wrote *Angela's Ashes* when he was 66.

So think back to the pastimes you enjoyed and even excelled at when you were younger. With focus and training, a new world of sporting achievements could open up – think cycling, tennis tournaments, or even endurance sports like trail running and triathlon. If you played a musical instrument as a child, a bit of practise could see you joining a local orchestra or band. Or if you loved treading the boards, how about amateur dramatics?

- Get inspired by Travis Bell's Ted Talk, 'Life's Way Too Short Not to Live Your Bucket List', encouraging you to realise your adventurous spirit, on YouTube.
- Marvel at Professor Norman Lazarus's achievements in competitive cycling in his 60s and 70s – and find out how you can do it too (*The Lazarus Strategy*; Yellow Kite, £9.99).
- Get tips on taking up an instrument at classicfm.com/discover-music/tips-adults-musical-instrument/

GIVE SOMETHING BACK

'Our life values very often change at midlife and many people find their sense of purpose shifts in the second half of their lives – you may notice a drive to be more nurturing or spiritual, and you may notice a stronger sense of justice,' says Dr Julie Hannan. Free from the burden of supporting a family, you are likely to have more time – and inclination – to get involved in voluntary work.

According to the UK Civil Society Almanac, seven out of every 10 people formally volunteer through a group, club or organisation at some point in their lives and studies, and research suggests that volunteering can increase wellbeing. Serving others provides a sense of purpose and achievement, and is a great way

to meet like-minded people and make new friends. Interestingly, older people appear to gain more from volunteering than other groups.

Your options are limitless: from being a voluntary tour guide at a museum or gardening at a stately home, to fostering animals that had a difficult start in life. You could work with children, the elderly, at home or overseas.

- Research volunteering options at restless.co.uk.
- Type your postcode into the search bar at nationaltrust.org.uk/support-us/volunteer or english-heritage.org.uk to find volunteering opportunities in your area.
- Visit gov.uk/volunteering for links to volunteering opportunities.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES



REDISCOVER PLAY

If you're going to be around for another 30 or 40 years, you've really got to factor in some fun. 'The "playful" part of yourself might have been suppressed by adulthood,' says Jon Stokes, co-author of *Changing Gear: Creating the Life You Want After a Full-On Career* (Headline, £12.99), 'but finding time for play right now could shine a light on the direction a meaningful next stage could take.'

Dr Julie Hannan suggests making a list of things you've always meant to try, or that you loved doing as a child. Fancy joining those bobble-hatted women for tea and cake after a spot of cold-water swimming? Search Facebook for local groups. Always fancied mastering bridge? Visit English Bridge Union (ebu.co.uk) and enter your postcode for clubs in your area. Enjoy computers? Adult gaming groups or programming classes for older adults might ignite a spark. Or how about exploring your cultural side – visiting galleries, booking theatre tickets, going to gigs? The key is to do something purely because it makes you happy.

● Read *Find Your Wow: How Seeing the World Differently Might Just Save Your Mind* by Lucy Stone (Wonderfield, £11.99).

● Join your local u3a (University of the Third Age; u3a.org.uk), a UK-wide collection of more than 1,000 charities that provide the opportunity for those no longer in work to come together and learn for fun, developing new interests in a relaxed environment.

● Go to the 'adult learning' section of your local authority website to find a list of courses.

RE-VAMP YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

If life with your long-term partner feels a little stale, or if you've let friendships lapse and family rifts fester, there's much to be gained from taking this opportunity to nurture relationships with those around you.

Loneliness and isolation isn't just miserable, it has been shown to damage your health. But Harvard psychiatrist Robert Waldinger extols the virtues of nurturing quality relationships. He suggests adding a couple of key points to your 'to do' list.

'It might be something as simple as replacing screen time with people time, or livening up a stale relationship by doing something new together, long walks or date nights, or reaching out to that family member who you haven't spoken to in years,' he says.

Dr Julie Hannan recommends working to expand your current friendships (get to know your friends' friends and reconnect with old friends) and making new friends whenever you can, seeking out new connections, which can help keep you plugged into a lively and thriving social life, and taking every opportunity to lean into relationships with family, friends and community.

● Watch Robert Waldinger's powerful Ted Talk 'What Makes a Good Life? Lessons From the Longest Study on Happiness', about the power of relationships, on YouTube.

● Read *The Midlife Crisis Handbook: Finding Direction in the Second Half of Life* by Dr Julie Hannan (Morency, £10.88), and visit drjuliehannan.com for more ideas. ■

