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LIFE TIME

January/February 2022

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Strong Foundations

TV and podcast host

Maria Menounos

on how we're better together in navigating, learning from, and overcoming life's challenges.

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WE LOVE

MEG BOGGS, BODY-POSITIVE ATHLETE

Everyone can benefit from exercise, but making fitness more welcoming for all bodies to participate requires honest conversations about exclusion and discrimination. That's where author and athlete Meg Boggs enters.

The Fort Worth, Texas, advocate uses her social-media platforms to educate her audience on modifications for moves, the ramifications of diet culture, body positivity and inclusivity, and juggling it all amid motherhood challenges — including her candid storytelling about her IVF journey. Her latest book, *Fitness for Every Body*, encourages us to view our athleticism through the lens of body strength rather than shape — and realize how capable we all are of incredible feats.



Read an excerpt from Meg Boggs's book at ELMAG.COM/MEGBOGGS.

Power WITH YOUR PEOPLE

Connect with fellow *Experience Life* readers and fitness enthusiasts who are seeking support in our Real Fitness Facebook group. Join the community, moderated by fitness editor Maggie Fazeli Fard, RKC, MFT-1, Alpha, at ELmag.com/realfitnessfacebook.



2022

RETHINKING RESOLUTIONS

The energy of the New Year can inspire you to set ambitious health-and-fitness goals. Our practical guide will help you along the way:
ELmag.com/resolutions.

KETO FOR WOMEN

Some people find the benefits of a temporary keto protocol useful at various points in their health journeys — though women's unique hormones can create more hurdles. Sara Gottfried, MD, helps troubleshoot them at
ELmag.com/ketowomen.

BEYOND BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Discover ways to deepen your own education and awareness, and celebrate and uplift the Black community by being a true ally, at
ELmag.com/blackallyship.

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS **Robin Asbell, Lauren Bedosky, Henry Emmons, Lori Berger, Katherine Reynolds Lewis, Jill Metzler Patton, Ze' Pierce, Nicole Radziszewski, Quinton Skinner, Stephanie Soucheray**

Please address all written correspondence and editorial inquiries to Managing Editor, *Experience Life*, 2145 Ford Parkway, Suite 302, St. Paul, MN 55116 or experiencelife@experiencelife.com.

LIFE TIME

FOUNDER **Bahram Akradi**

PRESIDENT, MEDIA **Kimo Seymour**

Please address all media and advertising inquiries to ltmedia@lt.life.

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LIFE TIME
HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE



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There's no such thing as perfect in any of this . . . so I keep checking in, noticing, and reassessing."



YOUR THOUGHTS?

Email us at experiencelife@experiencelife.com.

Steady Progress

It's resolution season again . . . but, truthfully, I'm not much for resolutions these days. Back in my teens and 20s, they were a staple when the calendar flipped to January: Exercise every day for at least 30 minutes. Avoid junk food. Track every single thing I eat. I usually stuck with them for a week or two, and then, like clockwork, the rigidity left me discarding them, one all-or-nothing goal at a time.

Statistics show that resolution abandonment is relatively common. Most people — around 80 percent, according to some estimates — give up on them by the start of February. And it can be hard to recommit and channel motivation once those ambitions fall to the wayside.

So in more recent years, rather than making resolutions on December 31, I've checked in on how I'm doing with the various aspects known to contribute to greater health and well-being. As I was thinking about them in preparation for writing this column, I realized they fall into the following buckets.

- **Surviving:** These are the essentials we need to survive — food, water, air, and shelter. Once these are dependably in place, we can also consider their quality and whether they're supporting our goals: Are we eating mostly whole, unprocessed food? Is our water clean? What is the air quality in the spaces where we spend most of our time? Is our shelter set up to keep us on track or distract us from good habits?

- **Supporting Health:** At *Experience Life* and *Life Time*, we often refer to the pillars of a healthy way of life, or the habits and practices that contribute to physical and mental health. These include things like movement, nutrition, health awareness, sleep, stress management, and social connections: Are we moving in ways that feel good and empowering to us most days? Are we optimizing our food intake (see previous section!) with good nutrition and supplementation?

Are we meeting regularly with our healthcare professionals for relevant screenings or when we notice something seems off about our health? (See "Your Healthy Way of Life Calendar," page 72, for tips on scheduling these appointments.) Are we getting plenty of sleep, managing our stress, and nurturing our relationships? Are we practicing self-care?

- **Thriving:** This is my favorite category, though it's also the easiest to overlook (at least in my experience). It includes things like joy, authenticity, purpose, growth, and beauty, and is about recognizing how we're engaging and connecting. It's about tapping into the things we love and are passionate about, being present and mindful, and noticing the beauty of the world around us.

Are we intentionally seeking out joyful, awe-inspiring moments and noticing them as they're happening? Are we living with integrity? Are we making time for those light-us-up things or getting bogged down by all the to-dos?

As another new year approaches, I'm asking myself these questions and reflecting on how I'm doing in each of these areas: What have I been neglecting? Where have I been consistent and successful? What opportunities do I have for sustainable progress and improvement?

There's no such thing as perfect in any of this — it's more about flow, growth, opportunity, and self-support than all-or-nothings. So throughout the year, I keep checking in, noticing, and reassessing. It's a practice, and according to the classroom motto of one of my daughter's former teachers, "Practice makes progress." I'm here for that.

JAMIE MARTIN is *Experience Life*'s editor in chief, *Life Time*'s vice president of content strategy, and cohost of the *Life Time Talks* podcast.

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Talk to Us

INSPIRING STORIES

👤 Thank you, Megan, for sharing your story (“A Haven for Health,” September 2021). It’s very inspiring, and I’m so happy for you and Gus and your garden. I am on my own path to more mobility and fun. All the best to you!

Mary

👤 I want to thank you for this amazing read (“How to Celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month as an Ally,” September 15, 2021). I am in my 40s and can honestly say this is the first year I have seen support for and visibility to this month’s purpose and celebration. It’s been a long journey, but I am glad to see we are being inclusive in our multiple communication forums — which has not been my experience growing up.

Karen H.

✉️ I enjoyed [editor in chief] Jamie Martin’s column, “Feats of Greatness,” in your October 2021 issue. She discusses the mental-health challenges of amazing athletes, including Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Naomi Osaka, and Caeleb Dressel — and Biles’s public struggle during the Tokyo Games. It reminded me of another amazing American Olympian, Molly Seidel, who won the bronze medal in the women’s marathon at the Tokyo Games. Seidel’s very public story of overcoming anxiety, OCD, and an eating disorder as a national-champion collegiate runner, and later taking on the big dogs as an underdog in the Olympic marathon, is truly amazing and an inspiration to us all.

Karl F.

📷 My son works at Life Time in Houston at the Greenway location. He gave me his September issue of *Experience Life* magazine and I came across the article Jamie Martin wrote, “Ready to Listen.” It was exactly what I need to read today. I want to thank Jamie for helping me reflect on me — I haven’t taken the time in a long time to look inward.

Marlene S.

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

👤 Thank you for educating me on the serious risks and problems that come with plastic (“The Problem With Plastic — and What We Can Do About It,” June 2020). We can all make a difference. I’ll be sharing

this article as well to help educate others on how we can collectively be the change we want to see.

Elizabeth A.



EMPATHY IS THE ANSWER

📺 We are in the midst of a kindness deficit because people

aren’t practicing empathy; they’re placing judgment (“Choose Kindness,” October 2021). Empathy says, “I may or may not understand what you are going through, but I am here with you.” Rather, there’s blame, finger-pointing, and loss of autonomy — all based on personal bias and expectations.

Debbie M.

A VERY GOOD MORNING

📷 My husband and I started taking a silent walk each morning after meditation (“6 Morning Routines for Better Sleep,” September 20, 2021). Sometimes it’s with the moonset and sometimes with the sunrise. It’s been a wonderful addition to our mornings.

@wendybrightfallon



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Letters to the Editor
Experience Life
2145 Ford Parkway, Suite 302
St. Paul, MN 55116

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The Addictive Power of Processed Foods

Compare two common snack foods: baby carrots and potato chips. One is fresh, healthy, and nutritious, and yet it's unlikely most people would ever overindulge. The other is chock-full of salt, fat, and starches that the body converts to sugar, and it can be remarkably easy to devour a family-size bag in one sitting.

Certain foods are significantly more addictive than others, according to several studies, including a 2021 report in the *Annual Review of Nutrition*. And highly processed foods lead the way.

Researchers developing the Yale Food Addiction Scale, released in 2009, used criteria from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* to identify signs of addiction-like eating.

The foods most likely to cause this behavior? Sweets and sugary drinks; salty snacks; white flour and rice; and high-fat anything, from hamburgers to pizza.

A recent survey of addictive-eating patterns published in *PLOS ONE* found that the most problematic foods are all processed ones — chocolate, ice cream, and French fries lead the list.

There's a reason these foods are so addictive: Big Food has engineered them to tap into the part of our brains

where habits are formed, explains Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Michael Moss, author of *Hooked: Food, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions*.

High concentrations of fats, salts, sugars, artificial flavorings, and texture enhancers in processed foods are key to their allure. It's true there's plenty of sugar in some fruits and vegetables,



Some research shows that the noisier a chip is, the more we will eat. **So the chip makers put lots of effort into maximizing the noisiness of chips.**

like baby carrots, and there's abundant fat in meats, nuts, and eggs. Yet few foods found in nature combine high levels of fat and sugar in the way processed fare does.

Plus, chips also pack that distinctive crunch.

"Some research shows that the noisier a chip is, the more we will eat. So the chip makers put lots of effort into maximizing the noisiness of chips," Moss explains.

So, why aren't those crunchy baby carrots addictive too?

Research suggests that the carbohydrates in highly processed foods rush into the bloodstream, causing blood-sugar spikes. As these carbs are digested, they prompt the gut to send signals to the brain, triggering a surge of dopamine, which has been associated with addictive behavior.

Whole foods, Moss argues, are unlikely to cause such spikes, and they typically take longer to prepare and eat, essentially putting the brake on bingeing.

"Speed is a big factor in addiction; the faster a substance hits the brain, the more apt we are to be seduced by it," he explains. "The slowness of whole foods helps avoid overeating."

Avoiding all processed foods can be daunting, but there are other ways to regain control over your eating habits. Moss, for instance, cooks his family's meals from scratch.

He also has a broader vision: "I hope that every school in the world can help kids get excited by real foods by having a garden for them to experience and by working good food into the curriculum so that kids can more easily get hooked on, say, blueberries and radishes rather than Doritos."

— MARCO DREGNI

Rx for the Aging Brain: Take a Walk

Going for a brisk walk on a regular basis may rewire vital parts of the aging brain that have long been thought to resist improvement, according to recent research.

The brain's white matter, whose nerve fibers connect neurons, is prone to losing volume and developing lesions that can damage cognitive function as we grow older. And researchers have historically considered it to be less adaptable to lifestyle changes than gray matter. But a team including Colorado State University neuroscientist Agnieszka Burzynska, PhD, suspected it might respond to certain types of physical activity.

In a study published in *NeuroImage*, the team recruited 247 generally healthy, but sedentary, older adults. After measuring their baseline fitness and cognitive abilities — including their white-matter functionality — the researchers split the volunteers into three groups that gathered three times a week for specific activities. An active

control group focused on stretching and balance training, a second group walked at a challenging pace for 40 minutes, and a third practiced line dancing and choreography.

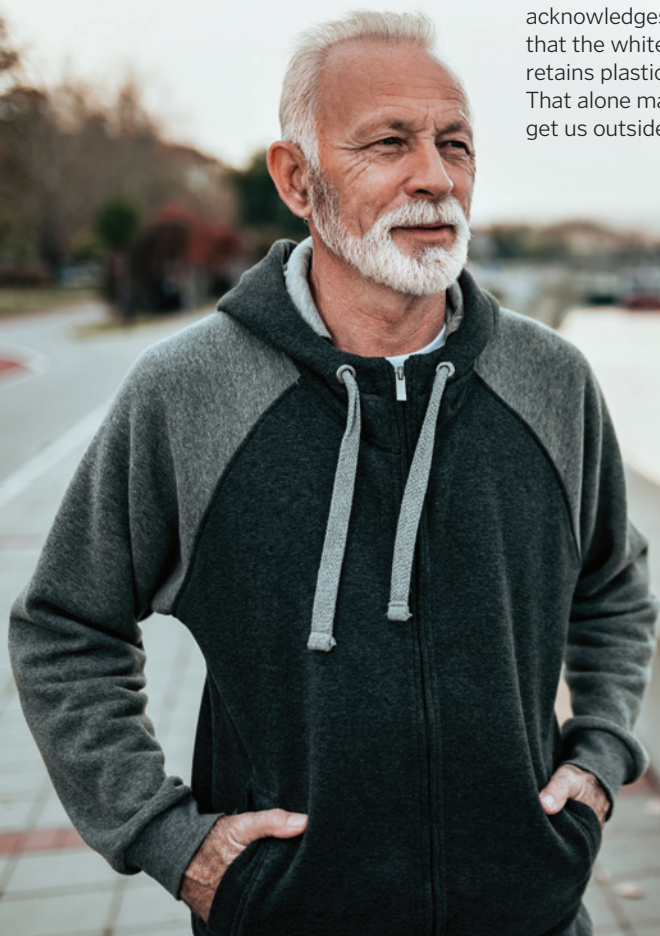
Six months later, Burzynska and her colleagues once again checked each participant's fitness and cognitive ability and were not surprised to find that those in the walking and dance groups had improved their aerobic capacity and cognitive function.

Using a sophisticated MRI scan, the scientists also discovered improvement in the white matter of those participants' brains: The nerve fibers had expanded and tissue lesions had diminished. The changes were most pronounced in the walkers, who also scored better than the dancers on memory tests.

The control group, meanwhile, fared worse. Scans showed increased damage to participants' white matter, and they scored lower on cognitive tests.

More study is needed, Burzynska acknowledges, but "the findings suggest that the white matter in the adult brain retains plasticity in vulnerable regions." That alone may be enough motivation to get us outside more often for a walk.

— CRAIG COX



WHAT'S YOUR Carbon Footprint?

The total amount of greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide and methane, that you generate constitutes your individual carbon footprint. In the United States, we each create 16 tons annually on average — one of the highest rates worldwide (the global average is closer to 4 tons, according to the Nature Conservancy).

Several online calculators offer free assessments for determining your own footprint, as well as recommendations for how you can lower it.

Just how accurate are such estimators? The answer lies in the name: They offer estimates. But that's better than nothing, and the advice for trimming your footprint may be invaluable.

There are several estimators you can try from the following sources.

- Environmental Protection Agency: www3.epa.gov/carbon-footprint-calculator

- University of California, Berkeley: coolclimate.berkeley.edu/calculator

- The Nature Conservancy: www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/carbon-footprint-calculator

— MICHAEL DREGNI



LONG-HAUL-COVID RECOVERY AND Vaccines

Some COVID long-haulers have seen their symptoms ease or even vanish after receiving one of the mRNA vaccines (currently, those from Pfizer and Moderna). This has raised questions regarding the mechanisms at play.

“Most long-haulers aren’t affected by vaccination, but maybe 10 percent get unexpectedly better — like someone turned on the lights,” says functional-medicine internist Leo Galland, MD.

There are several theories about what might be occurring, including that the vaccines may somehow “reset” a glitchy immune system or provoke a psychosomatic response. The more likely explanation, however, is that some long-haulers battle a persistent infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, says Galland, and the vaccine boosts their immune response.

“The theory has been circulating for decades that autoimmune disease is caused by a lingering infection,” he explains. There is evidence that COVID viral proteins may persist in the gut and in immune cells in the blood, even after the virus has become undetectable in nasal swabs.

There is precedence for this theory. Studies, clinical trials, and patient surveys have shown that antibiotic treatment can resolve the symptoms of some rheumatoid arthritis patients.

“There are definitely people who have what appears to be autoimmune disease, in whom the trigger is still present and active in the body,” he notes. “If you can treat the trigger, the autoimmune disease goes away.”

The uneven effects of vaccination on long-haulers point to a frustrating truth: The condition, its manifestations, and its underlying causes seem to vary greatly from person to person. “We have many more questions than answers at this point about how the vaccine might be helping,” says osteopath Leonard Calabrese, DO, director of the Cleveland Clinic’s R. J. Fasenmyer Center for Clinical Immunology.

(For more on autoimmune issues, see “Autoimmunity Now” on page 58.)

— MO PERRY

Metabolism Changes With Age — Just Not When You Might Think

Conventional wisdom tells us our metabolism peaks in our teenage years, boosted by puberty’s hormonal rush, then drops off precipitously once we turn 30 and continues to decline as we age.

Metabolism — the rate at which the body expends energy, or burns calories — does indeed change with age, but a recent large study confirms that it does so on a vastly different timeline than previously believed.

Data published in *Science* suggests that metabolism peaks in infancy, then slows by about 3 percent each year until we reach our 20s. When it levels off, this new normal remains stable — for decades. Metabolic rate doesn’t really start to decline again until after age 60, and even then, only gradually: less than 1 percent annually.

“There are lots of physiological changes that come with growing up and getting older — think puberty, menopause, other phases of life,” explains study coauthor Herman Pontzer, PhD, author of *Burn*, which examines human metabolism. “What’s weird is that the timing of our metabolic life stages doesn’t seem to match those typical milestones.”

Using data collected over 40 years, Pontzer and an international team of more than 80 scientists analyzed the average calories burned by more than 6,600 people from 29 countries. Study subjects ranged in age from one week to 95 years; 64 percent were female, 36 percent male.

“All of this points to the conclusion that tissue metabolism — the work that the cells are doing — is changing over the course of the lifespan in ways we haven’t fully appreciated before,” Pontzer says. “You really need a big data set like this to get at those questions.”

What a data set this large can’t do is tell the story of an individual whose metabolic rate at a given age may have diverged widely — as much as 25 percent — from the average. If you feel that your health (or your waistline) took a hit before the predicted age of 60, it’s possible that you’re one of these outliers.

It’s also possible that powerful factors beyond metabolism — such as behavioral, medical, and socioeconomic circumstances — are playing a role.

— MAGGIE FAZELI FARD



The State of Our Children's Health

It's been the worst of times for our children.

Events of the last few years, including the pandemic, have burdened our nation's youth with "unprecedented" hardships, according to several reports. Yet at the same time, there are signs of hope.

"A society must be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable — and most valuable — members: its children," notes the Children's Defense Fund's report *State of America's Children 2020*. "By this measure, America is falling shamefully short.

"Every aspect of children's lives has been impacted by these shifts more quickly than data can track; even the most recent available data sets do not fully encompass how this past year has shaped our lives."

These are some of the key health considerations.



NUTRITION: U.S. kids get the majority of their calories from ultraprocessed foods, according to a 2020 study in *JAMA* that analyzed the diets of 33,795 youths ages 2 to 19. In 2018, 67 percent of the calories consumed by kids came from ultraprocessed foods, up from 61 percent in 1999.

Meanwhile, childhood obesity has been steadily rising: 14.4 million kids ages 2 to 19, or 19.3 percent of U.S. kids, are now classified as obese, putting them "at risk for poor health," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A 2018 study in *Pediatrics* notes that the trend is especially prominent among kids ages 2 to 5.

There is some good news on the nutrition front, though: The *JAMA* study found that calorie intake from sugar-sweetened beverages dropped 51 percent over the past two decades.

Parents have less control over school meals. The National School Lunch Program feeds more than 30 million students daily — 22 million of whom are low-income — making it the nation's second-largest antihunger initiative after the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The Life Time Foundation, which partners with schools to provide healthy meals, now serves 3,634 schools and 1.7 million students nationwide. "We are trying to help accelerate access to better ingredients, as well as scratch-cooking practices," explains Life Time Foundation senior program manager Valeria La Rosa. "Despite all the challenges school food professionals face, I'm feeling very hopeful about the future of school meals."

EXERCISE AND MOVEMENT

MOVEMENT: People of all ages were moving less during the pandemic — and that includes kids. Lockdowns, school and park closures, and youth-sports cancellations curtailed much organized activity. A study in *BMC Public Health* found that throughout spring 2020, 82 percent of parents of preteens ages 9 to 13 said their kids were more sedentary.

"Of public-health concern is [that] these short-term changes in behavior in reaction to COVID-19 may become permanently entrenched, leading to increased risk of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in children as they get older," says lead author Genevieve Dunton, PhD, MPH, professor of preventive medicine and psychology at the University of Southern California.

"If the pandemic is resetting children's trajectories for physical activity, that can be difficult to change."

(For family-friendly exercise ideas, see [ELmag.com/familycircuit](https://www.ELmag.com/familycircuit).)

MENTAL HEALTH: Even in the best of times, adolescence is a challenging phase, but the pandemic exacerbated kids' inner turmoil. A 2020 meta-review of 63 studies, published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, found that young people were more likely to experience higher rates of depression and anxiety during and after the enforced isolation of the pandemic.

And, describing the results of a 2021 longitudinal study in *PLOS ONE*, Harvard research associate Maya L. Rosen, PhD, notes, "The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented changes in the lives of children and adolescents. These changes brought a sudden loss of structure, routine, and sense of control.

"Numerous pandemic-related experiences reflect novel stressors for youth and families, including unpredictability and daily-routine disruptions; unexpected loss of family members, friends, and loved ones; chronic exposure to information about threats to well-being and survival in situations that were previously safe; and social isolation."

Rosen also found that several simple strategies helped families promote better mental health during the pandemic: adopting a structured daily routine, limiting passive screen time, minimizing exposure to pandemic news reports, spending more time in nature, and getting quality sleep. 🧠

— MICHAEL DREGNI



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A pair of Hoka Clifton 8 sneakers, one in white with orange accents and the other in light blue with orange accents, are shown from a side profile. They are positioned on a surface that creates concentric ripples, suggesting a smooth, cushioned ride. The background is a solid light blue.

FOR THE LOVE OF THE RUN

CLIFTON 8

THE REMARKABLY SMOOTH
EVERYDAY TRAINER

HOKA

THE PATH FORWARD

The last five years presented several unexpected obstacles for media maven Maria Menounos. Now she's paving a new way — and living with greater intention.

BY LORI BERGER

Some might refer to Maria Menounos's return to the airwaves — after being mostly absent for nearly five years — as a comeback. But for the 43-year-old TV personality, whose world was shattered by the death of her mother last May, it's much more about transformation and, ultimately, resurrection.

On a recent episode of her self-help podcast, *Better Together*, the best-selling author, producer, and entrepreneur repeatedly referred to “the old Maria” and “the new Maria.” That demarcation began half a decade ago, when her mother was diagnosed with stage IV brain cancer. Shortly after, Menounos herself went to the doctor to investigate the headaches and blurry vision *she'd* been experiencing and was diagnosed with a hemangioma (a benign brain tumor) that required a seven-hour surgery.

Amid those life-altering diagnoses, Menounos struggled with fertility, turned to surrogacy, and somehow managed to work, pay the bills, and take care of her mother and her father, who has type 1 diabetes.

When COVID struck both of her parents in November 2020, she was left figuring out how to nurse them back to

health amid so many setbacks — while on the verge of a breakdown herself.

Yet as overwhelming as these struggles have been, especially the loss of her mother, they also set the stage for a life-changing journey toward self-healing, reinvention, and acceptance. “I think that when life presents two brain tumors in your life, you get new perspective very quickly,” Menounos says of her reawakening. “I knew I needed to make changes in my life. The old Maria, for instance, gave her

important personal work to do — for herself and for others.

“My podcast has been my rudder to make sure I stay on the path and continue growing, learning, and being a health advocate for everyone who listens. That reminds me to always be a health advocate for myself — and it's just one of the reasons why we are all ‘better together.’”

Hosting a daily roster of self-help guests, such as Deepak Chopra, Dr. Shefali, and Dr. Mark Hyman,



From left: Maria Menounos and her dad visit her mom during her cancer treatment; mom and daughter collaborated on *The EveryGirl's Guide to Cooking*; Menounos and her husband, Keven, on the set of *The Holiday Fix Up*.

power away, and the new Maria owns her power more — and she listens to herself and her gut more.”

“It's been a great guiding force,” she continues. “The new Maria isn't as tied up in achieving and is much more about her health in a 360-degree way. I like to think of myself as a human being, not just a human doing.”

It's not that her days of red-carpet reporting and interviewing celebrities are over. For now, though, these things are on the back burner: She has more

Menounos has moved into the area of mindfulness, self-care, and personal transformation. She's intent on educating her listeners — and herself — on how to shift attention to the stuff that really counts: health, gratitude, and happiness.

It's all still a work in progress. But that's just the point: Menounos is living out what she discusses while joining her listeners on a life-altering journey to discover how to live better, be better, and always keep growing.



Q&A

WITH MARIA MENOUNOS

EXPERIENCE LIFE | How would you describe the last four to five years of your life?

MARIA MENOUNOS | It's been a time of growing and transformation with a lot of pain mixed in. I've learned that personal growth often comes from pain and grief, and it's not necessarily an obstacle that you have to just overcome. Even though I've worked very hard at creating new habits and forging a new path, these last five years have been stressful, because I was dealing with life and death every day.

EL | How did your podcast come about?

MM | I got diagnosed with my brain tumor about two months after my mom got diagnosed. I was in a tornado and had to figure out how to take care of both of us. It was a personal-development journey, and the show was born out of my natural curiosity around wanting to be better and to grow and learn.

I also really needed answers and to find a way to help my mom beat the odds. My reporting and entertainment background provided me access, and I was able to take a deep dive into all these things that were interesting to me and would be helpful on my journey. As I say on the show, "Getting better isn't easy, but it's a whole lot easier when we can do it together."

EL | What is your goal with the show?

MM | It's about learning to re-raise ourselves every day. It's about how to reprogram ourselves, which is vital. One of the things Dr. Shefali and I talked about on the show recently was whether people can have this personal metamorphosis *without* a crisis in their lives. I think if there's one good thing that came out of COVID, it was like this country experienced a collective brain tumor — every single person was stopped in their tracks because they realized that the whole world shut down because of health. If that didn't make us focus on and care about our health, I don't know when we

will. Every day, I get to be in this "how do I get better?" space, and every day I open my eyes more to what's possible.

EL | You advocate a lot for self-care. How can that change someone's life?

MM | Self-care helps distinguish between what's important and what's not, because most of us are not taught to really love and take care of ourselves from an early age. Most of us don't have any regard for our health until it's unavoidable and massively screaming at us. We're taught from a young age that we have to become somebody — we have to be successful — so we come out of the womb like bullets, and we're on that bullet train.

But no one along the way is saying, "Your health is your wealth." And when I was in that hospital bed and couldn't do what I'd always done, which was work, work, work and push on, it was devastating. Part of what we try to do on the show is reshape and retrain people to realize there is an alternative.

EL | Do you think "the old Maria" would have disregarded her own brain-tumor symptoms, had you not gone through this experience with your mom and discovered the importance of self-care?

MM | Possibly. I was the queen of telling my body to shut up, because I was too busy to deal.

When cars make noise, we take them to the mechanic. When our bodies make noises, we're like, I'm busy. I don't have the time to take you to the doctor.

But I have time to take my car to the mechanic, because we know if we don't take the car in, the problem's going to get worse and I'm going to have to pay even more money. But what about our health? Isn't that valuable? No one thinks about it like that, until it's too late.

EL | So how do we begin the journey that leads to taking better care of ourselves?

MM | I talk about "the accumulation factor" every day on my show. We eat fast food, we work 20 hours a day, we run ourselves ragged. In our 20s we can get away with abusing ourselves. By the time we're in our 40s, all the stuff we didn't take care of in our 20s and 30s starts to kick in. Now we're dealing with full-blown diseases and illnesses because



GETTING BETTER ISN'T EASY, BUT IT'S A WHOLE LOT EASIER WHEN WE CAN DO IT TOGETHER."

we've beaten our bodies up — whether it's been the toxins in the foods we eat, toxicity of the mind, or work and family toxicity. It all accumulates mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

We need to steer toward focusing on our health and take baby steps, make better choices, and be more present. This helps us make better decisions, and making good choices is a message for all of us, every day — that we have power and are in control of our destiny. Where focus goes, the energy flows.

EL | When you think of the strong foundations in your life, what comes to mind?

MM | I think the foundation that first and foremost grounds me is my connection to God. My parents and my husband, Keven, have always been grounding forces for me, too — and, of course, my animals!

EL | What's your ultimate goal for yourself?

MM | I'm on the journey. I'm still working on stuff. But there's no destination I need to arrive at. Things will always continue to come up in our lives. You get better in one area, then there's the next thing and the next thing and the next thing.

I still cry, grieve, and can be rough on myself. But then I'll have a conversation with my husband or someone else close to me and they'll remind me that I don't have to get past how I'm feeling — that it's all part of the journey.

I end every show by saying, "Be nice, make good choices, and be present." And I end every evening with my daily prayers and my gratitude list, which reminds me not to be hard on myself. Instead of focusing on the one bad thing that happened that day, don't forget about all the amazing things. ☺

LORI BERGER is a veteran entertainment journalist and producer based in Los Angeles.

BLADE V8



Wilson

RETURN TO THE WILD

The new Blade v8 celebrates the return to your natural element of competitive tennis — renewed and reconnected to the game you love.



Starting a Yearlong Gratitude Practice

Cultivating and expressing appreciation on a regular basis can help you stay grounded in what makes your life meaningful.

BY **MOLLY TYNJALA**

Thankfulness may come more naturally during the holidays, but gratitude doesn't need to be saved for one special occasion or season.

Consider starting this year off by establishing an intentional gratitude practice to regularly acknowledge the people, places, and moments that make your life meaningful. In doing so, you may

find yourself feeling generally happier and perhaps better equipped to rebound from hard times in the months ahead.

These four ideas are some of our favorite ways to cultivate and express appreciation all year long.

MOLLY TYNJALA is an *Experience Life* assistant editor.

1

WRITE LETTERS

In a world where so much communication is digital, taking the time to write and mail a physical message is worth a thousand emoji. Spread your gratitude far and wide by sending a letter each month to someone in your life. (For tips on writing gratitude letters, see ELmag.com/gratitudeexercise.)

2

MEDITATE

Cultivating a deeper awareness of your sense of appreciation is a powerful way to promote happiness, connect with your core values, and reduce stress and anxiety. If you're new to meditation, check out our tips for starting a daily practice at ELmag.com/dailymeditation.

3

KEEP A JOURNAL

Research suggests that maintaining a gratitude journal can ease anxiety and boost your mood. If long-form writing isn't your thing, you can draw, create collages, or simply jot down meaningful words or phrases. (See ELmag.com/gratitudejournal to learn more.)

4

FILL A JAR

It's like a swear jar, but instead of collecting fines for verbal slip-ups, a gratitude jar captures memorable moments, experiences, and events. You can record these on slips of paper or toss in mementos. When you're feeling overwhelmed or depleted, reach into the jar and read a note or two.

PREVENTION IS THE BEST MEDICINE FOR ACL TEARS

A pivot—then a pop. It only takes a quick twist to join the 250,000 Americans who tear their anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) annually. The highest-risk sports involve jumping and sudden direction changes—think: basketball, soccer, and tennis.

The injury typically requires surgery and rehabilitation, but the good news?

Tried-and-true approaches can lower your risk so you can stay in the game.

Keep On Moving

A year-round workout routine will keep your leg muscles strong and flexible—which can buffer the ACL from injury. Exercises like deadlifts strengthen hamstrings and glutes, better protecting you against knee injuries. “A fit body can better withstand greater stress,” explains **Heather A. Milton, MS, RCEP, CSCS**, exercise physiologist supervisor at NYU Langone’s Sports Performance Center.

A stable core is just as essential; the basic plank can efficiently strengthen your core, arms, shoulders, back, glutes, and legs. Core stabilization helps your body move more efficiently, so these exercises should be part of a yearlong training program.

Follow the Laws of Physics

Landing a jump on stiff legs stresses the ACL, increasing injury risk. You can reduce this stress by bending at the knees and hips as you turn, aligning your knees with your feet. When you land, your core, glutes, quadriceps, and hamstrings together keep the ACL from bearing the full force.

“The habit of good alignment when warming up or training encourages safe movement during game time,” says **Cordelia W. Carter, MD**, orthopedic surgeon and director of NYU Langone’s Center for Women’s Sports Health.

Know Your Limits

It’s harder to maintain good form when you’re tired, so preventing injury means exercising effectively—and knowing when to stop. Avoid pushing yourself to the point of muscle fatigue, and prioritize healthy sleep for muscle recovery.

Taken together, these strategies can keep your ACL pivoting—and performing—in peak condition.



SPORTS HEALTH

At NYU Langone, our Sports Health experts have the multi-specialty expertise to provide coordinated, comprehensive care for all types of athletes. As an official healthcare partner of Life Time, we offer exclusive concierge access to our world-class orthopedic specialists and performance experts. To schedule an in-person appointment or a video visit with a Sports Health expert, visit [nyulangone.org/lifetime](https://www.nyulangone.org/lifetime).



A studio manager and group fitness performer at Life Time, Ze' Pierce aspires to motivate others and support their physical, mental, and emotional health.

Endless Possibilities

Struggling with body dysmorphia, a former model improves his health and fitness — and uncovers a passion for helping others do the same.

BY ZE' PIERCE

Standing in a room among other models preparing for a fashion show, I was suddenly paralyzed by the prospect of taking off my shirt. My heart began beating rapidly and my palms started to sweat. My body dysmorphia had emerged in full force.

It was 2008, and I had just signed on with a New York City casting agency. I should have been excited, but my mind was racing. I couldn't stop thinking about the people around me who would see the loose skin on my 29-year-old body and notice that my right pec was not as defined as my left. All the other models looked so built and perfect — I couldn't bear to imagine what they would think of my body.

In my eyes, the fabric of my shirt was the only thing protecting me from the judgment of my peers. It was then that I knew modeling was no longer for me. *How did I get here?* I wondered.

Big Lifestyle Change

My body dysmorphia is rooted in my history with weight loss. That journey began in 1999 when my doctor warned me that I was following a path like that of my father, who had suffered from coronary heart disease and died in his late 30s from a heart attack. My own heart almost stopped at those words: I was just 21.

At the time, I stood around 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighed about 265 pounds; I didn't really exercise, and I had never kept to a strict diet. My parents did the best they could when I was growing up, but fitness and healthy eating hadn't been priorities.

The doctor's warning was the wake-up call I needed. Having watched my father struggle with his health, I was determined to do whatever I could to avoid following a similar path.

I immediately cut out alcohol and fried foods. I committed to drinking plenty of water each day. I started YouTube workouts. Eventually, I was doing two-a-days, visiting the gym whenever I wasn't working at my full-time job in data entry or my part-time job as a janitor.

Over the next two years, my health transformed. I lost about 100 pounds — and most important, I felt stronger and more excited for life than I had in years. It seemed like a great time to take on a new adventure.

I was about 25 when a friend suggested I model. Though I was hesitant at first, as soon as I stepped on the runway, it clicked. There was something about modeling that losing weight and eating right hadn't given me, and that was the ability to really own who I am and share it with others.

Yet the deeper I delved into the industry, the more unsettled and insecure I became. I had to change clothes in front of other people, or do shoots where I needed to take my shirt off. The anxiety was crippling. I still had loose skin from my weight loss, and I wasn't ready to be part of an industry I didn't feel would accept my body.

Worse, I realized that I hadn't come to accept my body. I was always focused on what I could improve, and although I was feeling healthier, I began to recognize



Ze' during a photo shoot in October 2007 after starting to work as a model.

that neither weight loss nor modeling was the answer to the internal challenges I was facing (and still face today). I had to work on loving my whole self.

So, I asked myself another question: *What's next?*

A New Chapter

In 2006, I moved to Philadelphia, and that's when life really started for me. Two years after moving, I decided to step away from modeling and bring my focus back to fitness.

While searching Facebook for fitness communities, I stumbled upon a guy named Tre' who hosted boot-camp classes in the area. I'd never done a boot-camp class before, but I figured it would be a great way to meet people who share my interests. I was immediately hooked: They were intense, high energy, and collaborative in a way that felt empowering after years of solo workouts. I never missed a class.

Tre' also had a way of pushing me past my limits. Early on, he saw something in me that I had yet to see in myself: the ability to be a key part of the fitness industry.

When Tre' had to take some time off, he let me run some of his camps, and I loved it. Encouraging and inspiring people has always been a part of who I am, and after working with Tre' to build out even more well-attended classes, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in fitness.

In retrospect, I see how both modeling and leading fitness classes include an element of performance, but motivating people through fitness instruction was much more fulfilling. Modeling was all about aesthetics; leading fitness classes was all about inspiring people to move their bodies to build strength and feel good. When I led fitness classes, I had a purpose.

I decided to get certified as a personal trainer and deepen my understanding of nutrition.

Coming Together

You could say that during this time, things began to fall into place. I was hired as a group instructor at a

Philadelphia health club, where I had the opportunity to fine-tune my craft as a teacher with the support of some incredible people.

My experience there also encouraged me to explore, and ultimately embrace, my sexuality. Located in what is known as the "Gayborhood," the gym was a welcoming place. It was the first time I'd been exposed to all different types of people who openly loved who they pleased. Feeling the warmth and acceptance around me gave me the confidence to say, "I'm queer and I love it!"

I eventually met my now-husband at a video shoot for a fitness program I had created, and about four years ago he introduced me to Life Time.



First day working for Life Time in April 2017.

Now, I work at Life Time as a studio manager and group fitness performer. I'm also an Inclusion Council club ambassador and hope to help make a change, engage our communities, and make Life Time an inclusive place where everyone can thrive. It means so much to me, not only as a queer Black man, but as a member of a community of passionate people who want to be their best selves.

Having the opportunity to inspire others and make fitness a joyful experience is what I look forward to every day. Although I still struggle with body dysmorphia, sharing my story with others and working through common challenges together makes everything feel a bit easier. I believe we're all here for a purpose, and when I put on my mic and lead a class, I'm living mine out in real time. 🎧

Ze's Top 3 Success Strategies

1

WHEN YOU WANT TO GIVE UP, DON'T.

This is when you need to push yourself as hard as you did at the beginning, Ze' advises. This applies to working out (don't injure yourself, of course!) as well as other challenges.

2

LIVE IN THE SMALL PROGRESS.

Ze's wellness- and life-coaching philosophy is all about focusing on the small, incremental progress you make toward meeting your goals. You can achieve so much when you take one step at a time and celebrate your growth along the way.

3

FIND YOUR PEOPLE.

When you connect with the right people at the right time, it can change your journey in fitness and in life, he notes. Take chances to make it happen — Ze' found his first, and arguably most impactful, group fitness event on social media.



TELL US YOUR STORY!

Have a transformational healthy-living tale of your own? Share it with us at ELmag.com/myturnaround.

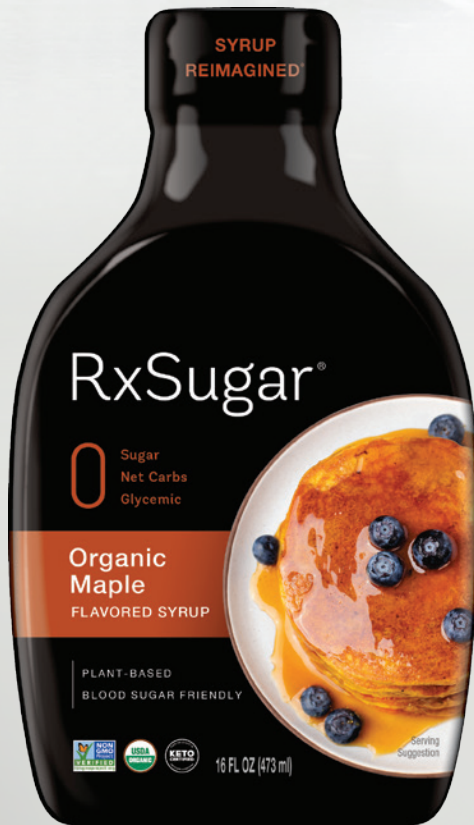
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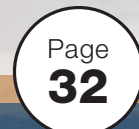
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Real Fitness



Metabolism is all of the complex biochemical processes that create cellular energy in order for your body to survive.”

— Mike T. Nelson, PhD



Find out how fitness practices can support your metabolic function — no hacking required.

3, 2, 1, Go!

Supercharge your strength, power, and overall resilience with this eight-week glute-and-hamstring program.

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

Want to sprint faster? Jump higher? Avoid back and knee pain? With a strong set of glutes and hamstrings behind you, you can achieve all of this and more.

Simply running or squatting once a week isn't enough to build or maintain a powerful lower body, but celebrating your rear end through exercise doesn't have to be a 24/7 endeavor either, explains Anna Taylor, NASM, USAW, Alpha, a Life Time personal trainer and small-group training coach. Twice-weekly glute-and-hamstring strength sessions — performed consistently with progressively heavier weights — can do the trick.

About two hours of targeted time each week can help increase strength and power, improve posture, and

prevent injury and pain (particularly in the lower back and knees), says Taylor, who designed and is pictured demonstrating the following eight-week program.

“Glutes and hamstrings are your ‘Go!’ muscles,” she says. “They generate power and help you move with speed and control.”

Glute-and-hamstring training has played a major role in Taylor's personal fitness journey, which has included postnatal recovery, improvements in knee and back pain, and better overall athletic performance.

“I love crushing some heavy-weighted leg exercises: There is something about lifting heavy weights in a glute session that feels amazing,” she notes. “These are the biggest and strongest muscles in the body — why not train them correctly?”

THE PROGRAM

The following eight-week program consists of two lower-body-focused strength workouts per week. For beginner or returning exercisers, these might make up their total strength-training routine initially. On your nonlifting days, choose an active-recovery activity that you enjoy: Walking, dance, and yoga are great choices.

More experienced lifters can incorporate these two workouts into their existing training routines. To complete a full-body split program, Taylor suggests, offset these lower-body strength days with two weekly upper-body strength days.

If you also enjoy another lower-body-focused activity, such as running or cycling, schedule these workouts on off days and make sure to include at least one active-recovery day per week.

The exercises will stay the same for all eight weeks, giving you an opportunity to refine your form and improve your body mechanics. What will change each week is the number of sets and reps and, with these, how much weight you use.

As a general rule, the more reps you perform, the lighter your weight will be. And vice versa: On lower-rep weeks, you'll want to increase the weight.

See page 29 for the full schedule.

INSTRUCTIONS

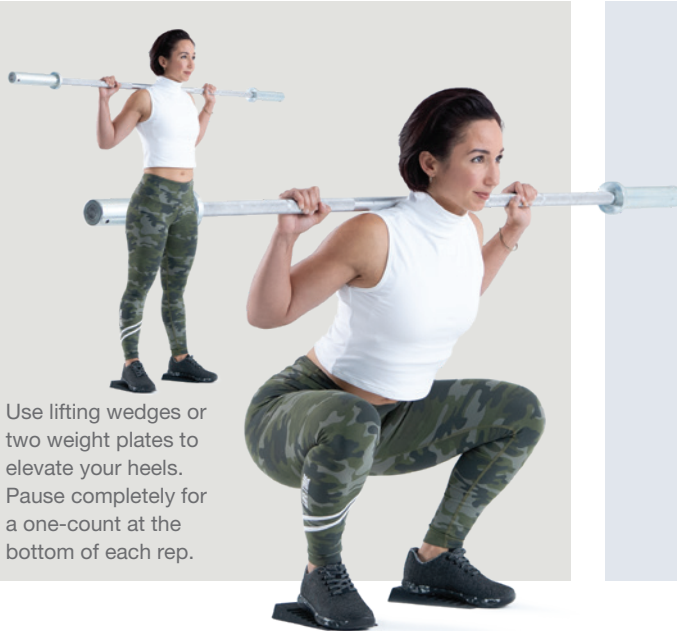
Begin each workout with a dynamic warm-up. (Find our favorite warm-up routine at ELmag.com/perfectwarmup.)

Perform A, B, and D exercises as straight sets, completing all sets and reps for each exercise before moving on to the next. Perform C1 and C2 exercises as supersets, alternating between the two moves for each set.

Rest as needed between sets; one to two minutes will likely be sufficient, but this is a good opportunity to listen to your body.

Day 1 Exercises

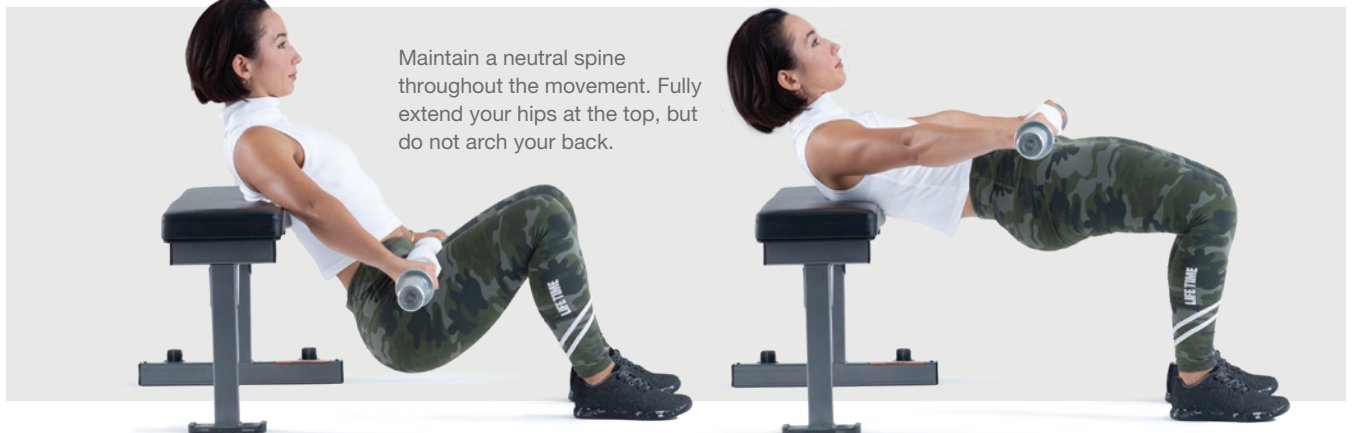
A: Heels-Elevated Pause Squat



B: Single-Leg (SL) Bulgarian Deadlift



C1: Barbell Hip Thrust



C2: Seated Banded Hip Abduction



D: Frog Bridge



Day 2 Exercises

A: Romanian Deadlift



B: Front-Foot-Elevated Split Squat



C1: Hack Squat With Back on Foam Roller



C2: Heavy Kettlebell Swing



D: Standing Banded Hip External Rotation



Day 1

	Exercise	Week							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A	Heels-Elevated Pause Squat	3 x 12	4 x 12	3 x 10	4 x 10	3 x 8	4 x 8	3 x 6	4 x 6
B	SL Bulgarian Deadlift	2 x 12/ side	2 x 12/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 8/ side	2 x 8/ side	2 x 6/ side	2 x 6/ side
C1	Barbell Hip Thrust	3 x 12	4 x 12	3 x 10	4 x 10	3 x 8	4 x 8	3 x 6	4 x 6
C2	Seated Banded Hip Abduction	3 x 12-20	4 x 12-20	3 x 12-20	4 x 12-20	3 x 12-20	4 x 12-20	3 x 12-20	4 x 12-20
D	Frog Bridge	2 x 30	2 x 30	2 x 30	2 x 30	2 x 30	2 x 30	2 x 30	2 x 30

Day 2

	Exercise	Week							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
A	Romanian Deadlift	3 x 12	4 x 12	3 x 10	4 x 10	3 x 8	4 x 8	3 x 6	4 x 6
B	Front-Foot-Elevated Split Squat	2 x 12/ side	2 x 12/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 8/ side	2 x 8/ side	2 x 6/ side	2 x 6/ side
C1	Hack Squat With Back on Foam Roller	2 x 15-20	3 x 10-12	2 x 15-20	3 x 10-12	2 x 15-20	3 x 10-12	2 x 15-20	3 x 10-12
C2	Heavy Kettlebell Swing	2 x 8-15	3 x 8-12	2 x 8-15	3 x 8-12	2 x 8-15	3 x 8-12	2 x 8-15	3 x 8-12
D	Standing Banded Hip External Rotation	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side	2 x 10/ side



LEARN MORE

For detailed exercise instructions and demos of all the moves, visit ELmag.com/glutehamstringworkout.

HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR WEIGHTS

When selecting weights, go with something that's challenging — but not impossible — to lift with good form for the prescribed number of reps. If an exercise is new to you, start conservatively. For the first week, choose weights that you can handle easily. Then, add weight based on your experience in previous workouts and to accommodate the decreasing number of reps every two weeks.

Let's take Day 1, A as an example: Perhaps in Week 1 you performed the Heels-Elevated Pause Squat with relative ease and great form using 95 pounds. In Week 2, you can try adding 10 pounds; this and performing four instead of three sets will increase the overall challenge.

Then, in Week 3, when the total number of reps decreases, you might try adding another 10 pounds (or more) to make the lower reps more challenging. In Week 4, you might keep the weight the same as the prior week, because you'll be doing an extra set. Or you might feel really strong and increase the weight incrementally as you work through the sets.

As you can tell from this example, weight selection requires listening to your body; terms like "heavy," "medium," and "light" are relative to your level of strength. Focus on form and heed your body's wisdom along with the following basic guidelines:

- Choose a heavy weight for rep counts fewer than eight.
- Choose a medium weight for rep counts of eight to 12.
- Choose a light weight (or use your body weight) for rep counts of 15 or more. 🎯

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The Barbell Good Morning

This lower-body pulling exercise targets the core and posterior chain.

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

The good morning is a powerful hip-hinge exercise that builds strength in the legs, core, and back — especially in the hamstrings and spinal erectors.

The move typically calls for resting a barbell across your upper back, leaning forward until your torso is parallel to the floor, and then driving your hips forward to return to standing. But even though the good morning looks like an easy move — bend over and stand up again — it's easy to mess up.

Here are several common pitfalls and some ways to avoid them:

- **Poor hinge pattern:** Instead of “head down,” think “butt back.”
- **Incorrect barbell positioning:** Place the weight on the shelf formed by the muscles of your upper back, not on your neck.
- **Awkward spinal position:** Brace your core and move with a neutral spine, avoiding rounding or arching.
- **Inappropriate loading:** Don't expect to perform a good morning with the same weight you would choose for a deadlift or squat.

Above all, focus on form. Start by practicing the movement with a

Make sure the weight sits on your upper back, not on your neck.

Focus on pushing your butt back and hinging at the hips rather than bending forward at the waist.

lightweight PVC pipe or broomstick.

And consider variations that boast similar benefits to the barbell version but may be better suited to your body, such as replacing the barbell with dumbbells, a resistance band, or a sandbag.

Maintain a neutral neck position and a forward gaze.

Brace your core and avoid rounding your back.

Work within your range of motion and lower your upper body only as far as you can control with good form.

You may also consider supporting the weight in positions that are more body friendly for you — over your shoulders, for instance, or in a bear-hug position against your chest.

Follow these tips to perform a great-for-you good morning.

INSTRUCTIONS

1

With your feet about hip width apart, position a barbell on your upper traps, just below the bony part of the back of your neck. Engage your shoulder blades and brace your core.

2

Without rounding your spine, hinge your hips backward, keeping the bar tight against your traps.

3

When you reach the end of your range of motion — typically indicated by tension in the hamstrings — reverse the movement and stand back up.

+

TRY THESE VARIATIONS

For five good-morning alternatives, visit ELmag.com/barbellvariations.

MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, is an *Experience Life* senior editor.

Move for Your Metabolism

Three fitness practices that can support your metabolic function — no hacking required.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

It's a common assumption that optimal metabolic function is synonymous with being thin. Those blessed with a "good" metabolism, the theory goes, can eat whatever they want and never worry about their weight. A "bad" metabolism must be hacked and overhauled in order to unlock fat burning and weight loss.

But metabolism affects far more than the number on the scale. "Metabolism is all of the complex biochemical processes that create cellular energy in order for your body to survive," says exercise physiologist Mike T. Nelson, PhD, a researcher and fitness and nutrition educator.

In other words, metabolism is the body's ability to take in fuel and process it to support life.

The measurement of metabolism is commonly broken down into two components: resting metabolic rate (RMR) and total daily energy

expenditure (TDEE). Of the many factors that influence your RMR, or calories burned while at rest, the most influential are your body mass and composition. Simply put, the bigger you are, the more energy is required to keep you alive and breathing. Your RMR accounts for 60 to 75 percent of calorie-burning processes.

Your TDEE includes the energy burned to do everything beyond staying alive, such as doing household chores, working on a puzzle, taking your dog for a walk, playing with your kids, doing a workout, and even fidgeting.

A 2021 study in the journal *Science* shed new light on metabolic function, particularly how metabolism changes as we age. Despite popular belief, our metabolism doesn't suddenly tank when we turn 30, causing weight gain (or weight-loss resistance) or other symptoms of a suboptimal metabolism: sluggishness, body-temperature

dysregulation (always feeling hot or cold), joint pain, digestive issues, and mood disorders.

On average, the study showed, metabolism remains steady through adulthood, until about age 60, when it begins to dip each year — but only slightly. (Turn to page 12 to learn more about how and when metabolism changes with age.)

That said, there is tremendous individual variation that can't be accounted for in large-scale studies: "Two people with identical body masses could have vastly different metabolic rates," explains Nelson.

For most people, trying to make sense of their metabolism and how it compares to others' likely won't lead to lasting positive change. Neither will taking extreme measures, such as cutting calories, overexercising, or using supplements that make empty promises of stimulating metabolism.

Focusing on holistic lifestyle improvements can be a more effective — and sustainable — way to support your unique metabolic circumstances.

When it comes to fitness, specifically, there are three ways you can support your metabolism. You'll notice that they line up neatly with general recommendations that promote overall health — which brings us to an important reminder: "There are thousands of processes that can really impact how you feel every day," says Samantha McKinney, RD, a Life Time dietitian and master trainer. "How your body burns calories is just one of the many barometers of health."





Up Your NEAT

“The biggest factor you can change when it comes to metabolism is increasing your NEAT (nonexercise activity thermogenesis) — all the movements you do as part of your everyday life,” says Nelson.

It may sound too simple to be effective, but little things like walking, bending over to retrieve things, and fidgeting all add up.

Research suggests that those people we think are genetically blessed with a fast metabolism may in fact be genetically driven to move more, and recent studies on animals have identified areas of the brain that regulate NEAT.

“Some people may not be genetically driven to move, but we can teach that,” Nelson notes. Tracking steps is one way to build a habit that improves NEAT. “It’s not perfect, but it’s something you can modify and you have control over,” he adds.



LEARN MORE

Although regular exercise is important for metabolism, other factors, such as nutrition and recovery, play critical roles. Learn more at ELmag.com/metabolism.

Strength Train Consistently

The metabolic effect of individual workouts is “not very impressive,” Nelson says. “What matters more is looking at adaptations you get from exercise.” And nothing beats strength training when it comes to driving adaptation.

Muscle burns more calories than fat does, so simply having a more muscular physique can boost metabolism. The difference isn’t huge, though: A pound of muscle burns six calories a day, while a pound of fat burns about two calories a day.

The more convincing reason to emphasize resistance training is that it helps maintain strength and prevent muscle loss, known as sarcopenia, which is especially common as we age.

As people get older, they tend to think their metabolism has slowed on its own. But, in reality, their muscle mass and NEAT have decreased, which could be the culprit. (For more on the benefits of strength training as you age, see ELmag.com/fitforlife.)

Vary Your Intensity

Exercise can provide short-term metabolic boosts, thanks to a phenomenon commonly known as the afterburn effect or excess postexercise oxygen consumption (EPOC). In layperson’s terms, EPOC is the body’s fat-burning response to exercise, which can continue for several hours after a workout is completed.

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) typically delivers a greater EPOC effect than steady-state forms of cardio and strength training, but McKinney and Nelson warn against driving yourself into the ground while chasing an EPOC burn. Very-high-intensity work isn’t appropriate for folks dealing with adrenal issues, extreme fatigue, or sluggishness; moreover, the short-term metabolic effect is negligible in the grand scheme.

Rather, Nelson advises incorporating higher-intensity work into a consistent routine that prioritizes NEAT and strength training. 🏃

NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI is a writer and personal trainer in River Forest, Ill.



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On Pursuing a Look

Our fitness editor reflects on setting aesthetic goals without compromising well-being.

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

Over more than 20 years, *Experience Life* has archived a treasure trove of information about exercise — all designed, as we state in “The Real-Fitness Manifesto” (ELmag.com/realfitness), “to empower you to build the kind of program that moves you toward your healthiest, happiest, most satisfying fit life.”

Typically, our approach to fitness does *not* include aesthetics. We don’t feature workouts that promise to change how you look, and there are a number of reasons for this philosophy:

- Despite widespread (and erroneous) messaging, what someone looks like is not an accurate representation of their health, or their value as a person.
- It’s easy for aesthetics-based goal-setting to prioritize one look, boxing out preferences that don’t fall within its narrow scope.
- Trendy ideals can be unattainable.

That said, aesthetic change is a real goal for many of you — and for me, too.

In my years as *EL*’s fitness editor, I’ve given a lot of thought to aesthetics-based goal-setting and how it fits in with the magazine’s broader philosophy, if it fits at all. Is the body’s physical response to exercise simply a side effect of training? Are aesthetics tangential to other benefits? Is it a lucky break if the result of your workouts squares with your idea of what looks good?

The truth is, exercise is a powerful tool for shaping and reshaping the body. Strength training, in particular, makes it possible to change how you look, sometimes significantly.

Like sculptors sitting in front of a block of marble, we have some control



over the outcome. And, like sculptors, we would do well to be careful, to make intentional choices so that one overzealous strike doesn’t sacrifice the larger work of art that is the human body. (*Every human body.*)

To this end, I’ve come up with a sort of checklist for myself. This set of questions gives me an opportunity to assess my goals and keep my greater well-being in sight.

Like sculptors sitting in front of a block of marble, we have some control over the outcome.

If, like me, you’re navigating aesthetic goal-setting in this world that is dead set on imposing trends and ideals on our bodies, you may find it helpful, too. Take what resonates, make it your own, and leave what isn’t relatable.

- Am I pursuing this change because I feel pressured by some external force?
- Am I pursuing this change out of hatred of or disgust with a part or all of my body?
- Does pursuing this change jeopardize my health in any way?
- What is the cost (physical, mental, social, financial) of pursuing this change? Is success worth it?
- How would I feel if the goal I set turned out to be unattainable?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. But the

answers do help me keep my head on straight.

For the sake of transparency, I’ll share: My goal the last couple of years has been to grow the size of my glutes and hamstrings. I could list many reasons — strength in these areas is good for my health, good for athletic performance, good for everyday life.

The reality is that I saw a bodybuilder on Instagram with a very developed posterior. I thought it looked amazing and told my coach I was curious to see how my body would respond to targeted hypertrophy training.

More recently, I had a similar moment on seeing an actress’s anterior deltoids: Her shoulders looked like beautiful boulders, and I once again wondered, *Could I grow those?*

In both cases, I was drawn to the goals by admiration and curiosity. In both cases, I wasn’t trying to erase a body I hated, and I didn’t feel emotionally attached to a particular outcome.

In both cases, I worked with my coach to make sure the rest of my programming worked my full body, ensuring some balance as I put more energy toward specific muscle groups.

And in both cases, I’ve been fascinated by, and happy with, my results. (It doesn’t matter to me if anyone else cares, approves, or even notices.)

Maybe you want a bigger *derrière* or boulder shoulders. Maybe you want six-pack abs or a thick keg of a torso. A body of steel or a softly padded frame. Or another look altogether. Whatever your desired outcome, I hope you can find a way to make it truly yours, to align its pursuit with your own healthy-life vision — however that may look.



MAGGIE FAZELI FARD, RKC, MFT-1, ALPHA, is an *Experience Life* senior editor.

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Real Food



What's for breakfast?
Pancakes with a healthy twist! Reboot your flapjacks with add-ins like mashed bananas, sweet potatoes, shredded carrots, protein powder, and more.

Page
46

Give our simple, nutritious recipes a try and start your days off right.

What's Your Unique Carb Tolerance?

How you respond to carbohydrates depends on your genetics, your microbiome, and more.

BY LAINE BERGESON BECCO, FMCHC



Low-carb diets have become popular in recent years — and if you’ve tried one (or wanted to try one), there’s no shortage of places to turn to for advice. Whether on health blogs, in books, or in magazine articles, recommendations abound on “good” and “bad” carbs, how many carbs to eat, and whether or not to eat carbs at all.

Indeed, paying attention to the type and amount of carbohydrates you consume can have health benefits. Low-carb protocols such as the ketogenic diet have caught on, in part, because research shows they may help improve blood-sugar balance, support optimal hormone function, protect against cardiovascular disease and cognitive dysfunction, guard against other chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes and cancer, and support healthy weight loss.

But one of the most useful ways to think about carbohydrates is one of the least talked about: how your body responds to them. Most articles give one-size-fits-all recommendations for carb consumption, but the body’s

response to these nutrients is highly individualized, based on genetics, microbiome, adrenal health, and more.

“There’s a lot of genetic variation in how much certain carbohydrates raise insulin,” says functional-medicine and



Your unique genetics and unique microbiome are the biggest factors in how you convert food to fuel and keep blood sugar and insulin steady.”

integrative practitioner Jill Carnahan, MD, ABIHM. The triggering of excess insulin can be one of the negative consequences of eating too many refined carbohydrates.

“And then there is everything we are finding out about the microbiome,” she continues. “Your unique genetics and unique microbiome are the biggest factors in how you convert food to fuel and


keep blood sugar and insulin steady.”

In other words, you may experience health benefits by paying attention to the type and amount of carbohydrates you consume — but you may gain the *most* benefit by understanding your body’s unique carb needs and tailoring your consumption to match your individual biochemistry.

“Good” Versus “Bad” Carbs

Not all carbohydrates are created equal. No matter how well your body tolerates them, some have more nutritional value than others — think those found in leafy greens compared with those found in candy bars.

So, the first step in taking a smart approach to carbs is to make the distinction between those that support health and those that leave the body in a state of nutritional bankruptcy. Studies show that diets high in refined carbohydrates — such as those found in candy, packaged baked goods, processed snack foods, and sweetened beverages — are linked to inflammation, oxidative stress, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.



On the other hand, diets that are high in nutrient-dense, low-starch, and fiber-rich carbohydrates — such as those found in broccoli, Brussels sprouts, arugula, cabbage, cauliflower, and bok choy — have been linked to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes. Most experts encourage people to eat these vegetables freely. And, generally, the more the better.

The wrinkle comes when we're talking about healthy carbohydrates like sweet potatoes and brown rice. Yes, they contain phytonutrients and fiber, but they also feature more starch than their aforementioned cruciferous cousins — and hence a greater ability to destabilize blood sugar. It's this more pronounced effect on blood sugar and insulin that can make it worth noticing how you feel when you consume these foods.



The fad right now is low carb. But some people need more healthy, whole-food carbs. The 'right' amount of carbohydrates depends on the person."

Because blood-sugar and insulin imbalances are believed to be at the root of the health problems associated with the overconsumption of certain carbs — and because higher-starch carbs are more likely to throw a wrench into your blood-sugar balance — you may feel better when you tailor how many of them you eat to your body's unique needs.

"So many of my patients think of insulin resistance and blood-sugar imbalances as something you have to be concerned with only if you have diabetes or polycystic ovarian syndrome," says Brooke Kalanick, ND, MS, coauthor of *Hangry: 5 Simple Steps to Balance Your Hormones and Restore Your Joy*. "But when we stabilize blood sugar, we have more energy and fewer cravings, and we feel better."

Some people may discover that eating fewer of these types of higher-starch carbs will improve their blood-sugar and overall hormone balance. Yet others may find they'll benefit by eating a few more of them. Our responses are individual.

"The fad right now is low carb," says Carnahan. "But some people need more healthy, whole-food carbs. The 'right' amount of carbohydrates depends on the person."





How to Find Your Carb Tolerance

Kalanick calls the body's individual response to carbohydrates your "unique carb tolerance." You can zero in on it with some easy, at-home experimentation. These are three approaches to try.

TAKE

1

• **PICK ONE HIGHER-STARCH** carbohydrate food — perhaps sweet potatoes, legumes, or a grain like brown rice — and eat a half-cup serving of it

with a dinner that also includes a healthy protein, a healthy fat, and a good source of fiber. Note the amounts of healthy fat, protein, and fiber you eat at this meal.

• **PAY ATTENTION** to how you feel 30 minutes later. If you feel contentedly full at the half-hour mark with steady energy, no cravings, and clear thinking, then a half-cup is likely a good amount of this high-starch carbohydrate for you, in combination with the other macronutrients.

If, however, your brain is feeling foggy and you're ready for a nap after 30 minutes, or if you're craving sugar or caffeine despite still feeling full, it can be a sign that a half-cup of this type of carbohydrate is too much for your body.

• **TEST THIS AGAIN** by repeating the same meal the next day at roughly the same time of day. Eat the same amounts and types of healthy protein, healthy fat, and healthy fiber that you ate the day before, but reduce the amount of the same high-starch carbohydrate to one-third cup.

If you get the same foggy feeling or sugar or caffeine craving, repeat this process at successive dinners, each time reducing the amount of carbohydrates by a small amount — one bite or two — until you find the amount of carbohydrates that works for you. Note that various carb-containing foods can affect people differently, so you may need to experiment with each different type of higher-starch whole food that you would like to incorporate into your everyday eating.



TAKE

2

• **RETURN TO THAT FIRST MEAL** and imagine a different postdinner scenario. This time, you eat your initial meal (with a half-cup of carbs) and feel great after 30 minutes, but then you feel insatiably hungry, cranky, or lightheaded one or two hours after eating. Like feeling crummy at the 30-minute mark, this can signal that this type and amount of carbs isn't ideal for you.

• **IF YOU FEEL SYMPTOMS** at the two-hour mark, repeat the meal the following night, keeping the amount of carbs the same but slightly increasing the amounts of fiber and protein on your plate. If that doesn't help, try again the next night with the same amount of carbs, slightly more fiber and protein (as on night two), and this time around, slightly more healthy fat.

• **IF ADDING EXTRA FIBER**, protein, and healthy fat to your plate doesn't erase your symptoms at the two-hour mark, try a fourth meal with the same foods in the same amounts as your third meal, but this time increase the amount of carbohydrates on your plate by two bites. This advice might seem counterintuitive, but this pattern of symptoms can indicate low cortisol and reactive hypoglycemia, notes Kalanick; it can be soothed by eating a few more carbohydrates.

TAKE

3

• **THERE'S ONE FINAL SCENARIO** that might happen after your first test meal (the one with a half-cup of higher-starch, whole-food carbs). In this instance, you eat your meal and feel tired, cranky, and awash in sugar and caffeine cravings immediately after eating.

If this happens, cut the amount of that particular carb by half at your next meal. If that doesn't help, repeat the meal again on the third night and keep the amount of carbohydrates the same but increase the amount of fiber.





The process of tracking symptoms over the course of several meals may feel complicated and confusing, or you might feel like your pattern of symptoms is sending you mixed messages. If this is the case, Kalanick suggests tracking your blood sugar with a glucometer, a small device you can use at home to measure the amount of sugar in your blood. Glucometers are inexpensive and widely available at drugstores and online.

It's important to remember, however, that any type of carb tracking is meant to be temporary. Once you've done the experiment (or used the glucometer) and have more detailed information about your body's response to carbohydrates, Kalanick recommends letting your body lead the way.

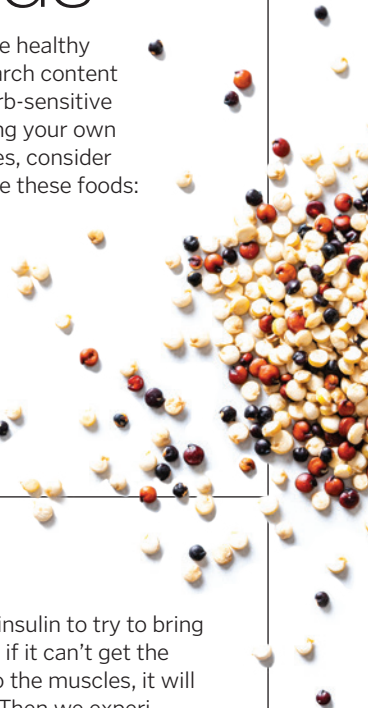
The information you glean from the experiment makes an excellent starting place for tailoring your carb intake, but the most important step going forward is to listen closely to your body. "Sticking to a macro plan despite your symptoms telling you that your hormones hate it can be a real disaster," she says. "What works better in the long term is getting feedback from how you feel." 🍌

LAINE BERGESON BECCO, FMCHC, is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

High-Carb Whole Foods

The foods listed below are healthy whole foods, but their starch content may cause trouble for carb-sensitive bodies. If you're measuring your own response to carbohydrates, consider testing after you consume these foods:

- Brown rice
- Oats
- Quinoa
- Sweet potatoes
- Beets
- Corn
- Lentils
- Bananas



The Insulin Factor

Despite their reputation — and the fact that some people feel terrible after eating them — carbohydrates are inherently neutral. They're just a macronutrient that the body uses as fuel.

Trouble arises, explains Cliff Edberg, RD, master trainer at Life Time, when the body is unable to turn carbs into fuel; this can trigger problems with the hormone insulin.

The body uses insulin to digest carbs. "It works as a lock-and-key mechanism at the cellular level," he explains. When we consume carbohydrates, blood sugar goes up. In response, the body sends out some "keys" in the form of insulin to unlock them.

When things are working well, says Edberg, these keys unlock the door that allows the carbs to go into the muscles as fuel. But when the body is malnourished, stressed, or underslept, those keys don't work. The body keeps

sending out more insulin to try to bring blood sugar down; if it can't get the carbohydrates into the muscles, it will store them as fat. Then we experience the uncomfortable side effects of elevated blood sugar, including energy swings, mood dips, and cravings.

Still, Edberg believes our response to carbs can be improved — it's a question of restoring the body to balance.

"Carbs are wildly beneficial for those who can handle and metabolize them well," he says. "Those who don't can unlock the opportunity to do so. We just need to manage some things. We need to replenish your nutrition. We need to get you some sleep. We need to get you active. We need to get you hydrated. We need to get you to probably put on some muscle mass to have more places to put carbohydrates.

"You only can store so much carbohydrate on the human body. It's managing that balance."

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Letting Go of Diet Culture

Our society's obsession with dieting can compromise the health-and-wellness efforts that truly move the needle. Our experts share tips to help resist the messaging.

BY **JILL METZLER PATTON**

January 1 shimmers on the calendar's horizon like a mirage in the desert. The mythical fresh start. The day we vow — once again — to rein in our appetites and our impulses and go on another diet.

Many of us can't resist this siren call, even if we understand that diets are destined to fail and that thinness does not determine health. Yo-yo dieting has been correlated, in numerous studies, with a host of concerns — including disordered eating, heart disease, insulin resistance, and immune dysfunction.

Other research has found that up to 30 percent of people who are medically classified as “obese” are metabolically healthy.

Yet the pressure to look a certain way persists, especially via the norms and expectations of diet culture — a belief system that prizes thinness and aesthetic appearance, often at the expense of true physical and emotional well-being. It's hard to feel good in your body if you've consistently been made to feel like it's the wrong size or shape or doesn't reflect the images featured across the media we see every day.

And it's hard to feel at peace with your food choices in a culture that frequently encourages restriction in the name of achieving the ideal body.

So how can we resist a diet culture so pervasive that we often don't even recognize we're caught up in it? How can we begin to see the full spectrum of factors that truly contribute to health and well-being? And how can we shift our relationship with food away from guilt and “shoulds” to one that is more intentional and joyful?

This advice on protective measures, mindsets, and practices offers a place to start.

Protective Mindset Measures

EXAMINE YOUR OWN BIASES

Messages we receive as children about weight, food, and bodies become ingrained in our thinking, says certified diabetes care and education specialist Megrette Fletcher, MEd, RDN, CDCES, cofounder of the Center for Mindful Eating. If we've been told that our shape or size is not adequate, and that messaging is repeated throughout our lives, we're vulnerable to equating body size — our own or others' — with value and even moral virtue.

There's often a circular aspect to weight bias and vulnerability to diet messaging, adds psychologist and eating-disorder specialist Rachel Millner, PsyD, a certified Body Trust provider. "Many of us have our own internalized weight stigma because of the culture that we swim in. And then struggling with feelings about our body makes us more susceptible to the messages and the culture."

CLARIFY YOUR BELIEFS AND VALUES

Diet culture feeds on our insecurities. "It's saying, 'Yes, actually, you are inadequate — but if you lost five pounds, or if you ate this shake, then you'd be complete,'" says Fletcher.

"Do we actually believe what the culture tells us? Is that really what most aligns with our truth?" asks Millner. "If we come back to our center, most of us can acknowledge that there's pain and suffering when we're in a constant dieting cycle. It doesn't feel good, and it doesn't feel in line with what we believe in."

PRACTICE MINDFUL EATING

"We see a lot of negatives with dieting," says Fletcher, "but eating in a more intentional way — where we're not trying to lose weight, we're just trying to be in the present moment — improves our relationship with food."

When you sit down to a meal, notice the space around you and the colors and textures of the food in front of you. As you eat, pay attention to the experience of tasting, chewing, and swallowing. "You're trying to understand your

direct experience," she explains. "You're developing awareness, compassion, and curiosity."

BE GENTLE WITH BIG EMOTIONS

Mindfully sitting with your feelings can help you break out of the all-good/all-bad thinking that permeates diet culture, says Jen Elmquist, MA, LMFT, director of Life Time Mind. "One way to break black-and-white thinking is with compassion."

If you're "hangry," for example, rather than pushing away that sensation, you can curiously investigate what's behind it. There may be a fear of overeating or anxiety about how much longer it will be before a meal is available.

From a compassionate place, you can help yourself navigate that emotion without judging it. "It's being able to sit and actually see the gray in that experience," she says.

ADJUST YOUR SOCIAL-MEDIA FEEDS

"I don't think we've ever been fed more images of aspiration than in our culture right now," says Elmquist. "Every average 'influencer' has become aspirational to someone who doesn't feel like they have what that person has."

Yet social media is also home to many fat-acceptance and body-neutrality influencers and groups. "Having these communities is one of the most protective factors," says Millner. "Having a space where we're going to hear positive messages about bodies and size diversity and eating — that can really help us to push back against the culture."

SET BOUNDARIES

It's OK to establish a simple boundary without further explanation, says Millner — especially if you know that some people in your life are likely to repeat the maxims of diet culture. "You can say: 'We are not going to talk about food and body,' or 'I don't want to hear any diet talk,'" she advises.

When people step over that boundary (and they will), Millner offers options for resetting it. "If

you think it was truly an accident, you could say, 'Hey, you might have forgotten, but we had agreed we're not going to do diet talk.' And if you think they're intentionally overstepping the boundary, you might make the decision to shorten your time with them and walk away."

CHANGE YOUR OUTGOING MESSAGE

Words matter. As you become more aware of your biases and more mindful of your experiences of eating and being present in your body, do your part to change the narrative — both your internal dialogue and the conversations you have with others.

When you're enjoying a meal with friends, for example, check your impulse to joke that "the diet starts tomorrow!" or to lament how "bad" you've been lately. Instead, comment on the amazing flavor of the food or on how great it feels to be together.

It will take time and practice to release the grip of diet culture, but every time you create a new message, you build resilience. "Our brain is very receptive to the messages we give it," says Elmquist. "What we tell ourselves repetitively gets grooved into our minds and becomes our belief system. We have to practice a healthy internal dialogue if we want our external experience to change."

GET PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

"If you're obsessed with dieting — if it's something that you feel is such an unresolved problem that you're always searching for the next solution — you may need to get some outside perspective," says Elmquist.

"Anybody who's dieting needs support, really, because ultimately they get to a place where they realize that dieting is harmful. They're caught in this hamster wheel that they want to get out of," says Millner, whose therapy practice emphasizes Health at Every Size principles. "Or that they recognize they've been lied to, and they're going to have a lot of feelings about that." 🍌

JILL METZLER PATTON is a writer and editor in Bloomington, Minn.

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The New Pancake Breakfast

A flavorful, nutritious reboot on this classic morning meal.

BY **ROBIN ASBELL**

A typical plate of syrup-drenched pancakes may seem like a fine recipe for a midday nap. But when you make your own pancakes with whole-food ingredients, a pancake breakfast can be a healthy start to any day of the week.

These recipes lean on nutritious additions — nuts, seeds, protein powder, vegetables — to serve up flapjacks that won't leave you headed for a sugar crash. With a few new recipes, you can easily make your pancakes gluten-free, whole-grain, plant-based, or whatever works for you.

Protein Pancakes

Makes two servings

Prep time: 5 minutes

Cook time: 15 minutes

- ¾ cup gluten-free rolled oats
- ½ tsp. baking powder
- 2 scoops (about 3 tbs.) whey protein powder, any flavor
- 4 large egg whites
- 3 tbs. mashed banana
- Avocado oil for the griddle

In a large bowl, combine the oats, baking powder, and protein powder.

In a medium bowl, whisk the egg whites until frothy, then whisk in the banana. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry mixture and stir to mix well.

Preheat a griddle to 400 degrees F, or put a cast-iron pan on medium heat. When hot, brush with oil and measure ¼-cup portions of batter onto the griddle. If the oats are piled high in the middle, gently pat them down. Cook for about four minutes, until the cakes are covered in bubbles and firm around the edges. Flip and cook about two minutes longer, or until cooked through.

Transfer to a plate and keep warm as you finish the cakes.



TOP WITH
COCONUT BUTTER
AND FRESH
BLUEBERRIES.



**SERVE WITH
SAUTÉED SPINACH,
FRIED EGGS, SLICED
AVOCADO, TAHINI,
AND HOT SAUCE.**

Savory Sweet-Potato Pancakes

Makes four servings

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 20 minutes

- 1 cup whole-wheat pastry flour
- ½ tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- 2 tsp. cinnamon
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- 1 cup mashed sweet potato (or canned sweet potato or pumpkin)
- ½ cup milk or nondairy milk
- 1 tbs. apple-cider vinegar
- 2 large eggs, lightly whisked
- 1 tbs. maple syrup
- 2 tbs. avocado oil, plus more for the griddle

In a large bowl, whisk the flour, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, and salt.

In a medium bowl, combine the sweet potato, milk, and vinegar, and stir well. Let stand for a couple of minutes.

Add the eggs, maple syrup, and oil to the sweet-potato mixture, then pour the wet mixture into the dry ingredients and stir to combine.

Preheat a griddle to 400 degrees F, or put a cast-iron pan on medium heat. When hot, brush with oil and measure ¼-cup portions of batter onto the griddle, leaving 2 inches between them. Cook for about two minutes on the first side, until the cakes are covered in bubbles and firm around the edges. Flip and cook about three minutes longer, or until cooked through.

Transfer to a plate and keep warm as you finish the cakes.



Plant-Power Pancakes

Makes four servings
Prep time: 5 minutes
Cook time: 25 minutes

- 1 cup spelt flour
- ½ cup almond flour
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- 1¼ cups nondairy milk
- 3 tbs. chia seeds
- 1 tsp. apple-cider vinegar
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 2 tbs. pumpkinseeds
- Avocado oil for the griddle

In a large bowl, whisk the flours, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.

In a medium bowl, whisk the milk, chia seeds, and vinegar until combined, and let stand for five minutes to thicken. Stir in the maple syrup and vanilla extract, then stir the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients until combined.

Preheat a griddle to 400 degrees F, or put a cast-iron pan on medium heat. When hot, brush with oil and measure ¼-cup portions of batter onto the griddle, leaving 2 inches between them. Sprinkle a scant teaspoon of pumpkinseeds on each cake as soon as it stops spreading.

Cook for about four minutes, until the cakes are covered in bubbles and firm around the edges. Flip and cook about three minutes longer, or until cooked through.

Transfer to the plate to keep warm as you finish the cakes.



Carrot-Cake Pancakes

Makes five servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 20 minutes

- 2 cups whole-wheat pastry flour
- 1 tsp. cinnamon
- ½ tsp. allspice
- ¼ tsp. nutmeg
- 1 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. sea salt
- 1½ cups plain, full-fat yogurt
- ¾ cup milk or nondairy milk
- 2 large eggs
- 2 tbs. maple syrup
- 2 tbs. avocado oil
- ½ tsp. vanilla extract
- 1½ cups shredded carrot
- Avocado oil for the griddle

In a large bowl, whisk the flour, spices, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. In a medium bowl, whisk the yogurt, milk, eggs, maple syrup, oil, and vanilla extract. Stir the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients until just mixed. Fold in the carrots.

Preheat a griddle to 400 degrees F, or put a cast-iron pan on medium heat. When hot, brush with oil and measure ¼-cup portions of batter onto the griddle. Cook for about four minutes, until the cakes are covered in bubbles and firm around the edges. Flip and cook about three minutes longer, until cooked through.

Transfer to a plate and keep warm as you finish the cakes. 🍴

ROBIN ASBELL is a Minneapolis-based recipe developer and cookbook author.

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Vanilla Extract

Savor the flavor of this ubiquitous baking ingredient with these helpful tips.

BY **KAELYN RILEY**



GO FOR THE REAL STUFF

Vanilla beans are the seed pods of the vanilla orchid, a very delicate plant that must be pollinated by hand and typically blooms only one day per year. This labor-intensive process is one reason pure vanilla extract is often expensive. Imitation vanilla is usually more affordable, but it's made entirely from synthetic ingredients and can't match the complex taste profile of the real thing, which contains hundreds of flavor compounds.



SHOP AND STORE

Those delicate flavor compounds are sensitive to heat and light, so look for brands sold in dark bottles to help protect the flavor. Be sure to check the ingredient list: High-quality extracts are made with just vanilla beans and alcohol; many low-quality brands include sugar, corn syrup, or other additives for taste and appearance. Thanks to its alcohol base, pure vanilla extract will keep practically indefinitely; store it in a cool, dark place.



TRY THE VARIETIES

Eighty percent of the world's vanilla is grown in Madagascar; it's a variety known for its high quality, versatility, and rich flavor. Mexican vanilla is somewhat woody and spicy, while Tahitian vanilla features more floral undertones. Vanilla beans are typically dried and cured in the sun — a process that takes more than a month. Indonesian vanilla beans are dried over fire, which expedites the process and gives the beans a slightly smoky flavor.



ADD A SPLASH

Vanilla's sweet, slightly caramelly notes can help balance warm spices or brighten fruity flavors. Use your vanilla extract to make your own granola (ELmag.com/granola), or mix up a batch of energy bars (ELmag.com/energybars). Thirsty? Add some vanilla to our DIY Chai recipe (ELmag.com/diychai). You can also use a bit of vanilla in some of our pancake recipes (see pages 48 and 49), or in any baked goods, as well as in marinades and even savory sauces.

KAELYN RILEY is an *Experience Life* senior editor.

A 3D anatomical illustration of a human back, showing the spine, ribs, and shoulder blades. The illustration is rendered in a blue, semi-transparent style, revealing the underlying skeletal structure. The word "BACK" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the upper and middle portions of the back.

BACK

A woman with dark hair in a ponytail is shown in profile, performing a yoga pose (Urdhva Dhanurasana or Upward Bow Pose) against a bright blue wall. She is wearing a grey and black patterned athletic top. Her arms are extended upwards, and her back is arched, with her hands reaching towards her feet. The lighting is bright, creating a high-contrast scene.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

ON TRACK

LEARN HOW IMPROVING STRENGTH AND MOBILITY IN YOUR BACK AND SPINE CAN ENHANCE ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE AND QUALITY OF LIFE.

As the literal backbone of the body, the spine is a foundational part of movement: Its overall health affects athletic performance and how you move through daily life. Unfortunately, many people have been led to believe that this central piece of anatomy will inevitably wear out, leaving them with pain, immobility, and no options but surgery.

“Human beings generally don’t pay much attention to their spine until it hurts,” says adaptive yoga teacher Matthew Sanford, author of *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence*. “By that time, it’s not necessarily too late [to fix it], but learning about your body through pain is not the best way to live life.”

There’s a better approach: By caring for your spine today, you may be able to prevent many symptoms commonly associated with aging. And even if you’re already coping with issues such as chronic neck and

back pain, osteoporosis, degenerative-disc disease, scoliosis, or kyphosis, chances are there’s still plenty you can do to ward off further damage and discomfort.

By maintaining mobility of the joints, proper alignment of the vertebrae, and strength in the musculature and connective tissues of your back, you can prevent and rehab many conditions we consider chronic and lifelong.

What’s more, developing a strong, mobile back may help you avoid acute injury in your workouts and daily life anytime you need to twist, lift, or bend.

Our experts break down the spine’s function, common issues that may occur, and strategies that can help keep your spine healthy.

HOW IT ALL STACKS UP

Understanding the spine begins with understanding its complex structure.

It consists of around 24 small, movable vertebrae stacked on top of each other, along with the sacrum and coccyx. (Humans are born with 33 vertebrae; some fuse together as we age.) In between the vertebrae are shock-absorbing discs that prevent the bones from rubbing together. Everything is connected by a series of ligaments and tendons and supported by small muscles.

Together, this structure not only keeps you upright but also plays the all-important role of protecting your spinal cord — a column of nerves that links your brain with the rest of your body. The spine itself is connected to the ribs and pelvis and, therefore, to the arms, the legs, and the head.

“The spinal column is one of the most important aspects of the human kinetic chain. It is paramount in dictating proper musculoskeletal function and general health,” says David Lipetz, MSPT, a physical therapist at LifeClinic Chiropractic and Rehabilitation in Syosset, N.Y.

When one link in this kinetic chain malfunctions, it creates a domino effect on neighboring segments and associated joints.

There are many things that can push this kinetic chain out of whack, including moving too infrequently, exercising with poor form, and suffering an acute injury. Hormonal changes — namely, flagging estrogen and testosterone levels later in life — can also affect spinal health by lowering bone density.

In addition, regularly sitting or standing with poor posture can lead to discomfort throughout the kinetic chain. “If your head is out in front of your torso all day [while you’re] sitting at

a computer or staring at your phone, you’re going to be pulling your whole spine out of alignment,” explains Lynn Shuck, a Minneapolis-based

Eischens-yoga teacher. You may feel the strain in your neck, upper back, lower back, or any combination thereof.

Lifting heavy weights can create problems if you try to recruit your spine instead of your hips, says Eric Goodman, DC, creator of Foundation Training, a program designed to mitigate acute and chronic back pain. (Goodman notes that when performed correctly, moves like deadlifts are actually an excellent option for a healthy back. For tips on form, visit ELmag.com/deadlift.)

Even your mental outlook can affect the health of your spine, especially if you suffer from chronic back pain. Although discomfort often starts from a physical place (such as an acute injury), it typically persists because of your brain.

“We want to see the spine itself as more than just part of the skeleton,” Shuck says, because its health can affect the health of every other part of your body, including the mind.

Although it may seem like there are many factors working against spinal health and resilience, there’s still a lot we can do to turn the tide in our favor. These expert-backed strategies can help you keep your spine healthy for the long haul.

Exercise for strength and mobility.

The incredible structure we know as the spine is capable of more healthy movement patterns than we may think. Regularly moving in these many directions can keep it — and the rest of your body — healthy.

The spine can flex (bend) and extend (straighten) forward and backward, as well as bend to either side, and twist. You can also create space between the vertebrae: Sitting or standing, straighten up through your torso and imagine reaching your tailbone down to the ground while lifting the crown of your head toward the sky. This elongation can create space along the whole spine, Shuck says.

Resistance training that strengthens the muscles and tissues surrounding the spine, along with mobility exercises that integrate the joints and bones, are key as well. “Proper movement and alignment of all the spinal joints sets the foundation for proper neuromuscular communication, allowing the brain and body to work in harmony,” Lipetz says.

Yet it’s not enough to lift weights and practice mobility exercises a few times a week. To keep your spine healthy, it’s important to keep moving.

“Even people who are considered very active sit for long periods at a desk job,” Shuck notes. “Then they go do a heavy workout for an hour, but there’s still 23 hours left in the day. That’s not moving.”

If you work at a desk, stand up every 30 minutes and perform gentle movements: Twist, lean from side to side, bend forward and backward, lift



your arms overhead, and place your arms in a doorway and lean forward to get a chest and shoulder stretch. Or, if you usually sit on the couch to watch TV, try moving to an ottoman.

Better yet, sit on the floor. By sitting without back support on the floor or something closer to it, “what you’ll discover is that you move a little more,” Shuck says. “Each time you shift your legs to the other side,



or cross them differently, or lean onto your hand, you’re putting weight on another joint in another way and you’re using your muscles differently to support your spine.”

On the floor, sit on a pillow or bolster for added support and to help maintain an upright posture.

All those little movements may not seem like much, but they add up.



**IF YOU’RE
EVEN SLIGHTLY
CHRONICALLY
DEHYDRATED, ADDING
A LITER OR TWO OF
WATER A DAY WILL
CHANGE HOW YOU
FEEL EXPONENTIALLY.”**

Hydrate well — and nourish with key nutrients. Keeping an eye on your hydration is a simple way to improve both your spinal health and your overall well-being. “Hydration is one of the cheapest ways people can get themselves feeling better,” Goodman says. “If you’re even slightly chronically dehydrated, adding a liter or two of water a day will change how you feel exponentially.”

Up to 60 percent of the human body consists of water. The amount of water you consume affects everything, including muscles, organs, and tiny cells — as well as the spongy discs that separate the vertebrae.

“Assuming we are well hydrated, our discs will successfully rehydrate themselves at night after performing as a shock absorber and spacer throughout the day,” Lipetz explains. “If we do not have enough water in our body, this can contribute to poorly hydrated discs, leading to a collapse of disc height and creating potential lower back pain and sciatica.”

In addition to staying hydrated throughout the day, eating plenty of whole-food proteins, vegetables, and fruits can help keep the bones in your spine strong as you age.

Many nutrients contribute to bone health, but pay particular attention to calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, and vitamin D. A blood test can tell you where your nutrient levels stand and whether they’re optimal for your age, sex, and activity level. Then you can modify your diet or add supplements, if necessary.

Build awareness. Developing the mind-body connection can be a powerful way to support and improve function in any area of the body. Because of the sensory and neurological functions of the spine, building awareness can be particularly impactful — not just for the back, but for the entire body.

“The spine is the organ of connection: It’s what connects you directly to what’s around you,” Sanford says. You receive sensory information in your brain, which organizes and makes sense of everything, but your spine is the core channel through which this vital information travels. “If it’s coming through the body, it’s coming through the spine.”

Paying attention to our spinal function lowers the risk of developing discomfort throughout the rest of the body, he adds. “Refining and clarifying spinal awareness helps ensure that our life force flows more fluidly and gracefully to the outer edges of our bodies. This can help decrease pain and lessen the impact of injury over time.

“There’s a lot of space that’s worth exploring between being completely oblivious of your spine and having to get back surgery,” Sanford says.

You can also build spinal awareness into your everyday activities by simply pausing from time to time to focus on your posture, Sanford explains. If you’re seated at your desk, think about sitting up straight and tall so you can feel each sit bone connected to your chair and your inner heels connected to the floor. Take a couple of breaths so you feel your rib cage expand.

Or take a moment to lie flat on your back and spread-eagle your arms and legs. Allow your body to relax, and notice what you feel. (If this is tough on your lower back, place a folded blanket or yoga mat in the space between your back and the floor to add support.)

“Usually, we have to work to move against gravity, so sometimes it’s cool to use the support of gravity on your spine,” Sanford says.

What’s more, bolstering the spine has a calming effect on the nervous system, he explains. You likely know the saying, “I’ve got your back”: Simply



YOU DON'T WANT TO SHOOT FROM THE HIP WITH EXERCISES. YOU'RE BASICALLY TRYING TO UNDERSTAND SOMETHING THAT'S REALLY COMPLEX AND OFTEN TAKES A LIFETIME TO MASTER."

placing a hand between someone's shoulder blades can make them feel calm and safe. You can offer yourself the same support with a pillow, bolster, or blanket.

Explore noninvasive

treatments. Consider adding tools like a foam roller or percussion-therapy device to your at-home healthy-spine program. (But be cautious of home spinal-traction devices, which promise to relieve pressure on the spine, says Lipetz. He recommends leaving this treatment modality to a professional.)

Chiropractors and physical therapists are invaluable resources on spine health — before any issues crop up. “Just like you go to your doctor or dentist for checkups, we’re able to detect abnormalities before they become a problem,”

Lipetz says.

A physical therapist or chiropractor can sit down with you to discuss your concerns, perform spinal adjustments or soft-tissue massage, and recommend specific exercises or stretches you can practice at home to prevent problems from cropping up later.

Seek professional support for pain.

Visit a medical professional if you experience sharp pain, new pain, or worsening pain in your back. Brushing it off or trying to fix it yourself may only make the pain worse.

“You don’t want to shoot from the hip with exercises,” Goodman says. “You’re basically trying to understand something that’s really complex and often takes a lifetime to master.” ➔

LAUREN BEDOSKY is a Minnesota-based health and fitness writer.



LEARN MORE

For a Q&A with David Hanscom, MD, on chronic back pain, surgery, and the body’s capacity to heal, visit ELmag.com/lowerbackpain.

6 EXERCISES FOR A HEALTHY SPINE

Regular movement is key for spinal health, but prioritizing specific exercises can help ensure that you do the *right* types of movement. “The best form of exercise is body-weight control and strength,” Eric Goodman, DC, says. “You can move into any other movement or resistance you’d like once you master your own body weight to the best of your ability first.”

He suggests the following exercises to help you control your body so you keep your spine aligned in any range of motion. You can take what you learn from these exercises to make your strength training and cardio workouts safer and more effective.

“If you’re not doing the act of alignment first, you’re likely going to [have to] correct injuries at some point,” he explains. “If you do that alignment from the get-go, you’ll be in a preventive place the entire time you’re getting stronger.”

For all the exercises, practice what Goodman calls “decompression breathing”: With each inhale, breathe deeply into your rib cage to actively lift and widen it in all directions. Visualize your vertebrae extending away from each other as you lengthen your spine. With each exhale, aim to maintain this feeling of vertebral separation.

Consult a physical therapist about targeted treatment if you have moderate back pain that doesn’t improve after two weeks. If you have already been diagnosed with an underlying spine condition, continue working with your healthcare provider before attempting these exercises.

Similarly, if back pain prevents walking or causes pain at night, see a medical professional before doing these exercises.

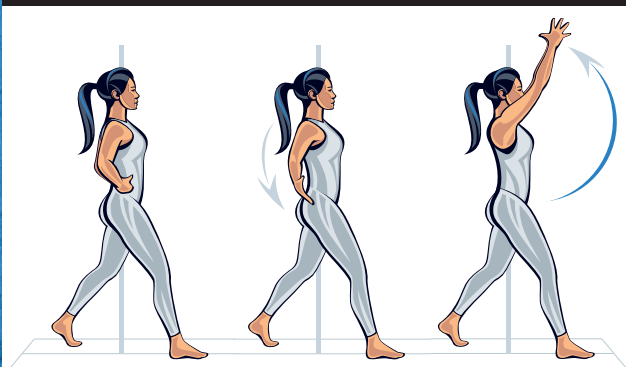


GET THE SPECIFICS

For detailed exercise instructions, visit ELmag.com/backhealth.

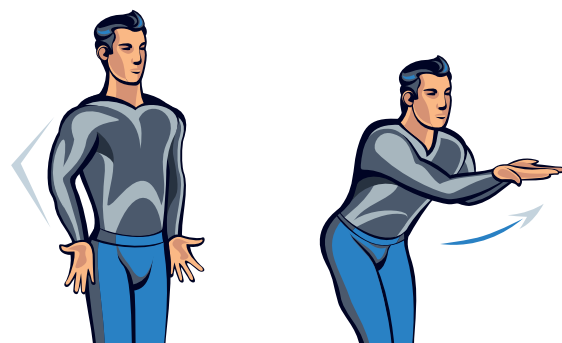


LUNGE DECOMPRESSION



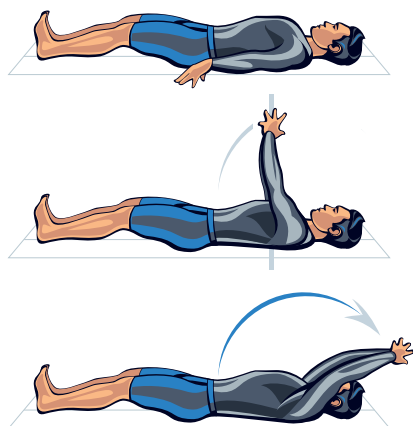
Begin in a split stance with weight even across both feet, the back heel slightly lifted. Engage your core and scoop your arms overhead. Hold the pose for five to 10 deep breaths (about one minute). Switch sides and repeat.

HIP HUGGER TO PLATTER HANDS



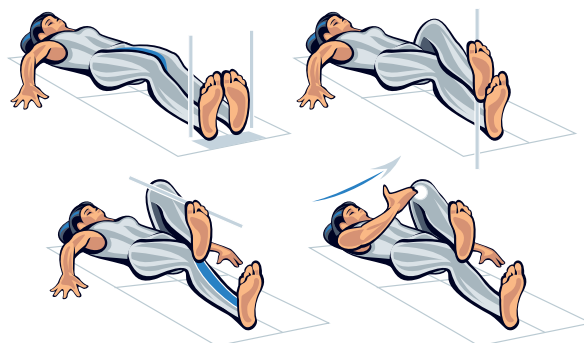
Stand tall. Press the pinkie side of each hand against your legs. Draw your elbows back and hold for five to 10 deep breaths. Then, hinge slightly forward and extend your arms in front of your chest, palms up. Hold for five to 10 breaths.

SUPINE DECOMPRESSION



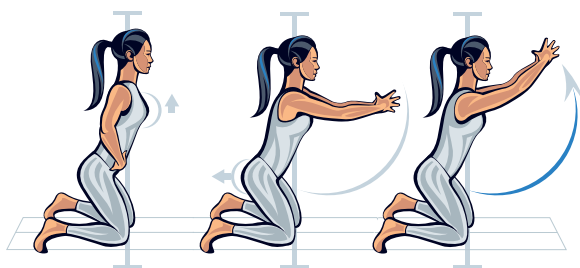
Lie on your back with legs long, feet flexed, and thighs pressing together. Engage your core and scoop your arms overhead until your biceps line up with your cheeks; make sure not to arch your back. Hold for five to 10 breaths.

INTERNAL LEG TRACE



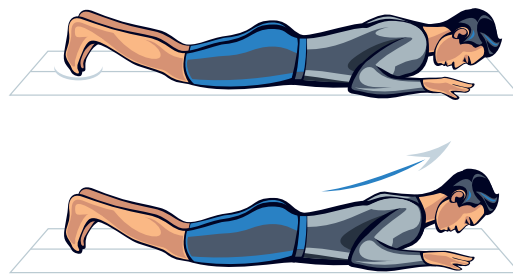
Lie on your back and place one heel on top of your opposite ankle. Trace the top heel up the shin of your bottom leg. Place your opposite hand against the top leg and apply light pressure. Hold for five to 10 breaths. Switch sides and repeat.

KNEELING FOUNDER



Kneel on the ground with your knees hip width apart and toes tucked under. Hinge your hips back and scoop your arms in front of your chest, fingertips touching. Try to push your hips even farther back. With your fingertips still touching, lift your arms higher. Hold for five to 10 breaths.

ANCHORED BACK EXTENSION



Lie face-down. Flex your feet so your toes press into the floor, and rest your hands beside your head. Keeping your neck neutral, lift your head a few inches off the floor. Then lift your hands, wrists, and elbows. Hold for five to 10 breaths.



AUTOIMMUNITY NOW

Why diseases of
the immune system
are on the rise —
especially after
COVID — and how a
functional-medicine
approach can help.

BY **MO PERRY**



ILLUSTRATIONS: ROCCO BAVIERA

Your immune system lives to protect you. Like an elite security detail, it guards your body's perimeters and swiftly deals with troublemakers, such as minor pathogens and cancer cells. It uses a range of tools, including the inflammatory response and specialized immune cells that attack invaders. Once it has vanquished the enemy, the immune system settles back into a state of cool, calm surveillance.

Or at least that's how it's supposed to work.

Sometimes the immune system gets confused and attacks the body it's meant to protect. This is called autoimmunity, or, literally, immunity to self.

Autoimmunity encompasses more than 100 known conditions, including type 1 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, multiple sclerosis, and inflammatory bowel disease. And the number of such diagnoses has continued to rise as healthcare providers have begun to recognize the prevalence of immune dysregulation.

"Twenty-five to 50 million Americans have some kind of disease characterized by dysregulation of the immune system," says Leonard Calabrese, DO, director of the Cleveland Clinic's R. J. Fasenmyer Center for Clinical Immunology. Symptoms can include joint pain, recurring fever, skin problems, fatigue, swollen glands, and gastrointestinal issues.

But diagnosing autoimmune conditions can be tough. There's

typically no single conclusive test, and many conditions mirror each other. A care provider may need to consider symptoms (which often fluctuate), blood markers, and other factors.

According to the Institute for Functional Medicine, latent or pre-autoimmune disease often exists for seven to 14 years before diagnosis.

The Challenge of Autoimmunity

Autoimmunity rates have been rising steadily for decades, and experts suspect that increasing exposure to environmental toxins may be to blame (more on this

later). But the COVID-19

pandemic could be responsible for a massive influx of members to this club that no one wants to join.

The virus that causes COVID was dubbed the "autoimmune virus" in a

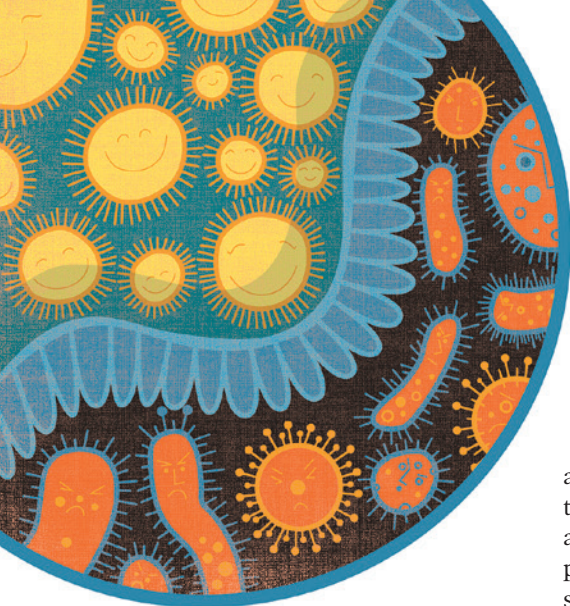
2020 article in *Autoimmunity Reviews*;

the authors cited a strong association between the viral infection and the development of autoimmunity. Research shows that the novel coronavirus may activate preexisting "autoantibodies" — the immune proteins that target a person's own tissues — as well as prompt the body to make new ones.

How can a virus cause the immune system to turn on itself? It apparently has to do with the delicate balance and regulation of this complicated system.

"The immune system doesn't work like a radio with a volume control," explains functional-medicine internist Leo Galland, MD.

How viruses interact with our immune system is at the forefront of understanding autoimmunity."



“It’s more like an orchestra with many different sections that interact with each other. The interactions are dynamic and complex, and the outcome of a novel interaction can be hard to predict.”

Several factors can make us more likely to develop autoimmunity, and genes are one of them. “Some genetic polymorphisms put people more at risk,” says functional-medicine practitioner Keesha Ewers, PhD, ARNP, FNPc, MSN, author of *Solving the Autoimmune Puzzle*. Polymorphisms on the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) genes that code proteins for the adaptive immune system, for example, can create greater susceptibility.

But a genetic proclivity doesn’t guarantee autoimmunity. “Genes are the cards you’re dealt at birth, but it’s how you play your cards that determines how your genes function throughout your life,” explains Calabrese.

Calculating Risk

Autoimmune conditions require five basic ingredients, according to pediatric gastroenterologist Alessio Fasano, MD: genetics, environmental triggers, loss of gut-barrier function, a belligerent immune system, and an imbalanced microbiome (dysbiosis).

For instance, if you have a genetic intolerance to gluten, eat a gluten-heavy diet, and develop a leaky gut, “your immune system is already angry,” says Ewers. A baseline state of chronic inflammation sets the stage

for an environmental trigger, such as a virus or parasite, to activate a dysregulated immune response.

Traditional approaches to treating autoimmunity involve medications that suppress symptoms without addressing root causes, so many people with one autoimmune condition soon develop others. One study found that a single autoimmune diagnosis increases the likelihood of a second (or third) diagnosis by up to 34 percent.

By contrast, addressing the root causes of a dysfunctional immune response makes it less likely that the immune system will expand its attack in other areas of the body, forgoing the need for ever more band-aids that simply suppress symptoms.

Although the presence of autoantibodies is usually a critical indicator in diagnosing autoimmune conditions, not everyone who has detectable autoantibodies has active autoimmune disease. Those with autoantibodies but no autoimmune symptoms are considered to have “pre-autoimmunity.”

Yet because the internal environment is a key influence on autoantibodies’ behavior, certain precautions can enable these people to remain symptom-free. “Some of the most common autoantibodies we produce only create damage when there’s also systemic inflammation,” explains Galland.

The exact provocations for autoimmunity are still poorly understood. Stress, which includes toxic relationships and thought patterns, is a known trigger, says

Ewers. But so are many pathogens, such as the bacteria that cause Lyme disease, and viruses such as Epstein-Barr, herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV), and coronaviruses such as SARS-CoV-2.

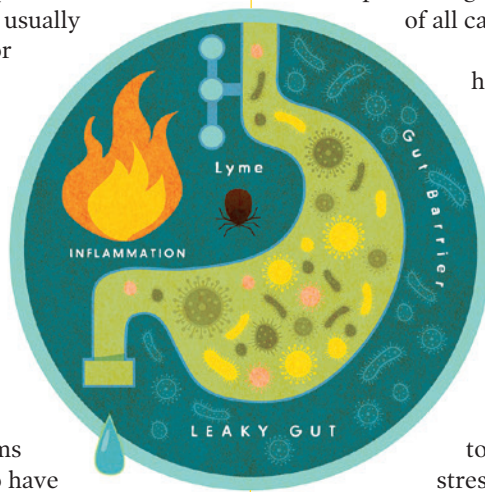
Ewers suspects that environmental toxins such as cigarette smoke, pesticides, allergens, and molds can potentially activate autoimmunity. She also focuses on estrogen-mimicking chemicals, including bisphenol A (BPA), which is found in plastic, canned foods, and personal-care products. These chemicals can disrupt the modulation of inflammatory proteins called cytokines, which may be one reason women appear to be more susceptible than men to autoimmunity, representing nearly 80 percent of all cases.

It sounds like a hodgepodge, but these suspected triggers are more alike than they seem. Calabrese notes that they are all part of the body’s “exposome,” or the sum total of its exposure to environmental stressors.

“The exposome is everything from pollution and chemicals in food and water to how we eat, exercise, sleep, and handle stress,” he explains. Researchers are just starting to understand the exposome’s role in autoimmunity.

The Virus Question

Viruses outnumber everything on the planet. Some we catch, like SARS-CoV-2 or HPV; others have been incorporated into the human genome and bestow benefits such as disease resistance or starch digestion.



As journalist Moises Velasquez-Manoff writes in *An Epidemic of Absence: A New Way of Understanding Allergies and Autoimmune Diseases*, viruses we catch help with training and balancing the adaptive immune system, providing external stimuli that may help prevent autoimmunity.

But viruses have also long been suspected as autoimmune triggers. Epstein-Barr (best known for causing mononucleosis) has been linked to lupus, and influenza can trigger a blood-clotting disorder called autoimmune thrombocytopenia. Chikungunya, a mosquito-borne virus, can cause chronic inflammatory rheumatic diseases.

Now SARS-CoV-2 appears to trigger its own autoimmune cascade, which is revitalizing researchers' urgency to understand the role of viruses in these conditions. "How viruses interact with our immune system is at the forefront of understanding autoimmunity," says Calabrese.

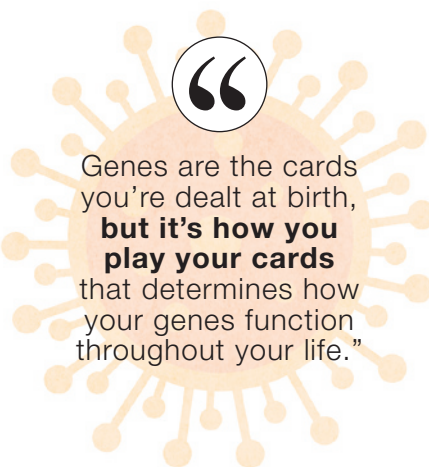
One of the most potent effects of SARS-CoV-2 is on the human immune system. Many COVID victims die not from the virus itself but from an overactive immune response to it, characterized by the "cytokine storm." (Cytokines are inflammatory immune proteins that, in large quantities, can destroy the body's tissues and organs.) And many who survive COVID seem to generate copious amounts of autoantibodies — the proteins that target the body's own tissues.

"The question is, What are those autoantibodies doing?" says Calabrese. "Are they predisposing people to inflammation and autoimmunity? Are they contributing to the pathogenesis of long COVID?"

There are multiple theories on how SARS-CoV-2 may be triggering the autoimmune symptoms (including brain fog, fatigue, headaches, dizziness, joint pain, fever, and mood disorders) that have come to be associated with

long COVID. The first theory is called molecular mimicry, in which viral proteins that resemble proteins in the body spur the creation of antibodies that attack the body's own cells.

Another possibility is that inflammation from the infection primes the immune system to mistake the spilled contents of destroyed cells as foreign



and create autoantibodies against these cellular pieces.

Again, the health of the gut seems to play an important role. "People with COVID-19 have changes in the gut microbiome of a type that fosters inflammatory reactions," says Galland. "The bacteria that provoke more inflammation grow, and anti-inflammatory bacteria are suppressed in the GI tract."

(For more on how mRNA COVID vaccines may resolve some autoimmune symptoms, see "Long-Haul COVID Recovery and Vaccines" on page 12.)

Repairing the Terrain

One of the greatest challenges with autoimmune conditions is that they can affect multiple body systems. A 2020 study in the *Journal of Autoimmunity* examined how autoimmune processes may account for the widespread dam-

age caused by some COVID infections, including inflammation of the heart and circulatory system. Circulatory damage can lead to loss of oxygen in the body's tissues; this in turn slows the function of mitochondria, the energy-producing powerhouses in our cells.

"Immune cells require energy to work properly," says Galland. "If you have a smart TV and the remote's battery starts to die, the TV starts doing screwy things. When the power source diminishes, it's not just that everything gets dim — it gets wacky. That's the impact of mitochondrial damage on the immune system."

While researchers still have much more to learn about long COVID, functional-medicine practitioners are already reaching for proven strategies that have helped people manage other autoimmune conditions. There is no one-size-fits-all protocol, but some basic principles apply.

"I go to individualization — what's at the root?" asks Ewers. "Why was this terrain susceptible to this virus, and what form did it take? Then the treatment protocol matches those things."

Turn the page to learn about the main tenets of a functional-medicine approach to treating autoimmunity.





AN ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DIET

An anti-inflammatory diet is one of the most important tools for managing autoimmune conditions. “Many predisposing factors to poor outcomes [from autoimmunity] come from chronic inflammation, and a largely plant-based diet is a great start toward lowering inflammation,” says Calabrese.

Several special diets have proven to be helpful for people with autoimmune disease, including the Wahls Protocol, Autoimmune Protocol, and variations on the paleo diet. While they vary in their specifics, they share an emphasis on fresh, whole, unprocessed foods; plenty of colorful vegetables; abundant fermented foods; bone broth; and healthy fats. They also minimize sugar, processed carbs, alcohol, dairy, and caffeine.

Ewers recommends working with a functional-medicine provider to identify specific food sensitivities, absorption issues, or nutrient deficiencies. Using diet to manage inflammation and support circulation and mitochondrial function can make a huge difference in autoimmune symptoms and quality of life.

MICROBIOME MANAGEMENT

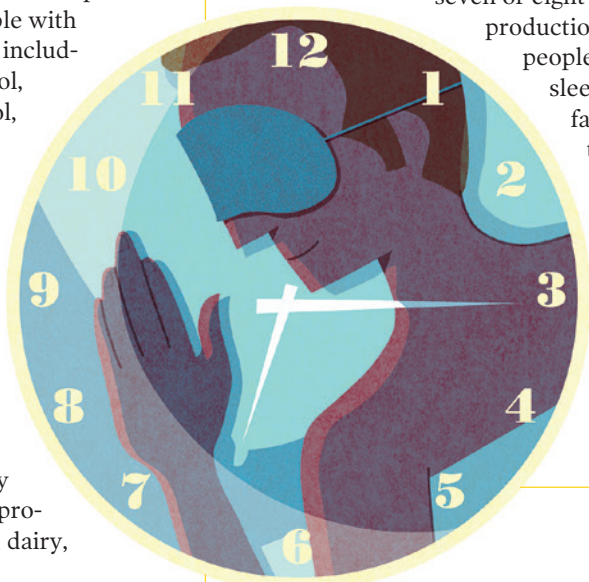
The gut microbiome plays a crucial role in immune function. “The microbiome controls so much of how the immune system responds to invaders,” says Ewers. A comprehensive stool analysis can help identify imbalances in the microbiome, such as a lack of beneficial bacteria or an overabundance of harmful microbes, parasites, or yeast.

“We see similarities between long COVID and chronic fatigue syndrome in the microbiome,” says Galland. For long COVID, he recommends supplementing with specific bacteria strains, such as *Bifidobacterium longum* BB536 and a form of *Bacillus subtilis*, which may help stabilize and reorganize the gut microbiome. Studies show that eating avocados and chickpeas may also support the growth of anti-inflammatory bacteria, he notes. (For more on microbiome health, see [ELmag.com/microbiome](https://www.elmag.com/microbiome).)

ADEQUATE SLEEP

Sleep helps restore the immune system. Insufficient sleep (less than seven or eight hours per night) has been linked to the production of inflammatory cytokines. But many people with autoimmune conditions have disturbed sleep patterns; they may suffer from profound fatigue *and* struggle to regularly sleep through the night.

Working with a functional-medicine provider to integrate sleep-hygiene techniques, such as ritualized sleep-wake cycles, environmental and dietary modifications, and (potentially) melatonin therapy, can help restore healing and supportive sleep patterns. (For more on sleep, see [ELmag.com/sleepandhealth](https://www.elmag.com/sleepandhealth).)



MODERATE MOVEMENT

Exercise is key for healthy immune function. Multiple studies have shown that moderate exercise offers benefits for patients with autoimmune conditions — including improvements in joint mobility, mood, cognitive ability, energy, and quality of life. If you’ve received a diagnosis recently or are easing into exercise after being sedentary, start with gentle, moderate movement as you build up strength and stamina, and be sure to consult with your provider.



SUPPLEMENTS

There is no singular supplement protocol that will achieve the same results in everyone with autoimmunity. Most functional-medicine providers make supplement recommendations based on a person's specific test results and symptoms. Still, these are some of the most common supplements used to support better health and function for a variety of autoimmune conditions, including long COVID, and each one has a range of salutary effects.

- **VITAMIN D3:** Insufficient vitamin D is associated with a number of autoimmune diseases. Raising low levels may help mitigate disease severity and progression and help repair a leaky gut.


- **CURCUMIN:** This potent anti-inflammatory chemical is found naturally in turmeric.

- **RESVERATROL:** A polyphenol found in peanuts, berries, and red grapes, resveratrol may help reduce the production of autoantibodies, among other immunomodulating effects.

- **FISH OIL:** This oil contains EPA and DHA, anti-inflammatory omega-3 fatty acids that Ewers says help with healthy gene expression.

- **NAC:** Short for "N-acetyl-L-cysteine," NAC helps the body make the antioxidant glutathione, which protects against cellular damage and supports immune health. Combining NAC with niacin can help support mitochondrial function, says Galland.

- **COQ10:** Naturally produced by the body and also available in supplement form, this antioxidant supports circulation and mitochondrial function.



Autoimmune patients need to treat their bodies with unconditional love. . . .

Praise them when they get it right, and when things go wrong, offer some help and support.

STRESS RELIEF

Psychoneuroimmunology is a burgeoning area of immune science based on the insight that the central nervous system and immune system are intertwined. "The brain and the immune system are one organ," explains Calabrese.

To manage the stress of autoimmunity itself, Ewers believes we may also need to look directly at the "autoimmune mindset" — a sense of being at war with oneself.

"People are always looking to be done," notes Ewers. "The expectation is that we kill the yeast in our gut, get our hormones balanced, and the body should shape up."

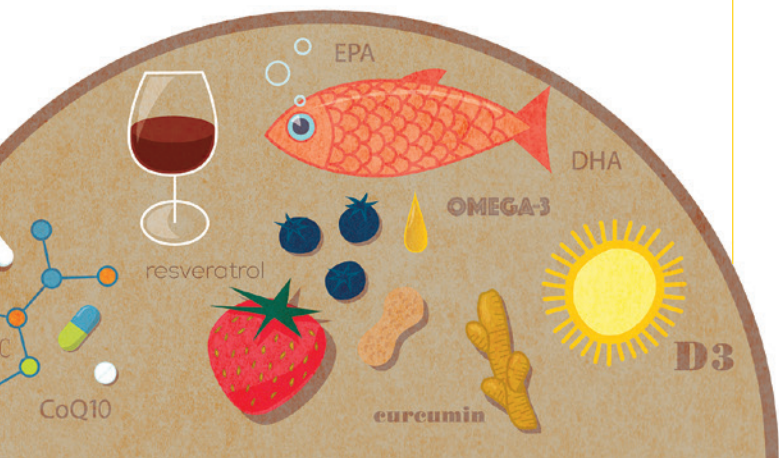
But people with autoimmune conditions need to accept that creating health is a long-term process that involves all the layers of our being — physical, energetic, mental, emotional, and spiritual. "There are no quick fixes or tricks for immune health," notes Calabrese. "It's a process."

We can use tools like mindfulness meditation, which has shown a capacity to lower inflammation and tamp down inflammatory genes. Mind-body techniques such as yoga, tai chi, and qigong can reduce autoimmune activity. But overall, the recovery process requires patience and lots of self-love.

"When we have expectations that aren't being met, that's one thing that sets the immune system off the worst," says Ewers. She believes autoimmune patients need to treat their bodies with unconditional love, the way we would children who are learning a new skill: Praise them when they get it right, and when things go wrong, offer some help and support.

"It's about getting into a collaborative instead of a combative relationship with yourself." ☯

MO PERRY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.







Get Curious

How a “scout mindset” can help us improve our reasoning and make better decisions.

BY **QUINTON SKINNER**

AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, we will all remain loyal to a person or job that’s clearly not good for us, or to an idea that just isn’t valid. Our friends and family may suggest alternatives, become exasperated, or simply shake their heads as we argue vigorously for something we can neither justify nor prove.

Chances are we’ll also refuse to change our minds, even in the face of new evidence.

There are many terms to describe our devotion to entrenched beliefs: motivated reasoning, confirmation bias, rationalization, wishful thinking, denial. Of course, most of us believe that these terms don’t apply to us — but that’s part of the trap. At some point, we will resist a truth that’s right before our eyes.

Sometimes this resistance is benign. We may choose to focus on the good rather than worst in a person or insist that Grandma is going to live to 105 because we can’t bear the thought of letting her go.

But this powerful tendency to see what we want to see can have real ramifications in our lives, as well as for the health of society at large — especially when verifiable facts begin to lose their power to convince people of anything.

We may also miss out on new experiences and connections if we don’t keep an open mind. Stubborn beliefs can cut us off from one of our most vital life forces: curiosity. The capacity to remain interested shapes our character, our relationships, and the way we treat others.

Curiosity can be difficult, too — our reptilian instincts tend to pull us toward the comfort of our preconceived notions.

So how do we cultivate an appetite for truth, even when it challenges us? Experts suggest that untangling ourselves from the snare of motivated reasoning starts with learning to identify when and where we’re caught.

THE BATTLEFIELD OF BELIEF

Julia Galef, host of the *Rationally Speaking* podcast and cofounder of the Center for Applied Rationality, describes herself as someone with a “passion for good reasoning.” As a podcast host, she’s observed how motivated reasoning seems to involve certain habits of thought. She refers to this as a “soldier mindset.”

“We experience reason and belief in surprisingly militaristic terms,” explains Galef, author of *The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don’t*. “We talk about our ideas as being strong and as impregnable as possible. We talk about buttressing our positions with evidence or shooting down someone else’s argument or poking holes in someone’s logic.”

Most of us know how it feels to experience a conflict of ideas as mortal combat. We may feel a rush of adrenaline or a flush in our faces when someone disagrees with an opinion we hold dear, or when we rush to defend our idea against a perceived attack.

That’s the inner soldier, who has no time for curious exploring. The soldier’s mission is to defend beliefs, and evidence-gathering typically works backward from preexisting conclusions. This makes it difficult to discover anything but what we’re seeking.

“We experience some serious cognitive

headwinds in our thinking,” says Annie Duke, a former champion poker player and the author of *How to Decide: Simple Tools for Making Better Choices*. “We have ownership over our ideas; we don’t want to let them go. We think they’re more valuable than other people’s ideas.”

The soldier mindset is motivated by more than just a love of combat, though. It wants to protect us from harm, so it guides us to avoid unpleasant emotions, maintain morale, persuade others, and look good and virtuous so we’ll be accepted by the group. In moderation, these are admirable social traits that allow us to function in the day-to-day.

Yet there is a price for defending our psychological safety. Our defenses can blind us to information that we need to make well-informed decisions. They provoke discord in relationships with those who don’t agree with us, and they can lead us to confuse consistency with integrity.

“Cognitive dissonance is built into identity,” Duke adds. “We reason toward the beliefs we already possess, because who are we if we let them go? The fabric of our identity is what we believe to be true about the world and about ourselves. If we let go, we tear a hole in that fabric.”

Still, a hole that appears when we let go of a belief isn’t just an absence of identity: It is a space for new information to enter.



Our defenses **can blind us** to information that we need to make well-informed decisions.



The scout's role is not to attack or defend.
It's to go out and explore
and see what's really there — and form as
accurate a map of the situation as possible.”

SCOUT MINDSET

The soldier mindset isn't our only option, and you've likely already used a different approach. Maybe you acknowledged that someone else was right and you were wrong or a coworker's plan was better than yours. Maybe you disagreed with someone but continued to listen to them without interrupting or arguing.

These modest gestures might seem like no big deal, but Galef views them as evidence of what she calls the “scout mindset.”

“The scout's role is not to attack or defend,” she explains. “It's to go out and explore and see what's really there — and form as accurate a map of the situation as possible.”

This mindset doesn't scan the landscape for threats; it seeks data, with curiosity and interest. It can accept some tradeoffs and paradoxes behind the choices we make and beliefs we hold. It allows us to take in new information, including when we're under stress.

“[Sometimes] things aren't the way you would prefer them to be,” Galef notes. “But [when you use a scout mindset], you've accepted that, and you're not fighting it. You're trying to be objective and intellectually honest, and curious about what is really true.”

What's more, she adds, a scout can “sometimes see the motivations that make us stick to predetermined beliefs.”

While the scout mindset has a long list of appealing features, it's often stymied by our tendency to overestimate the value of fitting in and our fear of the costs of not doing so.

We also tend to undervalue its benefits — how it can give us a more accurate view of our own thinking and behavior and help us choose long-term benefits over short-term gain.

CLEARING THE LENS

The truth is, we're all a little bit soldier and a little bit scout every day — maybe even every minute. The trick is learning to tell the difference

between the two and to nudge ourselves toward curiosity when we feel tempted to become rigid.

“The scout mindset comes in as such a great tool,” says Duke. “It helps us shift what it is that makes us feel good about ourselves. Instead of feeling that we must recover from a loss when we change our minds, we can actually feel good about changing our minds and admitting we were wrong, exactly because it is a hard thing to do. It can become part of who we are, that we are experts at being OK with being wrong.”

Because we can't change our habits overnight, cultivating a scout mindset is best approached as a daily practice. Galef places self-awareness at the top of her list of traits to hone. “There's a real art to becoming self-aware in the moment,” she says. It's also essential to helping us “get better at noticing when we're shifting into a soldier mindset.”

This may be as simple as routinely asking yourself questions such as *I feel some tension here — do I need to adjust my thinking?*

A mindfulness or meditation practice can be another tool for building inner awareness as well as a more expansive outward view. “In meditation we get beyond the rigidity of our world, in order to be open to all the possibilities,” explains Roger Gabriel, chief meditation officer for Chopra Global, which promotes meditation as a strategy for increasing well-being.

Gabriel, who has taught meditation for nearly five decades, helps his students develop “metacognitive awareness.” This involves paying attention to thoughts and feelings as they arise while learning to view them dispassionately, without defensiveness. This helps us get to where we can choose a view of the world, rather than defending one.

“Life is all about choices,” he adds. “And when we start to make conscious choices, we begin to ask not just *How does this serve me?* but *How will this serve my growth and evolution? And how will it serve the world around me?*”



Our tendency is to want to believe things that enhance our status, identity, and sense of self. And our natural inclination is to associate with people who believe those same things.”

THE CHALLENGE OF GROUPTHINK

Perhaps more now than ever, we are living our lives immersed in the opinions and beliefs of others, particularly in the inflamed districts we encounter online and in social media. These platforms can feel like the battle theater for the war between soldier mindsets.

Some experts believe the tendency to hyper-identify with our positions is hardwired into human consciousness. “Our tendency is to want to believe things that enhance our status, identity, and sense of self,” says Jonathan Rauch, author of *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*. “And our natural inclination is to associate with people who believe those same things.”

Just as we seek safety by curating our self-image, we also tend to take refuge in identifying and thinking along with our groups, whether they be political, professional, or familial. This means we often find ourselves merging with a collective soldier mindset. This unexamined embrace of group beliefs can come between us and our own judgment and lead us to make choices we might not make otherwise.

Staying in a scout mindset, however, keeps us free to make our own decisions, even if they aren’t always in perfect lockstep with our social groups. In his book, Rauch offers rational dialogue and constructive disagreement as antidotes to political polarization and disinformation.

“It starts with our self and having a certain amount of epistemic humility,” he explains. “Even when we’re feeling the most certain, we might be wrong. To try to live an inquiring life means that when I see a new idea, I ask, *What can I learn from this idea?* rather than *How can I make it go away?*”

Finally, the quality of our thinking ultimately matters more than the amount of data we accumulate. We may be weighted down with information, but if we’re still in soldier mindset, we’re likely to assume that those who disagree with us are simply uninformed. In her book, Galef shares a study by Yale law professor Dan M. Kahan, JD, that suggests the greatest polarization of opinion is among the most informed.

“This is a crucially important result,” she notes. “Being smart and being knowledgeable [can] give us a false sense of security in our own reasoning.”

THE COMPANY WE KEEP

We are social creatures, and the people we spend time with help influence our tendency toward defensiveness or open-mindedness.

“Are your friends and the people you interact with online the kind of people who will attack you for showing any uncertainty?” asks Galef. Or are they people who love to discuss ideas and issues and rarely take things personally? It matters. We’re susceptible to social pressures around our beliefs, and styles of arguing that thwart curiosity can be contagious.

But so can open-mindedness and nondefensiveness. During her years as a professional poker player, Duke learned to notice the way players can deceive themselves — such as blaming losses on bad luck while chalking up every win to skill and smarts. She realized that to get better, she had to ask not just the players she’d beaten but also the ones who’d beaten her for insights on her game.

“I had to train myself in a scout mindset, going to my peers and begging them to tell me what I did wrong,” Duke recalls. “How could I have played that hand better? What did I see and what did I not see? We ended up having a social contract: Be direct and to the point.”

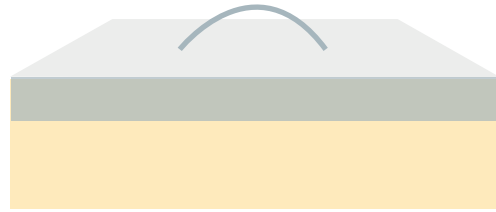
Finally, the scout mindset thrives on the buddy system. Having friends who are pledged to curiosity and inquiry can be a sort of compact. This is based not on mutual criticism but a willingness to give another person the space and the freedom to explore ideas and opinions freely, without fear of being ridiculed for changing one’s mind.

“You don’t have to overhaul your entire life,” Galef says. “But it’s a big help to find more time for people who are more scout-like. They actually get excited when something turns out to be more complicated than it seemed, or they applaud you for changing your mind or noticing when you’re wrong about something.”

In other words, the scout mindset isn’t penalized for being wrong or trying again. And that may be one of the greatest freedoms of all. 🧭

QUINTON SKINNER is a Minneapolis-based journalist and novelist.

The Scout's Toolbox



BECAUSE WE'RE WIRED to protect ourselves against threats to our egos and sense of belonging, it can be challenging to lower our defenses and boost our curiosity. The pursuit of greater curiosity is a long-term project, and there are a few simple techniques to help you along the way.

"A good tool is to simply become more willing to consider unpleasant or inconvenient possibilities about what may or may not be true," says Julia Galef, author of *The Scout Mindset*. This can be as simple as asking yourself, *What if I'm wrong about this?* And then noticing that the sky does not fall if you realize that your belief was incorrect or you decide to change your mind.

Galef also encourages these strategies:

- **Tell people** when you realize they're right and you're wrong.
- **Notice how well — or poorly — you tolerate criticism.** (Galef admits to shortcomings in this area.) Aim to increase your tolerance in the name of growth.
- **Make things less personal.** When you're discussing issues, focus on the issues. Refrain from making ideas extensions of people.
- **Visualize a simple plan** for doing something you've been avoiding, such as apologizing to a friend over a slight. When Galef visualizes how she will apologize to someone, it becomes clear that she really should, and that it won't be as difficult as she imagined.
- **Take the outsider test:** Look at a conflict through the eyes of a neutral outsider who has nothing at stake.
- **Do the status quo bias test:** Consider whether you'd accept your current situation if it wasn't what you were already used to.

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Carve out time when there is nothing you need to do, nowhere you need to go, no one you need to try to be — other than yourself. . . . Just let go of the busyness, set all the doing aside for a little while, and see what happens.”

— Henry Emmons, MD

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Learn how taking time to do nothing can lead us to our better selves.

Your Healthy Way of Life Calendar

Take the long view of the year ahead with this seasonal map of health-supporting reminders.

BY **STEPHANIE SOUCHERAY**

Many of us greet each new year with improvement on our minds.

Maybe we want to save for a down payment, run a marathon, or cut back on booze. Or we make more general (but still worthy) goals: Drink more water, get eight hours of sleep each night, or reconnect with friends.

The New Year can be a good time to take stock of what's working in your life, according to Seattle-based productivity and mindfulness coach Sarah Steckler. "We are cyclical creatures, and the seasons tap back into our own cycles," she explains.

Many of us also crave structure and guidance around the New Year, which is one reason Steckler recommends constructive to-do lists and calendars. These offer a physical reminder of the issues you want to address and practices you can add to improve health, productivity, and quality of life.

This helpful calendar is designed to support your health and well-being with reminders and ideas — regardless of your goals. Think of it as a mashup of a to-do list and a goal-setting session. Take what you need, leave what you don't, and bring some seasonal organization to the year ahead.



ILLUSTRATIONS: CLAUDI KESSELS

JANUARY, FEBRUARY, AND MARCH

Take care of your taxes. They're one of life's must-dos, so get them out of the way. For the new year, consider trying something new financially, such as an envelope system, a digital budget, a fresh investment strategy, or a different plan for tackling debt. (Get more tips on financial health at ELmag.com/mindfulmoney.)

Deep clean the kitchen. You can do this at any time of year, but most kitchens could use a good scrub after the holidays. Be sure to clean inside your oven, refrigerator, and microwave, and don't miss surfaces and light fixtures.

Start a weekly ritual. What's one thing you could do 52 times this year to take better care of yourself? Think outside the bubble-bath box. Maybe it's an art class, or a weekly coffee date with friends. Keep in mind that scheduled things tend to stick.

Plan your garden. Order seeds, design a raised bed, or learn how the heck to keep a succulent alive. Days will be getting a bit brighter and warmer, and it's good for your mood to think green. No matter how big or small the project, growing something is satisfying. (Learn more about why gardening is good for you at ELmag.com/gardeningforhealth.)

Visit the dentist. And while you're at it, take another look at your health benefits for the year and make sure you're not overlooking good deals, like discounts on health-club or gym memberships or health products.

Rethink your "foodprint." The beginning of the year is a great time to try a meal-subscription service, line up a community-supported agriculture (CSA) membership, or join a local co-op. Consider what you'll really use; a full third of the global food supply ends up in the trash. (Get tips for reducing your household food waste at ELmag.com/foodwastetips.)

APRIL, MAY, AND JUNE

Prep your pets for the outdoors.

If you have a four-legged friend who spends time outside, now is a good opportunity to take precautions — like giving heartworm and tick-and-flea medication — to keep your pal healthy and safe for the season.

Spring clean your closet — and your phone. You've heard about taking stock of your clothes and donating, recycling, or tossing things you haven't worn in a year. That's a good idea — and so is a digital refresh. Delete old apps with expired trials, those you haven't used in a while, and any photos or old messages you don't need. It's also a good time to evaluate your use of technology and consider a more mindful approach. (Get our tips for breaking free from tech addiction at ELmag.com/mindfultech.)

Consider your community. During the first half of the year, research issues in your area to identify those causes and organizations that align with your values and need your help — whether it's your time and energy or a financial contribution. Recurring donations are more valuable to most nonprofits than a one-time gift, so consider setting up monthly giving for causes you're passionate about.



Tune up your gear. Schedule a bike tune-up a week or so before you're ready for outdoor riding — bike shops are notoriously busy in the spring. If you prefer to hit the pavement or trails on foot, figure out how many miles are on your kicks. Running shoes should be replaced roughly every 500 miles. If you have an old pair, check to see if any of your local shoe stores have recycling programs.



JULY, AUGUST, AND SEPTEMBER

Schedule annual health screenings like prostate, breast, and vision exams if they're due. This is also a good time for parents to schedule pre-fall-sports physicals for their school-age children.

Tackle deeper-cleaning projects. With spring cleaning behind you, now is the time to clean the carpets, tune up your HVAC system, and address any pressing outdoor house maintenance. Long days mean lots of daylight to attack larger to-dos.

Fine-tune your self-care routine. Successful goals are flexible, Steckler notes. She recommends that clients practice daily or weekly "brain dumps," or a few minutes of freewriting, to reflect on what worked in the past week and what needs more attention. "It's a simple way to declutter your ideas," she says.

Prep your home for winter. Even if you usually wash your windows in the spring, this is a good time to wash them again, so you'll be able to let the winter light in. If you live in a colder climate, consider replacing weather stripping or adding insulation to help save energy. (Get more tips for winterizing your home at ELmag.com/winterizehome.)

OCTOBER, NOVEMBER, AND DECEMBER

Pickle or ferment something. Fermented foods are good for your gut, and no fancy equipment is needed. Take a trip to a late-season farmers' market and try pickling veggies to keep on hand for the shorter days ahead. Pickled cucumbers, carrots, green beans, and beets all make for a snappy addition to winter meals. (Get our recipe for Quick-Pickled Veggies at ELmag.com/pickledveggies.)

Boost your immunity. Clean out your medicine cabinet and stock up on immune-system supporters, such as vitamin C and oregano oil. If you get an annual flu shot, try to schedule it by the end of October.



Level up your cozy. You may naturally feel pulled to bed as the days get darker, so consider adding a weighted blanket for added relaxation or a sunrise lamp for brighter mornings. Still not sleeping well? Learn how to reclaim your sleep rhythm at ELmag.com/internalclock.

Take time to volunteer. This can be a busy season, and it's helpful to step outside of your bubble to keep things in perspective. Whether it's serving a holiday meal, asking a shelter about winter donations, or running a toy drive, helping others is guaranteed to end your year on the right note. 🍎

STEPHANIE SOUCHERAY is a health journalist based in St. Paul, Minn.

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Stillness

BY **HENRY EMMONS, MD**

How taking time to do nothing can lead us to our better selves.

When my boys were young, we would pack up the van for spring break and head south from our Minnesota home. Desperate for sun and warmth, we'd drive as far as necessary and then set up camp for a few days.

Every trip was fun, but one stands out in my mind as exceptional. After many hours on the road, we discovered a state campground in the Florida Panhandle, and we were pleasantly surprised to find it mostly empty. It was inland, so we figured most of the tourists had chosen the beach. Our plan was to use the campground as a launching point and head out in different directions each day to explore the area, including the Gulf.

The morning after we arrived, we found ourselves lingering over breakfast, enjoying the peaceful surroundings. None of us, not even the active and typically restless boys, made any move to leave. The leisurely morning soon turned into afternoon, which turned into evening. We had done virtually nothing all day, other than hang out and enjoy one another.

We spent more or less the entire week like that. When we did venture out, we limited ourselves to one destination per day. What we all wanted, for those few days at least, was some downtime. Inactivity, it turned out, was pretty great.

I really enjoy being active, seeing the sights when we travel, and filling life with a variety of fun and interesting things. But I have also come to appreciate the restorative value of “nondoing.” It is truly good for the soul.

Finding the balance between movement and rest can be tricky. Growing up, I developed a strong belief in productivity, activity, and usefulness. A bit of an overachiever, I've struggled to let go of those traits after practicing them for most of my life. But I'm getting the hang of it.

Slowing the Pace

In the last few years, my family and I have spent considerable time at a cabin near the Boundary Waters, in far northern Minnesota. One of my favorite activities when we're there is to go off by myself for an afternoon. I paddle our canoe across the lake to a protected wilderness area

and hike inland a mile or so to a secluded spot overlooking a river. I sit for a couple of hours doing nothing.

I've never seen another person at that spot, but I often notice deer, eagles, hummingbirds, and other wildlife. I never see them when I'm crashing through the woods, but when I am quiet and still, they seem willing to show themselves.

Sometimes I take my journal to this secluded space. It always feels more personal, more authentic when I write there — as if it's coming from a deeper place within me. My voice seems both honest and reassuring, and always kind and nonjudging. I leave with more clarity, inspiration, and peace than I had before.

I like to think that I am encountering soul when I take this time to be alone, with no other agenda. I imagine soul to be that still, small inner voice that is always with me, but whose nature is to be silent and nonintrusive. It doesn't yell or shove or fight for my attention. Like the wild animals who show up only after I've sat quietly for a while, the soul presents itself only if I am still enough to hear it.

Tapping into this still space doesn't require camping in the woods, but I suspect it helps. What is more important is to carve out time when there is nothing you need to do, nowhere you need to go, no one you need to try to be — other than yourself.

Give it a try. Set your intention for nondoing. Spend at least an hour and a half somewhere that feels special, whether it's an outdoor spot with natural majesty or a cozy, private corner of your home. Make it a quiet place during a time when you won't be interrupted. Bring a journal and a pen if you want to write or some paper and markers if you feel like drawing.

But you don't need to do a thing. Just let go of the busyness, set all the doing aside for a little while, and see what happens.



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

Good Green News

There's so much bad news surrounding climate change that it often eclipses the positive strides we're making.

BY **MARCO DREGNI** AND **BLESSING KASONGOMA**

It's not all doom and gloom on the environmental front. These positive tidings may brighten your day — and inspire you to keep doing the little things you can to be part of the solution.



Renewing Energy Sources

In 2020, renewable energy sources became the second-largest generator of electricity in the United States, surpassing nuclear and coal power for the first time, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Among these renewable sources, wind and solar power are growing at the fastest rates.

Wind-generated electricity surged by 14 percent between 2019 and 2020 and has now become our most prevalent source of renewable energy. It currently provides 8.4 percent of total U.S. electricity.

Solar power output increased by 9 percent during the same time period, both because of state legislative mandates requiring utility companies to build more renewable capacity and the rise of small-scale solar installations, such as those on homes and businesses.

The amount of energy generated by burning coal — once by far the largest source of electricity as well as one of the dirtiest — has dropped off consistently since 2007, and many coal-fired power plants have been replaced by natural-gas facilities or other lower-emission sources.

Although the prevalence of coal-fired power has decreased, we still need to take significant steps to reach President Biden's goal of generating 100 percent carbon-pollution-free electricity by 2035.

— MARCO DREGNI

Driving Electric

Nearly 1.8 million electric vehicles (EVs) were registered in the United States in 2020 — a threefold increase over 2016's numbers. EVs offer a green alternative to diesel- and gas-fueled vehicles, major sources of the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. And many EV manufacturers use recycled materials to make certain components.

General Motors, Toyota, and other prominent automakers are transitioning away from internal-combustion engines and have pledged to build only EVs by 2030. Meanwhile, improved battery technology is extending the range between charges, and the number of charging stations continues to grow. Plus, those living in solar-powered homes can recharge some EV models without plugging in to the electrical grid.

Still, the lithium-ion batteries used in EVs (as well as many digital devices) rely on cobalt, a so-called blood metal that's mined — often with child labor — primarily in Central African countries operating under corrupt governments. Cleaning up cobalt mining will be key to truly green and humane EVs.

— BLESSING KASONGOMA



Riding Electric

E-bikes and e-scooters skyrocketed in popularity during the pandemic, with their mix of practicality, portability, and fun. U.S. e-bike sales alone grew 145 percent between 2019 and 2020. Electric two-wheelers provide freedom and unlimited options, speeding people to their destination faster than pedaling — and without all the sweat. E-bikes and e-scooters are projected to become a major force in global transportation in coming years.

Skateboards have also gone electric, including one-wheelers. These boosted boards are not made for ramps but are ideal trendy transportation. The e-skateboard market is expected to reach \$2.4 billion in sales by 2025. — BK





Big-Business Environmentalism

In 2021, the oil industry was pushed to reduce emissions thanks to pressure not from the government but from shareholders and activists. For instance, Chevron shareholders voted to reduce emissions created by the company's products, and their counterparts at Exxon elected three new board members focused on reducing the company's carbon footprint and reliance on nonrenewable energy.

Although it remains to be seen if these votes will manifest as real-world changes, they reflect increased interest in promoting renewable energy, even within the largest oil companies.

— MD

Cleaner Clothes

Your eco-conscious life can start with the clothes on your back: Manufacturers are turning to fabrics made from recycled plastic, bamboo, and organically grown fibers. In 2019, the global eco-fiber market was valued at \$40.5 billion and is expected to grow by 4.6 percent annually in coming years. Choosing clothes

made from recyclable materials can indirectly help reduce air, water, and land pollution, creating a more sustainable environment.

— BK



Greener Cities

As urban populations grow, legislators, planners, and residents are confronted with the daunting task of addressing the environmental issues that stem from high-density development. They're finding many new — and old — methods to improve life in the concrete jungle.

It's no secret that parks are good for our health and well-being, but they are often scarce in dense urban and lower-income areas. Policymakers in Nashville, Tenn., Montreal, and other cities are addressing the lack of green space by re-naturalizing underutilized areas like alleyways and parking lots. This provides new community gathering spaces and helps reduce retained heat and water runoff.

Even where concrete is being laid for buildings and public-works projects, environmentally minded groups are seeking new opportunities to reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. UCLA researchers, for example, have developed new technologies to sequester CO₂ in concrete, reducing the material's carbon footprint by more than 50 percent.

— MD

Curbside Composting

Many American cities are adopting curbside composting programs, allowing residents to reduce landfill waste. Between 2013 and 2017, the number of municipal composting programs increased by 65 percent. These programs even help those who compost at home, because they accept items that take much longer to decompose in a nonindustrial setting, such as compostable containers, meat scraps, and egg cartons.

In cities that don't offer curbside composting, there are still a growing number of initiatives that make it more accessible. Washington, D.C., provides workshops, rebates for home-composting systems, and drop-off locations where residents can bring compostable items.

— MD





Plants — They're What's for Dinner

Raising livestock for meat contributes almost 15 percent of total global greenhouse-gas emissions annually. Plant-based eating has blossomed in recent years as a response to this and other ethical issues, as well as a broader understanding of the health benefits — and this move is happening in homes and restaurants.

Putting a number on the trend is tough, but a 2020 food-retailer consultant's survey found that veganism "has grown from obscurity to become a mainstream part of the American diet. Since 2004, the number of Americans turning plant-based has reached 9.7 million people, growing from around 290,000 over a period of 15 years."

And an international restaurant-industry consultant charted a 7 percentage-point increase during the first seven months of 2020 alone in the number of surveyed customers who said that they would switch to a restaurant offering plant-based options.

First promoted during World War I, Meatless Monday is an international campaign that was reintroduced in 2003 to encourage people to reduce meat in their diets to improve their health as well as the overall health of the planet. Even *Epicurious*, the first website devoted exclusively to recipes, stopped publishing new beef recipes in April 2021.

These trends have inspired restaurateurs to rethink their menus. Chef Daniel Humm reopened the doors of New York City's world-famous Eleven Madison Park after the pandemic with a menu eschewing meat and seafood. Plant-based meals are even being served in a fast-food restaurant near you: Faux-beef Impossible or Beyond Meat burgers are now on the menu at McDonald's, Burger King, White Castle, and more.

— BK

More Efficient Home Energy

American residential and commercial buildings account for some 76 percent of total electricity use. But there are a variety of ways to reduce usage at home, including replacing inefficient appliances with Energy Star-certified models, adding new insulation, and sealing leaks to stop drafts.

Federal government initiatives, such as the Weatherization Assistance Program, aim to make eco-conscious home improvement more accessible. With the assistance of local organizations and utility companies, these programs help homeowners install energy-efficient upgrades, reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and lowering utility costs.

Many homeowners are also installing solar panels to reduce their energy bills and go green. The number of residential solar installations in the first quarter of 2021 was the highest ever, and the cost of installation has dropped by more than 70 percent since 2010. Even in homes unsuitable for solar panels, centralized community solar projects can provide inexpensive renewable energy.

— MD



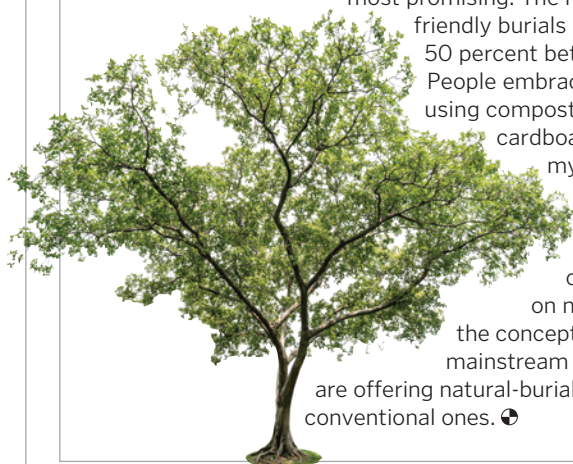
Natural Burials

Conventional burials can have a large environmental impact from the wood and metal for caskets, concrete for vaults, and thousands of gallons of formaldehyde and other embalming chemicals. Cremation is less environmentally harmful and has become a popular alternative, but each cremated body still releases about 530 pounds of CO₂.

Among the many end-of-life options, natural burials may be the most promising. The number of these eco-friendly burials increased by nearly 50 percent between 2010 and 2015. People embracing the practice are using compostable caskets made of cardboard, wicker, or even mycelium, and they're forgoing grave liners and embalming.

A few American cemeteries focus solely on natural burials, but the concept is gaining traction in mainstream cemeteries — many are offering natural-burial options alongside conventional ones. 🌱

— MD



MARCO DREGNI and BLESSING KASONGOMA are *Experience Life* interns.

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Taking a Chance on Health

Life Time member Paul Matthies discovered community, hope, and health — one 60day at a time.

In 2018, at age 37, Paul Matthies came face to face with a health crisis he could no longer ignore. At 315 pounds, he had developed diabetic neuropathy — losing feeling in his feet, hands, and even along his spine — and his sleep apnea was so severe he awoke one night gasping, unable to breathe.

At the ER, Paul's doctor didn't mince words: He had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high blood sugar. His life was at risk.

"But he said, 'I have hope for you,'" says Paul. Devastated by the prospect of a life of disability and disease, Paul clung to that hope.

He went home and poured out all the soda he had. He got out a trash bag and emptied the pantry. "I told myself, 'This is my chance.'" He made a few simple, if not easy, changes: stop drinking sugary drinks, park far from the door at work, and take the stairs to his second-floor office. Within two months, Paul had lost 30 pounds.

BUILDING ON CONFIDENCE

Paul's early success inspired him to focus on fitness, and he decided to check out the Life Time near his home in North Dallas, Texas.

After a few personal-training sessions and some time building stamina on the treadmill, Paul signed up for his first 60day Challenge and enrolled in GTX group training. He also joined a local martial arts studio, and soon had a schedule that included six days of physical activity a week.

Paul then turned to nutrition. "I've been on a learning curve to really understand what it means to eat healthy — to still feel full, but eat nutrient-dense foods," he explains. And he came up with an intermittent fasting "hack" that works for him: "I eat when the sun comes up, and when the sun's down, the kitchen's closed for the night."

INSIDE-OUT TRANSFORMATION

Despite the external changes that Paul has made these past three years (he's lost 135 pounds and now trains up to 10 hours a week), he says the biggest transformation in his life has been emotional and spiritual.

"I had a lot of internal narratives where I would tell myself, 'You're just not worth this.' And I had to stand up to that bully," he says.



"My HOKA shoes help me feel my feet on the ground. When you're a heavy person, and you begin to incorporate movements that require coordination and a little bit more courage, it's nice to have that feeling of support."



"For so many years, I carried the anxiety of 'Am I going to fit in this airplane seat? Am I going to fit in this movie seat?' I had to recognize the emotional weight was very heavy."

He found a counternarrative in the people he met at Life Time, who accepted him and supported him as he made his way.

"I was so busy judging myself that I assumed that everybody else was judging me, too," he explains, describing this mindset as being "closed-fisted." "But through the kindness of the people around me, I slowly began to 'open my hands,' and when I did that, I recognized that I have a lot of cheerleaders in my life. When I began to accept that kindness and the community, my life began to change for the better in terms of my overall health."

DISCOVERING LIFE LESSONS

"There are four principal lessons I've carried away from my training, between Life Time and martial arts," Paul says. "I call them my four Cs."

COMMITMENT. "You have to bring your whole self — body, mind, spirit, soul — to this journey. You might even consider seeing a counselor along the way because as you begin peeling back layers,



you discover other areas of your life — unhealthy relationships, toxic environments — you're going to need to confront to keep going."

CONSISTENCY. In each 60day Paul completed, he chose three behaviors to focus on. "If I could do those consistently, I began to see results."

COMMUNITY. "It's not always the workout that you're doing. Sometimes it's the people you're doing it with that make all the difference."

In 2019, Paul won the National 60day in his third competition. "It was a Tuesday night, and I thought they weren't going to announce the winner until Wednesday. I opened the door, and balloons and banners fell, and everyone began erupting in cheers. I fell to my

knees. It was one of the best moments of my life to know that we did this together."

COACHING. "You have to humble yourself," explains Paul. "I had to learn the humility to say I need help, that there are others that know better than I do. I had to submit to and trust the process of coaching — of good expertise to help me understand my body and learn about proper nutrition."

Finally, Paul believes in the power of hope. "There's something deep within me that just believes that things can get better," he says. "Somewhere along the way I lost that, and now I've regained it."

“

When I began to accept that kindness and the community, my life began to change for the better in terms of my overall health.”

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Bridge the Gap



Our differences don't have to keep us polarized. Try this expert advice for forging unexpected connections.

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS

Kalamazoo, Mich., musician and spiritual director Betsy Meagher, 76, felt anxious before her meeting with a Pennsylvania woman named Jodi. Their conversation was facilitated by StoryCorps, a nonprofit that shares interviews about people's lives with the goal of spreading compassion and empathy.

Meagher had read Jodi's bio and knew they shared a Christian faith but defined their beliefs differently. Meagher worried they'd end up locked in conflict — she's socially liberal, and Jodi seemed more conservative. But she relaxed when Jodi said that she didn't want to be put in a box.

"I also don't want to be labeled," says Meagher, who often faces the assumption that she holds certain positions because of her religion, such as being opposed to LGBTQIA+ rights.

From there, the conversation flowed naturally. Meagher described having learned about politics by watching television with her father when Dwight D. Eisenhower was running for president. Jodi talked about her mother's death in December 2020, when no family members were allowed in hospice because of COVID-19.

Meagher left the conversation surprised by how easily two people with differing beliefs could be honest and respectful with each other. "We both agreed that this was helpful to our personal lives and that we might keep an open heart for conversations with other people," she says.

That willingness is the goal of One Small Step, a project launched by StoryCorps in 2018 that matches strangers who have differing political beliefs for a conversation aimed at building mutual understanding.

"The goal is not to convince the other person they're wrong and you're right, but rather to talk about who we are as people — to be reminded of one another's humanity," says StoryCorps chief program officer Lisa Gale, PhD.

Gale adds that the polarization of our politics has created a culture of contempt that poses an existential threat to America. It's human nature to see outsiders as a threat and to cling to our opinions when someone challenges them — but bridging our differences is how we can understand one another, cocreate solutions to pressing social issues, and meet the needs of our whole community.

"If we want to live in a democracy and a civic society where we're self-governed, we have to figure this out," says Anna Sale, Berkeley-based host of the *Death, Sex & Money* podcast and author of *Let's Talk About Hard Things*. "This is building the muscles we all need to figure out how to find common ground."

Simply bringing different groups into the same space isn't enough to mend fences. We can see from toxic social-media outbursts, public protests, and broken family relationships that talking without listening may do more harm than good.

If you approach the process thoughtfully, with an open mind and the willingness to change your perspective, you too can contribute to healing our divided society. Gale and other experts suggest these steps.

Begin Intentionally

Before you launch into a potentially polarizing conversation, take the time to consciously affirm the relationship or whatever you have in common. That can be as simple as both of you being residents of the same community and wanting it to thrive. Or perhaps you're family members committed to understanding each other.

"When you take those moments to reinforce what your relationship is to one another, that puts you in the headspace of wanting to understand, and encourages curiosity rather than debate," Sale explains. (For more on nurturing curiosity, see page 64.)

Discuss in person, rather than online — and keep it private so you're both focused on what the other person has to say. Consider stating a goal or setting ground rules, such as an agreement that if either of you feels overly agitated, you'll take a break.

You might say, "I'm going to try my hardest to listen openly, without judgment, with the hope that the two of us can better understand each other," says Daniel L. Shapiro, PhD, founder and director of the Harvard International Negotiation Program and author of *Negotiating the*

Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts.

Engage only if the desire for communication is mutual, and be mindful of the circumstances. “Is it worth it to raise the topic at the first reunion after two years of pandemic?” Shapiro asks. “Both people need to be motivated to have the conversation.”

Open Your Mind

To bridge the difference, you need to see the value in recognizing someone else’s perspective — and be willing to have your own mind changed. Know that your beliefs, values, and ideas stem from your unique path through life and represent only one view of the world, advises Columbia University associate professor of science education Christopher Emdin, PhD, author of *Ratchetdemic*.

“The only expertise I have is my own perspective,” says Emdin, who advises “radical humility” in the hard work of seeking to understand others. “Take the time to be still and to study.”

Don’t look to score points in a debate; instead, make mutual compassion your goal. By seeing the other person as having valid reasons for their beliefs, and acknowledging the truths they share, you’re modeling how to have a civil discourse.

“We start the conversation in an untenable position if we make it so that our only path to victory requires the other person to say, ‘I’m bigoted and racist,’” says Kwame Christian, director of the American Negotiation Institute in Columbus, Ohio, and author of *Finding Confidence in Conflict: How to Negotiate Anything and Live Your Best Life*.

Listen Attentively

Often we don’t listen in a conversation; we merely wait for our turn to speak. When it comes to charged topics, attentiveness is paramount.

“The thing that’s most profound is the listening,” Gale says. “It’s in taking in the information that your eyes are opened.”

Acknowledge and validate emotions that come up, advises Christian. Ask reflective questions with the goal of deepening your understanding — not to catch the other person in a logical fallacy.

“Responding with curiosity and compassion recognizes that they have value,” Christian says. “If you think that the only person who needs to transform in the conversation is the other person, that arrogance comes out in your tone.”

Name the areas of commonality, whether you both believe in hard work, the importance of honesty, or the need for a robust economy. Don’t argue over facts; dig deeper to the values and beliefs that are being challenged by whatever issue is on the table.



The goal is not to convince the other person they’re wrong and you’re right, but rather to talk about who we are as people — **to be reminded of one another’s humanity.**

Ask about the reasons underlying people’s beliefs, and the evidence that led them to certain conclusions, says educator Lecia Michelle, author of *The White Allies Handbook* (forthcoming). “Talk about your own experiences, and encourage empathy.”

Manage Your Triggers

Expect that you may feel anxious during a difficult conversation and your body may react physically. Humans are social animals, and we’re often more comfortable around people whose views are similar to our own.

In fact, our brains work harder metabolically when we’re learning something new, says Lisa Feldman Barrett, PhD, a neuroscientist and author of *7½ Lessons About the Brain*.

“When we’re faced with people who are different from us in some way that we’re unexperienced with, our brains have a harder time predicting what will happen next,” Barrett explains. That metabolic tax on our brains makes it harder for them to regulate our bodies.

You can prepare for this by being hydrated, taking deep breaths, and making sure you embark on the conversation when you feel grounded and well rested. Keep the conversation pace slow, and notice if you start to use pressured speech — you may have fallen into attempting to persuade the other person rather than truly seeking to understand.

Think Long Term

Feeling uncomfortable is an unavoidable part of the process, Emdin says. You’re building resilience: The more you engage, the easier it will become.

One conversation may not change the world. But a practice of respectful, sincere conversation across differences can sow the seeds of transformation in your life and your community.

“Just like you exercise every day or invest energy in certain practices to keep yourself healthy, this is something you can do,” Barrett says. “You can deliberately engage with people who disagree with you, not for the purpose of convincing them, but to learn something new.”

Any number of problems in our neighborhood, state, or country will be better solved if we can find common ground. Shapiro calls this a civic mindset, as opposed to a partisan or individualist mindset.

“We’re all part of the same national project, the United States of America,” he says. “There’s so much shared work that can get done that’s in the interest of not just red and blue but everyone. A little bit of talking and listening helps everybody.” 🌱

KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS is a writer based in the Washington, D.C., area.

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Rise and Fall

A reflection on ancient empires and the lessons we can learn from them.

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

Over the course of history, patterns of success and failure have played out across cultures and societies, offering lessons for change and opportunities to do things differently. Various empires, for instance, rose to significant power and influence — the Inca, Greeks, Romans, and Persians are all examples of superpowers that dominated their respective regions for periods of time.

Each of them grew because of their respective ideologies (philosophical, religious, economic, and political), leadership, military power, cultural diversity, and trade. And despite limited technology, communication capabilities, and means of travel, they continued to expand over vast areas. At its peak, the Roman empire, for instance, was estimated to be around 2 million square miles that spanned three continents.

Yet despite their periods of growth and success over many years, all of these empires eventually fell, quite literally becoming ancient history. As with their rise, their collapse was the result of various issues, including invasion, migrations, division, poor leadership, ideological differences, overexpansion, and succession.

In the case of the Inca, the story goes that a civil war — caused by disputes over control of the empire between two sons of emperor Huayna Capac — was a factor in the fall to the Spanish in the mid-1500s. In ancient Greece, the death of Alexander the Great resulted in conflict between his generals; infighting about who had the right to rule contributed to the eventual decline.

I share all of this because there are common threads I see within the

rise and fall, success and later failure, of these empires; some of them are playing out in our society today — ideological differences, division, the sense of entitlement.

By definition, entitlement is “something that you have a right to do or have” or “the feeling that you have the right to do or have what you want without having to work for it or deserve it, just because of who you are.”

As participants in society and various groups, we should all have certain entitlements — from the protections of citizenship to the right to expect fair treatment and equal opportunity across experiences, to the workplace offerings of benefits, fair wages, and vacation time.

It’s the second definition that gives me pause: “the feeling that you have the right to do or have what you want without having to work for it or deserve it, just because of who you are.”

Like the empires of the past, America began as a result of various factors — ideologies, leadership, diversity of culture, and more. The forefathers were committed to creating a democracy — a better place with greater opportunities. They wanted its citizens to be able to build a better life for themselves and future generations. So they worked together, devoting their efforts to forming a more perfect union.

Over the last 245 years, which is a relatively short period in terms of a rise to power, the United States has become a global leader. In expanding across much of North America, it quickly grew its economy, along with its transportation and technological capabilities.

And though our nation’s leaders initially and intentionally stayed out of foreign affairs, its involvement in wars between the mid-1800s and mid-1900s solidified its influence at the international level.

Yet in the last decade, there have been warning signs that our nation could be at risk of veering down a path similar to those of earlier empires. Ideological differences, division, disputes over who has a right to what — these factors seem to be tearing us apart when it’s more important than ever to come together.

If we continue on this trajectory, where will it take us? Is this the direction we really want to go? And what can we do to influence a turnaround as individuals within a collective?

I think we have to start with self-reflection: What is my role? What am I expecting because of my current circumstances? When I’m feeling entitled, how do I balance that with my personal responsibility?

Then we have to take action, each of us doing our unique part to contribute to the greater good. That includes working together, in spite of our differences and varying points of view, and being willing to listen to and respect one another.

Most important, we have to put in the hard work as we pursue the rights this nation promises us. Because when we do, we can collectively prevent the fall — and nurture healthier, happier people and communities in the long run.

BA

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



You start wherever
you can.

— ANNE LAMOTT

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Tastes Like Sugar, Zero Aftertaste
Ideal for Coffee, Tea, Water, Shakes
Perfect for Baking & Cooking
Use on Cereal, Granola, Yogurt



**The World's Best-Tasting, Keto Certified,
Non-GMO Project Verified, Plant-Based Sugar & Syrup**



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