

# The pandemic has inspired new health habits: What four scholars put into practice and why

January 12 2022, by Libby Richards, Jessica Bane Robert, Katherine Basbaum, L. Alison Phillips

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For some people, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about

change—some welcome and some not so welcome—to their routines or to what they prioritize. We asked four scholars to reflect on a health habit that they have adopted during the tumultuous months and years since COVID-19 turned people's lives upside down.

## **Walking as a source of solitude and connection**

### **Libby Richards, Associate Professor of Nursing, Purdue University**

As a busy working mom of two active boys, I embrace solitude whenever I can; I even take solace in grocery shopping. But when the pandemic hit, my errands became risky activities. Instead, with schools closed and the family at home, I embraced my time with them and got creative entertaining the kids.

But it was harder to find time for myself. "Alone time" went out the window. If I wanted to keep my sanity, I knew I needed to find some space. That's when I put on my walking shoes and went outside.

At first, the walk was simply an escape. But as my routine became more consistent, I began to recognize and experience its benefits. [As a nurse](#) and [physical activity researcher](#), I already understood the importance of an active lifestyle. But before the pandemic, I focused only on the physical aspects, like keeping my muscles toned and weight stable.

I discovered that I had overlooked a crucial benefit of physical activity: [mental health](#). Instead of focusing my walks on physical fitness, I started walking for [stress and tension relief](#). And it worked. My sleep improved, I had fewer headaches and I could concentrate better.

Although my family is easing back into a new routine, I continue to

walk, even during phone meetings and when it's [cold out](#). Sometimes I walk to do errands instead of driving. I feel more connected [with nature](#), and I have a greater appreciation for fresh air. I've been able to disconnect from daily stressors, my mood and outlook are better and my overall sense of well-being has improved.

## **Making weightlifting a strong habit**

### **Alison Phillips, Associate Professor of Psychology, Iowa State University**

I decided to lift weights during the pandemic to [build strength and to reduce stress](#). As [a health psychologist](#) who studies [how to build health-related habits](#), I already knew what I needed to do: repeat the behavior in the same time or place and make sure a reward was tied to the behavior. No problem, I thought.

When it comes to cardio activity, I already had a solid habit, starting years before the pandemic. Every day, before dinner, I would do something that counts as cardio. During the pandemic, this has included getting on the home elliptical, jogging outside or doing a step video. I knew that one way to form a new habit is to piggyback on an existing habit, so I planned to lift weights after my cardio sessions. Four times a week, I would alternate resistance training of arms and legs.

But lifting weights wasn't fun, it didn't feel good at first, and I couldn't tell if I was improving. I kept track of my weights workout on a calendar, and for most of 2020, that was the only reward I felt—a sense of accomplishment and a check mark on a piece of paper. I still had to persuade myself to do it, and only guilt or anticipated regret would drive me.

That didn't work so well. Three days or more would pass with no weightlifting, until I would finally force myself to do it. Eventually, after months and months of semiregular lifting, I came to see it as something I valued.

What was my reward? I became more toned and fit, sure. And that was part of my identity and something I could be proud of during the mess of the pandemic. But what finally turned weightlifting into a habit was the good physical sensations I came to appreciate during and after a muscle-building exercise. If I didn't lift weights after doing cardio, my body felt unused.

All habits, good or bad, require a [similar process to become habitual](#). Typically, this involves [repetition in a familiar context](#), paired with a reward for the behavior. The "context" for the habit might be a consistent location, timing and/or a sequence of activities.

It took me a full year to develop what I would call a habit of lifting weights. Now, even when my context changes—like returning to the gym after getting vaccinated or traveling for work or holidays—my body expects and needs the muscle work, and I find a way to do some kind of resistance training.

## **Small indulgences, in moderation**

### **Katherine Basbaum, Clinical Dietitian, University of Virginia**

As [a registered dietitian](#), I've always promoted and followed the "all foods fit" mentality. This means that, as long as [the majority of your meals and snacks](#) are prepared with nutritious foods, then [small indulgences are fine](#).

For as long as I can remember, chocolate has been one of the tiny indulgences I allowed myself. Pre-pandemic, my chocolate habit consisted of one small piece in the morning with coffee, none during the day since I was running around a hospital from 9 to 5, and then another after dinner.

But when the pandemic began and I began working at home a few days per week, my routines changed in a big way, including what and when I ate. I still had three mostly balanced meals on the days I worked from home. But a new habit emerged too. My chocolate consumption, once a morning and evening indulgence, sometimes tripled. That's because the chocolate was always right there, easily accessible all day long.

When I realized my once-harmless habit was out of control, I stopped buying the large bags of chocolate. Instead, I [downsized to a single-serving package](#) once per week. Because I wasn't going to stores much, I was forced to stretch it out.

Ultimately I got back to my two-a-day routine. And even though I'm back to working in person at the hospital, I haven't gone back to the big bags of chocolate. Those single-serving packages still suit me just fine.

## **Clearing the mind through meditation**

**Jessica Bane Robert, Writing and Mindfulness  
Instructor, Clark University**

I've [taught a course](#) called [Mindful Choices](#) at Clark University for eight years, so one might think I would have had a consistent meditation practice before now.

Yet not until the pandemic did I find the time and mental space to

commit to daily meditation. Since March 2020, at least once daily, I have reserved 10 minutes to calm my mind by focusing on the breath or by using guided visualizations to picture beautiful supportive places or positive future outcomes. Depending on the day, I performed my "sits," as they are called by meditation practitioners, by the pond in front of my home, upon waking or at bedtime.

Since then, my [blood pressure has dropped](#)—but even more importantly, I have experienced greater peace. I have less attachment to negative thoughts and emotions while being able to really dwell and linger on the positive. Further, meditation has improved my focus and "working memory." Research suggests that [benefits can be achieved](#) with as little as 10 minutes a day spent meditating.

Taking time to meditate may feel selfish to some, but research shows it [can reduce prejudice and bias toward others](#) as well as lessen one's own tendency to find the negative in situations, called negativity bias. To foster gentleness toward oneself and compassion for others, my students and I practice loving kindness—a [type of meditation practice popularized by](#) author Sharon Salzberg.

Many [apps are available](#) to guide you while cuing you to meditate and provide community—[two things that make a new habit stick](#). Insight Timer—my favorite—has a [free version](#), but you may want to try Headspace, Waking Up, Ten Percent Happier and Calm, all apps that offer free trials. If you learn a new practice better by reading, dive into Salzberg's "[Real Happiness](#)" or Jon Kabat-Zinn's classic "[Wherever You Go, There You Are](#)."

What I love about my new [habit](#) is that meditation can be done anytime, anywhere. All you need is your breath and, with it, you can change the quality of your thoughts and your day.

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Provided by The Conversation

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<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-pandemic-health-habits-scholars.html>

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