

The emotional, physical perks of planning a bucket list

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Whether it's traveling to Hawaii, trekking to Machu Picchu or starting a community garden, creating a "bucket list" prioritizes ambitious goals or spells out how we want to be remembered. It also can bring emotional and physical health benefits.

Research has shown pretrip planning brings happiness, and taking [vacation time](#) has been linked to more positive cardiovascular health outcomes.

Shilagh A. Mirgain, whose work as a health and sports psychologist involves cardiac rehabilitation patients, often asks: "What do you want your health for?"

Time goes by fast, she said, and it's important to avoid regrets later in life about what you wish you had done. A bucket list of experiences or places to visit can keep hopes and dreams front of mind amid [daily routines](#).

"We are creatures of habit, and we tend to go through our days on autopilot," said Mirgain, of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison. Think of a list as "a northern star that we can steer by."

Bucket list items may change throughout life. People in their 20s may yearn to embark on a rigorous hiking trip or travel abroad, while someone in their 70s or 80s may want to spend valuable time with grandchildren.

"You're never too old or never too young to start a bucket list," Mirgain said. "It's something to create and something that evolves as you go along."

Write or print out the list, and post it in a visible spot, or find a photo,

create artwork or make a "vision board" depicting the subject, Mirgain said. It's a tangible signal that even when everyday chores dominate your time, lifelong dreams matter.

A visual reminder can help you take daily steps to prepare for a bucket list event. Perhaps you'll be more likely to get on a treadmill or pack a nutritious lunch to boost your health and save money.

For example, Mirgain longed to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa. Looking at photos and envisioning it helped her get into good physical shape, buy the right hiking equipment, plan the trip and save up for the adventure. It took 20 years, but she achieved her goal. "It was amazing," she said.

If your bucket list includes spending time in nature, relish in the knowledge that relaxing, walking or practicing yoga in the natural world can ease stress and improve mental and physical health. If it's something requiring physical stamina, that can clarify the healthy steps needed to prepare.

When developing a bucket list, include a variety of items. They may be immediate plans, personal goals or once-in-a-lifetime events.

Shorter-term goals that are easier to achieve, such as trying a new food or visiting a place close to home, can prevent you from giving up on bigger goals and can generate "inner fuel and strength and confidence" when you achieve them, Mirgain said.

Sometimes, a bucket list item may need to be postponed because of a [health](#) setback or a family problem. But that doesn't mean giving up. Reaching the goal might be even sweeter once it's achieved.

Moments that test you may coax you to rework your bucket list and ask

yourself: Do I really want this?

A bucket list is not only about a singular event or moment, but about the person you become and the feeling you have when you reach a [goal](#), Mirgain said. Savor each step of the journey.

For example, visiting the Eiffel Tower isn't just that one moment at the top. It's about experiencing the surrounding parks, museums or cafes and enjoying Paris.

Having flexibility and a sense of humor helps during any special event and can help you avoid feelings of letdown if things don't go exactly as planned.

Finally, a bucket list doesn't need to be elaborate. Items can include taking up a new craft or learning a language or musical instrument. It can be mentoring a young person, planting trees or cleaning up your neighborhood.

"Bucket lists can be a wide range of things for people," said Mirgain, who emphasizes it's all about listening to your heart's desire.

Provided by American Heart Association

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