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Hanks: Looking for some January resolve? Try being nicer

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By Anna Hanks - Regular contributor

I've spent the first weeks of January at home with the kind of severe cold that justifies not getting out of pajamas for days.

While contagiously confined to the couch, I've seen countless stories about kale, this year's diet and how to pick the right gym for you.







Anna Hanks blogs about pop culture at annainaustin.com.

Our focus on physical self improvement in January is both relentless and misguided. Sure, if your blood pressure needs attention, you should do what your doctor says, but this collective mania to quickly erase the physical evidence of our familiarity with the holiday cheese plate is incredibly selfish.

We ought to reform how we look at January. It's time to stop focusing on ourselves and on the improvements in our own bodies. Instead let's turn the focus of January onto the kind of self-improvement that does some good in the world. Instead of trying to get motivated about exercising our triceps to seem sleeker, we ought to make a collective effort to stop putting ourselves first and exercise our "be nice" muscle.

Why is January a good time for this? January could use the help. January is currently the gloomiest and most grump-producing month on the entire calendar. The holidays are over – for better or worse – and it's a long time until the next scheduled break from school and work. The holiday bills are coming due while the holiday decorations are coming down. The weather is often terrible, and the cedar pollen makes many of us in Central Texas mighty wheezy. Together these things make for a terrible month. It's a time of year where many of us could use a little cossetting and kindness.

First on the list of ways to improve the world: Be nicer behind the wheel.

When I was first learning how to drive, my father pointed out that most traffic accidents are caused by rudeness. The older I get, the more I realize how he is totally right. So the next time that someone tries to cut in front of you in a line of traffic, just let them go on ahead. Smile if you can manage it.

Next up: Increased civility at the grocery store. When you do your shopping, try being fabulously considerate to the person checking out your groceries. I often shop at a small hippie co-op near my house, and I usually try to go through the check-out line of a female composer I've talked to several times, mostly so I can talk to her about her current works. On the days when shop at the big H-E-B, I try to make the checker laugh a little as he or she rings up my groceries. (One of my friends got a lot of grief as a blue-haired checker at an H-E-B last year, so I try to be extra nice.)

This kind of sociability pays all sorts of dividends. I found out on one of my trips through the Whole Foods checkout line that Academy Award winner and bongo aficionado Matthew McConaughey had bought the same brand of facial cleanser I did from the exact same checker at the downtown Whole Foods. It's my brush with stardom!

If you feel that you are ready to step up your "be nice" game beyond the streets and the stores, there are a lot of organizations that would love to have your help. No matter your skill set, someone can use your help. My husband and I put in many hours each year with the charity Scare For a Cure, where we help build and operate

an elaborate haunted house. This year our efforts helped Scare donate \$30,000 to the Breast Cancer Resource Centers of Texas, money that we diverted to charity by building –and chewing– the scenery!

So instead of us all literally navel-gazing at our post-holiday bulge, let’s get out and do something to improve the world. It might be nothing but trying harder to be kind while picking up your dry cleaning, but it could be doing something much more hands-on.

Of course, if you really feel you must get more active, you can combine the two activities. In Austin there’s a group called the RuffTail Runners, who aim to get some of Austin’s shelter dogs outside for some fresh air and exercise, in the hopes that this will make the dogs happier and more adoptable.

In the words of the RuffTail Runners website, “So, get off your butt, and run a mutt!”

That’s some good advice for making the world a better place.

Hanks blogs about pop culture at annainaustin.com.

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