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9 ways to improve your world

*By Sophia Ahmad , Mary Challender, Patt Johnson, Jennifer Miller, Michael Morain, Tom Perry, Dawn Sagario
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It's about time to stop dwelling on the negative news in 2008. This year, find a positive way to make a difference in your life, your family's life or in your community in the coming year.

1. Get and give

Learning new things doesn't have to be scary — or expensive. Des Moines schools' community education program offers dozens of affordable classes.

Peggy Altman, coordinator for community education, said registration is under way for classes in everything from yoga, blacksmithing and making soup to blogging basics.

"The real key is people enjoy the social contact," she said.

Classes begin the week of Jan. 12. Register at www.dmced.org or (515) 237-1690.

- Teach adults how to read at the Drake University adult literacy center. Coordinator Anne Murr said the only prerequisite for volunteers is a willingness to learn and commit to a year of tutoring twice a week. (515) 271-3982 or e-mail ann.murr@drake.edu.
- Learn Spanish basics through Des Moines Area Community College's continuing education Spanish program. Once a week six weeks, \$149. Sheri Reynolds, (515) 965-7322 or e-mail slreynolds@dmacc.edu.
- Learn computer basics at a free class offered by The Des Moines Public Library. 283-4152.

2. Declutter your life

To get a handle on a busier-than-you-want life, organize your physical surroundings then declutter your schedule, said professional organizer Lori Vande Krol of Life Made Simple. "That way you will find more time for family, friends, church" or other things that are important to you, she said.

•Use a calendar consistently, consolidating work and home. "It's harder to over-book yourself when you only have 24 hours per day on your calendar," said Pam Woods, owner of Smart WorkLife Solutions in West Des Moines.

•Clean out the house. Find a place for everything or get rid of it. Donations to thrift stores support the community. And sorting through closets, drawers and cupboards with your family can provide some valuable together-time for busy families, said Patty Horton, an organizing specialist and an owner of Straighten Your Paths in West Des Moines.

• Dump the junk mail in the green bin before it ever comes in the house. Limit more mail by paying credit card and other bills online. Remove your name from direct mail lists by contacting Direct Marketing Association, www.dmachoice.org.

3. Lift your spirits

Improving your inner health can be as simple as spending time with friends, getting a massage or rearranging your furniture.

- Find a place of worship. Common rituals make individuals feel invited and involved, according to Doug Peters, senior minister at Walnut Hills Church in Urbandale. “Church is one of those rare opportunities in society to not be isolated, but to reconnect and be a part of a community,” he said.
- Get a massage. We might think of massage’s obvious physical benefits like muscle relief, but pain can have psychological roots, said Cassie Sampson, owner of At Ease Spa in the East Village. “Massage can help people learn more about their body and how it responds to stressors. When people are under stress, they may tend to clench their jaw, leading to headaches.”
- Laugh more. “People who have a sense of humor and can laugh — they feel better about themselves most often,” said Pat Tetersen, MSW, LISW and owner of Inner Health Services in Des Moines. And, a plus, good humored people who laugh attract others.

4. Manage your money

Bulking up personal savings top the list of most people’s goals for the new year, according to recent surveys.

- Check out SmartyPig, the brainchild of Des Moines businessmen Jon Gaskell and Mike Ferrari. It allows people to start online savings accounts to which family and friends can make contributions, directly or through a social networking page, such as MySpace. The goal-based program helps people save to make a major purchase and get moral support along the way, said Gaskell. Smartypig.com.
- Teach kids to save by giving them an allowance and letting them decide how to spend it. It will make them more competent with their money as adults. And if your family is having financial difficulties, talk to your children about it, said Margaret Van Ginkle, an Iowa State University Extension specialist. “You don’t have to give them every detail, but you can ask for their input,” she said.
- Make a donation. The Endow Iowa program adds some incentive: Taxpayers receive a 20 percent Iowa tax credit on top of the normal state and federal charitable income tax deductions for certain charitable gifts. www.desmoinesfoundation.org.
- Know the score. Consumers, by law, are entitled to a free copy of their credit reports each year. Get a copy of your credit report from each of the credit reporting agencies: (877) 322-8228 toll-free, www.annualcreditreport.com, or write P.O. Box 105281, Atlanta, GA 30348-5281.

5. Go green

Already recycle? Take the next step? Anita O’Gara, director of development for the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, said Iowans can do that by buying products with less packaging, such as bulk foods.

In the larger sense, it means just buying less, period, O’Gara said. “The idea of just having less stuff in your life really does simplify your life and free up your time,” she said. Also, teach your children the difference between wants and needs.

- Use reusable shopping bags to reduce the 500 billion plastic bags that end up in landfills and waterways each year, suggests Lynn Laws, communications director for the Iowa Environmental Council.
- Barter or swap. Get the things you need used, either at thrift shops like Goodwill and St. Vincent de Paul or online at sites like freecycle.org and reuseitnetwork.org.

- Take public transportation. It's less isolating, Laws said, and if you have to walk to your bus stop, you're getting in some exercise.

6. Eat tastier food

Improve the flavor of home cooking by using the freshest ingredients possible, said Teresa Tomka of Kitchen Collage in the East Village. To do this, shorten the distance between farm and fork and buy from local sources, she said.

Locally grown produce is also likely to be higher in nutrients than food that has been shipped great distances, said Joyce Lock, the Des Moines-based author of the game "Foodie Fight."

- Sign up with a farmer in a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program. "I can't promise there are a lot of openings, but we'll help people find what's out there," said local Buy Fresh-Buy Local coordinator Matt Russell at the Drake Agricultural Law Center. www.buyfreshdrake.org.
- Consider the new Iowa Food Cooperative, which has an outlet at Merle Hay Mall. "I think people will be surprised by the variety of local products we have year-round," the coop's Linda Gobberdiel said.
- Grow your own. "Planting your own herbs and vegetables is a fantastic, economical way to eat more gourmet food," said Michelle Walke of the Polk County Master Gardeners.

7. Manage your time

Streamline a few things to make the most of the new year — all 525,600 precious minutes of it.

Carolyn Hill, who helps manage the Drake Relays (where even seconds count), churns through piles of e-mail every day.

Her strategy? "Organize your incoming e-mails by responding immediately with the answer or that you will get back to them," she wrote in a (prompt) e-mail. "Delete e-mails that won't be needed and move others to specific e-mail folders for reference . . . the main thing is to develop a system so all questions are answered in a timely fashion."

She also recommends communicating as much as possible online, with the help of grouped addresses for quick announcements.

- Be ruthless. Colleen Kelly, a radio host on 102.5 FM, used to work for a boss who kept a stopwatch on his desk. "If you asked for 'a minute,' that's what you got," she said. "I remember thinking it was a little harsh but after I noticed how many people asked him for 'a minute' every day, I understood."
- Plan ahead. Jan Gillum, who has worked as an assistant to John Ruan and John Ruan III for almost 48 years, tries not to leave the office on Friday afternoon without first plotting a list of priorities for Monday morning. "I lay things out to save me steps," she said.
- Read "It's About Time: Time-Saving Tips for Every Day" by Schar Ward and Vicki Lansky. Its 120 pages are full of simple ways to stretch the hours in a day: store new garbage bags in the bottom of the trash can, arrange furniture to simplify cleaning, and — for the mildly devious — make strategic phone calls. "Need to call a 'talker'? Place your call when the 'talker' isn't likely to keep you on the phone, or just before lunch or quitting time," write Ward and Lansky.

8. Find your health

Being fit and healthy is a team effort for Beth Jorgenson and her co-workers.

From walking every lunch hour to participating in the IMT Des Moines Half Marathon, it's about supporting and encouraging one another, said Beth Jorgenson, 47, who works in the Iowa Department of Public Health's Bureau of Professional Licensure.

"I don't exercise to get in shape; I exercise to socialize," Jorgenson laughed. Their lunchtime walking group includes Jorgenson, Karla Hoover, Margie Jass, Judy Manning and Ella Mae Baird, Jorgenson said.

They inspire each other, too, said Jorgenson, who points to Hoover's 153-pound loss as one of her personal inspirations.

- Join Live Healthy Iowa, a team-based weight loss and physical activity program that runs from Jan. 14 to April 23. "When you're a member of a team, you can't let your teammates down," said Jim Hallihan, executive director of the Iowa Sports Foundation, which runs Live Healthy Iowa formerly Lighten Up Iowa. www.livehealthyiowa.org.

- Walk your child to school and invite others to join you. "Such an effort will deliver them to school ready to learn and healthier for the effort," said Tim Lane, fitness consultant at the Iowa Department of Public Health, via e-mail. It will also improve traffic congestion and offer great memories.

9. Reach out and help

In the early 1980s, the Animal Rescue League used to bring a beat-up trailer full of adoptable animals to Nollen Plaza for the lunchtime crowd to fall in love with. Mary Sparling visited the animals each time, and each time she would cry for them.

Finally, Sparling's lunch buddy told her to quit boo-hoing and do something about it by volunteering. Twenty years later, the 52-year-old Des Moines woman is still at it, now working mostly with special events such as Santa 'N Paws holiday photo event each fall. "I get much more out of it than I put into it," Sparling said.

According to Tom Colvin, ARL's executive director, in November alone, 368 helpers put in 2,197 hours. Volunteers can do everything from dog-walking to laundry to cat-toy making. Volunteer orientations are held the second Saturday of each month, 9 to 11 a.m. at the main shelter, 5452 N.E. 22nd St., Des Moines. (515) 473-9101; www.arl-iowa.org.

- Help with wildflower and grass maintenance at Brenton Arboretum. Volunteers help with prairie restoration, children's programs and trail maintenance. Kay Meyer, director of education and outreach, also plans about three big volunteer projects each year, such as collecting prairie grass and flower seeds each fall. (515) 992-4211; thebrentonarboretum.org.

- Help refugees become independent by teaching them how to use the bus system via Lutheran Services in Iowa Refugee Cooperative. Volunteers are required to complete required trainings and submit documentation of a recent TB test. Jill Stuecker, LSI refugee resettlement, 515/271.7418; jill.stuecker@lsiowa.org; www.lsiowa.org