

Experience Life

JULY/AUGUST 2026

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL.

**DIY
RETREATS**
FOR CREATIVITY,
FLOW, AND REST

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DREAM BIG

PICKLEBALL PRO
TYRA BLACK

IS TAKING THE COURT
BY STORM — AND
DISCOVERING JOY, FUN,
AND NEW AMBITIONS.

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LIFE TIME

POWERING
L.A.I.C.

NOBULL

Lightweight Feel

Locked-In
Stability

Lateral Support
Built In

OUTWORK EDGE
WHITE GUM



Built to Work.
Made to Last.

OUTWORK

The OG
Strength
Trainer

OUTWORK
BLACK GUM

NOBULL

NOBULL

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Experience Life 25th Anniversary Edition

The Stories That Stay With Us

In celebration of 25 years of *Experience Life* magazine, our team shares the articles that have stuck with them.

“Fearless Health”

(January/February 2015)
I experience a lot of health anxiety, and I’m quick to catastrophize about what’s going on in my body. But when I fall into a health spiral, I try to recall Jill Patton’s advice to embrace enjoyment over fear, consume health news more consciously, and make peace with uncertainty. This balanced approach grounds me even when I feel most unmoored. — **Molly Tynjala King**, senior editor/lead fact checker

“What We Don’t Know About Lyme”

(June 2009)
The one piece that sticks in my mind is Pam Weintraub’s feature on chronic Lyme disease. I feel like it established *EL* as a serious journalistic voice in the health and fitness world. — **Craig Cox**, deputy editor

“Hands-Free: 18 Ways to Break the Cellphone Habit”

(September 2020)
It took a while to recognize that my cellphone is mostly designed to hijack my attention. But when I went from reading a couple of books a month to struggling to read a few a year, I knew I needed some strategies to help reset my focus and concentration. This article detailed how to do it — and I go back

to it often when I’m feeling overwhelmed by screen time. — **Jane Meronuck**, production director

“Sleep-Supportive Nutrients”

(October 2022)
This article came out shortly after we had our second child. I was desperate for sleep and tried many different things, all thanks to this article. Supplementing with magnesium is the one I stuck with. I feel like I have a more restful sleep when I take it — even after my children wake me up in the middle of the night. — **Carrie Stafford**, senior manager—business and circulation

“10 Essentials of Aging Well”

(November 2022)
I return to Frank Lipman’s healthy-aging piece on the regular. I can never get too many reminders to sleep more, complain less, and have a sense of humor about aging. — **Courtney Helgoe**, executive editor

“No-Fail Fitness”

(January/February 2005)
This article led to my light-bulb moment: The key to staying active is to enjoy what you’re doing. If something doesn’t feel good physically or mentally, I don’t do it. — **Laura Lineburg**, director—digital marketing and media strategy

“Purposeful Movement”

(April 2018)
This article by Kara Douglass Thom is always in the back of

my mind. Initially, it encouraged me to evaluate how much movement I outsource in my life by reaching for the easiest, fastest way to get something done. Now, years later, I move more slowly and with more intention, something that has benefited all aspects of my life. — **Tatyana McNamara**, senior manager—multimedia, email, and social media

“Rethinking Heart Health”

(September 2016)
For me, it’s Anjula Razdan’s article on heart health, published way back when I was still fairly new to the *EL* team. This article totally reframed everything I thought I knew about cardiovascular disease, and it serves as an excellent example of what truly sets our content apart: We’re always questioning what we think we know and trying to look at the bigger picture. — **Kaelyn Riley**, editorial director of food and nutrition

“Pan-Fried Halloumi With Cucumber Salad”

(June 2023)
I had never heard of halloumi before we did this article, and this ended up being one of my favorite dishes in the 11-plus years I’ve worked here! Every time I make this dish for friends, they’re impressed with how fancy it looks, but it’s actually quite simple to make! It’s a recipe I reach for over and over. — **Jennifer Jacobson**, art director

“The Healing Power of Sleep”

(March 2013)
This article marks a turning point in my personal and professional life. When it was published, I was a breaking-news reporter struggling with insomnia and burnout. The piece was a reality check: Within months, I had transitioned to a dream job at *Experience Life* and was finally healing my relationship to sleep. — **Maggie Fazeli Fard**, editorial director of fitness

“Eggs: Recipes, Techniques, and More”

(September 2006)
Thanks to a tip from this article — “[Eggs] continue cooking when removed from heat, so to avoid rubberiness, remove when they are still slightly wet” — I haven’t overcooked an egg in 20 years! — **Christy Rice**, digital content specialist/special projects coordinator

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Experience Life

BY LIFE TIME

OUR MISSION: Empowering people to become their healthiest, happiest, most authentic selves and supporting their enjoyment of a balanced, sustainable, deeply satisfying way of life.

OUR MANTRA: HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL.

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HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

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Experience Life shares health-and-wellness information and healthy-way-of-life stories that reflect a wide variety of human experiences. We respect individuals' pronouns and personal descriptors; for this reason, terms may vary from article to article.

LESSONS LEARNED

A QUARTER CENTURY of publishing — that's what this edition marks for *Experience Life*. To celebrate, I'm excited to share 25 of the lessons I've gleaned from our team's 25 years of health and wellness reporting.

1. It's all intertwined — mindset, stress and sleep, nutrition and healthy eating, fitness and movement, community. Pull one thread and it affects the others. Nothing happens in isolation.
2. Mental health is as important as physical health. "Mind right, body right," as my *Life Time Talks* cohost David Freeman often says.
3. Pleasure matters in all aspects of our health and well-being. If we're not enjoying how we're moving, eating, and connecting, then what are we doing?
4. Prioritize consistency over intensity. When we commit to showing up, we create habits and behaviors that set us up for long-term success.
5. Of course, intensity has its place. It's about applying it in the right doses to stimulate the change we're seeking.
6. The right support system can make all the difference. We need our people.
7. Slowing down and taking breaks is not lazy — it's essential for our emotional, mental, and physical well-being. (More on this in "Build Your Own Retreat" on page 64.)
8. Practice to progress, not to be perfect. Improvements come from moving forward, even when we stumble or have to take a few steps back along the way.
9. Our positive habits and behaviors make us resilient, which helps us cope when life throws curveballs our way (which it inevitably will).
10. Adversity is often an opportunity for personal growth and discovery.
11. Sleep is as important as exercise and good nutrition for optimal health.
12. Understanding our bodies and how they function can change our motivation for how and why we take care of them.
13. Connecting with our why — our intrinsic motivations and values — is more effective than focusing on external rewards, which are often temporary.
14. A healthy relationship with oneself is the basis for healthy relationships with others.
15. Forget all-or-nothing goals; instead, focus on what's sustainable and realistic.
16. Food is more than fuel for our bodies: It's pleasure, it's connection, it's memory.
17. Strength training and building muscle are nonnegotiable for healthy aging.
18. Being curious and embracing adventure can open the door to new possibilities. (On page 52, get inspired to start a new fitness adventure.)
19. Willingness is more powerful than willpower when it comes to making meaningful change. This is one of my favorite lessons from our founding editor, Pilar Gerasimo.
20. The language we use about our bodies, our age, and our eating habits can affect how we experience and engage with them — positively or negatively.
21. Play is not a frivolous indulgence. It's an opportunity to reconnect with our younger selves and experience real joy.
22. Environmental, societal, and communal health are directly related to individual health.
23. Change happens as we work toward our goals, not when we achieve them.
24. Empowering people with information — so they can take their health into their own hands — is way more effective than "shoulding" people with guilt and shame.
25. Following our dreams keeps us connected to our authenticity, our values, and our passions. This pursuit is a reminder that anything is possible.

Twenty-five years in and there's still more to learn and share. Cheers to what's ahead!



Connecting with our why — our intrinsic motivations and values — is more effective than focusing on external rewards, which are often temporary.



YOUR THOUGHTS?

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TALK TO US

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

🧠 This article couldn't have come at a better time for me ("How to Break Free From Hyperpalatable Foods," March/April 2026). It helped me to understand why I have cravings and why I couldn't stop eating these hyperpalatable foods. I now understand why I didn't feel satisfied, even though I had just eaten a sizable portion.

Nancy W.

📘 There are three reasons to eat: Survival. Fuel. Pleasure. Most of us find a way to get enough to survive ("The Truth About Ultraprocessed Foods," January/February 2025). We get confused, though, between the need to eat to grow, develop, and produce vs. the need to eat for pleasure and that momentary "high."

Kenneth H.

EXTRA HELP FOR ALLERGIES

🧠 I have struggled with allergies my entire life ("Why Seasonal Allergies Are Getting Worse — and What You Can Do About It," March/April 2026). I get immunotherapy and it helps, but having some other ways to combat allergy symptoms and reactions is also helpful, and I will keep these tips in mind.

Nicole G.

NORMAL VS. HEALTHY

📘 I read your article "*Normal* vs. *Optimal* Lab Ranges: Why the Difference Matters" (February 2026), but for me the real problem isn't whether the typical lab results are normal. My doctors always say my numbers are good. But they're not looking at the right numbers, like stress biomarkers, fatigue, pain over time, social support, and quality of life. It's almost like the whole disease-management industry is set up to ignore these and sweep trauma under the rug.

Shay S.

ASSESSING AI

(On "The Chatbot Blues," January 2026)

📘 I didn't spend 20 years gaining an education to now in my later years



allow off-the-leash code to "think" for me. I am firmly of the use-it-or-lose-it persuasion. I can now appreciate why my mathematics instructors banned pocket calculators in basic math classes. If you don't learn foundational math (or any educational rudiments, really), you will always be illiterate without a machine.

Michael C.

📘 I'm a senior and I *love* AI! You can stay stagnant, but I choose to move forward with great advancements and less "Terminator conspiracy theory."

Debi L.

Experience Life welcomes your comments and suggestions. Email experiencelife@experiencelife.com, connect with us on social media, or send feedback to:

Letters to the Editor

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A COURAGEOUS CONFESSION

✉ I want to send a shout-out to Jamie Martin for sharing her story and journey with high-functioning depression ("Less Is More," November/December 2025). It takes courage to share one's own vulnerabilities — especially in print for all to see. Know that sharing your story now helps all of us readers take a look in the mirror and evaluate our own current state. Thank you for being brave and strong.

John T.

A GREEN LIGHT FOR RED-LIGHT THERAPY

📘 I did red-light therapy for a while ("Can Red-Light Therapy Help Fitness Performance and Recovery?," March 2025). It seemed like a gimmicky waste of time and money, but I did notice positive changes in my body at the time, so I think it's beneficial.

K Rob S.

THE WHY OF A YOGA POSE

🧠 Thanks so much for this article ("How to Do Savasana," October 2024). As I work on my yoga teaching certification, I'm learning the importance of breaking down a pose and understanding the why behind it. I'm really glad I came across this piece; its insight will definitely guide my practice moving forward.

Olivia

ANTIDOTES FOR ANKLE PROBLEMS

🧠 I recently visited a podiatrist after suffering pain under my big toe and was told I have extremely tight ankles. Rather than recommending any exercises, he offered to redo my orthotics. When I visited an acupuncturist, he too commented on my tight ankles. Then I came across this article while I was browsing my emails ("How to Improve Ankle Mobility," June 2009). I'm going to follow the recommendations today.

Cynthia H.



THE BEST MEDICINE FOR JOINT PAIN MAY BE EXERCISE

CREAKY KNEES, stiff hips, and other sore joints often send us to the medicine cabinet in search of pain relief. But recent research on osteoarthritis (OA) suggests that we may be better served by simply moving more.

Exercise was just as effective as over-the-counter pain medications for those suffering from knee or hip osteoarthritis, researchers reported in a 2023 review published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* that examined 152 randomized controlled trials.

“Given its excellent safety profile,” the authors note, “exercise should be given more prominence in clinical care, especially in older people with comorbidity or at higher risk of adverse events related to NSAIDs and paracetamol [acetaminophen].”

That message, however, has not been widely embraced by healthcare providers — or by their patients. Writing in *BMJ Open*, University of Limerick physiotherapist Clodagh Toomey, PhD, cites a large study that found that fewer than half of osteoarthritis patients in Ireland, the United

Kingdom, and the United States have been referred to a physical therapist to treat their joint pain.

“Despite OA being among the leading causes of years lived with disability,” Toomey writes, “the decision to seek care can be deterred by negative or dismissive attitudes from healthcare professionals about their nonurgent condition, or the perception that pain is part of aging.”

Many patients misunderstand the origins of OA, which may contribute to treatment avoidance. Osteoarthritis isn’t a product of wear and tear on the joint, she explains. It’s really a “wear and repair” process that can benefit from movement.

The spongelike cartilage that covers the ends of our bones and our joints relies on movement for its nutrient supply. Fluid is squeezed out when this cartilage is compressed during walking or other exercise and reabsorbed when it’s decompressed. By encouraging nutrients and natural lubricants to circulate, exercise promotes joint health.

Toomey sees osteoarthritis as a whole-joint disease because it also affects bones, ligaments, muscles, and nerves. She cites studies that show a link between OA and muscle weakness and argues that resistance training may be key to prevention and treatment. She also points to neuromuscular exercise programs that have been effective at relieving pain from hip and knee osteoarthritis.

And then there’s bicycling. Writing in *Outside*, Alex Hutchinson touts the results of a 2024 study in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, which found that people who have “any history of cycling” are 9 percent less likely than noncyclists to be diagnosed with osteoarthritis.

“Lifelong cyclists cut their risk of symptomatic knee OA by almost half,” he writes.

Swimming, strength training, and even running have been associated with lower risk for the disease, Hutchinson notes, “despite what every nonrunner and ex-runner you know will continue to insist.”

— CRAIG COX

YES, YOUR SCALP HAS A MICROBIOME TOO

Your body's 5 million hair follicles have a unique microbiome of their own. And the multitude of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms that live within it help protect you from pathogens and harmful environmental factors like UV radiation.

Beyond just growing hair, follicles are home to a vital and dynamic environment with a "range of protective and regulatory functions," explain the authors of a 2025 review of research published in *The Microbe*.

The 90,000 to 150,000 follicles on your scalp are key to hair growth, hair loss, and hair health. But they also avert the pathogenic colonization that causes conditions such as dandruff, seborrheic dermatitis, and acne.

Diet, stress, and hormonal changes can all affect the health of the microbiota, for better or worse. Our personal-care products — including shampoo, conditioner, bleach, and colorings — can upset the balance too.

"Just as the fundamental rule of the Hippocratic oath

Diet, stress, and hormonal changes can all affect the health of the microbiota, for better or worse.



in modern medicine is to first and foremost do no harm, the products we use to maintain or improve scalp and hair health should at least preserve the microbiome," the authors of a 2023 study argue in the *Journal of Clinical and Aesthetic Dermatology*. "As evidence for links between microbiome imbalances and scalp/skin disorders mounts, research turns toward more natural therapies to improve scalp and hair health without causing dysbiosis of the microbiome." (For more on safer personal-care products, see [ELmag.com/personalcareproducts](https://www.ELmag.com/personalcareproducts).)

Recent research on the scalp microbiome might also lead to new therapies for hair issues, the *Microbe* authors note. "Probiotics, prebiotics, and other microbiome-modulating treatments may hold promise for restoring balance to disintegrated microbial communities and alleviating associated conditions."

— MICHAEL DREGNI

TRACKING THE DECLINE IN CHILDREN'S PEANUT ALLERGIES

Among the most common food allergies, the peanut allergy affects between 1 and 2 percent of Americans. It typically appears during childhood and persists through life, although some 20 percent of people outgrow it.

Doctors long advised parents to avoid giving peanut products to their infants and young children. But in 2017, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases officially reversed that guidance — and peanut allergies have decreased sharply since, according to a 2025 study in the journal *Pediatrics*.

That reversal followed a landmark 2015 clinical trial published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* that found introducing peanut products to babies could cut their chances of developing an allergy by more than 80 percent.

After the new guidelines were put into place, the *Pediatrics* study notes, peanut allergy rates in children under 3 fell 43 percent from 2017 to 2020.

The 2017 guidelines were expanded in a 2021 statement from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology; the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology; and the Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology.

"To prevent peanut and/or egg allergy, both peanut and egg should be introduced around 6 months of life, but not before 4 months," the authors recommend. "Other allergens should be introduced around this time as well. Upon introducing complementary foods, infants should be fed a diverse diet, because this may help foster prevention of food allergy."

— MD





TIPS TO REDUCE NIGHTTIME TRIPS TO THE BATHROOM

There's a name for waking up in the middle of the night to empty the bladder: nocturia. About half of all seniors wake up at least once a night, and a third of people over 30 wake up more than twice. While for most this is a simple annoyance, the condition can also be a sign of acute or chronic illness.

Aging takes a toll; hormonal shifts and declining kidney function force the body to produce more urine at night than during the day. That can tax a more rigid bladder, enlarged prostate, or weak pelvic-floor muscles.

A urinary infection or overactive bladder can cause these nightly interruptions; the condition may also be a byproduct of type 1 or type 2 diabetes, heart disease, or sleep apnea — each of which triggers the body to produce more urine at night.

"Nocturia doesn't lend itself to a single magic bullet," Alison Huang, MD, a primary-care physician at University of California San Francisco Health, tells *The New York Times*.

Still, a few lifestyle changes can reduce the likelihood of developing the condition and even help nocturia sufferers stop those nighttime trips to the bathroom, increasing the chances of a good night's sleep.

- **Avoid fluids two to four hours** before bedtime — especially tea, coffee, or alcohol. These beverages not only disrupt sleep patterns but cause the body to produce more urine.
- **Minimize produce with high water content** before bedtime. That includes grapes, watermelon, asparagus, and celery.
- **Limit your sodium intake** to avoid fluid retention, which can lead to increased urination.
- **Reduce acidic foods** because they can increase the acidity of your urine, which may irritate your bladder and make you feel as though you need to pee more frequently. Such foods include citrus fruits and juices, tomatoes, onions, vinegar, and soy sauce.
- **Practice pelvic-floor exercises** to strengthen the muscle and control bladder contractions. (For pelvic-floor exercises, go to ELmag.com/pelvicfloorworkout.)

— CC

FDA REMOVES BLACK-BOX WARNINGS FROM HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY PRODUCTS

In November 2025, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced it was requesting the removal of black-box warnings from menopausal hormone replacement therapy (HRT) products. This change comes after "more than two decades of fear and misinformation" surrounding HRT, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) — a division of the HHS — stated in a press release reversing its own censure.

In supporting this shift, the HHS cites numerous studies

Benefits of HRT, the HHS states, include a reduced risk of bone fractures and all-cause mortality, a 50 percent reduction in heart-attack risk, a 64 percent reduction in cognitive decline, and a 35 percent lower risk of Alzheimer's.

"There are essentially over 400 purposes for estrogen in our body," says Karen Kaufman, MD, a board-certified obstetrician and gynecologist and medical director of MIOIRA in Colorado. "It's joint health, it's bone health, it's brain health, it's heart health, it's vaginal health, it's urinary health."

"It's a significant moment in medical history for women and their health, including quality of life."



— some dating back more than four decades — suggesting "that starting HRT within 10 years of the onset of menopause can have numerous benefits [that] for most women outweigh potential risks."

Women have long used HRT to relieve menopausal symptoms. But demand fell in the early 2000s when the FDA applied the warnings following a Women's Health Initiative study that associated HRT with an increased risk of a breast-cancer diagnosis. Now the FDA says that increase was statistically insignificant.

The removal of the black-box warning, she adds, is groundbreaking and will revolutionize access to natural HRT. "It's a significant moment in medical history for women and their health, including quality of life."

Still, HRT may not be right for everyone. Women with a history of breast cancer — which affects one in eight U.S. women — may want to avoid systemic HRT: Previous studies have found that the treatment increases the risk that breast cancer could recur. This was especially true for patients with a history of hormone receptor-positive disease, according to the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

— EXPERIENCE LIFE STAFF



UNDERSTANDING REJECTION SENSITIVE DYSPHORIA

ARE YOU DISAPPOINTED

and mildly annoyed when a friend cancels plans without explanation or doesn't reply to a text? Or do you feel devastated and spend the next few hours spiraling?

The latter represents a common response for individuals with rejection sensitive dysphoria.

RSD is not a formal diagnosis. It's a term that describes overwhelming feelings of emotional or even physical pain triggered by perceived rejection, criticism, or teasing. The triggering feedback could be trivial, well-intended, or even just imagined. Yet to the person with RSD, it feels like the end of the world.

A heightened sensitivity to rejection is common among people with certain personality disorders, mood disorders, or trauma histories. But individuals with RSD tend to both magnify and personalize any perceived rejection. A default assumption is *There must be something wrong with me.*

The reaction can occur so quickly that some describe it as a punch to the gut.

Although these intense reactions may come and go fairly quickly, RSD can still be debilitating. Some may lash out in rage; others may engage in self-harm or have thoughts of suicide.

These reactions might also be deeply embarrassing, so those who suffer from RSD may go to great lengths to avoid negative feedback. Withdrawal from social situations is common, as are perfectionism and persistent self-criticism.

"People with RSD can get caught up in self-blame and shame," says psychotherapist Vivienne Lorig, LICSW.

These outsized reactions to feedback can also cause interpersonal problems.

RSD remains a relatively unknown condition, easily missed or misdiagnosed. For one thing, RSD episodes can resemble other disorders: The intense feelings of failure, hopelessness, and suicidality mirror major depression, while the near-instant shift in mood resembles a form of bipolar disorder known as "rapid cycling."

A person's response to their own intense emotions can also be misleading to others. Those who lash out in anger may be perceived as volatile or aggressive rather than sensitive; those who internalize their feelings may not be recognized at all.

RSD AND ADHD

A link between emotional dysregulation and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder became evident in the 1960s, although RSD wasn't formally studied until the 1990s.

ADHD impairs cognitive processes like attention, concentration, and memory, but it also corresponds with reactivity, sensitivity, and a tendency to be overwhelmed by one's emotions. It's estimated that more than 90 percent of people with ADHD experience symptoms of RSD at some point, and one in three considers it the most impairing aspect of their condition.

Still, it's not entirely clear whether RSD occurs only among individuals with ADHD or whether it's a learned response.

ADHD manifests in childhood, often in the kinds of disruptive behaviors that elicit negative feedback from parents and teachers.

"If you grow up surrounded by criticism, you eventually believe there's something wrong with you," explains Lorig. "Feedback can seem less like information and more like something threatening, immediately triggering those old feelings of being unsafe or unseen."

That's why seeing RSD for what it represents the first and perhaps most crucial step in healing. "It allows for self-compassion, which is key to overcoming shame," she says.

ADHD medication can be helpful for treating RSD, but it's not the only option. Lorig contends that by unpacking negative narratives and learning to cope with their emotions, people with RSD can better navigate their response to triggers.

In time, they may learn to trust others and — more importantly — trust themselves.

"So many people with RSD shy away from relationships," says Lorig. "But it's relationships that help them heal." 🧡

— ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC

RSD is not a formal diagnosis.
It's a term that describes overwhelming feelings of emotional or even physical pain triggered by perceived rejection, criticism, or teasing.

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Hurricane on the Court

Raised to be a tennis star, Tyra Black is now playing her own game.



Black competes at a Professional Pickleball Association match in Newport Beach, Calif., in March 2026.



BY **JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC**

PHOTOS BY
KWAKU ALSTON

INSET PHOTOS BY
LAUREN YOON

TYRA HURRICANE BLACK was in Turkey in February 2023 when two powerful earthquakes jolted the country. Though the quakes' epicenters were hundreds of miles away, Black recalls the aftershocks and her panic as she watched news of the mounting death toll, which ultimately exceeded 56,000 people.

Black was competing in the International Tennis Federation Women's World Tennis Tour, where she had won two titles the previous year. She was safe from the quakes, but the tremors triggered an important wake-up call: She wasn't where she wanted to be.

"I realized that if something had happened to me there, I was not doing what made me happy," the 25-year-old recalls. "I had not fully enjoyed my life."

BORN INTO TENNIS

Black's middle name is Hurricane, inspired by the nickname given to her older sister, Alicia: Tornado. Their names were a marketing play by parents who were intent on seeing their daughters grow into tennis champions.

Their father is a coach who trained top tennis players, including Sloane Stephens and Victoria Duval. Black's earliest memories are of being on a tennis court in Boca Raton, Fla., watching her sister train.

As a child, Black was ambivalent about becoming a tennis star. She would run away from practice, more interested in rescuing animals than playing the sport. "We lived by the Everglades," she says. "I would bring home turtles, crawfish, even a baby alligator once."

Black's parents "had kind of given up" on her as a tennis player, she recalls, but she surprised them by winning important tournaments at ages 11 and 12. Black was 13 when her mother signed her to a professional sponsorship contract with tennis-equipment brand Head. Black began touring full-time, traveling by herself to international tournaments.

As Black's years on the road extended through her teens, life at home became unstable and stressful. Black's parents divorced. Alicia, then a top-ranked junior, suffered career-ending injuries. Black's mother became ill, and the family faced financial hardships.

Isolated and depressed, Black felt immense pressure to compete and win, but her performance and focus were inconsistent, and she struggled.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE NET

Before she'd left for Turkey, a friend suggested Black try pickleball. "It's so much fun — and you can make money!" he'd told her. Black wasn't convinced initially, but after the earthquakes, she was ready to try something new.

"I decided I wanted to be happy," she says. "I'd spent 22 years not being happy playing tennis, and it was time to go down a different route."

Now in her fourth season on the pro pickleball circuit, Black is top-ranked and plays nearly year-round with Major League Pickleball and the Professional Pickleball Association. We chatted with her about how her life has changed for the better.

Q&A

WITH TYRA BLACK



EXPERIENCE LIFE • What happened when you got home from Turkey?

TYRA BLACK • I started playing pickleball every day. I was having so much fun — I'd be on court anywhere from six to 12 hours a day. I'd tell my mom I was going to tennis.

I still had tennis sponsors, and there was a tournament that April [2023] in Boca. I played two games and got off the court. I told my coach, "I can't do this. I'm not playing anymore."

EL • What did you bring to your pickleball game from tennis — and what did you leave behind?

TB • I brought some shots from tennis. At first, a lot of people told me, "That's not a pickleball shot — you can't hit the slice volleys or the angled overhead shots."

Now I see players doing these shots, or they're working on them. I understand people were trying to help me play the more conventional way, but I think everyone in pickleball has their own style and brings their own flair to the game.

What I left behind? My old mentality. When I was playing tennis, I had a bad attitude, just because I was upset about so many things going on in my life. I would break racquets. I'd scream.

There was a point when I was 17 or 18 when I told myself, *OK, you should not be acting like that*. I learned some meditation and breathing exercises, and I learned how to calm down.

Now when people from tennis see me laughing and smiling on the pickleball court, they say, "That does not seem like the same person!"

EL • Why did you make the decision to primarily play doubles, rather than singles, in pickleball?

TB • Doubles is just more fun. It's nice having a partner next to you, someone who's supportive and who you can talk to. If I'm ever feeling stressed on the court, we can crack jokes or just make things lighthearted again. I love how social it is. I really want to focus on doubles, keeping a good attitude, and being positive for myself and for my partners.

EL • As you look back over your tennis career, what are you most proud of?

TB • I think every tough thing you go through can teach you. My parents weren't always happy with my playing, and I didn't have a lot of self-confidence. I would cry myself to sleep at those international tournaments when I was younger. It was awful being there by myself, not really knowing anyone and being the youngest player there.

But I'm thankful I got to travel. I loved learning about new cultures and sightseeing. I should not have been sightseeing alone at that age, but I was doing it! When I look back, I wonder, *How did I do that? How did anyone even let me walk outside at that age by myself?* I feel proud of myself for pushing through, and for fighting for myself.

EL • What are your professional and personal goals moving forward?

TB • I try not to set performance-based goals in pickleball. That's something I did in tennis, and whenever I did not reach them, I was upset. I just want to make

sure I'm still having fun and I'm happy on the court.

Lifewise, I've been taking everything one step at a time. I want to encourage other people to play. I want to give back to all the people in the community, if I can. I don't have too many goals for myself outside of that. I feel happy with what I'm doing and with my life, so, from here, I think it's just helping others and making them happy, too.

EL • What advice do you have for pursuing your dreams in a healthy way?

TB • Obviously, you want to stay as healthy and active as possible, but there needs to be a balance in life. Find things that make you happy and that you want to do each day. I love to try new things. I go to Pilates and I've tried aerial yoga, including the silks splits! I try not to take everything too seriously. That's why I love pickleball. It's a super-active sport where you can still have fun. 🍷

JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC, is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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What's Your Favorite SHORT WORKOUT?

EL staffers share their go-to routines for when time is limited.

DAD STRENGTH IS REAL: My arms are bigger than ever from wrestling daily with my 40-pound toddler. Add the constant desperate sprints to keep him from running away in a store or into the middle of the road and I'd wager I could give Usain Bolt a run for his money.

— **Cole Luskey,**
business and circulation specialist

While I wait for the kettle to boil, I fling my leg high up on the kitchen island, barre-style, and **S-T-R-E-T-C-H** for a good 30 seconds. Then I fling the other leg up there and repeat.

Then, I make tea.
— **Anjula Razdan,**
senior director—digital

For a quick addition to my regular farm chores and longer workouts, I follow our fitness director's advice: **FIVE BURPEES EVERY DAY,** and I add four pushups at the bottom of each burpee.

— **Lydia Anderson,**
executive creative director

Every-minute-on-the-minute (EMOM) **KETTLEBELL SWINGS** for 10 to 15 minutes — usually 20 reps each time. It's a dynamic strength workout that gets my heart pumping too.

— **Jamie Martin,**
editor in chief

I love what I call my **BACKYARD BOOTCAMP.** I grab my kettlebells and BOSU, then pull together a 20-minute intuitive, circuit-style workout with swings, squats, core work, and agility drills. And I do it all barefoot so I can enjoy the feeling of the grass between my toes.

— **Christy Rice,** digital content specialist/special projects coordinator

My go-to is a 10-minute **KETTLEBELL EMOM:** 10 heavy swings at the start of every minute for 10 minutes.

— **Maggie Fazeli Fard,**
editorial director of fitness



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All the Right Notes

How a fitness routine helped me improve my physical control, stamina, and quality of life as a classical pianist.



BY LUDOVIC ZAMOR

Clockwise from bottom left: Ludovic deadlifting in 2025; stretching during a workout in 2024; headlining at Carnegie Hall in December 2025.

IN THE MIDST of performing a classical piano concert in 2022 — one that was bombastic and required a great deal of showmanship — I physically struggled to keep up with the music. I was gasping for breath. Sweat poured off my face, and not in a glamorous way. When I took my bows, I felt like I was receiving a pity applause.

“Hey, man, you gotta slow down,” a friend told me afterward. It was a kind way to tell me that my delivery was underwhelming.

For a concert pianist, elite performance requires extreme stamina and total physical control, neither of which I possessed. I was only 27, and I was faced with a choice: retire, or do a hard reset on my life.

A MUSICAL HISTORY

I had a mostly typical childhood on Long Island, going to the park with my friends and playing intramural sports. But music was a constant. There are photographs of me at the piano as a 3-year-old. My father was my first teacher, but I began studying with another instructor when I was 7.

At 15, I was invited to study at a conservatory in Toronto. I chose to stay home, though, when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. I graduated from high school in 2013

and enrolled at Stony Brook University, double majoring in biology and music performance.

That year, at the age of 18, I performed at Carnegie Hall. Then, just as the trajectory of my career was rising, my mom passed away.

I began to wonder about my purpose. I knew musical performance was a risky career — and that if I wanted to pursue it, I had to go all in.

I also knew piano was my calling. So in 2018, I committed to studying full-time under a retired grandmaster pianist. It meant practicing 12 to 15 hours a day, until every note was part of me and I could make a one-hour program seem effortless.

Six months later, I had a manager who negotiated a contract for me with an event-promotions company. I spent the next year creating a performance and planning a concert tour scheduled to kick off in 2020.

DREAMS DEFLATED

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and everything shut down, live performances were canceled. Despite the uncertainty — or perhaps because of it — I’d wake up at 5 a.m. and practice all day. I poured all my energy into the music. I’d maybe get four to five hours of sleep, or I’d pull

an all nighter. Meanwhile, I was on a first-name basis with the delivery drivers bringing me food from Taco Bell and McDonald’s.

Then, in December 2021, my grandmother and my manager both died from COVID, leaving me distraught and alone. I was juggling loss, fear, and a lack of self-worth, and my weight ballooned from 180 to 250 pounds.

In early 2022, I focused on preparing for my first postpandemic concert, which was set for May in my hometown. When only 75 people showed up to the 800-seat venue, I was distressed.

My new manager offered plenty of promises: Carnegie Hall, a Grammy nomination, connections. “Buckle up,” he said. “I have big plans for you!” Yet when it came time to meet, he always canceled.

One time, in early 2023, he said, “I don’t know what time I’m going to be free today, so be ready.” I left my house and parked at a Porsche dealership — nose to nose with my dream car — in an attempt to manifest my success. When he called, I would be able to quickly hop on the expressway to meet him.

An hour went by. Then two. Finally, I got a text: “Sorry, I can’t make it today.”

He repeated this pattern all year. I felt my performance career slipping away.

It didn't help that I couldn't play to my standards. I specialize in Romantic-era classical music, primarily the dramatic and virtuosic works of Franz Liszt. (Many people know Liszt's music thanks to vintage Tom and Jerry and Bugs Bunny cartoons.) Performing his work requires a level of physicality and stamina I could no longer reach.

TURNING THE PAGE

By January 2023, my weight had increased to 275 pounds. My knees hurt when going down stairs, and my mood was low. I needed to increase my physical capability and confidence.

So, at the end of the month, I joined a nearby Life Time club. Although I didn't know anything about exercising, I do know how the brain works — and how to practice.

I started by riding a stationary bike for 40 minutes at a casual pace, three or four days a week. A month later, I began walking on the treadmill and using the stair stepper, beginning with three minutes and adding a minute every day. After eight months of measured, methodical workouts, I lost 75 pounds. This improved my mobility and motivated me to keep going.

Next, I incorporated body-weight exercises. A dead hang for 30 seconds led to one pull-up. I was intentional, as I am with practicing music, and I progressed slowly; this helped prevent injury. I hired a trainer who specializes in calisthenics and body-weight control. I wanted to learn proper technique and improve my coordination.



Left: Ludovic practicing before a recital in 2004. Right: After a radio interview in 2022.

I applied the same intentionality to my diet. I knew I couldn't eat crap and expect to offset the result with a workout. I cut out junk food and focused on protein.

I committed to recovery too. The sauna became a daily ritual. Interestingly, the Finnish tradition is also where I found community. I connected with Jeffry, who invited me to join his gardening club; with Lee, who teaches music to autistic children; and with Grant, a fellow I admired for watching all of *Gladiator* while on the stair stepper.

Gardening became a huge part of my mental health routine. It started with trimming my own plants. Then Jeffry and his partner, Liz, gave me tomato plants. That ignited my interest in growing and harvesting my own food (or at least trying to).

Putting my body first helped everything get better. My mood improved. I was more creative. The workouts gave me time to reflect. I no longer needed midday naps, and I could perform full piano programs at concert pace without feeling gassed. I started to sleep a full eight hours. I was ready to play to my potential.

DREAMS ACTUALIZED

In early 2024, I was preparing for a May concert, working out twice a day in addition to maintaining my full practice schedule. My routine included traditional weightlifting, calisthenics, cardio, and core work. I felt genuinely athletic: I could deadlift 405 pounds, do controlled pull-ups and muscle-ups, and complete my cardio sessions without having to breathe through my mouth.

As my hard reset renewed my physical capacity, I arranged a new concert program. In my previous program, I'd played only one or two showstoppers. Now I delivered one showstopper after another.

I performed the program at Carnegie Hall two days before Christmas in 2025. And thanks to my Life Time community, the seats were filled with new friends.

The experience was the validation I needed. I was born for this. But I also practiced for it and built a body that can pull it off onstage — and now I can do what I was meant to be doing. 🎹

Ludovic's Top Takeaways

1.

It's never too late to do a hard reset.

"You're never beyond healing," Ludovic says. "Believe that your health is worth prioritizing."

2.

Build resilience with patience.

"Once you take that first step, keep going with another and then another — but only when you're ready," he advises.

3.

"Save those 90 to 100 percent efforts for the big moments . . .

like a solo performance at Carnegie Hall."



TELL US YOUR STORY

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A woman with dark hair in a ponytail, wearing an orange tank top, is smiling and looking off to the side. She is holding a white portable music player with a black circular screen. The background is a blurred city street with a bridge railing, bathed in the warm, golden light of a sunset. The overall mood is positive and energetic.

REAL FITNESS

THERE'S MAGIC in fitness rituals: They can decrease anxiety and make it easier to perform during stressful moments. But what makes a ritual so effective? Find out on **page 32**.



THE WEIGHT- PLATE WORKOUT

Get a fun, full-body workout in just 20 minutes using a single piece of equipment.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS

DUMBBELLS, KETTLEBELLS, and a loaded barbell are the stars of the show in most strength routines. But that solitary weight plate you're about to add to the barbell? It can be the perfect tool for a quick strength session all on its own.

This unassuming object is full of potential. Because the weight plate alters your center of gravity differently than a dumbbell or kettlebell, it can challenge your muscles in a different way. Grasping a plate between your fingers is great for building pinch-grip strength. Laid flat, a plate can transform the floor into an elevated platform. Using a weight plate in new and unexpected ways can add novelty and interest to a workout.

Give the weight plate a whirl with the following bare-bones workout. All you need is a single medium-heavy weight plate, a yoga-mat's worth of floor space, and 20 minutes on the clock.

THE WORKOUT

The workout comprises two circuits: a warm-up and a main set.

For the warm-up, perform each move for 30 seconds, alternating between exercises without resting, for three total rounds. The warm-up takes three minutes.

Follow the same pattern in the main set. Perform each move, in order, for 30 seconds. Perform three or four rounds without resting. The main set takes 12 to 16 minutes, depending on how many rounds you complete.

Transition as quickly as possible to the next move. Don't stop the clock or pause between moves.

WARM-UP

LYING LEG-RAISE PULSE

- Begin in a hollow position with core engaged, arms and legs extended, and feet hovering about 6 inches off the floor.

- Raise your feet an additional 6 inches, then lower to the starting position. Pulse your legs up and down for 30 seconds.



SEAL JACK

- Begin standing with feet and palms together.

- Jump your feet outward and extend your arms to the sides.

- Jump your feet and hands back together. Repeat for 30 seconds.



MAIN SET

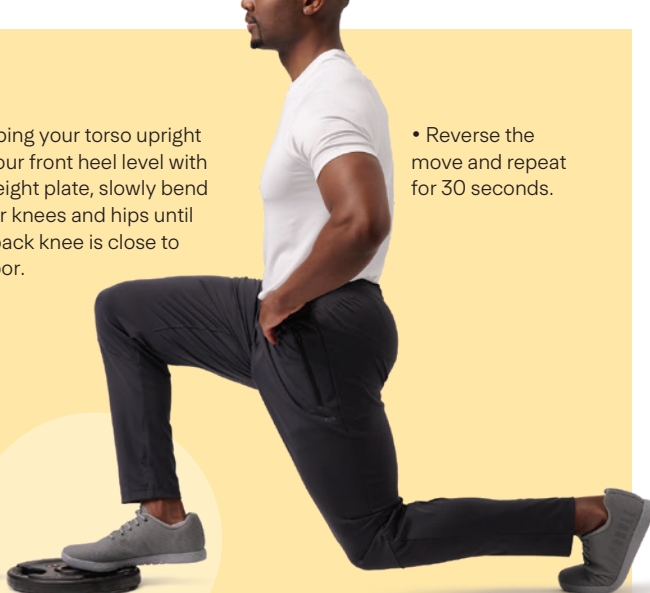
FLOATING-HEEL SPLIT SQUAT (RIGHT SIDE)

- Assume the top position of a lunge, with the ball of your right foot planted on the plate and your right heel hovering off the edge.



- Keeping your torso upright and your front heel level with the weight plate, slowly bend at your knees and hips until your back knee is close to the floor.

- Reverse the move and repeat for 30 seconds.



WEIGHT-PLATE RENEGADE ROW

- Assume a pushup position with your hands on the floor on either side of a weight plate. Grasp the plate with your right hand and perform a single-arm row.



- Lower the weight with control and repeat the row on the left side.

- Repeat, alternating sides for 30 seconds.



MAIN SET, CONT.

FLOATING-HEEL SPLIT SQUAT (LEFT SIDE)

- Assume the top position of a lunge, with the ball of your left foot planted on the plate and your left heel hovering off the edge.

- Bend at your knees and hips until your back knee is close to the floor.
- Reverse the move and repeat for 30 seconds.



ALTERNATING OFFSET PUSHUP

- Assume a pushup position with your right hand on the plate and left hand on the floor.

- Perform a pushup, then shift to the right so your left hand is on the plate and right hand is on the floor. Perform a pushup.

- Repeat, alternating sides for 30 seconds.



KICKSTAND ROMANIAN DEADLIFT (RIGHT SIDE)

- Stand holding the weight plate with your right hand.

- Shift your weight to your right foot and take a small step back with your left foot.

- Keeping a soft bend in your right knee, and using your left foot for balance only, hinge your hips back.

- Reverse the movement and repeat for 30 seconds.



Because the weight plate alters your center of gravity differently than a dumbbell or kettlebell, **it can challenge your muscles in a different way.**

RIGHT-TO-LEFT ROTATIONAL PLATE LIFT

- Stand holding the plate with both hands.
- Rotate your body so the plate is near your right hip. Then rotate your body to the left, raising the plate up and across your body until the weight is overhead.
- Reverse the move down and back to the right.

Repeat for 30 seconds.



KICKSTAND ROMANIAN DEADLIFT (LEFT SIDE)

- Stand holding the weight plate with your left hand.
- Shift your weight to your left foot and take a small step back with your right foot.
- Keeping a soft bend in your left knee, and using your right foot for balance only, hinge your hips back.
- Reverse the movement and repeat for 30 seconds.



DO THE WORKOUT

Download a mobile-friendly version at
**ELmag.com/
weightplate.**



LEFT-TO-RIGHT ROTATIONAL PLATE LIFT

- Stand holding the plate with both hands.
- Rotate your body so the plate is near your left hip. Then rotate your body to the right, raising the plate up and across your body until the weight is overhead.
- Reverse the move down and back to the left.
- Repeat for 30 seconds. 🕒



ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS, is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



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THE GOBLET SQUAT

Three cues to fine-tune your form.

BY **MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, CSMC**

THE GOBLET SQUAT

is a front-loaded squat variation that builds leg strength and core stability. It requires minimal equipment — just a single kettlebell or dumbbell — and is based on a straightforward setup, making it a useful tool for beginners and experienced lifters alike.



Positioning is key for reaping the goblet squat's many rewards. These tips can help you get the most out of your next squat session.

1. Secure your goblet. Treat the weight as if it were a chalice full of precious liquid. Hold the kettlebell or dumbbell just under your chin, close to your chest, with your elbows tucked in, and avoid any extraneous movement that could cause a "spill."

2. Bend your hips and knees simultaneously. It's common to hinge your hips back to lower into the squat and to raise the hips up first to return to standing — but fight these urges as much as you are able. The hips and knees work best as a team. Bend and extend them in tandem, rather than in isolation.

3. Maintain an upright torso. Imagine that your torso is an elevator filled with passengers, and if you lean too far forward, you'll knock them over. As much as possible, try to keep your shoulders over your hips and allow your knees to track forward over your toes. If this is too difficult, elevate your heels slightly using a wedge, slant board, or weight plate (pictured at left).

MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, CSMC, is *Experience Life's* editorial director of fitness.

THE POWER OF Fitness Rituals

Nine embodiment practices to ease workout anxiety and prerace jitters.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

WHETHER SHE'S stepping out for a run around her Minneapolis neighborhood or stepping up to the start line of the Leadville 100-mile trail race in Colorado, ultrarunner Barbara Powell's day begins with the same set of actions.

"I always journal with my morning coffee and breakfast, taking note of how I feel emotionally and physically," says Powell, MA, NBC-HWC, a Life Time Mind performance coach and author of *Finding Leadville: My Story to a Hallowed 100 Mile Finish Line*. "Then I put on my gear, slowly and deliberately, focusing my attention on each piece I put on my body."

On the surface, this sequence might sound kind of, well, ordinary. Journaling, eating breakfast, and getting dressed amount to little more than daily habits; fueling and gearing up before a workout are generally necessary.

For Powell, the sum is greater than the parts: The ritualized routine grounds her, quelling any anxiety about the miles ahead.

"The jitters don't disappear," she acknowledges. "Rather, they transform into useful energy."

Powell is among a roster of athletes who swear by rituals. Some actions — like NHL players' refusal to shave their beards during the playoffs — may seem like little more than superstition.

But, experts say, there is real magic in rituals: They have been shown to decrease anxiety, alleviate grief, reduce depression, and make it easier to cope or perform during stressful moments.

This makes ritual a tool for not just professional athletes but anyone facing an unknown. Rituals can serve as distraction from anxious thoughts and ground us in something that's within our control.

"Rituals create a microenvironment of certainty that builds calm, confidence, and emotional stability, especially before something challenging," explains Jessie Syfko, ND, CSCS, a Life Time senior vice president and creator of the MB360 mind-body program.

The secret of an effective ritual lies in its repetitive action. This makes it a strong coping mechanism, writes anthropologist and cognitive scientist Dimitris Xygalatas in *Ritual: How Seemingly Senseless Acts Make Life Worth Living*.

What sets rituals apart from, say, a habit like brushing your teeth is that they are largely symbolic and "deeply imbued with meaning and importance," Xygalatas notes.

Research suggests that when you believe a routine is meaningful, it can become a tool for reducing anxiety rather than something that's simply functional.

"A routine becomes a ritual when you attach meaning or emotional significance to it," says mental performance coach Carrie Jackson, author of *On Top of Your Game: Mental Skills to Maximize Your Athletic Performance*. A sense of meaning shifts the focus from worry to connection and purpose.

If you're ready to create your own fitness ritual, the following nine elements can help you build one.

1. VISUALIZATION

Visualization is the practice of using mental imagery to prepare your mind and body for performance. You might picture yourself doing the workout or race and feeling excited to be there, Jackson says. Or you can replay a past successful performance in your mind as if watching a movie, focusing on how good you felt. (Learn more about visualization at ELmag.com/visualizegoals.)

2. BREATHWORK

Breathing exercises are a great way to reset your focus and calm your nervous system, Syfko says. Find a comfortable spot and try box breathing: Inhale through your nose for four seconds, hold your breath for four, exhale through your mouth for four, and hold for four. Repeat this pattern several times until you feel centered and ready to begin again. (Discover more breathwork techniques at ELmag.com/breathe.)

3. MUSIC

Find your own pump-up song or create a playlist to listen to as you arrive at the gym or change into workout clothes. Experiment with genres to see what energizes and motivates you; you might be surprised by what resonates. “Clients come in with music they really love,” says Jackson. “But when we try something else, they realize, ‘Wow, classical music works really well for me.’”

4. ESSENTIAL OILS

Scents have a powerful impact on mood. While research suggests that lavender and jasmine soothe anxiety and peppermint boosts energy, a scent’s effects are personal. “Sometimes, there’s a compound in the scent that produces a particular response, but sometimes it’s an emotional memory associated with that scent,” Jackson says. (For more on essential oils, visit ELmag.com/essentialoils.)

5. JOURNALING

Before a workout or event, jot down any top-of-mind thoughts or feelings without worrying about spelling, grammar, or writing in complete sentences.

Alternatively, use your journal to set an intention for your workout or race. Jackson suggests asking yourself, “How do I want to feel?” and giving space on the page to whatever comes up.

“I will have a great workout today,” or “I am capable of anything.” Affirmations remind you of your strengths, helping act as a buffer against anxious, negative thoughts.

8. PREWORKOUT FUEL

Choose a snack or drink you enjoy and consume it only before workouts



“Rituals create a microenvironment of certainty that builds calm, confidence, and emotional stability, especially before something challenging.”

6. PREPERFORMANCE ROUTINE

Michael Jordan’s free-throw routine always followed the same, systematic steps: shoulder-width stance, ball spin, three bounces, one more spin, then shot. Your preperformance routine can be just as structured — or much simpler, like taking three deep breaths before starting your timer or dipping your hands in chalk before each lift.

7. POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

Create a list of encouraging affirmations to say before your workout or event. “Affirmations are powerful statements said as if they’re already true,” Jackson says.

They’re often “I” statements — “I am powerful in this moment,”

or competitions. Eating the same food or meal can offer more than just psychological comfort: It can provide a consistent and reliable digestive experience. (For fueling suggestions to support your body and mind, visit ELmag.com/preworkoutfuel.)

9. POWER OUTFITS

Jackson views her workout clothes as a uniform reserved only for exercise. For her, this helps create the right mindset. “Think about the persona that you’re embodying to do the activity you’re about to do.”

LAUREN BEDOSKY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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Exercise and Fat Loss

True or false: Fat-burning workouts are the best way to lose body fat.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

FALSE. Fat-burning workouts — that is, workouts that use fat for fuel — don't guarantee fat loss.

"Burning fat and losing fat aren't the same thing," explains exercise physiologist Todd Buckingham, PhD.

To understand the difference, it might help to review how our bodies use energy during exercise.

During low-intensity activity, fat supplies up to 85 percent of the fuel, explains Buckingham. That includes easy jogs, nature walks, and other workouts that you can sustain for prolonged periods.

As the intensity ramps up, the percentage shifts toward carbs.

During moderate-intensity exercise, the split between fat and carbs is nearly equal, Buckingham says. Once you shift into high intensity, your body primarily relies on carbs and, to a lesser extent, a fuel source called creatine phosphate. (Learn more at ELmag.com/energysystems.)

On the surface, lower-intensity workouts look like the fat-loss winner because they burn a greater percentage of fat for fuel. But the fuel source doesn't determine fat loss, says Janet Hamilton, CSCS, a registered clinical exercise physiologist and certified running coach in Georgia.

Losing fat depends on creating a calorie deficit. This means your body needs to burn more calories than it consumes.

You might have heard this fat-loss concept explained as "calories in versus calories out."

The theory is that "if you're taking in more fuel than you need to sustain your life and physical activity

demands, your body will store that excess fuel as adipose tissue, or fat," says Hamilton.

And while the concept is technically correct, it misses the mark in execution.

The common interpretation of "calories in versus calories out" is to begin counting calories consumed through food and drink as well as those burned in exercise — with the intention of making sure you burn more than you take in.

But the body is more complicated than a machine that eats and exercises. Calories are required to fuel all aspects of daily life. Pitting what you eat against how much and what type of exercise you do is an oversimplification of complex bodily processes — and it can also quickly become unsustainable, setting you up for failure in both your fitness and your fat-loss pursuits.

FAT LOSS AND FITNESS

How the human body holds and releases fat is a multifactorial equation, explains Jeff Rosga, CPT, a Life Time personal training lead and the founder of Life Time Academy. Poor nutrition is a major contributor to fat gain and obesity, as is a sedentary lifestyle.

Factors like sleep quality, stress management, certain health conditions and medications, genetics, and economic stability all contribute. So does access to affordable and nutritious food, physical activity, childcare, education, healthcare, housing and transportation, potable water, and clean air.

In the greater context of these influences, Rosga says, the precise workout

you do for fat loss matters less than you might think.

That said, if you are at a point in your journey where the foundational elements of nutrition, movement, sleep, stress, and access are securely in place, it is possible to fine-tune your fitness regimen to support a fat-loss goal. Just remember that a fat-loss-focused workout is not mandatory for changing your health, fitness, or body composition.

A BALANCED BODY-RECOMPOSITION PLAN

So, what does an exercise routine tailored to fat loss look like? As it turns out, not very different from any well-balanced fitness plan.

According to Rosga and Hamilton, it includes a combination of strength training and cardio, with a focus on intensity rather than on calorie burn.

Perform two to four days of strength training each week to maintain and build skeletal muscle mass. "Prioritize compound movement exercises, like squats, deadlifts, presses, and rows, that train multiple muscle groups at the same time," Rosga says.

Additionally, engage in cardio that you enjoy most days of the week, making sure to include a balance of low-, medium-, and high-intensity work.

Says Hamilton: "Using a varied approach to exercise keeps it fun and stimulates your body in a variety of ways while also maximizing your weekly fuel burn."

LAUREN BEDOSKY is an *Experience* Life contributing editor.



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Burpees Reimagined

Modify this full-body exercise to maintain mobility and strength as you age.

BY **MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, CSMC**



BURPEES — that grueling combination of squats, pushups, and jumps — are not only a physical challenge but a mental one. Typically associated with high-intensity workouts and gym-class punishment, they're an easy exercise to hate and avoid.

But at their heart, burpees are a test of one's ability to get down on the ground and back up again. Seen in this light, burpees are actually a form of survival training, especially as we get older.

"You get down, you get up — that's all the burpee is," says Life Time personal trainer and group fitness coach Jen Walter. She coaches the movement in her Hybrid XT classes, which prepare athletes of all ages for hybrid endurance events, as well as in her ARORA groups, which are tailored to exercisers 55 and older. "If you don't practice, at some point you're going to get down on the floor and you're not going to be able to get back up. The burpee is one way to retain that ability."

For many people, the loss of physical mobility happens gradually, says Walter.

"It can start with avoiding an exercise because it's too hard, or [it] feels uncomfortable, or it's inconvenient, or you have an injury, or you just don't like it," she says. "So you stop doing that exercise, but you also stop doing that movement pattern."

For example, say you get plantar fasciitis and to avoid pain you

stop going for daily walks. Or you experience a bout of frozen shoulder — stiffness and pain commonly associated with menopause — and never resume reaching overhead to avoid aggravating the joint. Perhaps you stop sitting on the floor simply because there are more comfortable and convenient places to sit.

"There are so many movements that you could do but stopped doing for whatever reason, and then one day you simply can't. That's frightening," says Walter. "The question then becomes, Can you get it back?"

Yes, you can, she says. "Generally speaking, as long as your joints are mechanically functional, it's not too late to try."

If you're ready to give burpees another go (or to try them for the first time), begin with this two-pronged approach.

1. GET YOUR BRAIN ON BOARD.

Toy around with the idea that burpees are functional and beneficial for healthy aging. Remind yourself that they are a way to practice getting down on and up off the floor, a useful skill whether you're playing with your grandchildren or getting up after a fall.

Consider that the underlying skill of burpees also exists with different names across different cultures. Take yoga, for instance: The surya namaskar sun salutation sequence takes practitioners from standing to a prone lying position and back to standing.

If it helps, rename the burpee to better suit you; something as simple as "up-downs" could shift your mindset.

2. BREAK THE BURPEE DOWN. WAY DOWN.

You may assume that you have to do a perfect squat, a perfect pushup, and a series of fast-paced jumps to do a burpee. Forget those rules, says Walter. "Start by figuring out how you can get your belly to the ground safely."

Using your hands — and a nearby sturdy support, such as a chair or wall, as needed — step one foot back as if you're going to do a reverse lunge, drop that knee, and get down on all fours. Then, moving one knee back at a time, lower yourself all the way down so your hips and chest are flat on the floor. Reverse the movement by pulling your knees back up.

"Getting your knees under your hips with control on the way down and up is really the key here. Don't rush the quadruped position," Walter says. Then, bring one foot up at a time to replace your hands on the floor and push yourself up to a standing position. Finally, reach your arms overhead as far as you comfortably can. Add a little jump here, if you want. Then repeat.

Do five slow and controlled burpees in this manner when you wake up in the morning or as part of your warm-up routine at the gym — anything that helps make them consistent.

"Safe and repeatable is the goal," Walter says. "It's deconstructed, but it works."

MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, CSMC, is *Experience Life's* editorial director of fitness.

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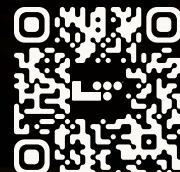
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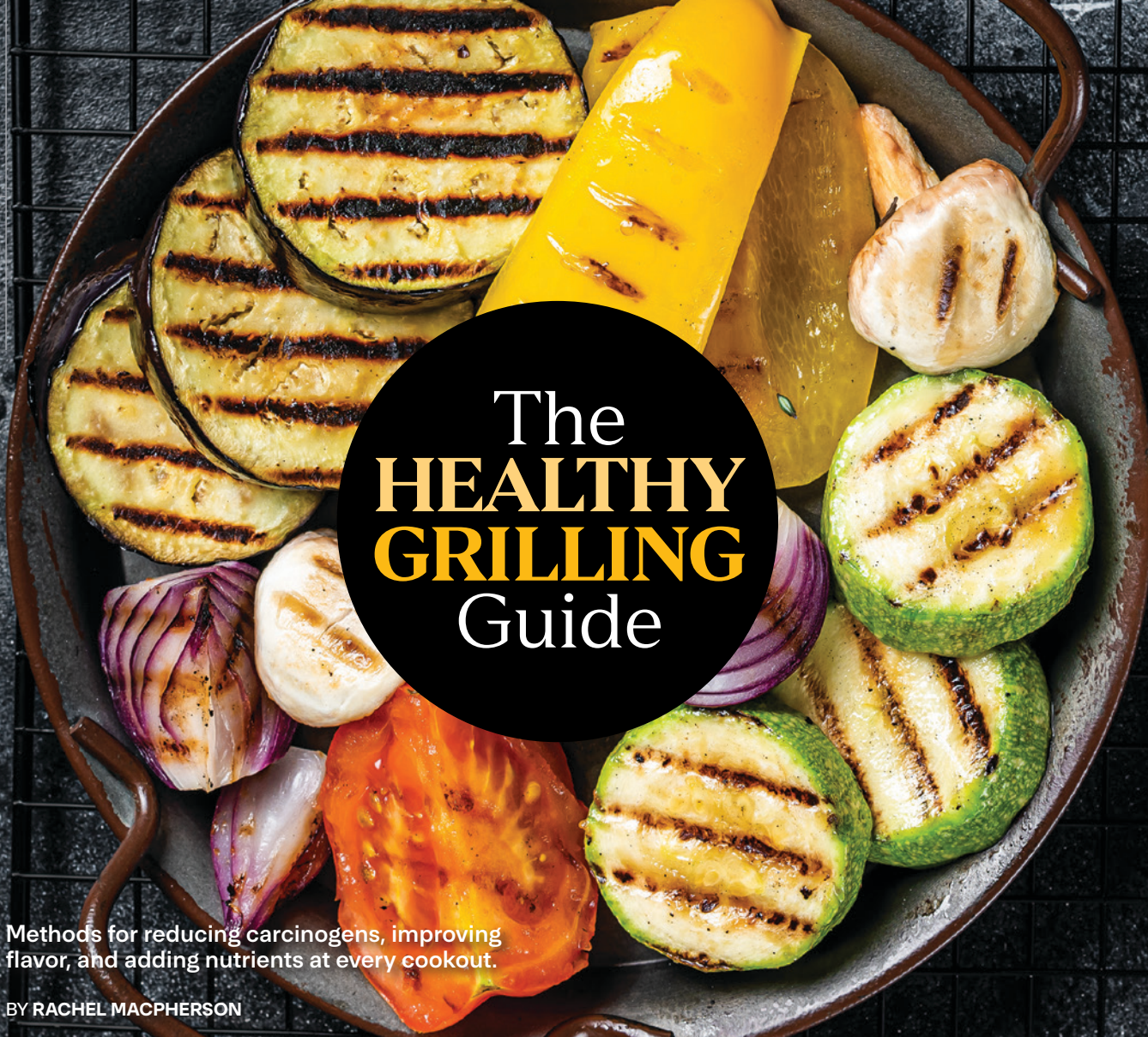
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REAL FOOD

IN THE MIDDLE OF SUMMER, few things are less appealing than standing over a hot kitchen stove. Beat the heat with the three fresh and flavorful dishes starting on **page 48** — and try the Shrimp and Veggie Summer Rolls pictured here at ELmag.com/nocookmeals.



The HEALTHY GRILLING Guide

Methods for reducing carcinogens, improving flavor, and adding nutrients at every cookout.

BY RACHEL MACPHERSON

THERE'S SOMETHING primal about grilling. The sizzle of the hot grates, the waft of smoke drifting across the backyard, the anticipation of that first juicy bite — it's a sensory experience that signals summer has arrived.

Alongside the pleasures of cooking over an open flame come persistent questions about health. You may have heard that grilling can produce harmful compounds, or that char on your steak is something to avoid.

These concerns aren't unfounded. High-heat cooking can generate chemicals called heterocyclic amines (HCAs) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which have been linked, in laboratory studies, to cancer risk.

Before you retire your tongs, though, it's worth knowing that the doses used in those studies are typically 100,000 to a million times higher than what you'd encounter at a typical backyard cookout, explains Robert Turesky, BSc, PhD, professor of medicinal chemistry at the University of Minnesota.

He stresses, however, that it's still important to be mindful of how often you eat well-done meat; moderation can help minimize exposure. "A well-balanced diet that includes plant-based proteins and cruciferous vegetables can further support overall health," Turesky says.

In other words, grilling isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. A few technical adjustments can meaningfully reduce your exposure to

these compounds while improving flavor. And the same strategies that limit char and flare-ups also produce juicier, more evenly cooked food.

KNOW THE CHEMISTRY

At the center of the healthy grilling debate are HCAs and PAHs, both classified as potential carcinogens. They form in different ways, and understanding the distinction can help you control them.

HCAs develop inside muscle proteins when meat, poultry, or fish is cooked at high temperatures, typically above 300 degrees F. "High temperature catalyzes HCA formation through the reactions of amino acids with carbohydrates and creatine in the muscle," Turesky explains.

Generally, the hotter the surface and the longer the cook, the more HCAs accumulate. This is why well-done meat tends to contain higher levels than medium or medium-rare preparations.

PAHs, on the other hand, form when fat drips onto flames or hot coals. The resulting smoke carries these compounds up and deposits them onto the food. Flare-ups and prolonged exposure to smoke increase PAH levels, as does cooking close to the flame.

CHOOSE YOUR PROTEINS WISELY

Some meats naturally lend themselves to quicker or moderate-heat cooking, producing fewer HCAs and PAHs while still bringing plenty of flavor. In general, red meat produces the highest HCA levels, followed by pork, poultry, and fish, says Turesky.

For beef and pork, lean cuts that cook relatively quickly are your best bet. “The kings of weeknight grilling in my house are pork chops, pork tenderloins, and flank or skirt steak,” says Melissa Cookston, seven-time world barbecue champion and owner of Memphis Barbecue Company, a restaurant in Horn Lake, Miss. “I prefer thinner cuts, as you can imbue them with so much flavor.”

A thin-cut ribeye is another option, she says — just keep it moving and pull it before it chars excessively.

Processed meats like hot dogs, sausages, and brats remain cook-out staples for many families. Kellie Blake, RDN, LD, IFNCP, an integrative registered dietitian, suggests treating them as side dishes rather than the stars, grilling them over medium heat, turning them frequently to prevent charring, and balancing the plate with plenty of colorful vegetables and fiber-rich sides. “Small technique shifts can dramatically lower exposure to HCAs and PAHs,” she notes.

Chicken thighs stay juicy without requiring high heat, and chicken breasts and turkey tenderloins can cook in minutes when sliced thin or pounded to an even thickness. “Poultry is protein-rich and, when cooked

properly, can be a standout option on the grill,” Blake adds. “[It reaches] a safe temperature quickly over moderate heat, which lowers the risk of burning.”

Fish is another good choice. Because it cooks quickly and stays tender over lower heat, it spends less time in the HCA-forming zone.

“Firm fish, such as swordfish or tuna, work well,” says Cookston. Blake suggests salmon and trout for their omega-3 content and natural moisture, which may help prevent charring, especially when using a marinade. Shrimp and scallops need just a few minutes per side, making them ideal for weeknight grilling, she says.

Because plant proteins contain little to no creatine — the compound that reacts with amino acids and sugars to form the most common HCAs — they generate far fewer of these compounds, if any.

This makes plant-based options excellent candidates for grilling, says Blake. She recommends extra-firm tofu and tempeh because they

hold up well on the grill, especially when marinated. Portobello mushrooms and cauliflower steaks provide meaty texture and take on a nice smoky flavor, she adds.

MARINATE WITH PURPOSE

Marinades do far more than add flavor. When made with the right ingredients, they can significantly reduce HCA formation during grilling.

“Research is pretty clear: When you combine herbs, an acidic base, and a bit of oil, you can cut HCA formation by 60 to 90 percent,” Blake says. “Marinades act like a protective shield, delivering antioxidants that neutralize free radicals and helping prevent fats and proteins from breaking down under intense heat.” This breakdown reduces overall nutritional value while generating more of the compounds you want to avoid.

Herbs and spices are especially effective at protecting fats and proteins from degrading at high temperatures. Acidic ingredients

help tenderize meat and speed up cooking time, meaning food has less of a chance of developing HCAs; healthy fats carry their antioxidant compounds deeper into the meat, enhancing the protective effect.

To build an effective marinade, Blake recommends starting with an acid (citrus juice, vinegar, yogurt); adding a healthy fat (olive oil, avocado oil); then loading up on herbs, garlic, or other alliums. For depth, include an umami component like soy sauce, fish sauce, or Worcestershire. (For more details, see “Marinade Matrix” on page 43.)

MASTER YOUR HEAT

Ask any pitmaster what separates a good griller from a great one and you’ll likely hear the same answer: heat control. Learning to manage temperature helps reduce harmful

Herbs and spices are especially effective at protecting fats and proteins from degrading at high temperatures.





“The best sides and condiments for a grill plate are the ones that bring vibrant color and plants to the meal.”

compounds — and it’s a foundation for better-tasting food.

The simplest way to gain control is to set up two temperature zones, which gives you a hot side for searing and a cooler side for gentler cooking or resting. “Building a two-zone fire is an easy and effective way to set up your grill for successful cooking,” Cookston explains.

The type of grill also makes a difference. Charcoal grilling creates significantly higher levels of PAHs than gas grilling due to incomplete combustion and more smoke, which deposits compounds onto food.

Gas grills, meanwhile, simplify temperature control, helping reduce HCA formation by avoiding intense, uneven heat and charring.

Regardless of the fuel source, the core principles are to manage heat, minimize flare-ups, and prevent excessive charring.

With a gas grill, Cookston recommends turning one side to medium-high and the other to low or, in the case of smaller grills, off. You can mimic this on a charcoal grill: Rake the lit coals to one side, leaving the other side empty or with just a few briquettes. “On smaller grills, the radiant heat from the hot side should be enough to heat your cooler side to the proper temperature,” Cookston explains.

This setup also solves the issue of flare-ups, one of grilling’s most common frustrations. When fat drips onto flames, it creates the smoke that deposits PAHs onto your food. Rather than trimming away all the fat, which can leave meat dry, Cookston recommends moving food to the cool zone when flare-ups occur. “Using a drip pan directly under the meat is the most effective way to avoid flare-ups,” she adds. “But I usually rely on a two-zone fire and move cuts to the cool side when flare-ups start.”

Keeping the grill lid closed also helps: Every time you open it, oxygen rushes in and can ignite dripping fat. Set up your grill properly, then resist the urge to peek, opening only when it’s time to flip.

If you’re the cook, don’t overlook your own exposure to the smoke and vapors containing the HCAs, PAHs, and other harmful chemicals. “Position the grill so that the smoke and vapors are not blown directly into your face while cooking,” Turesky advises.

Frequent flipping is another smart technique: If you’ve trimmed the excess hard fat (the kind that won’t render and only fuels flare-ups), you can cook with the grill open without igniting dripping fat. This means you can flip the meat more frequently to keep its surface temperature lower, reducing char and HCA formation.

The goal isn’t to eliminate every trace of char; a bit of browning is part of what makes grilled food taste so good. But staying in control means you get flavor — rather than burnt edges and raw centers — where you want it.

BUILD A BALANCED PLATE

What’s next to the protein on your plate matters as much as how you cook that protein. A well-constructed plate helps round out the meal nutritionally and can buffer some of the health effects associated with grilled and processed meats.

“The best sides and condiments for a grill plate are the ones that bring vibrant color and plants to the meal,” says Blake. She recommends the following ratio:

- 3–6 ounces lean or omega 3-rich protein
- About 2 cups nonstarchy vegetables (a mix of grilled and fresh works well)
- ½ cup fresh fruit
- ⅓–½ cup whole grains or beans
- 1–2 tablespoons nutrient-dense condiment, like sauerkraut or salsa

Vegetables like peppers, zucchini, onions, mushrooms, and asparagus cook quickly, pair well with any protein, and deliver fiber, polyphenols, and antioxidants, says Blake. Bean and lentil salads add plant-based

protein and slow-digesting carbohydrates that help keep blood sugar steady. Fresh fruits like berries, melon, and grilled peaches bring color and additional polyphenols to the plate.

Condiments are an excellent way to pack in even more nutrition, Blake notes. Chimichurri (mostly parsley, garlic, and olive oil) is rich in polyphenols and healthy fats. Fresh salsas

made with tomatoes, corn, or stone fruit add vitamin C and brightness without excess sodium. Guacamole contributes fiber, potassium, and heart-healthy fats, while yogurt-based sauces like tzatziki offer protein and probiotics alongside cooling herbs.

Grilling doesn't have to be a health compromise. The techniques that reduce harmful chemical exposure

are the same ones that produce juicier, more flavorful results. You can add nutritious marinades to boost flavor, and you can build a colorful, balanced plate to turn a simple cookout into a genuinely nourishing meal. 🍴

RACHEL MACPHERSON is a writer and certified nutrition coach based in Nova Scotia, Canada.

GRILL-NIGHT SAFETY CHECKLIST

Flavor and technique matter, but food safety is nonnegotiable. A few simple habits can prevent the kind of cookout that guests remember for the wrong reasons. Donald W. Schaffner, PhD, a distinguished professor of food science at Rutgers University, recommends these essential practices for safe outdoor cooking.

DO:

- Use a clean plate for cooked meat.
- Keep two sets of tongs, one for raw and one for cooked food.
- Invest in a tip-sensitive digital thermometer and insert it into the thickest part of the meat to test for doneness.
- Cook ground meats to at least 160 degrees F. Poultry and processed meats should be cooked to 165 degrees F; red meat and fish should reach 145 degrees F. For a complete temperature chart, visit www.foodsafety.gov.
- Cool leftovers uncovered in the refrigerator in shallow containers no deeper than 2 inches until chilled. Then cover.

DON'T:

- Place cooked meat back on a plate or platter that held raw meat.
- Use the same tongs for handling raw and cooked food.
- Assume a burger is done by color alone — always check with a thermometer.
- Let food sit in the danger zone (40 to 140 degrees F) for more than two hours total.



MARINADE MATRIX

Building an effective marinade is simple once you know the formula. Add one element from each column, then marinate foods for at least 20 to 30 minutes (or up to several hours for deeper flavor), and grill as usual. Research shows that this combination can reduce HCA formation by 60 to 90 percent, says integrative registered dietitian Kellie Blake, RDN, LD, IFNCP.

FAT

(2–3 tbs.)

- Olive oil
- Avocado oil
- Sesame oil

ACID

(2–3 tbs.)

- Lemon or lime juice
- Red- or white-wine vinegar
- Plain yogurt

HERBS AND AROMATICS

(1–2 tbs., or to taste)

- Rosemary and thyme
- Oregano and basil
- Garlic and black pepper
- Turmeric and ginger

UMAMI BOOSTER

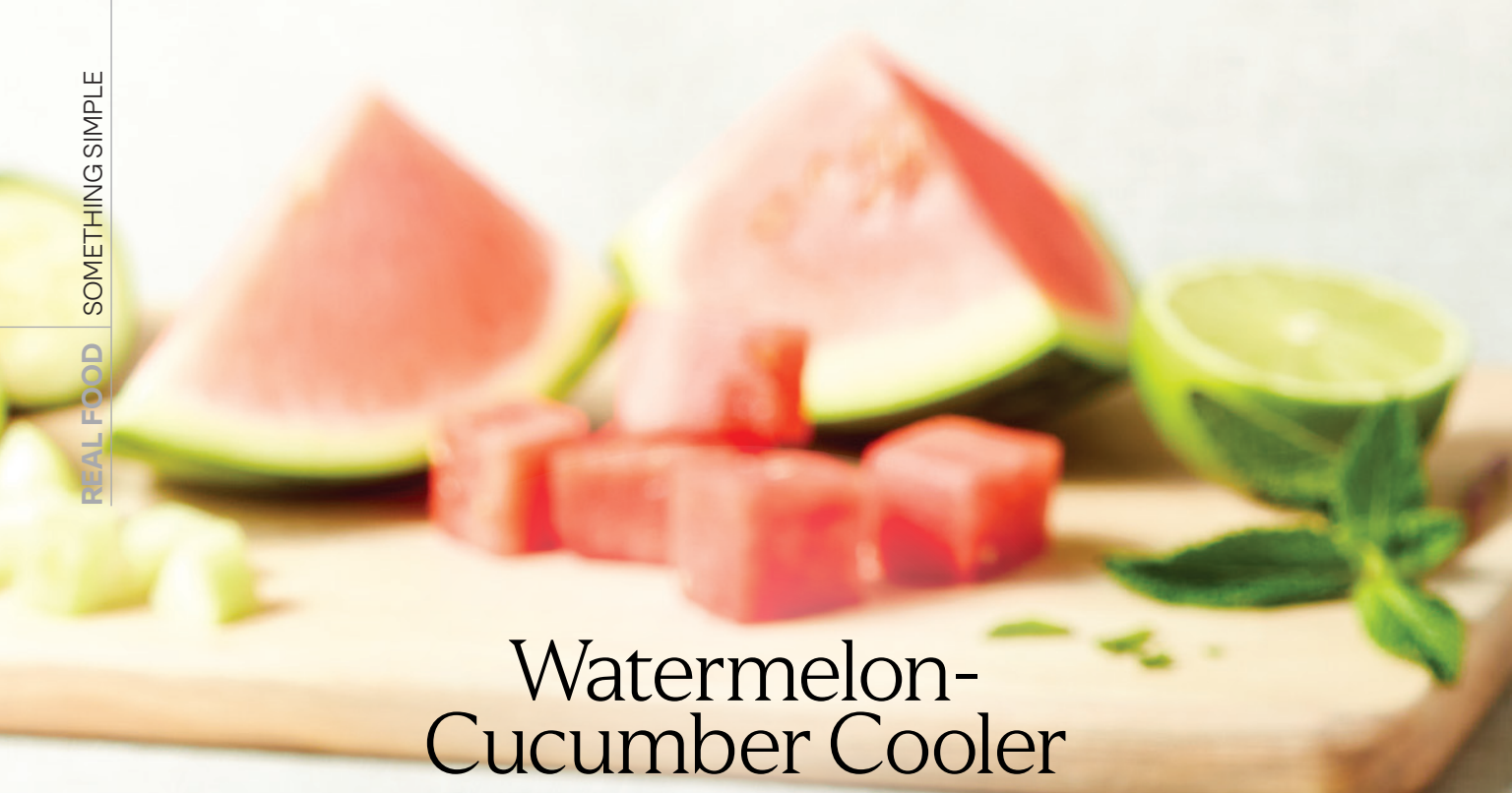
(1–2 tsp.)

- Soy sauce, tamari, or coconut aminos
- Fish sauce
- Worcestershire sauce
- Miso paste

Marination Time

- Quick (20–30 minutes): Offers measurable protection and is ideal for weeknights and delicate foods like fish
- Standard (two to four hours refrigerated): Provides deeper flavor penetration
- Overnight (refrigerated): Best for tougher cuts; results in maximum flavor and tenderness



A wooden cutting board is the central focus, holding several slices of watermelon, some cut into cubes, and a few cucumber slices. A lime is also present, with one half cut open. Fresh green herbs are scattered around the board. The background is a light, neutral color.

Watermelon-Cucumber Cooler

This blended beverage has natural electrolytes and a cool, refreshing finish.

BY KAEALYN RILEY

I LIVE IN Minneapolis, where it feels like summer can never come soon enough. After spending months shoveling the sidewalk and dressing in layers and questioning whether I can take out the trash without risking frostbite, that first day above 60 degrees can be almost intoxicating.

Suddenly, I'm swapping my handwarmers for sunscreen. I'm requesting a patio table at my local watering hole. I'm biking home from yoga class and stopping to meet some buddies for a concert in the park. I'm in my garden, pulling weeds and trying to intimidate the neighborhood rabbits. I'm paddling my kayak around Lake Nokomis, and I'm not stopping until the mosquitoes come out.

All that summertime spirit can make a girl thirsty.

I'm really serious about hydration, mostly because I love to sweat. I know that drinking enough fluids throughout the day is going to help keep me feeling my best — especially if I'm spending time in the sun or recovering from a challenging workout.

It's not just in my head: Optimal hydration facilitates some of the

body's most crucial processes, like breathing, digestion, energy metabolism, and blood-pressure regulation. Our brains, kidneys, and skin all need plenty of water to do their best work. Water even acts as a lubricant for our joints, quite literally helping to keep our bodies moving.

On my personal list of daily health aspirations, staying hydrated is also one of the easier boxes to check. Even if I exceed my screen time or fall short of my fiber goal, I always manage to get enough water — especially in the summer, when lots of my favorite water-rich produce is at its peak. Tomatoes, zucchini, cucumber, and watermelon are more than 90 percent water, and they're all at their best during the hottest days of the year.

The cucumber and watermelon in this recipe contain potassium and magnesium, electrolytes that play a vital role in helping your body absorb water and move it through your bloodstream. Without electrolytes, your body would struggle to maintain fluid balance in your cells, where it's needed to prevent dehydration.

The coconut water is also high in electrolytes, specifically potassium, magnesium, and calcium. I don't particularly enjoy drinking coconut water plain, but I like the tropical flair it adds to blended watermelon, which can otherwise taste too sweet.

The acid from the lime juice and a pinch of sea salt help round out the flavors and add a bit of sodium, another electrolyte that's typically present in lower amounts in coconut water. The sea salt is optional; depending on your brand of coconut water or the ripeness of your watermelon, you may find you don't need it.

I prefer this beverage strained, but you can skip the straining step if you don't mind the pulp, which adds a bit of fiber to your glass.

If you're craving more of a cool-down after a sweaty day in the sun, toss a handful of ice cubes into the blender and make it a watermelon-cucumber slushie.

And if you, like me, are out there trying to squeeze all the juice you can out of summer, make sure you stay hydrated. Go ahead and drink both servings.



Makes two servings
Prep time: 15 minutes



2 cups chopped
watermelon



1/2 cup peeled and
diced cucumber



3-5 fresh mint
leaves



1/2 cup
coconut water



Juice of
1 lime



Pinch of sea salt,
optional

Place the watermelon, cucumber, mint leaves, and coconut water in a blender and blend until smooth. Pour the mixture through a fine-mesh sieve into a jar, pressing on the solids to extract as much liquid as you can. Stir in the lime juice and sea salt and serve over ice. 🍹

A Postbiotics Primer

Meet another biotic that can influence your gut health.

BY ADAM MEYER

YOU'VE LIKELY heard of prebiotics and probiotics, and you may already eat fermented foods or take probiotic supplements. But there's another category of gut-friendly compounds that's worth your attention: postbiotics.

To understand the benefits of postbiotics, it helps to know how probiotics and prebiotics function.

"Probiotics are live microbes that have a wide range of potentially beneficial properties for the person consuming them," explains functional-medicine physician Robert Rountree, MD. Every time you eat yogurt, sip kombucha, or take a probiotic supplement, you're introducing living bacteria into your gut ecosystem.

Prebiotics, on the other hand, nourish these beneficial bacteria. "Prebiotics can be thought of as fertilizers or food for microbes," Rountree explains. Your body doesn't digest prebiotics; rather, it sends them to your colon where they ferment while your gut bacteria metabolize them.

Postbiotics form the third branch of this biotic family. Rather than fibers or

live bacteria that we ingest, postbiotics are the substances that microbes leave behind after they break down nutrients. Hence the "post-" prefix.

"Many of the benefits we often credit to probiotics actually come from the postbiotics they produce," explains Melissa Mitri, MS, RD. And even though postbiotics are produced by bacteria, they remain active in the body long after the microbes themselves have expired, making them a useful tool for sustaining overall health.

Postbiotics are the substances that microbes leave behind after they break down nutrients.

POSTBIOTICS AT WORK

Postbiotics include a variety of molecules and microbial components. Some are metabolic byproducts. Others act as the structural parts of cells, or nutrients made by microbial activity.

There are several common types of postbiotics, including short-chain fatty acids like butyrate; beta-glucans found in yeast; vitamins and amino acids; fungi- and bacteria-derived digestive enzymes; and heat-killed probiotic

strains, also called paraprobiotics or "ghost probiotics."

"Postbiotics can improve the overall diversity of bacteria in the gut microbiome, increase the ratio of beneficial to potentially harmful microorganisms, and prevent pathogenic bacteria from attaching to the intestinal walls," says Rountree. They may also help strengthen your gut barrier, which keeps irritants out of your bloodstream and helps fight inflammation in your gastrointestinal tract.

There's some debate as to whether some of these molecules qualify as postbiotics, Rountree explains. The International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics has stated that purified metabolites and isolated molecules (including butyrate, beta-glucans, and digestive enzymes) should simply be referred to by their chemical names and not considered postbiotics.

But Rountree says this semantic controversy neglects to consider the real-world usage of the term. "The practical reality is that many commercial products containing these substances refer to them as postbiotics on the label," he says. "And they're not just random chemicals; they're a specific result of previous microbial activity."

POSTBIOTIC POTENTIAL

Since postbiotics aren't alive, they work differently than probiotics. Researchers are still uncovering postbiotics' full potential, but they've already discovered several promising benefits.

They can boost your immune health.

"Because so much of the immune system resides in the gut, postbiotics can also support the immune system," explains Mitri.

Rountree adds that some forms of postbiotics have been studied extensively, especially yeast-derived beta-glucans. "The main clinically studied benefits of postbiotics are for immune support, which includes prevention of infection, improved tolerance — thus decreasing risk of allergy and autoimmunity — and possibly cancer prevention."

They're potent and shelf-stable.

Unlike probiotics, which start losing strength the moment they're packaged (and often require refrigeration), postbiotics are relatively stable.

"Since postbiotics are not viable organisms, they have a very stable shelf life at room temperature and maintain their potency over much longer time frames than probiotics," Rountree explains. This also means that postbiotics travel well and are relatively easy to store and incorporate into your routine.

They may help with seasonal allergies and eczema.

Research suggests postbiotics could be useful for managing certain inflammatory conditions. Heat-killed probiotic strains, for instance, have shown potential for reducing seasonal-allergy symptoms. Other microbial metabolites may calm eczema by supporting the skin's barrier and lowering inflammatory signals.

They can improve digestive health.

Butyrate is one of the most studied postbiotics, and it plays a significant role in gut health and digestion. That's because butyrate helps strengthen the intestinal lining, reduce inflammation, and support healthy gut motility.

Rountree says butyrate's digestive health benefits extend beyond the colon. Butyrate can also support your nervous system, helping to regulate bowel habits and reduce gastrointestinal discomfort. Early findings suggest that postbiotics may offer relief from bloating, irregularity, and general sensitivity, especially for those with irritable bowel syndrome.

They might help anyone sensitive to probiotics.

Some people, especially those with sensitive digestive systems, small-intestinal bacterial overgrowth, or impaired gut motility, feel bloated or uncomfortable when taking probiotics. But because postbiotics don't contain living organisms, they typically don't produce the same symptoms — and so they could offer a path for sensitive individuals to improve their gut health.

POSTBIOTIC-CURIOUS?

If you eat a balanced diet rich in a variety of plant-based whole foods, your body should produce plenty of its own postbiotics naturally.

"Most people can get enough postbiotics . . . by eating a variety of probiotic-rich foods alongside those that contain prebiotic fiber," says Mitri. Yogurt, miso, sauerkraut, kombucha, tempeh, and kimchi are some of those common probiotic foods.

However, for people with digestive

issues or immune concerns, or who have trouble tolerating probiotics, postbiotic supplements could be a supportive strategy.

If you're curious about postbiotics, speak with your healthcare practitioner, who can help determine whether supplements are right for you. Those who are acutely ill or immunocompromised should consult with a physician before making any major changes to their diet or supplement

strategy. Those with allergies to yeast or fungi should take care to avoid yeast-derived products.

Postbiotics aren't meant to replace probiotics or prebiotics. Instead, they're meant to be another tool in your gut-health toolbox. Whether you get them from fermented foods or from supplements, these microbial byproducts can deliver a plethora of benefits for your immune system, digestion, and overall health. 🍌



NO-COOK SUMMER MEALS

Beat the heat with these
fresh dishes — no stove required.

BY KATE MORGAN

IN THE SWELTER of midsummer, there are few things less appealing than standing over a hot stove to prepare dinner. The good news is there are plenty of delicious meals that don't require cooking. The even better news? Eating raw foods can be a big boost to your health.

Researchers have found that a raw-food diet is associated with lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers. And a raw meal that centers on vegetables and fruits is minimally processed and high in fiber — which supports your gut and immune health.

In other words, avoiding the heat isn't the only upside to a no-cook night.

These recipes focus on fresh summer flavors, come together fairly quickly, and most importantly, don't require a single pot or pan.

Melon-Prosciutto Salad

Makes two servings
Prep time: 15 minutes

SALAD

- ½ cantaloupe, scooped out with a melon baller
- ½ honeydew melon, scooped out with a melon baller
- 8 oz. small fresh-mozzarella balls
- 3 tbs. minced fresh parsley
- 3 tbs. chopped fresh basil
- 3 tbs. chopped fresh mint
- Flaky salt, to taste
- 4 oz. prosciutto, sliced or torn into pieces

DRESSING

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- 2 tbs. white balsamic or apple-cider vinegar
- 1 tbs. lemon juice

In a large bowl, mix the melon balls, mozzarella, and herbs.

In a smaller bowl, whisk the dressing ingredients together, then drizzle the dressing over the salad and toss to coat. Sprinkle the salt over the fruit, then top with the prosciutto and serve immediately.



Mediterranean Smashed Chickpeas

Makes two servings
Prep time: 15 minutes

CHICKPEA SALAD

- 1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- ½ red onion, diced
- 1 medium cucumber, diced
- 2 tbs. minced fresh dill
- 3 tbs. minced Castelvetrano olives
- ¼ cup canned artichoke hearts, roughly chopped
- 2 tbs. chopped dried cranberries or cherries
- ¼ cup crumbled feta cheese
- ¼ cup loosely packed parsley, minced

DRESSING

- ½ cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- ½ tsp. ground coriander
- 1 clove garlic, finely minced
- 3 tbs. lemon juice
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

In a medium bowl, use a fork or potato masher to roughly mash half the chickpeas. Leave the rest whole. Add the other salad ingredients, except the parsley, and mix thoroughly.

In a small bowl, whisk the dressing ingredients. If the dressing seems too thick, add a splash of water.

Dress the salad and top with the minced parsley. Add more salt and pepper to taste, and serve.

Crab-Avocado Wraps

Makes four servings

Prep time: 20 minutes

- 1 ripe avocado
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 tbs. lemon juice, plus more for serving
- 1 tsp. Old Bay seasoning
- 2 tbs. finely diced red bell pepper
- 1 rib celery, finely diced
- ½ cup drained canned sweet corn
- 1 cup lump crabmeat
- 1 head butter lettuce, leaves washed and patted dry
- 3 tbs. minced green onion
- Flaky salt, to taste

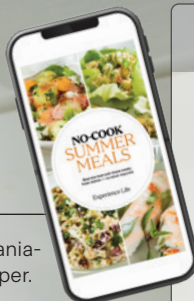
In a food processor, purée half the avocado with the mayonnaise, lemon juice, and Old Bay. Dice the other half of the avocado.

In a large bowl, mix the avocado mayo with the diced avocado, bell pepper, celery, and sweet corn. Fold in the crabmeat gently, to keep it in large pieces.

Wrap the crab mixture in the lettuce leaves and top with the green onions, a squeeze of lemon, and a sprinkle of flaky salt, and serve. 🍴



KATE MORGAN is a Pennsylvania-based writer and recipe developer.



SAVOR SUMMER

Download a mobile-friendly version of these recipes — plus one for Shrimp and Veggie Summer Rolls — at ELmag.com/nocookmeals.





WHAT'S YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE?

A full-page background image showing a sunset over a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright orange and yellow glow. A red kayak paddle is visible in the foreground, partially submerged in the water. The water reflects the sunset colors.

GET INSPIRED TO TAKE ON A NEW FITNESS GOAL.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

GOALS HAVE A WAY of getting us to do hard things. They light a match under us when we're stuck — or simply don't know what to do next.

"Everybody's definition of 'hard' is going to be different," says professional adventurer Michael Lanza, creator of The Big Outside, an online platform of resources for backpackers and hikers. "But whatever the thing is that's challenging becomes immensely satisfying when you push yourself to a realistic goal. . . . It's an indescribable feeling of accomplishment. You think, *If I can do this, then I can try the next thing I never thought I'd do.*"

You can pursue fitness goals outdoors, in a health club or gym, or in your own home. These goals can involve improving your current skills or learning something new. You can aspire to lift more weight, move faster, or go farther than you've gone before.

"Having a clear goal almost acts as a GPS and turns your random effort into intentional action," says David Freeman, senior director of coach excellence for Life Time. "So when you start to know what you're going after, you wake up differently, you have a sense of urgency, you move with more focus, and you start stacking up small daily wins. Then goals bring back the momentum that's needed for you to get out of a funk."

We asked experts in a variety of fields for their best goal-setting inspiration. Perhaps one or more of these goals could spark your next fitness endeavor.

LEARN A NEW SKILL

Training for a new sport or skill expands your body's physical abilities and creates new neural pathways in your brain. The more complex the activity, the more you engage and challenge your brain.

"You hit a focused mindset where you block everything else out," says Lanza. "It's a rare experience to be singularly focused on one thing to the point where we don't realize how much time has gone by."

Tackling a new skill can also foster continued learning and broaden your potential as an athlete. For example, if you learn to rock climb in a gym, you'll be more prepared to try climbing in nature. If you work with a coach to learn Olympic lifts, your improved explosiveness can help your performance in other sports.

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Rock climbing
- Stand-up paddleboarding
- Kayaking
- Mountain biking
- Surfing
- Skateboarding
- Skiing (alpine, Nordic, back-country, water)
- Ice skating
- Snowshoeing
- Olympic lifting: snatch and clean and jerk
- Kettlebell or mace swinging
- Boxing or kickboxing
- Martial arts
- Dance
- Any new sport, such as tennis, pickleball, or golf

IMPROVE YOUR HEALTHSPAN

Your "healthspan" is the period of life you spend in good health, free from chronic disease and disabilities associated with aging.

One way to set goals around healthspan is by looking at fitness indicators for longevity. For example, grip strength correlates with your risk of falling and your risk of chronic disease, says Jennifer Miller, PhD, CSCS, an assistant professor of kinesiology at St. Olaf College and a Life Time Alpha and GTX instructor.

While these fitness indicators are commonly associated with aging, it's never too early to start paying attention to them.

"What you're doing in your 20s and 30s really [becomes what you build upon] when you're 55 and 65," Miller says. "We start to see changes every 10 years or so as we get older, so who you want to be in 10 years really depends on what you're doing in the years prior."

One way to set goals around healthspan is by looking at fitness indicators for longevity.

GRIP-STRENGTH GOAL:

At age 65 and older, men need around 60 to 70 pounds of grip strength (the standard associated with lower mortality risk); women need about 35 to 45 pounds. Improve your grip strength with the farmer's hold and carry.

- Baseline goal: Hold two kettlebells totaling 28 kilograms or about 60 pounds (men) or 17 kg or about 35 pounds (women) for 30 to 60 seconds.
- Advanced goal: Walk with two kettlebells totaling 50 to 100 percent of your body weight for 30 to 60 seconds.

MUSCULAR-ENDURANCE GOAL:

For functional independence, older adults need enough strength and endurance to sit down and stand up from a chair 11 or 12 times in 30 seconds.

- Baseline goal: Sit and stand 18 times in one minute.
- Advanced goal: Sit and stand 33 times in 30 seconds.

SPEED-WALKING GOAL:

Research shows that gait-movement patterns — such as a step length greater than 25 inches — predict lower chances of injury and better longevity outcomes in older adults. VO_2 max is associated with longevity and lower mortality risk. Speed walking can help improve both markers.

- Baseline goal: Run or speed walk one mile without stopping.
- Advanced goal: Speed walk a mile in under 13 minutes. Miller notes that it should take no more than three minutes for your heart rate to return to within 20 to 30 beats of your resting heart rate.

LOWER-BODY STRENGTH AND BALANCE GOAL:

This compound exercise helps keep you mobile: Go from sitting to standing, then walk or run a short distance and return to your starting position.

- Baseline goal: Get up from a chair, walk 10 feet, and come back in 13.5 seconds.
- Advanced goal: Get up from the ground without using your knees, hands, or anything else for support, run 25 yards and back, and return to seated. Bonus: Do this while wearing a weighted vest.

LIFT MORE WEIGHT

Resistance training — tackling a heavier weight or doing more repetitions or sets, say — draws on the principle of progressive overload. By gradually increasing the challenge to your body, you continue to build strength, muscle, and endurance.

Start by making sure you have good technique around a specific movement, such as a squat. Then, add intensity — and don't be afraid to make it a challenge, says Lindsay Ogden, CPT, a Life Time personal trainer and Alpha Strength coach.

"Many times, participants will say something like, 'This is hard!' And I say, 'Good, because you didn't come for easy!'" Ogden says. "If you're not a little uncomfortable or nervous, then you're likely not truly exploring what all your body and mind are capable of. Invite and welcome those feelings in — they mean you're onto something great."

It's common to aim for a specific strength-training benchmark like bench pressing your body weight or deadlifting 300 pounds. Alternatively, consider strength tests that gauge your improvement over time.

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Increase your one-rep max for a major lift by 10 percent.
- Increase your load for a major lift by 10 percent for a set of five or 10 reps.
- Increase your maximum number of reps for a body-weight exercise such as pushups, dips, or pull-ups.
 - Hold a plank or wall sit for a minute or longer.

MASTER A NEW MOVE

It's gratifying to be able to add more weight to the bar, but it can be even more satisfying to nail a move you didn't think was possible.

"Getting a chin-up for the first time, when people have never done it in their life, gets them thinking more of exercise for getting stronger than for losing weight. It changes their perspective of why they're doing it," says Scott Schutte, fitness coach and cofounder of Evolved Personal Training.

A new movement can be intimidating for many reasons. Maybe, for example, you think it's too complex or requires more strength and mobility than you have. "As humans we wish a lot. We fear what we don't understand because we think we can't do something," says Ryan Hurst, cofounder of GMB Fitness, who specializes in teaching gymnastics movements, such as handstands, cartwheels, and rolling variations.

But Hurst says taking the time to understand and tackle a movement that seems scary or difficult not only makes us better movers but gives us the opportunity to play. "When we use incremental progressions and work toward overcoming that fear, it opens up a new world. And this world is exploration — and this is where play comes in."

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Handstand
- Cartwheel
- Kakasana (crow pose), pincha mayurasana (forearm stand), or other challenging-for-you yoga poses
- Pistol squat
- Forward or backward shoulder roll
- Backbend
- Monkey bars traverse
- Chin-up or pull-up
- Muscle-up

GO FASTER

Whether you're doing track intervals or boot-camp plyometrics, training at a high speed or intensity has numerous benefits, including elevating your metabolic rate, improving your ability to transition from burning fat to burning carbs during workouts, boosting your anaerobic function, improving your insulin sensitivity and blood-sugar stability, enhancing your mood and cognition, increasing your VO₂ max, and improving your cardiovascular health.

"When you do interval training, this causes your heart wall to get thicker so your heart can literally pump harder," says Mike Thomson, CSCS, Life Time coach and endurance athlete.

You don't need to be in your prime to set speed or intensity goals. Challenge yourself with a cardiovascular activity that allows you to safely and confidently work at your maximum effort.

"Let's say I've got a 69-year-old athlete who cannot run because it hurts his knees," says Thomson. "Well, what can he do? He can still get on the air bike and do a 20-minute time trial."

For the following ideas, first find your baseline and then use it to set goals relevant to your current fitness level.

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Improve your mile or 800-meter run time.
- Improve your mile walking pace on an inclined treadmill.
- Increase your distance covered in a 20-minute air-bike time trial.
- Improve your 2K row time.
- Improve your 25- or 50-meter freestyle-swim time.



CONQUER CONSISTENCY

Process goals are focused on a habit you want to develop or a result you want to achieve, such as walking more or increasing your one-rep max in the gym. But instead of fixating on the outcome, you focus on the process, knowing that your actions likely will lead you to positive results. For example, if you lift heavy three days a week, you'll eventually be able to increase the amount of weight on the bar.

"A lot of us get caught up in the results. Consistency is not going to come from chasing PRs or big audacious objectives," says Freeman. "It comes from committing to small habits, and that starts to compound over time."

"Process goals teach you discipline, bring about confidence through repetition, and keep you progressing week after week. And then even when the results haven't shown up yet, you still understand that you're becoming a better version of yourself."

The following process goals span multiple fitness categories. Choose one or more of these to build health-supportive habits, or come up with your own.

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Complete no fewer than three strength workouts a week.
- Run a mile at least twice a week.
- Be active in nature for an hour or more every day.
- Take an average of 7,000 steps every day.
- Do at least one walking errand per day.
- Attend a Pilates/barre/yoga class once every week.
- Take a weekly Zumba/ballet/swing- or aerial-dance class.
- Foam roll and stretch every morning.
- Do a meditation and breathing practice every evening.

GO THE DISTANCE

Since ancient times, endurance activities have challenged human potential. Feats like the dolichos Olympic race in ancient Greece, the inaugural long-distance bicycle race in France, and the first crossing of the English Channel by a swimmer — and their modern adaptations — are achievements of grit, perseverance, and discipline.

The discipline you practice while training for a marathon or other endurance event can apply elsewhere in life, too.

"In the world of fitness, when you say you're going to be at run group at 5:30 a.m., the more you do this, the easier it gets," says Thomson. "The more you do the things you say you're going to do, the easier it is to do the things you say you're going to do. That's not just with working out."

Physiologically, endurance training may lower all-cause mortality by improving blood flow.

"Once you start doing cardiovascular activity — specifically zone 2 — your left ventricle gets larger in size and your capillaries get larger in diameter so your blood can be transported to the rest of your body better," Thomson says. "The better your plumbing — your heart, veins, and capillaries — the longer you're capable of living, and the less likely you are to die of a cardiovascular disease."

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Run/bike/row/ski continuously for 30 to 60 minutes.
- Complete your first 5K or 10K.
- Complete a triathlon of any distance: super-sprint, sprint, Olympic, half-Ironman, or Ironman.
- Complete a half-marathon, marathon, or ultramarathon.
- Complete a century or other long-distance bike ride.
- Complete an open-water swimming race.
- Set a PR in an endurance event.

BECOME A HYBRID ATHLETE

Foot races and triathlons have long been a gold standard for establishing grit as an endurance athlete. But since the debut of obstacle-course and fitness-racing events, endurance sports have evolved to test both cardiovascular fitness and muscular endurance.

These events combine several functional-strength challenges with short- to moderate-distance running or other endurance efforts. "Physically, you're training with more intention and intensity," Freeman says. "Your conditioning improves because you're pushing into heart-rate zones you don't normally reach. It's a more well-rounded approach when it comes to strength and mobility."

Signing up for a competitive event also challenges you to perform under pressure, something that you might not experience in your regular workouts.

"When you're under that pressure in this environment that is challenging and stressful, how do you yield to that stress? Do you end up overcoming it? I think it's always a learning experience, and you build resilience through adversity," Freeman adds. "Competition allows you to tap into a version of yourself that everyday training doesn't reach."

SAMPLE GOALS:

- APEX
- DEKA
- GORUCK
- HYROX
- LT Games
- Spartan
- Tough Mudder

"Competition allows you to tap into a version of yourself that everyday training doesn't reach."

TAKE IT OUTSIDE

Combining nature and movement makes for some of the most meaningful fitness adventures. “Backpacking, rock climbing, trail running, skiing — there are all these dimensions that people already into fitness can discover when they expand their horizons,” says Lanza.

Goals related to these activities can be as simple as walking or biking on local trails, or as intense as completing an immersive wilderness expedition.

For Ogden, it meant attempting the rim-to-rim-to-rim challenge, which involves hiking across the Grand Canyon twice in one day. She and her fiancé set off before sunrise in May 2024. Then, just 30 minutes in, she twisted her ankle — badly. She completed one crossing, from the canyon’s South Rim to its North Rim (itself a feat known as the rim-to-rim challenge), but was unable to make the return trip.

“At that moment, I was so upset over it,” Ogden recalls. At first, all she could think was *All that hard work for nothing*.

But falling short of her original goal illuminated an important lesson: “It’s about the journey and who you become in the process of that adventure. The finish lines are fleeting, but the training and the experience itself, especially when shared with others, is what stays with you.”

“It’s about the journey and who you become in the process of that adventure.”

SAMPLE GOALS:

- Walk, run, or bike the entirety of a local trail system (over several weeks, months, etc.).
- Attain a specific elevation gain or distance, or aim to reach a named summit.
- Visit all the national parks or all your state parks.
- Participate in a trail-running event.
- Do a guided hiking or biking trip.
- Tackle an epic multiday hike, like Camino de Santiago or the Great Norse Run.
- Commit to a multiday bike ride.
- Attend a surf camp or a seaside breathwork and yoga retreat.

WITH SO MANY possibilities, choosing just one goal might feel like a goal in itself. “A lot of people come in with so many things they want to accomplish,” says Schutte. But pushing your limits doesn’t mean doing everything all at once.

You don’t have to set out to run a marathon and PR your deadlift and improve your bone density. Often, the behaviors required to achieve a single goal can result in crossover benefits. And keeping your focus on one overarching goal can help make the journey more sustainable and enjoyable.

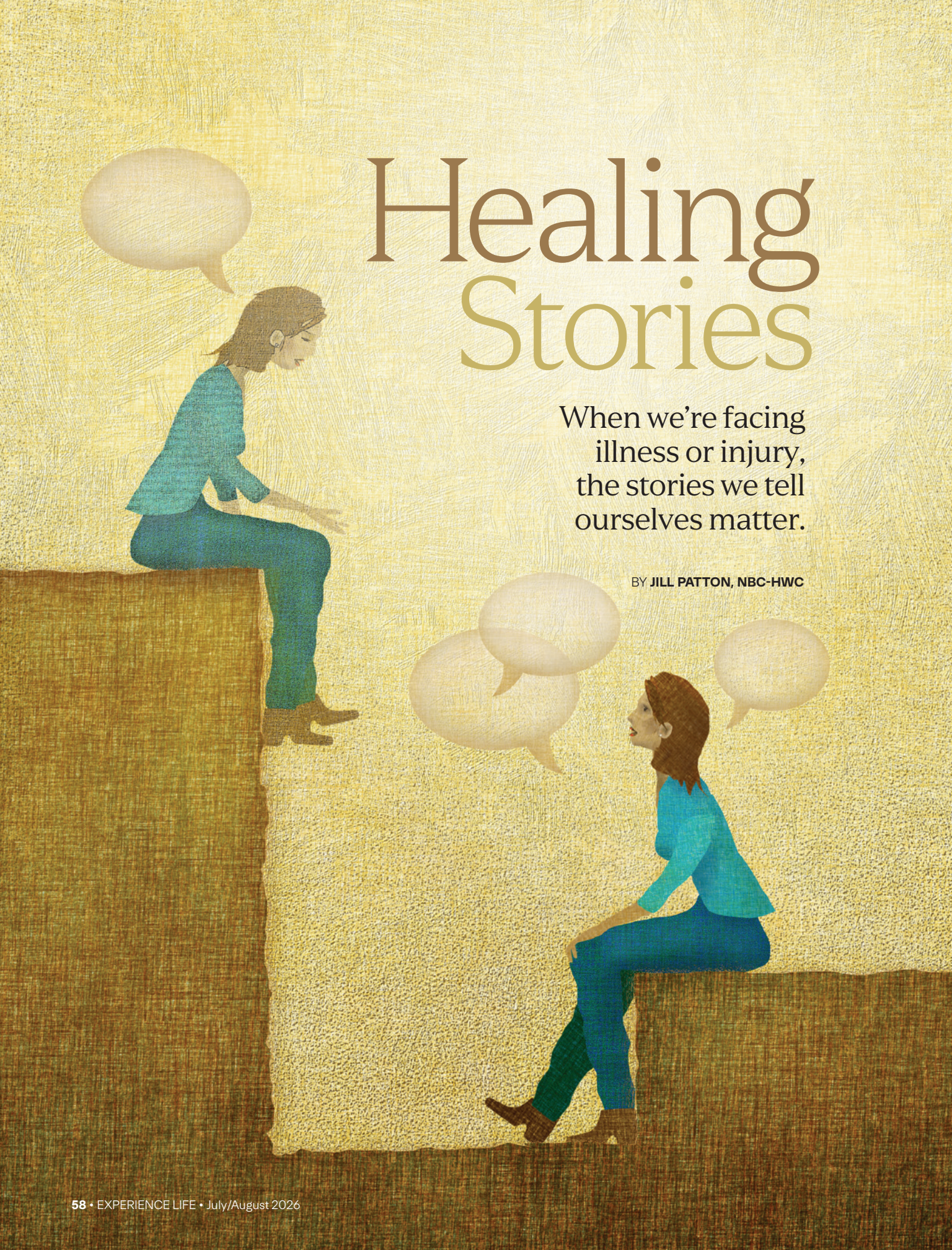
Whatever goal you choose next, no matter how simple or audacious, remember to make it meaningful to you. Consider what exactly you want to accomplish — and why it matters. Backing your goal with personal meaning and passion sparks motivation and improves consistency, increasing your chances of amazing yourself with what you’re capable of. 🌱

NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



SET YOUR GOALS

Discover six principles for developing an effective fitness plan at ELmag.com/fitnessgoals.

An illustration with a textured, painterly style. Two women, both with reddish-brown hair and wearing teal tops and dark blue pants, are depicted. One woman is seated on the edge of a brown, textured ledge on the left, looking down. A single speech bubble is positioned above her. The other woman is seated on a similar ledge on the right, looking up towards the first woman. Three speech bubbles are positioned between them, suggesting a conversation. The background is a light, textured yellow.

Healing Stories

When we're facing
illness or injury,
the stories we tell
ourselves matter.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC

ANNIE BREWSTER had always seen herself as strong, physical, and capable. A lifelong athlete with degrees from Stanford University and Harvard Medical School, she was used to folding life's challenges neatly into her identity as a resilient, focused person — someone always able to achieve her goals.

None of this aligned with the words she heard from a neurologist in 2001: “You almost certainly have multiple sclerosis.”

Nope, she thought. She left his office and didn't see another neurologist for five years.

“I couldn't take it in, because I had these ideas of what I could accomplish and what I could outrun,” says Brewster, now a practicing physician and author of *The Healing Power of Storytelling: Using Personal Narrative to Navigate Illness, Trauma, and Loss*.

Just below the surface of Brewster's denial lurked shame. She feared that she had somehow caused her illness and that she would lose herself to it. She felt betrayed by her body. When her symptoms accelerated and she began treatment, she told almost no one. The story was too painful.

Then in 2009, Brewster found herself delivering an MS diagnosis to a young patient. Seeing her despair, Brewster decided to share her own experience, including how she holds hope despite an uncertain future. After the patient heard the story, she said she felt immediate relief.

So did Brewster.

She soon shared her story with her local public radio station. Rather than the judgment or pity she'd feared, she received acceptance and support from the colleagues and friends who had tuned in. Yes, her life had taken a new direction, but she was still Annie.

After all those years of hiding her MS from others, Brewster found that grappling with her health story, and then sharing it with others, was profoundly healing — even without a potential cure.

This can be true for all of us. The stories we tell about our health really matter.

THE VALUE OF HEALTH STORIES

A life-changing diagnosis or injury can make us feel like strangers to ourselves. Who are we without the same body and abilities we've always relied on?

Humans across time and cultures have turned to storytelling as a way to find meaning in health crises.

For example, many Indigenous oral traditions feature stories about illness, injury, and survival, and these may be shared during ceremonies and healing circles.

“Our brains are wired for storytelling,” says psychologist Jonathan Adler, PhD, who researches the relationship between mental health and personal narratives. “It's both an evolutionarily programmed adaptation and a deeply cultural practice.”

Research shows that the stories we tell about our health — to others and to ourselves — have an impact on our ability to weather difficult changes. And, sometimes, changing how we tell our health stories helps us reclaim an empowered relationship with our bodies. A different story can make more space for our minds and hearts

to heal — even if we can't regain our former health status.

Narrative-based therapies, such as expressive writing, have been shown to help people process their feelings about difficult experiences, bringing a range of health benefits.

In a study of nearly 300 patients with renal cancer, published in 2014, patients who explored their feelings about their diagnosis in writing were found to experience fewer symptoms and better physical functioning than a control group.

Telling one's health story to others can also help counter the loneliness and isolation that often comes with illness. This

effect applies to both parties.

“You as the storyteller are affirmed when someone else hears your story, while your listener receives a new lens through which to view their own evolving story,” says Adler.

Stepping outside our own narratives long enough to examine them also provides new perspective.

Once she began to share her diagnosis, Brewster realized that MS had not really diminished her. She could see she had also gained things, including increased empathy and a deeper sense of connection to others.

Approaching our health this way, says Adler, invites us “to consider whether the story we've told ourselves is the only one that can be told.”

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CHANGING YOUR NARRATIVE

A growing body of research in narrative psychology suggests that how you tell your health story affects your mental health more than the story's actual content.

"Not only are you the main character in your life story, but you are also the narrator," says Adler. "Often, it's a real mind shift to realize *I'm not just doing my life. I'm also telling the story of my life, and the way I tell it really matters.*"

In 2016, Adler published a review exploring the connection between life stories and experiences of well-being. The paper identified several narrative themes associated with stronger mental health — even when someone's story

is deeply difficult. Those themes are coherence, agency, communion, redemption, and accommodation.

"Deciding to tell your story — whether you simply write it down on paper and keep it private or share it with a larger audience — is a brave act and . . . ultimately a healing endeavor," Brewster writes.

Adler and Brewster now teach these five themes — and how to work with them — to patients and physicians at a nonprofit called the Health Story Collaborative. Here we explore how the themes look and feel via the health stories of real people — and reflect on some prompts from Brewster that can help you tell your own story.



Life rarely follows a neat plotline, says Brewster, and health challenges can introduce a profound sense of incoherence. By organizing your health story after a disruption — outlining a timeline, noting important characters and relationships, describing details, and offering some interpretation of why it all matters — you'll make the changes easier for yourself, and others, to grasp.

In psychology, this theme is known as coherence. It describes how a person's story can bring order and meaning to an otherwise chaotic experience.

Telling a coherent story, even a hard one, has been correlated with reduced stress. A study of mothers caring for

children with autism, published in 2019, suggests that telling more coherent, well-integrated stories about their caregiving experiences predicted less parenting stress.

The mothers even showed less biological aging at the cellular level.

Importantly, these benefits were linked to how well the story held together, rather than how positive it felt.

Finding coherence — as well as other supportive narrative themes — involves literally writing and revising your story. This is the core of the work Brewster and Adler now do at the Health Story Collaborative.

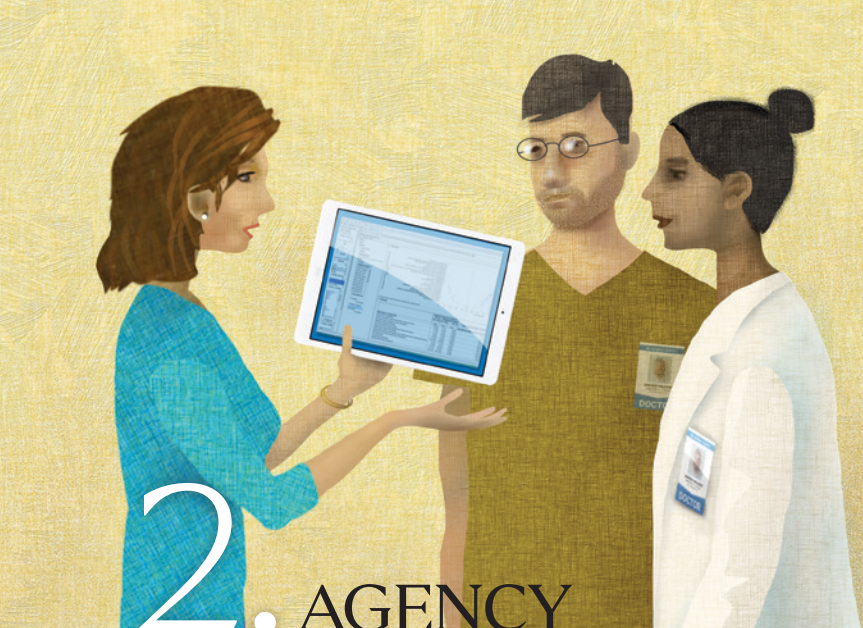
They believe sharing your story with another person can lead to even deeper healing.

"Stories don't just live in our head," says Adler. "They live in the space between us."

Telling a coherent story, even a hard one, **has been correlated with reduced stress.**

Ask yourself questions like these as you begin to write, and then tell, your health story:

- What are the key moments in your health story?
- In what order did the events take place? (Flashbacks are fine.)
- What is the emotional backdrop of your story? How did you feel at different times?
- How does your interpretation of events affect and shape your story?



2. AGENCY

If a health story reveals someone's belief that they have some influence over their own experience, it demonstrates a theme of agency. The story of writer and performer Taylor Coffman is a good example.

Within moments of giving birth to her daughter in 2022, Coffman went into sudden organ failure. "I had a heart attack, my kidneys failed, and I had a pulmonary embolism," she recalls. "The doctors couldn't read my chart fast enough."

Luckily, one doctor recognized what was happening: The stress of childbirth had triggered an underlying disorder called complement-mediated thrombotic microangiopathy (also referred to as atypical hemolytic uremic syndrome), causing Coffman's body to form dangerous blood clots.

"I am absolutely a miracle of science," Coffman says of her survival. Yet, as she awakened

from a medically induced coma two weeks later, she was discouraged by the lack of coordination among the 20 or so specialists working to keep her alive.

"I had previously been a project manager, and I saw gaps in communication," she says. "I began to realize my voice was valuable in this process." Coffman raised her concerns, and the physicians created a better system to collaborate. "That was a turning point in my care."

Coffman's sense of agency continues to sustain her as she navigates life with a rare disease. She chronicles her health story on Substack and social media, offering insights and advice to others with chronic illness. "I don't see myself as passive in this experience," she says. "I am on the team. I advocate for myself, always with respect."

Develop agency in your own health story with these questions:

- What personal strengths have helped you navigate this illness or injury?
- What can you control?
- What have you learned that might be helpful to others in a similar situation?

3. COMMUNION

The theme of communion arises in health stories that involve the support of close, nurturing relationships — such as the story of Alisa Kennedy Jones.

Jones suffered her first epileptic seizure in 2010, shortly after the onset of perimenopause. The author of *Gotham Girl Interrupted* has since endured hundreds more seizures, including two that led to multiple broken bones in her face, requiring extensive reconstructive surgeries.

Early on, Jones tried to minimize her illness. "You don't want to be a burden, and you don't want to be a source of drama," she says. Aware of the stigma associated with epilepsy, she told only close family and two friends about her condition. When she moved with her youngest child to a new city, she felt completely isolated.

"I couldn't tell my new employer about this or they would start to doubt me," Jones says. "And if they started to doubt me, I could lose my authority, my job, and my health insurance."

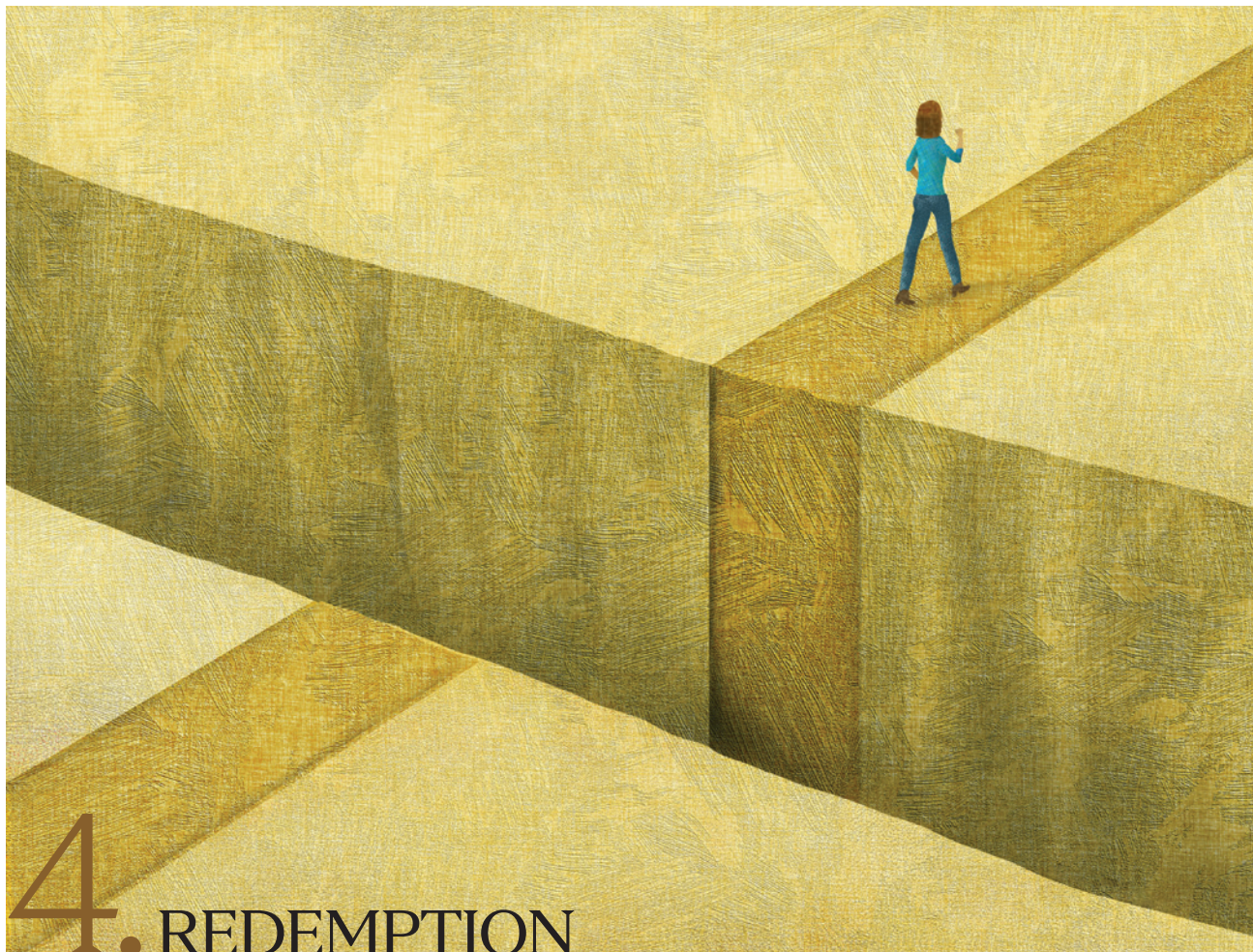
Over time, her seizures made it unsafe for her to operate a car. One day she took a bus to pick up her child from school, and another mother she barely knew, Camille, offered to give them a ride home.

This gesture ended her isolation. It brought Jones into a circle of other supportive women; what's more, Camille found a house in her family-friendly neighborhood for Jones and her child to rent.

"We all took care of each other," Jones says, recalling game nights and tag-teaming childcare when anyone in the close-knit group needed help. "It was just a really remarkable group of women looking out for each other."

Identify communion in your own health story with these questions:

- Who has been there for you on your journey?
- How much are you able to share with close friends and family?
- How have those close to you been affected by your health story?



4. REDEMPTION

Not all hardships can be overcome, but they can often be transformed. A health story that identifies events and situations that started badly but improved over time demonstrates a theme of redemption.

Matthew Sanford was 13 when his sister and father were killed in a car accident that left him paralyzed below his chest. In the years that followed, Sanford absorbed “a mythology of healing stories” from well-meaning experts, friends, and family intended to help him overcome his loss and disability.

He was told, for instance, that any sensations he felt in his lower body were phantoms to ignore. He was told that building up his arm strength would compensate for the silence of his lower body. Doing so would supposedly enable him to have a “relatively normal life.”

Redemption is not just about overcoming challenges. It comes from telling your story fully, complete with grief and paradox and humor.

“But what if I really wanted to be whole?” Sanford asks in his book, *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*.

Sanford gradually learned that his lower body was not completely silent, and that he could reintegrate his body and mind. This led him down his own path toward wholeness.

At age 25, he began studying yoga. He eventually founded Mind Body Solutions in suburban Minneapolis, where he guides others with disabilities to engage with their bodies in empowered ways — and to rewrite their stories on their own terms.

Redemption is not just about overcoming challenges, Sanford explains. It comes from telling your story fully, complete with grief and paradox and humor. “It’s not about trying to change anything.”

Find redemption in your health story with these questions:

- What have you learned from your illness or injury?
- What new strengths have you developed or recognized?
- How have your relationships shifted? Have you become closer to or lost touch with anyone?
- How have your priorities changed?



Some health experiences can't easily be assimilated into our life's story. But when we're able to change the story to accommodate a new reality, we're performing something called "accommodative processing." This skill is often connected to a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

When Aimee Prasek, PhD, lost her father to suicide in 2000, she felt like she had survived an earthquake. "Everything came crashing down, and life did not look the same the next day," she recalls.

At 17, Prasek had no coping skills and few resources. She became deeply depressed. "I did not know my feelings, and nobody asked me about my feelings. My mom signed me up for a grief group and that was about it."

A year later, she headed to college "soaking in depression and anxiety."

Prasek signed up for some free therapy sessions on campus,

where she was introduced to cognitive behavioral therapy and breathwork. When she returned home, a minister at her church advised her to "press into the mystery" of her loss with curiosity and self-compassion. These glimpses of healing sent Prasek on an academic and spiritual quest to understand the connection between mind and body.

Today, two decades later, Prasek co-leads a mental health program called Joy Lab and cohosts its companion podcast.

"Struggling is an important piece of this," she says of the growth she experienced after losing her father. "After an earthquake, there's search and rescue. There's lots of people that come together to assist, and then there's rebuilding. It takes time and attention and effort."

Prasek's profound loss is part of her life story — but it's not her entire story. That's integration.

Learn to accommodate your new reality with these questions:

- How has this experience shifted your sense of identity?
- How have your challenges caused you to grow or change?
- How has your perspective shifted?
- What matters most to you now? 🌀

THE CASE FOR NARRATIVE MEDICINE

Perhaps the most common venue for sharing health stories is a doctor's office or hospital. But unless clinicians have been trained to engage skillfully with your story, much can get lost in translation.

"Healthcare professionals may be knowledgeable about disease, but they are often ignorant of the abyss at which patients routinely stand," writes Rita Charon, MD, PhD, in her groundbreaking book *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*.

The field of narrative medicine, which Charon helped establish through her work at Columbia University, seeks to address this gap by encouraging medical students and practitioners to study literature, philosophy, and ethics. These fields can help healthcare professionals learn to become "close readers" of their patients' stories.

By taking careful note of details, including characters, plot, themes, gestures, and silences, the clinician can better understand what's happening medically, as well as what the patient values most. The aims of narrative medicine include making clinicians more sensitive and empathetic toward their patients as well as helping physicians become more self-aware and reflective in their own lives.

Patients can also help their care teams pay closer attention to the important details of their own stories.

"I really want my doctors to see me as a whole person, not just a problem to solve," says Taylor Coffman, a writer, performer, and patient advocate who lives with a rare disease.

Coffman recommends going to appointments with detailed notes to share. These can include your symptoms and questions plus a list of what matters to you in your life and in the care you seek. One tactic she recommends is bringing a photo showing yourself at a time when you were well and doing things you enjoy or that are important to you.

"If you come in on your sickest day, your doctors don't know what 'well' looks like on you," she explains. Instead, she says, you want to tell a story that communicates, "This is my normal and this is my goal."



BUILD YOUR OWN RETREAT

**A SEASONED RETREAT EXPERT
EXPLAINS HOW TO CREATE
YOUR OWN REFUGE.**

BY **CAROLINE SYLGE**

DO YOU LONG TO PRESS PAUSE on the stress, digital overload, and general overwhelm of daily life? Throughout much of history, restorative retreats have helped humans cope with life's demands. And today we need them more than ever.

A retreat is different from a vacation. Although vacations can be restorative, they can also be exhausting, depending on the circumstance. The goal of a retreat is to give yourself a break from the daily hustle and to emerge renewed, with a fresh perspective.

Attending a hosted yoga or meditation retreat is a delicious experience, but you can also retreat by yourself, on your own terms, for an hour, a day, or longer. Retreating doesn't have to be complicated, time-consuming, or expensive. The only thing you truly need is your own permission to take some time for yourself.

What you seek from your retreat depends on your life stage and situation, and it changes as you change. What you get from it depends on how much of yourself you put into it.

So, banish the excuses and give retreating a try. You may discover that it creates more of the time and energy you long for.







3

DIY RETREATS

When you're deciding how to retreat, it can be useful to align the practices you choose with the seasons, each of which offers its own focus.

Spring invites us to cleanse and declutter our body, mind, and space as we emerge from hibernation to greet the world again. Summer's warmth and expansiveness encourage us to embrace creativity, find our flow, and nurture ourselves with delight. Autumn, with its grounding energy, teaches us to trust ourselves and others, and to reclaim our space and time. This prepares us for winter, when we can settle down, gather resolve, and plan for the coming year.

The following retreat frameworks are designed with the heat and creative energy of summer in mind. They range in length from an hour to a long weekend. Decide how much time you're able to commit and then choose the template that appeals to you. Follow your instincts, see what resonates, and let go of what does not. This is your time.

THE CREATIVE HAPPY HOUR

LENGTH: ONE HOUR

Courageously expressing yourself on a blank piece of paper can be therapeutic, and you don't need to be artistic or even know how to draw to do so. This is the principle behind art therapy, a playful practice that allows you to observe yourself without judgement, work through inner tensions, and reconnect with what's important in your life.

This approach can help you release all manner of stress, says art psychotherapist Penelope Orfanoudaki, MA. "Art therapy uses 'mark making' to help you connect with yourself and whatever is going on in your world at the moment," she explains. "You don't have to be traumatized to do it, just dealing with the stresses of daily life."

If you have only an hour, do this activity alone to truly focus. With a bit more time, this can be a fun, connecting activity to do with a trusted friend or partner.

PREPARE: Gather some large, plain white sheets of paper, a pencil, and some colors of your choice. Colored pens or pencils are fine, as are different kinds of paints or pastels. Find a quiet, private, comfortable space. Place a treasured object or something from nature nearby to remind yourself that you're on retreat.

CHOOSE: Decide whether you'd like to draw a circle, a line, or three dots. If you draw a circle, imagine it as part of an image, and complete the image. If you draw a line, imagine it as a connector or separator in an image, and complete that image. If you make three dots, connect them in any way you want to complete the image.

CREATE: Start immediately, without a plan. Let go of perfectionism. Be playful. As you draw, you get to decide the size of your circle or the length and shape of your lines and where they are placed on the paper. Color and embellish your image.

OBSERVE: In the last 10 minutes of your hour, look at your image. What do you see? How does it make you feel? Why do you think you chose that color or made that shape? Write down your thoughts in a journal or on a separate piece of paper. Don't judge yourself; there is no right or wrong. Give your artwork a title, then set it aside and get on with your day.

REFLECT: Allow your creation and its title to percolate in your mind during the hours that follow. Has it provided any insights? What might your creation, or your feelings about it, say about how you're doing? Has it prompted you to consider any changes you might need to make in your life today? If you wish, share your discoveries with someone you trust.

THE 24-HOUR FLOW

LENGTH: ONE DAY

When was the last time you were so immersed in an activity that you lost track of time and nothing else seemed to matter? Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, PhD, called this state of mind “flow.” If you’re feeling a little stuck in life, practices that help you rediscover your flow can help you get unstuck.

Flow occurs during activities that present enough challenge to focus your attention but not so much that you feel overwhelmed. Self-consciousness fades, worries dissolve, and your actions feel effortless. You emerge elated but grounded, often full of ideas and the energy to act on them.

Summer, when creative energy tends to run high, is an ideal time to experiment with finding your flow.

Make this one a solo retreat so you can really lose yourself in your activities.

PREPARE: Plan a day off and block it out on your calendar. If you share your home with others, choose a date when you can be there alone. Select three activities that you think could bring you into a flow state. They could be practices you already love or something new you’d like to try. Just make sure they appeal to you and present a potential challenge.

Whatever activities you choose, plan to do as many of them as you can outdoors, where you can reap the benefits of fresh air and natural light. You might weed your garden vigorously, enjoy a silent disco on the beach, hike or bike through the forest or countryside, swim in a river, craft at a table in the sunshine, or read or write in your favorite hammock. The possibilities for flow are endless.

Feel free to choose from this list if you need more inspiration.

- **Movement:** Dance, Hula-Hoop, walk, run, cycle, skateboard, rock climb, swim, bodyboard, surf, practice yoga or qigong.



Whatever activities you choose, plan to do as many of them as you can outdoors, where you can reap the benefits of fresh air and natural light.

- **Art and craft:** Create a collage, draw, paint, sew, knit, cook a full recipe, garden, write a story or poem, read an immersive book.

- **Music and sound:** Play an instrument, chant, sing, listen deeply to music you love or music that’s new to you: classical, reggae, Gregorian chant.

- **Your child self:** You might also try to recall the activities you loved when you were around 9 or 10, just before you reached puberty. At this age, play often involves spontaneous flow.

SCHEDULE: Lightly schedule your retreat day ahead of time. If you’re new to one of your chosen activities, you might book a class or a lesson with an instructor and build your day around that timing. Stay flexible, allowing time for spontaneous activities afterward. These may include journaling, shaking out your body, or planning something new and exciting that occurred to you during your flow state. Consider this sample schedule.

- **Morning ritual:** On waking, sit up in bed and take 10 slow, deep breaths, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Let yourself begin your day without rushing.

- **Morning:** Start with an energizing flow activity, ideally outdoors, such as gardening or hiking, followed by a sus-

taining breakfast. Rest or move for 20 minutes or so afterward, depending on what your mind and body need.

- **Midday:** Use the high energy of midday for your primary flow activity, or the one that requires the most time. Again, rest or move for 20 minutes or so after you finish. Allow time to write in a journal or otherwise express yourself, especially if your flow state produces a rush of creative ideas.

- **Late afternoon/evening:** Use this time for your third flow activity, ideally one that is gentle, relaxing, and creative. Give yourself plenty of time to unwind before bed.

- **Evening ritual:** Before you go to sleep, reflect on one thing you are grateful for. Relish its energy before you turn out the light.

REFLECT: At the end of your retreat day, ask yourself a few questions: Which activity generated the most energy and creativity? Did any of them help you solve a problem with which you’ve been struggling? Which of the activities would you do again?

Know that everyone experiences flow differently, and don’t beat yourself up if you weren’t able to find it on your first retreat. This practice can help you decide which activities are most likely to bring you into flow — and which aren’t.



Even a short retreat allows you to step away from the everyday and find space for yourself. You might be surprised by whom you discover there.

THE SUMMER STAYCATION

LENGTH: A LONG WEEKEND (OR LONGER!)

We often pin big hopes on our summer adventures, but the effort involved in researching, booking, packing, and traveling can sometimes outweigh the rewards. To truly rest and regroup, away from the crowds, consider a staycation.

A long weekend is a good start for this retreat, but if you have the time, you could take a week, 10 days, two weeks, or even a whole luxurious month. Lean into the idea of *being* and eliminate as much of the *doing* as possible.

Try channeling the animals of hot, dusty regions, such as the desert tortoise or the chuckwalla. They enjoy wonderfully long naps during summer to avoid the extreme heat and drought. Scientists know this process as estivation — summer's equivalent to hibernation. The season's expansive heat and long

light make it the perfect time to relish idleness.

This retreat is lovely as a solo venture. You could also invite a friend, your partner, or your family to join you at some point in your estivation, for a combination of restorative solo time and restful connection with others.

PREPARE: Choose your dates, label them “Retreat” on your calendar, then decide ahead of time how you will pepper each day with opportunities to rest, relax, and regroup. Try these ideas.

- **Putter:** Make the most of being at home, perhaps in comfy pajamas or barefoot, enjoying the feel of floors or grass, drifting from reading in bed to making tea to dabbling in creative projects. Tend to things gently, with quiet, slow rituals. Water a plant or sort fresh laundry with care.

• **Bask:** Enjoy warmth, water, or wild spaces. Sunbathe safely, take a long walk in nature, do some gardening, spend time in a nearby forest, or swim in a lake or the ocean. End the day by watching the light fade.

• **Embrace joy:** What makes you feel pure joy? Do more of it each day on this retreat. Put your feet up and listen to your favorite music. Cook, read, draw, craft, paint — or simply daydream in a hammock. Give yourself or a family member a mini facial or foot massage.

• **Rest:** Each day, mimic the deep-rest environment of a desert cave by lying down somewhere shady and covering yourself with a blanket or shawl. Put cushions under your head and knees to support your spine. You might extend your legs up against a wall (or tree). Cover your eyes with an eye mask or light scarf, and breathe normally for five minutes or more.

• **Regulate:** Catch up on sleep early in the retreat, indulging in sleep-ins and long naps. Then use your retreat time to reset your body clock, or circadian rhythm. This 24-hour system is guided by a light-sensitive portion of your brain, and it regulates sleep, energy, mood, hormones, and temperature. Ideally, you wake with the sun, fall asleep when it sets, and eat your main meal at midday. To move in this direction, try shifting your bedtimes, waking times, and mealtimes to be just a little earlier each day of your retreat.

SCHEDULE: After scheduling these retreat days, hold your plan lightly. Allow each day to unfold naturally, without a rigid agenda. Just like the tortoise, you are slowing down and resting, not trying to grow or change. Here's a sample staycation day.

• **Morning ritual:** If you've been sleep deprived, try sleeping in as long as you need, with no alarm. When you get up, make your bed with care.

• **Morning:** Shower, dress, and enjoy a sustaining breakfast. Then take time to move outside in nature, perhaps with a long walk or bike ride.

Return to read or daydream in your garden, on your porch, or in another comfortable space.

• **Afternoon:** Make lunch your main meal and prepare it mindfully. After eating, take some time to rest. You might meditate, enjoy a siesta, or simply lie down and breathe. Once you feel restored, you could tend to some small tasks — decluttering a small space like a drawer, washing produce, or doing some light yard work. Let yourself be.

• **Evening:** Spend time with your journal, observing your thoughts and feelings. Then relish an early, simple meal. Close the day with a mini foot massage. As the daylight fades, you might cocoon under light blankets, sit in your backyard with some herbal tea, stargaze.

• **Evening ritual:** Give yourself a quiet inner weather report. Close your eyes and notice how you feel inside: Is it a little cloudy, bright and breezy, calm or changeable? Name it gently before you turn out the light.

REFLECT: A few days after your retreat, ask yourself: What's one thing I did during my estivation that truly restored me? Once you've identified it, try practicing it during the following week to help ease yourself back into your normal routine, whether it's making daily time for puttering or lying down quietly as soon as you return from work rather than switching on the TV.

TIME IS A GIFT. Even a short retreat allows you to step away from the everyday and find space for yourself. You might be surprised by whom you discover there. 🌱

CAROLINE SYLGE is a U.K. poet and journalist, and the author of *How to Retreat: A Guide to Stepping Away from the Everyday to Find Space for Your Self*. She is also the founder of queenofretreats.com.



MAKE THE MOST OF A DIY RETREAT

CREATE A SPACE. Make a haven for retreat time in your home. Use a bedroom, a spare room, or an area in your sitting room, home office, or backyard. You don't have to spend a lot of money — just focus on adding a little something beautiful, comforting, or meaningful. Often one simple object, such as a colorful flower in a glass vase, can lift a space.

SET AN INTENTION. Before each retreat, ask yourself what you hope to get out of it. Then write down a clear, realistic intention, such as "I will allow myself to rest deeply" or "I will allow myself to create without judging myself." This brings clarity and purpose to your retreat and helps you stay present.

UNPLUG. The quickest, most powerful way to create a nourishing silence and support focus during your retreat is to unplug all electronic devices for the duration. Consider handing off your tech to someone you trust before your retreat starts. If you can't disengage entirely, choose how and when you will interact with your devices. Avoid scrolling and stick to necessary tasks.

NOURISH YOURSELF. For retreats that last a day or longer, plan your meals and stock your kitchen beforehand. Make brunch or lunch the main meal of the day; according to Ayurvedic philosophy, digestion is strongest at midday. Avoid refined sugar, ultraprocessed foods, and huge meals, as well as alcohol and drugs. Limit caffeine, favor water, and eat all your meals while sitting down.

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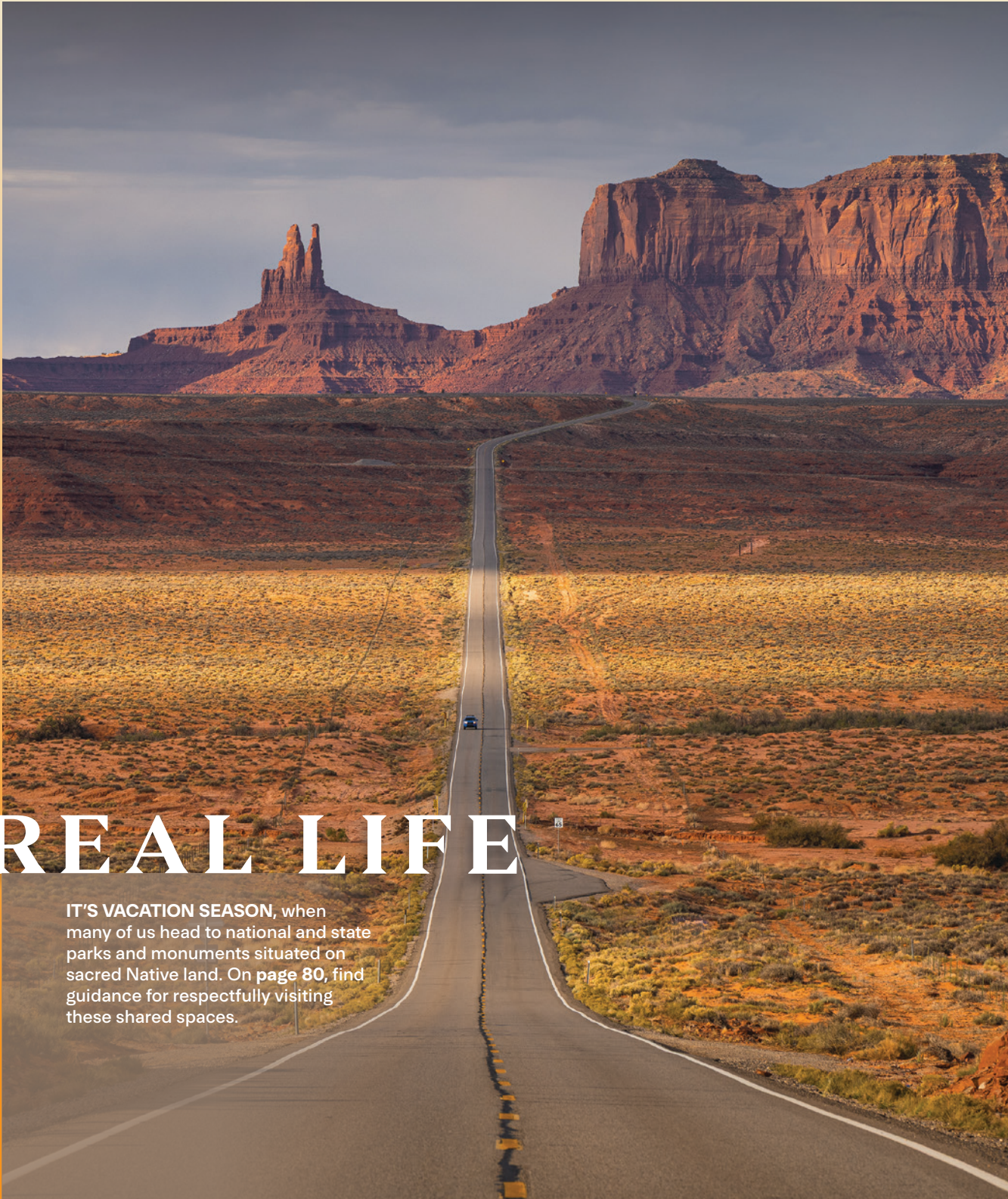
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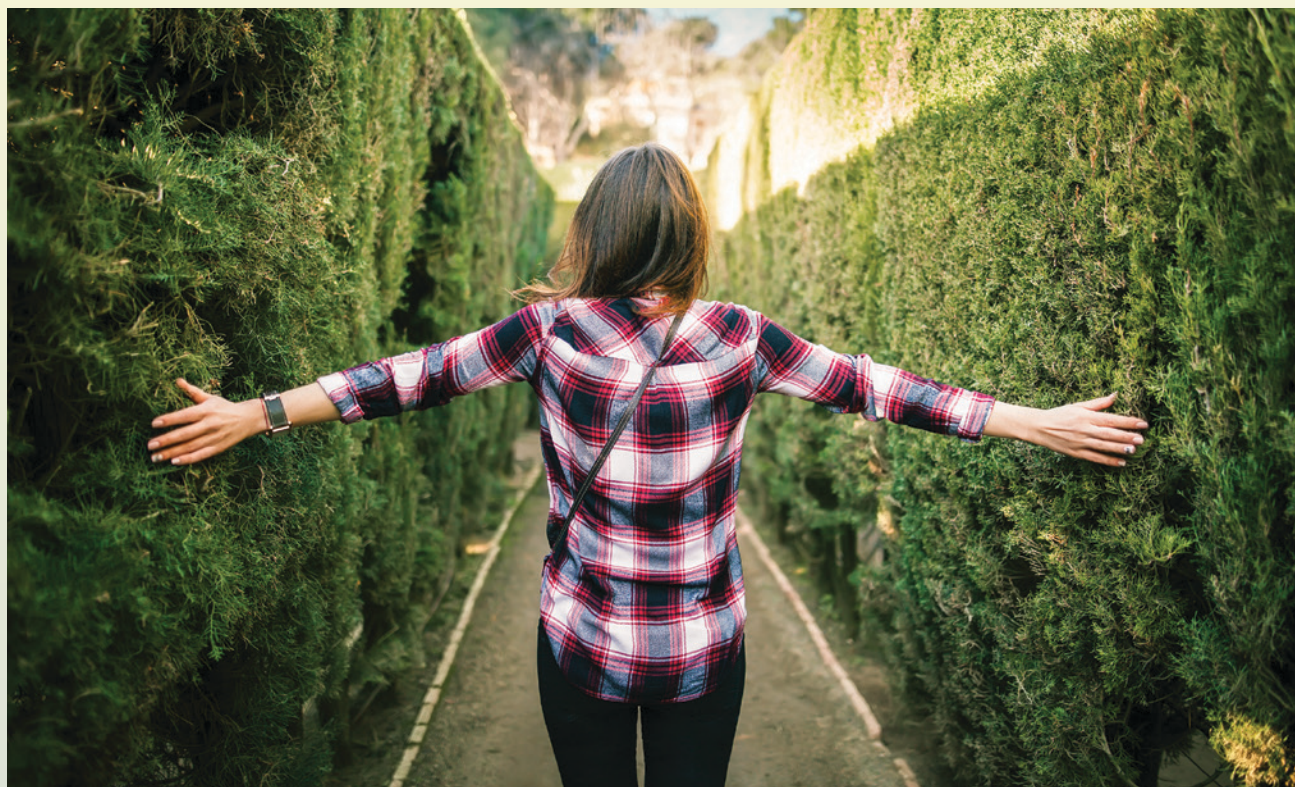


REAL LIFE

IT'S VACATION SEASON, when many of us head to national and state parks and monuments situated on sacred Native land. On **page 80**, find guidance for respectfully visiting these shared spaces.

How to Get Out of a Rut

Ideas for embracing novelty when your routine leaves you feeling stuck.



BY JESSIE SHOLL

RUT. Just the sound of the word is unpleasant. And getting stuck in a rut feels like the word sounds: flat, boring, empty.

Most of us have fallen into a rut at one point or another — eating a certain meal for lunch every day, doing the same unfulfilling workout, or maybe hanging around a toxic group of friends you’ve known forever because, well, they’re there.

Ruts often stem from once-comforting routines that have grown stale. “Routines are typically consciously designed or developed for functional reasons,” says Pilar Gerasimo, author of *The Healthy Deviant: A Rule Breaker’s Guide to Being Healthy in an Unhealthy World* and founding editor of *Experience Life*.

An established routine can minimize our mental burden. Making decisions takes time and mental energy that could be better spent on the good stuff, like pursuing creative passions or connecting with others. When we observe a basic routine, we don’t have to spend as much of our precious energy deciding how to structure our day.

Unfortunately, a once-helpful routine can easily become a rut, says Gerasimo. “That happens the minute we start losing energy to it, begin resenting it, or recognize it’s being maintained at a too-high cost — yet we can’t muster the courage or capacity to adjust it.”

But even if a rut is deeply ingrained, escaping it may be easier than you think. Sometimes all it takes is a little change of scenery.

START TINY

Ruts can wreak havoc on our self-esteem. "There is a painful gap between what people want and what they actually do," writes behavior scientist BJ Fogg, PhD, in his book *Tiny Habits*. When we don't close that gap, we may internalize a cultural message that our inability to change is our fault.

Fogg argues that the problem lies not with our willingness to change but with our approach to change. Rather than setting out to overhaul our lives overnight, he recommends breaking goals down into smaller behaviors.

Say you're in a rut of avoiding the gym. Instead of vowing to work out every day, start small by doing squats while your bread is toasting before breakfast or by going to a fun dance class.

These small wins remind your body how good it feels to exercise — perhaps leading you to another workout tomorrow. Over time, little victories add up and contribute to bigger lifestyle changes.

Other tiny actions can help too:

- Fogg recommends a ritual he calls the "Maui habit" to start the day on a positive note. After you wake up, put your feet on the floor and say, "It's going to be a great day." As you say the words, try to feel optimistic and positive.
- Consider livening up your living space with a new plant or piece of art. Giving yourself something new to view can make your familiar surroundings feel fresh.
- Speaking of art, consider visiting a museum or an outdoor sculpture garden. A systematic review published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in 2025 suggests that viewing art can help us feel that our lives have meaning.



GET CREATIVE

Playful creativity is an excellent way to escape a rut, says clinical psychologist Michael Alcée, PhD, author of *The Upside of OCD: Flip the Script to Reclaim Your Life*.

When one of his former patients, a classically trained pianist, had grown bored of playing songs she knew, Alcée suggested that she transform one of them. "Have fun with it," he said. And she did.

Her feeling of stagnation vanished when she took a familiar tune and mashed it with something she'd just composed, Alcée says.

For those not artistically inclined, there are plenty of ways to be what he calls "mindfully creative":

- Do your work at a coffee shop or a library for a few hours during the week (if your job allows). If you're a regular somewhere, try a different time — or a different place.
- Strike up a conversation with someone you see regularly but haven't talked to before. Connecting with a new person and getting out of your own head for a bit can work wonders for the doldrums.
- Along those lines, the next time an old friend pops into your head, text them or (gasp!) even call.
- Go on a solo date. Getting out and following your own desires can be restorative. (See "Build Your Own Retreat" on page 64.)

OBSERVE YOURSELF

"Get curious about the exact moment when your pattern-shifting methods meet resistance," Gerasimo suggests. When you're intent on making a particular change but struggling, notice the thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations at play, then jot them down in a journal or describe them in a voice memo. "Think of it like taking lab notes," she advises.

Observing your behavioral dynamics in this more curious, nonjudgmental way might ease feelings of shame. Documenting the experience and reflecting on it later, Gerasimo notes, can help you identify where you might have one foot on the gas and the other on the brake.

Gerasimo suggests an exercise called the Trouble Clock, which she says helps her students and coaching clients identify the times of day they're most vulnerable to problematic behaviors or patterns — and the underlying reasons for that.

Once you become aware of those self-diminishing patterns, Gerasimo notes, it becomes easier to prepare for and preemptively interrupt them.

When you find yourself feeling stuck, try these strategies:

- Mentally scan your lived experience of the previous few hours and the effect it has had on your energy and mood.
- Ask yourself when you last had a nutritious meal, adequate hydration, a little rest and recovery, or some social connection, fun, or outdoor time.
- Consider that your rut-vulnerable moments may have their origins in periods of depletion and dysregulation.



DEFOCUS YOUR MIND

Ruts can develop for physiological reasons as well:

"We become stuck in ruts due to our brains' habitual electrical patterns," writes psychiatrist Srin Pillay, MD, in *Harvard Health Online*.

"Faced with new situations, our brains will apply rules based on prior events to match the current context," he adds. "There's a part of the brain that is especially wired to do this." Pillay, author of *Tinker Dabble Doodle Try: Unlock the Power of the Unfocused Mind*, calls it "the brain's pattern seeker."

The pattern seeker helps reduce the brain's energy costs: By finding old rules that can be applied to a current situation, the brain circumvents the energy-draining chore of learning something new.

Building unfocused time into your day may help counteract these tendencies.

Try one of the activities recommended by Pillay for 15 minutes a few times a day:

- Go for a meandering walk (or try forest bathing).
- Daydream.
- Doodle.
- Nap. ☹

JESSIE SHOLL is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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Feed Your Energy

Good nutrition can support mood and motivation.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD

LOW ENERGY and a lack of motivation are hallmarks of depression. Still, anyone can experience them. What's more, energy and motivation are precisely what we need when we're trying to recover from a persistent low mood. It's a difficult conundrum for many people, but it's not impossible to solve.

As an integrative psychiatrist, I consider the energy production of three systems: metabolism, mitochondria, and the brain. All three are interrelated, and improving one of them can improve the others.

These systems can be supported with simple lifestyle measures, including exercise and sleep. But the most potent influence on energy production is diet. In most cases, our cells can't store energy for long, so our bodies must regularly produce the energy we need to function. And this process is entirely dependent on the nutrients we consume.

Let's explore these energy domains and how we can support them nutritionally.

METABOLIC ENERGY

Our bodies convert food into cellular energy by the process of metabolism. We require a steady influx of calories to provide our brains, in particular, with the glucose they need. We can get glucose from any of the macronutrients, but carbohydrates are usually the most efficient source.

MITOCHONDRIAL ENERGY

Mitochondria are the energy factories within most of our cells, and our mental and physical health depend on them working efficiently. The process by which mitochondria convert glucose into adenosine triphosphate (ATP) — which sustains our energy — requires several nutrient cofactors, including B vitamins, magnesium, coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10), alpha lipoic acid, L-carnitine, and omega-3 fatty acids.

BRAIN ENERGY

Norepinephrine is one of the key neurotransmitters for mental health, influencing mood, energy, and focus. It's chemically related to adrenaline, so to understand its effects, picture what happens when you're in fight-or-flight mode: You become focused, alert, and energized. When energy is low, we need to find ways to optimize our norepinephrine levels.

HOW TO EAT FOR ENERGY

An energy-promoting diet looks a lot like how you might eat in the middle of summer: lighter foods, modest amounts of high-quality fats and proteins, and ample complex carbs, including lots of fresh, colorful vegetables and fruits — all while limiting sweets and simple carbs as much as possible.

The goal is to eat in a way that supports stable blood-sugar levels and supplies the body with the building blocks for optimal mitochondrial and brain function. Try this:

- Eat meals with plenty of fiber from veggies, fruits, and whole grains. Include healthy fats and a moderate amount of protein to help stabilize blood sugar.

Sweets are best eaten after or alongside a complete meal or snack — not alone.

- To support metabolism, try intermittent fasting for about 12 hours each day, say from around 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.

- To help insulin metabolize glucose, consume more chromium, a trace mineral that acts as insulin's assistant. It's found in meats, nuts, grains, and eggs.

- Norepinephrine is made from the amino acid L-phenylalanine. Find it in high-protein foods like poultry, seafood, eggs, and dairy, as well as in beans, legumes, nuts, and whole grains. But be careful not to get too much: Phenylalanine is used as a sweetener in many diet sodas, and it can trigger anxiety and insomnia.

- Consider these foundational supplements to support energy production: B-complex, magnesium, vitamin D3, and omega-3 fatty acids.

- Finally, consider these specific supplements for each of the three energy domains.

For metabolism: Chromium picolinate, 200 micrograms per day

For mitochondrial function: CoQ10, 100 milligrams daily

For focus: 500 mg DL-phenylalanine once or twice daily, along with a B vitamin (Consult your doctor before combining this supplement with an antidepressant.)

HENRY EMMONS, MD, is an integrative psychiatrist and the author of *The Chemistry of Joy*, *The Chemistry of Calm*, and *Staying Sharp*.

Facing Rejection

Rejection is often painful, but it doesn't have to be paralyzing. A psychotherapist offers strategies for processing and reframing the experience.

STRESS SOURCES

BY JON SPAYDE

REJECTION IS DISPIRITING.

Whether you've been passed over for a job, turned down for a date, or left out of a social engagement, it can feel like a vote against your value as a person. It hurts. In fact, research shows that rejection activates the same regions of the brain that process physical pain.

Unfortunately, rejection is also inevitable and unavoidable. No one gets through life without hearing "no" from time to time. But it's possible to learn how to handle these instances without losing faith in ourselves so we can continue setting goals and striving for them.

Psychotherapist Elayne Savage, PhD, author of *Don't Take It Personally! The Art of Dealing With Rejection*, has some suggestions for how to reframe rejection as an opportunity to focus on new aims. Professionally known as the Queen of Rejection, Savage says that processing the experience begins with "taking a mental step away from our immediate reaction so we're not so wrapped up in the emotionality of it."

Past experiences can make us more sensitive to rejection. Growing up, we may have felt rejected by family, friends, or teachers. We may have been excluded from games or singled out for criticism by a parent or other authority figure. Savage says that these early experiences can leave an emotional mark that makes us more likely to react strongly to rejection in the present, whether it's real or imagined.

We may respond to rejection with anger. "Anger is big, powerful, and scary," Savage says. "When it takes over, we feel out of control. It can turn into rage and resentment, which take so much energy that we lose our perspective."

We can become trapped by shame. Savage notes that rejection can lead to feelings of shame, which can turn into self-rejection and become paralyzing. This can prevent us from sharing our feelings, processing them, and moving on in our lives.

We're embarrassed by feelings of rejection and try to suppress them. Because rejection can make us feel

"less than," we may find it difficult to talk about our experience with other people — who might be able to help — or even think about it ourselves. "And this embarrassment can turn into added shame," Savage points out.

We worry that we're overreacting. When we're told that the book club has no room for a new member or when a boss doesn't acknowledge our hello in the morning, the painful feelings of rejection may seem foolish or illegitimate.

For many of us, early childhood experiences of rejection can go deep. "A boss ignoring us in the hallway can really hurt, because at a deep level it reminds us of a disapproving or neglectful parent," Savage explains. Trying to ignore the feelings, or denying them, won't help us recover from them.

We're tempted to ruminate. Rejection may lead to a pattern of painful thinking and rethinking in which we struggle to find meaning or have trouble focusing on practical solutions. This can be as immobilizing as resentment.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Gently examine your rejection origin story.

Consider whether you often felt left out of family, school, or social groups when you were younger, Savage suggests. Are you still harboring feelings of shame or resentment about those times? Understanding the level of your sensitivity to rejection can help you keep things in perspective.

Remember that most rejections are not personal.

It's important to keep in mind that rejection is not a judgment of your intrinsic value. "Usually, no one's trying to hurt us," Savage says. "The fact that we didn't get the job was probably due to many factors other than our personal fitness or unfitness for it. That 'no' from a romantic partner isn't a denial of our value as a person." Making a list of your past successes can help you remember your worth outside this one experience.



Check in with yourself. Savage suggests that when life gives you a "no" — or you feel that it has — ask yourself the following questions, in order:

1. Am I feeling rejected?
2. Am I taking it personally?
3. Where does this feeling come from? Is it something old, from childhood or my family?
4. Can I accept that this is probably not a total rejection?

"If you can take these four steps, you probably don't need to take any more," she says, adding that she recommends getting professional help if you have trouble with acceptance.

Those who experience extreme emotional pain in response to rejection or disapproval may have a type of emotional response known as rejection sensitive dysphoria, which is especially common with ADHD. (Learn more about RSD on page 13.)

Reframe the rejection. The next phase in the process is reframing the incident as something other than a complete rejection. "See it instead as a situation that differed from your expectations," Savage says. "Tell yourself, *I am growing resilience. I don't have to feel vulnerable or trapped. I have choices here.* Picture yourself operating out of a sense of empowerment rather than helplessness."

Connect with understanding friends.

Productive venting about your feelings in a safe space can be a critical step toward letting them go. "Giving words to the feelings creates some emotional distance from them, and that's always helpful," says Savage. People who know you well can also remind you of your strengths and suggest new areas to explore.

Use your voice. If you journal about the rejection, Savage suggests, read your reflections aloud to yourself. "I always encourage people to say out loud what they have learned from journaling — and from meditating too. Actually hearing your own words can be healing; it can help you feel more in control."

Consider the other perspective.

When you experience an interpersonal rejection, Savage says, it's both fair and helpful to try to put yourself in the other person's shoes.

For example, if someone has turned you down romantically, "perhaps they don't want the relationship you want, or they don't want any relationship," she suggests. "They have a right to that point

of view, and I think we have to balance the hurt that we feel with that recognition. We can't control that point of view or that decision, but we can do something about our own response to it."



Use the rejection as a learning opportunity.

"Working to see what we can learn from, and gain from, a rejection can rebalance your off-balance response — especially when that response is shame or anger," Savage notes.

For example, an experience may help you identify a hypersensitivity to rejection that could be healed by some psychotherapy. Or it could indicate that you need to emotionally prepare a bit more the next time you seek an opportunity. It might even inspire you to look in an entirely new direction for your next step.

By considering what you have learned, tough situations or rejections can inspire healing. "Seeing what we can take away from the experience opens up some space in our minds," says Savage. "So that the feeling of rejection doesn't have as much room to take over." 🌀

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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Anything Can Happen

And when it does, you'll cope.

BY OLIVER BURKEMAN

LIFE-TRANSITION counselor and writer Sheryl Paul defines anxiety as “a feeling of dread, agitation, or foreboding associated with a danger that does not exist in the present moment.” I’m guessing you can relate; I certainly can. (Holding this sort of feeling at bay is, I think, the secret motive behind many people’s interest in productivity techniques and personal development.)

Both parts of Paul’s definition are crucial: Anxiety is the feeling that something bad might be about to happen, and it’s combined with the absence or near absence of any real evidence to believe it actually will.

This is extremely bizarre, when you think about it. And it’s worth a closer look, if only because — and I speak from experience — going around all day with a pit in your stomach is no way to live.

IMAGINE THE WORST

In my book *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can’t Stand Positive Thinking*, I explore a Stoic technique for coping with this sort of worry. The Stoics call it “the premeditation of evils” — the practice of soberly envisaging the real worst-case scenario in any given situation.

Suppose you’re anxious about giving a speech. It helps to imagine, in detail, the experience of embarrassing yourself before an audience of hundreds, then shuffling offstage and hiding under the bedcovers.

While that possible outcome is certainly unpleasant, it’s also pretty clearly cope-with-able. And since anxiety is the fear of a danger with

which you couldn’t cope, the exercise has the effect of cutting your worries down to size.

I still recommend (and use) that practice today. But I’ve come to see it has a limitation: It risks implying that nothing catastrophically bad could ever really happen. Whereas the anxious person knows, if only subconsciously, that it could.

Public humiliation won’t kill you, but it’s always the case that your next hour or week or month could contain a bereavement, a terrible accident, or a shattering medical diagnosis. So the attempt to reassure yourself that nothing too appalling is coming down the pike will always run up against the gnawing realization that you can’t be sure of that.

ANXIETY ISN'T ALWAYS WRONG

I think this is part of what Sheryl Paul means in calling her (excellent) book *The Wisdom of Anxiety*, echoing the title of Alan Watts’s great book *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. Anxiety isn’t a silly mistake about how bad things could get. It’s a logical response to what’s entailed by the human situation.

We are thrown into the river of time, unable to know what’s coming, let alone to control it, condemned to the condition the author Robert Saltzman calls “total vulnerability to events.” Yet we’re obliged to try to build a meaningful and enjoyable life anyway.

My partner has vividly described the teenage epiphany that occurred when she realized, after a childhood steeped in moviegoing, that if something devastating were to happen to her, it wouldn’t be foreshadowed by

sinister music so she could at least mentally prepare. Nope. It would just happen. Anything always could.

In this predicament, you won’t find the deepest solace in compulsive planning, or in visualizing worst-case scenarios. You’ll find it from seeing, first, that there’s nothing you could ever do to change this state of affairs, so you might as well relax into it if you can. And, second, that literally everyone is in the exact same boat. So at least you needn’t worry that, existentially speaking, anyone else is more in command of their lives than you are.

The solace you can find, in my experience, is not through any kind of mental insight or cognitive exercise, but in actions: when you’re inching forward into the future, doing tiny bits of the things that may cause you anxiety, committing a little more to tentative relationships. It’s at these times that you’re discovering, in each moment, further concrete evidence that you can actually cope with what reality tosses your way.

It’s easier to act yourself into new ways of thinking than to think yourself into new ways of acting, as they say.

My own life, so far at least, provides zero reason to believe I’ll ever attain the degree of control over the future I always thought I needed. But, then again, my track record of having not yet been entirely overwhelmed by existence suggests that maybe — just maybe — I never needed that control at all.

OLIVER BURKEMAN is the author of the best-selling book *Meditations for Mortals* as well as the newsletter *The Imperfectionist*, from which this column is adapted.

On Native Soil

Ways to be a respectful visitor to Native lands.

BY KATE NELSON



Top: The Mittens and Merrick Buttes in Tse'Bii'Ndzisgaili (Monument Valley) Navajo Tribal Park in the Navajo Nation.

Lower left: The ancient Zapotec capital of Monte Albán in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Lower right: Shoreline in Iqaluit, situated on Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island), Nunavut, Canada.

I'M DRIVING WEST across the Navajo Nation, marveling at the beauty of the rising sun's glow drenching the surrounding mesas, mountains, and other natural wonders in daylight.

At first glance, this vast open space reminds me of the Red River Valley of northwestern Minnesota where I grew up. As a child, I would gaze out upon the fertile prairie lands that seemingly stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could see. And yet, this place is so very different from those Ojibwe ancestral homelands.

The Navajo Nation is the largest Indian reservation in the United States, spanning some 27,000 square miles across Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. Even so, it represents just a portion of Dinétah (meaning "land of the people"), the traditional ancestral homelands of the Navajo, or Diné. More than simply geography, this is a sacred place where this tribe's culture is actively being preserved for future generations.

It's also a sovereign nation within the greater United States. This means it's a self-governing entity with its own established laws. There are no giant billboards announcing when you've entered the Navajo Nation but rather blink-and-you-miss-them road signs, meaning it's entirely possible to stumble onto these tribal lands unknowingly.

Throughout my trip to Dinétah, I'm keenly aware of the fact that I'm here as a visitor. Sure, I have been invited to this tribal nation by friends who call this place home, and I'm an Alaska Native (Tlingit) journalist who has extensively covered the Native American community.

Even so, I don't assume that I have special access to ceremonies or sacred sites beyond what's readily available to the typical traveler. I understand that I'm a guest, and I'm taking my cues from my hosts as to their expectations for my visit.

I'm honored simply to be here.

It's an unfortunate reality that many travelers are often unaware

they're on Indigenous homelands. Of course, that's not entirely surprising, given our nation's colonialism that attempted to erase the history of the first peoples of this place.

In lieu of proper education about Native American cultures, many of us gleaned our understanding of Indigenous groups from movies, TV shows, and other media. Those depictions were, at best, misappropriations and misrepresentations; at worst, they were perpetuations of prejudiced stereotypes. In short, many people are misinformed about modern Native life.

"Once you open your mind and open yourself up to learning from different people, it changes the way that you see the world."

What's more, a long-held misconception that Indigenous cultures are a monolith persists. Quite the contrary: There are 575 federally recognized tribes in the United States and more than 630 First Nations communities in Canada. In other words, there's no single travel guide for all of Native America; that'd be akin to having one pocket handbook covering the entirety of Asia.

Thankfully, though, there are common-sense guidelines for how to respectfully visit tribal lands.

SHOWING RESPECT

Learning about whose land you're visiting, from a historic and a contemporary context, comes first. Much like a trip to a foreign country, an excursion to tribal nations and significant sites ideally starts with some research.

Native peoples experienced major displacement and dispossession due to colonialism, so it isn't always obvious which communities have ties to what places. Doing your pretrip due diligence is not only a great way to learn about our Indigenous cultures but also an important step in honoring and helping preserve them.

For more insight about this, I turned to Sherry L. Rupert (Paiute/Washoe), who is the CEO of the American Indigenous Tourism Association.

"Anywhere I go, I try to learn more about the culture and the people from that particular place," she says. "As visitors, we don't know every protocol. For example, when I went to New Zealand, I didn't know all of the protocols there, but I was open to learning. Once you open your mind and open yourself up to learning from different people, it changes the way that you see the world."

Those transformative experiences are a happy byproduct of the research and preparation we can all embrace when venturing beyond our home turf. This kind of conscientious consideration is especially crucial when visiting places like Mexico, where Indigenous communities account for nearly 20 percent of the population. These communities are often overshadowed by profit-driven tourism operations that promise "authentic" excursions and mementos that are typically rooted in tired tropes.

On top of that, Mexico is experiencing a major influx of U.S. travelers and expats, whose presence affects the very cultures that draw visitors. That influence is especially evident in places like Oaxaca, which has become a trending travel destination in recent years.

When I visited Oaxaca in 2024, I was seduced by its bustling food scene, rich arts community, and thriving Indigenous cultures. I was fortunate enough to travel alongside an Indigenous Mexican friend, so I was able to live like a local for a week. I sought counsel from him anytime I was in doubt about how to conduct

myself in a respectful fashion — when I might be welcomed to participate in a ritual, where it was (and wasn't) appropriate to take photos, how best to thank someone for their gracious hospitality.

For those without a trusted local tie to tap, there are guides like Betsaida López Díaz (Zapotec) of Me Encanta Oaxaca Experiences. Born and raised in Oaxaca, she has dedicated herself to helping tourists experience the Indigenous sides of the city — but without the typical extractive tendencies and harmful commercialism.

"We're happy to welcome tourists to Mexico because, especially in Oaxaca, that's how we support our families," she says. "But we're also experiencing gentrification here. It's sad to see tourists trying to change our community rather than respecting our cultures."

It also troubles López Díaz to witness cultural appropriation supersede cultural appreciation, an all-too-common phenomenon. Specifically, she's referring to copies of the intricate Oaxacan embroidery designs that adorn many textiles, from dresses to rugs. This important Zapotec practice reflects a time-honored cultural tradition and requires hours of painstaking work.

"We invite people into our homes to see our design process and appreciate it," she says. "But when they return to their country, they start making our designs and selling them at more expensive prices. It's really awful when that happens, because we open our doors to show what we do, and we give everything with our hearts."

Buying knockoff wares is equally harmful to local communities. But because tourist trinkets are often presented with unclear Indigenous connections, even savvy travelers can be deceived.

So how do you know if you're truly supporting Native artisans and entrepreneurs with your travel dollars? Authentication initiatives like the Original Original certifica-

tion from the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada and the Alaska State Council on the Arts' Silver Hand program help consumers identify the real deal.

A CIRCLE OF RECIPROCITY

Of all my travels to tribal lands across this continent, perhaps no place embodies Indigenous resilience better than Iqaluit, Nunavut. Located just shy of the Arctic Circle, Canada's northernmost city is the capital of the country's first Indigenous self-governing territory. Established in 1999 in response to major Inuit political activism, Nunavut is a shining example of Canada's efforts toward reconciliation with its first peoples.

"The Indigenous worldview has always centered around sustainability. That's who we are, and that's how we live."

In Iqaluit, it's impossible to overlook the Indigenous representation. The town's street and building signs are in the Inuktitut language first, English second.

Inuit culture is alive and well here, in part out of necessity. Centuries-old practices like subsistence hunting and fishing ensure families are nourished to this day. These ancestral traditions are juxtaposed with contemporary conveniences: shops, restaurants, art galleries, a movie theater, and more.

But the real attraction in Iqaluit? The vast, open stillness that surrounds it, and a palpable connection to place.

"The Indigenous worldview has always centered around sustainability," says Tamara Littlelight (Keeseekoose First Nation), director of marketing for

the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada. "That's who we are, and that's how we live. We have always respected the land and given back to the land. Our communities lead with their knowledge, and travel is such a great way to get to know us. Tourism breaks down barriers. It allows for our important stories to be heard and our beautiful cultural teachings to be shared with the world."

Throughout my travels to Indigenous lands, I've come to learn that intentional tourism isn't just about what we receive; it's also about what we give, in a beautiful circle of reciprocity.

Littlelight agrees. "Tourism creates a space for Indigenous people and a path toward healing," she says. "I

A traditional inukshuk, or stone landmark, built by the Inuit in Iqaluit, Nunavut.



come from a lineage of residential school survivors on both sides of my family. For me to be able to thrive in a space that allows me to just be myself — to be Indigenous — is so healing. It's not just about cultural appreciation; it's about cultural revitalization."

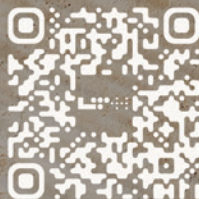
Back in the Navajo Nation, I thank my friends for showing me such caring hospitality and for welcoming me into their world. As I make the drive back east, I realize I'm a changed person because of this special sojourn.

I also understand that my greatest impact on this place is having no apparent impact on it at all. ☺

KATE NELSON is an award-winning writer and editor in Minneapolis and an Alaska Native Tlingit tribal member.



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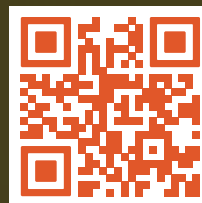
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First, Know Thyself

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

NEARLY EVERY DAY, members ask for my take on the latest innovations in health and wellness. Lately, questions have been along the lines of, What vitamins and minerals should I be taking? What's your stance on GLP-1s and other peptides? What about testosterone?

With the growing interest in strategic supplementation and advanced protocols like hormone optimization and peptide therapy, these inquiries have only increased — and for good reason.

The research about them is stacking up. Now, nutrients, supplements, hormones, and peptides are more accessible than ever, and many of them have the potential to improve how we feel and function as we age.

This can make it tempting to dive in headfirst, especially when influencers and “experts” are touting them far and wide across the media landscape. It's a pattern we see repeatedly: People read about a supplement that's generating excitement — or a friend swears by a particular peptide, or a podcast host raves about hormone therapy — and they decide to try it for themselves.

Maybe they experience some changes. Maybe they don't. Either way, they're essentially navigating in the dark. Enticed by broad-stroke recommendations, these folks are ingesting or injecting products they often don't understand, without knowing whether they even need them.

At Life Time, we know there is no one-size-fits-all solution. We've seen time and again that the most successful health and fitness protocols are targeted and personalized; they're tailored to fit someone's individual physiology.

So, the question isn't, What should I be taking? but rather, What is my current baseline? What does my body

need to function optimally? These kinds of questions can't be answered with guesswork.

That's why we're creating a centralized health coaching hub that aims to help you find the answers and solutions your body needs. Our goal is (and always has been) to provide education so that you can make empowered decisions about what to do next to improve your health and well-being.

The experience starts with a one-on-one session with a health coach, who guides you through a symptom assessment and questionnaire; this covers your goals, your lifestyle (including nutrition, fitness, and sleep habits, and stress levels), and any challenges you might be facing.

Depending on your results, your coach may recommend additional testing or support:

- **An active metabolic assessment** (AMA) with a Dynamic Personal Trainer can pinpoint how efficiently you use oxygen while exercising at various intensities; your unique metrics can help you work out smarter, not harder.

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- **At-home lab tests** can identify food sensitivities or inflammation. A Dynamic Nutrition Coach can help you address issues through supplementation and lifestyle changes.

- **A comprehensive blood panel** with medical interpretation by the team at MIOra, the precision medical clinics at Life Time, details your nutrient status, hormone levels, metabolic health, and more. The panel, one component of the Metabolic Code (created by Jim LaValle, our chief science officer), assesses more than 70



biomarkers to uncover patterns — not just isolated numbers — about how your body's systems are functioning.

With this data in hand, you can now take action that actually helps you progress toward your goals.

This is the work the Life Time team cares most deeply about: empowering people to understand where they are, what they need, and why they need it, so they can make informed and personalized decisions. And that can be game-changing.

So, when someone asks me if I think they should try one of these new health interventions, I usually suggest that they get to know themselves first. Do some advanced blood work; maybe take an AMA.

Sit down with someone who can help you understand your results. Then have an honest conversation about the strategies and interventions — and the combinations of them — that make the most sense for you.

After all these years in the health and wellness business, we know that the people who make the most meaningful, lasting progress are not those who latch on to every trend that comes along. They're the ones who take the time to truly understand themselves. Then they act with intention based on what they learn.

So tune in, because your body has a lot to tell you.



BAHRAM AKRADI is the founder, chairman, and CEO of Life Time — Healthy Way of Life.

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we must not only act,
but also dream.

— ANATOLE FRANCE



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