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Experience Life

STRONG, FAST & FIT

A 9-Week Escalating
Density Program

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FIND YOUR BALANCE

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024

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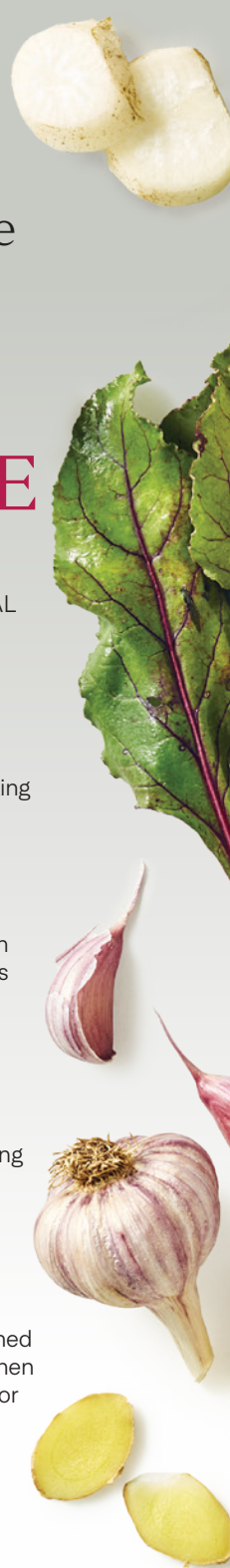
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Whether you're contemplating a dry January, exploring the sober-curious movement, or simply trying to cut back on alcohol, these winter mocktails are just the ticket. If you're in the mood for something warm and cozy, try our recipe for Mulled Cider With Hibiscus or Dirty Chai With Maca. For something cold and bubbly, whip up a Rosemary-Grapefruit Sparkle or Elderberry Fizz. Scan the QR code below or go to ELmag.com/wintermocktails to see more of our mocktail recipes.



CONNECT WITH US!

HOW TO NAVIGATE THE FITNESS FLOOR

The gym can be a confusing and intimidating place. Experts offer tips to help boost your confidence. ELmag.com/fitnessfloorguide

14 HEALTHIER VALENTINE'S DAY DESSERTS

From a simple yogurt dip served with fresh fruit to an elegant gluten-free raw chocolate tart, these recipes are delightfully decadent. ELmag.com/valentinedesserts

TIPS TO START A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Meditation not for you? No matter. Whatever mindfulness practice you choose, here are five things to keep in mind. ELmag.com/mindfulnessstips



Win These!

SLIP INTO COZY

These house slippers and house shoes from Nootkas are made with hand-felted New Zealand merino wool — which means they're naturally odor-resistant. The soft suede soles make it easy to pad around the house, and they're a breeze to get on and off. Sign up for your chance to win by scanning the QR code or visiting ELmag.com/janfebgiveaway.



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LIFE TIME
HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

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

Reality Check

REFLECT AND LOOK FORWARD — it's one of my favorite traditions at the start of a new year. On Jan. 1, once the holiday decor is all packed away, and before the regular routine of life resumes, I reflect on the intentions I set for the previous year. Then, I document new ones for the year ahead.

Recently, I've followed the lead of best-selling author and podcaster Gretchen Rubin, creating "22 for 2022" and "23 for 2023" lists.

That might seem like a lot to take on in any given year, but as Rubin explains: "These items can be easy or ambitious; one-time undertakings or habits that stretch for years; fun or . . . less fun. There's no one way to make your list — just think about what you want the new year to hold."

My lists feature a mix of personal and professional goals, some large, some small, some practical, some aspirational. Last year, for instance, they included taking daily walks, researching the steps for writing a children's book, and training for a fitness competition or event.

I'm always interested to see what I've completed and what remains outstanding. It leads me down a path of wondering: *Why did I accomplish some things but not others? Did my interests change? Was a goal too vague or too big? Did something shift and pull my attention in a different direction? Is the goal something I'd still like to accomplish?*

With those insights in mind, I then start to look forward: *What do I want to build or expand on from previous years? What do I want to do more of? What do I want to try? Where do I want to travel? How do I want to feel? How do I want to spend my time?*

I then draft the new year's list, first carrying over any of the goals that still resonate with me and adding on from there. The key, as Rubin advises and I've come to appreciate, is finding a balance of ambitions.

If every goal or habit is big, it can be hard to make meaningful progress on any of them: *Where do I start? Where do I put my focus?*

But with a variety of goals, there are usually small actions or steps I can take over time that move me closer to where I'm aiming to go. This motivates me to keep going. And once I reach a goal, however big or small, I have the confidence and the experience to know that I can probably achieve another one (or maybe several more), too.

None of this is groundbreaking, but I share it as an alternative to the all-or-nothing resolutions and calls for change that often dominate headlines and conversations this time of year. I share it because real progress and change happens when goals are intentional, actionable, realistic, and sustainable.

So as we start 2024, I encourage you to find a balanced approach — one that honors how far you've come and inspires you to pursue whatever's next.

A quick note: We hope you love the new look and feel that we're debuting with this issue of Experience Life! This redesign is a visual evolution of our ongoing editorial commitment to support your health and wellness endeavors. A huge thank you to our amazing creative team for bringing it to life.

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.



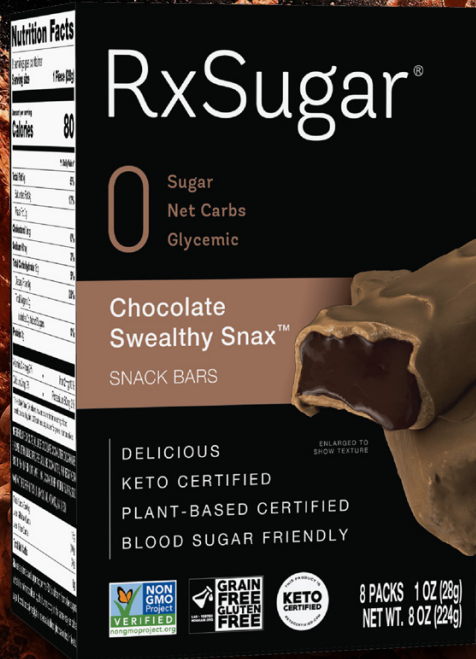
"There are usually small actions or steps I can take over time that **move me closer to where I'm aiming to go. This motivates me to keep going.**"



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TALK TO US

GRATEFUL TRAVELERS

 I am a grateful traveler for so many of the reasons Laurel Kallenbach illustrates in this terrific piece (“Five Strategies for Becoming a More Conscious Traveler,” July/August 2023). And she reminds us, too, of a deeply important lesson: “In the end, we’re always on some kind of journey, and what matters is that we truly inhabit the place we’re in — even if we’re there for only a half-hour.”

Patricia L.


EMBRACING CURIOSITY

 Thank you for the publication of this article (“How Curiosity Changes Your Mind,” July/August 2023). Life can feel especially cruel when one loses a loving soulmate, as I did after 64 years of marriage. It was curiosity that saved my life. Line dancing, learning a new language, canasta, poetry — they all continue to help me find a pocketful of joy in each day.

Accepting grief and learning to cope with its ever-persuasive reality is much more enduring when you open your mind and body to new pathways of possibility.

Sasha E.


ACCOUNTING FOR AGE

 I find many articles in every issue of your magazine quite valuable. I particularly appreciate how you span the age spectrum when it comes to how different solutions apply to people of different ages. However, I was a bit disappointed by the photo accompanying your article “The Importance of Maintaining Mobility as You Age” in the June 2023 issue. When I turned the page to start the article, my eye went from the title to the picture that is coincidentally right by the subheading of “Maintaining Mobility With Age.” It shows a young woman doing a yoga pose that I know I certainly can’t do. I read the article anyway but couldn’t help but think how many others in my age group (I’m in my 60s) saw the picture and said to themselves that this article was not for them.

Mary G.




FROM ME TO WE

 Finally, something that makes sense in navigating a successful, healthy relationship (“How to Move Beyond Individualism to Create a More Loving Relationship,” September/October 2023), instead of the “it’s all about me” mentality.


Robert S.

SUPPORT STRATEGIES


 Regarding your article “Good News on the Cancer Front” (July/August 2023), here are some ways you can help a cancer patient: Wear a mask when you are sick and be mindful of hand hygiene; get your seasonal vaccines so you’re less likely to pass on seasonal germs; donate a pint of blood (it can help up to three people, including a cancer

patient); and, for those with the means, donate money to research.

Jennifer D.


 I took my mother to pool physical therapy twice a week for her Parkinson’s (“Can Exercise Mitigate the Effects of Parkinson’s?,” July/August 2023). She loved it and felt safe from falling while in the pool.

Gloria P.


 A lot of folks experience OCD symptoms at a level that is not debilitating but is enough to hinder their comfort, happiness, and relationships to some degree (“Understanding OCD,” October 2021). Even if the symptoms are not severe enough to require a diagnosis, understanding what’s behind the thoughts and feelings, and using techniques designed for treating the full-blown disease, can help.

Jan B.

FINDING CONNECTION

 I loved your May 2023 issue and particularly enjoyed “Food, Freedom, and Forgiveness.” I’m 62 now, but I ran track in college and identified with Julieta Cruz’s story. I also did not seek counseling and was able to pull myself out of my struggle with bulimia. The last time I purged was when my husband proposed to me 40 years ago. It wasn’t easy, and I sometimes still find myself using exercise to allow myself to eat more. Then I have to catch myself and stop the madness! Thank you for sharing.

Jen H.

 Your article “The Neurobic Workout” (October 2020) featured outstanding info and exercise directions. Neurobic exercises will be difficult at the outset for seniors, but it gets much easier over time, I am guessing. I turn 80 in a couple of weeks. My goal is to not run out of function before I run out of years. Enhancing proprioception is so important in preventing falls!

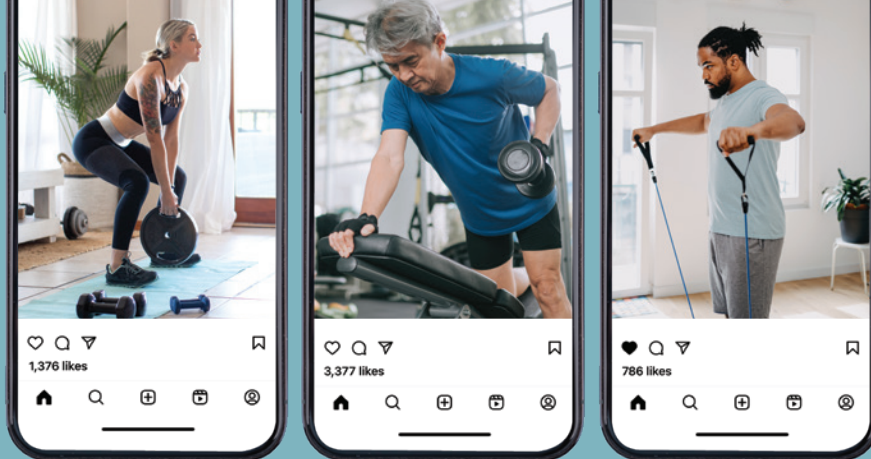
Gerald B.

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The Ugly Side of #FITSPPO



INSTAGRAM IS BUFF with fitness advice. But several new studies warn that much of it is misleading or even dangerous, particularly to mental health.

Search #fitspiration, or its abbreviation, #fitspo, on the social media platform, and you'll find some 90 million posts. The number of "fitfluencers" is tougher to gauge, although estimates range to more than 50,000. And some megainfluencers have upward of 12 million followers.

Critics argue, however, that too often "fitspiration" is just "thinspiration" — and that it can do more harm than good.

EFFECTS OF THINSPIRATION

A study published in 2023 in *BMC Public Health* found that 59 of the 100 most popular Instagram fitfluencers offered unsound fitness advice or "contained sexualization, objectification, or promotion of unhealthy or unrealistic body shapes." These posts could damage people's physical and mental health by promoting exercise as a tool to become skinnier, the authors noted.

"The majority of fitspiration posts consist of images of thin and athletic women promoting exercise, fitness, and healthy lifestyles," the authors reported. "On face value, this type of inspiration should increase exercise behavior and help to improve well-being. However, a relatively small but growing body of evidence has . . . established that, while exposure to fitspiration images inspires fitness, it also results in greater body dissatisfaction and negative mood and lower perceived sexual attractiveness."

It's common for these posts to feature outfits, lighting, camera angles, and poses that create a slimming silhouette. And with the rise of body-altering photo apps, the proliferation of filtered and doctored images has furthered the trend toward body dissatisfaction while giving the platform the nickname Thinstagram.

Too often
"fitspiration" is
just "thinspiration"
— and it can
do more harm
than good.

A systematic review of 43 studies, published in *Adolescent Research Review* in 2022, concluded that "viewing images on [social media] depicting unattainable beauty ideals leads young people to feel dissatisfied about their bodies, with appearance-comparison processing playing an important role."

After showing fitspo images to 269 women aged 18 to 30, researchers conducting a study published in the journal *Body Image* in 2022 concluded that "viewing fitspiration and clean-eating content on Instagram is negatively associated with thin-ideal internalization and disordered eating symptomatology."

THE MOST SUSCEPTIBLE AUDIENCE

Fitspo may adversely affect people of all ages, but research finds that youth — especially adolescent girls — may be most susceptible. In 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA, issued a special report outlining "alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges" among youth. He cited multiple factors, including developing brains, family relationships, and neighborhood conditions, as well as messages from media and popular culture.

In 2023, Murthy issued another public advisory, warning that social media can have "a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents."

Buttressing Murthy's reports, the American Psychological Association (APA) in 2023 issued a report, *Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence*, warning in particular that "adolescents should limit use of social media for social comparison, particularly around beauty- or appearance-related content."

"Research suggests that using social media for social comparisons related to physical appearance, as well as excessive attention to and behaviors related to one's own photos and feedback on those photos, are related to poorer body image, disordered eating, and depressive symptoms, particularly among girls," the APA authors noted.

For practical guidance to help recognize what's harmful and what's helpful in Instagram fitness advice, see "The Dos and Don'ts of Following 'Fitfluencers'" on page 32.

— MICHAEL DREGNI



MEASURING MORE THAN BMI

Obesity was classified as a disease by the American Medical Association (AMA) in 2013, and physicians then began to accept body mass index (BMI) as a way to measure a patient's health risk — and to convince insurers to cover treatments.

Now, 11 years later, the AMA is warning doctors that BMI doesn't tell the whole story.

During its annual meeting in June 2023, AMA delegates approved a new policy encouraging physicians to use BMI only in conjunction with other measurements, such as visceral fat, body adiposity index, relative fat mass, waist circumference, metabolic function, and genetic factors.

"There are numerous concerns with the way BMI has been used to measure body fat and diagnose obesity, yet some

physicians find it to be a helpful measure in certain scenarios," noted the group's immediate past president, Jack Resneck Jr., MD. "It is important for physicians to understand the benefits and limitations of using BMI in clinical settings to determine the best care for their patients."

BMI can be a useful metric when assessing population-level trends, says Mayo Clinic cardiologist Francisco Lopez-Jimenez, MD, but it can't distinguish between fat, muscle, and bone. And because it was originally accepted as an accurate weight metric based on research that largely excluded racial minorities, it tends to deliver misleading data when applied to BIPOC patients.

Black patients typically have lower body-fat percentages and more muscle mass when compared with white people

displaying the same BMI, Lopez-Jimenez tells *Scientific American*. People of Asian descent, on the other hand, tend to carry more body fat than what their BMI suggests. In both cases, physicians may be making diagnoses without accurate information.

"Relying on BMI to diagnose obesity," he argues, "is like diagnosing diabetes on the basis of weight instead of testing someone's blood-sugar level."

For a more reliable picture, Lopez-Jimenez advises physicians to use DEXA scans, which can estimate a patient's fat tissue, as well as to check blood pressure and order blood tests to measure cholesterol and triglycerides. "That gives us a better picture about the health risk of a patient."

— CRAIG COX

ASPARTAME AND Cancer Risk

Aspartame — the ubiquitous artificial sweetener sold under the brand names NutraSweet, Equal, and Sugar Twin — has sparked controversy for decades, but in 2023 a leading health watchdog for the first time officially labeled it as a possible carcinogen.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a body of the World Health Organization (WHO), ruled that the faux sugar may cause liver cancer in humans.

The IARC based its conclusion on observational studies connecting the consumption of artificially sweetened drinks to an increase in cases of the cancer.

Other organizations rushed to refute this finding, however. "Our results do not indicate that occasional consumption should pose a risk to most," Francesco Branca, MD, director of the WHO Department of Nutrition and Food Safety, said at a press conference. Still, he added, people who consume large amounts of aspartame should consider switching to water or other unsweetened drinks.



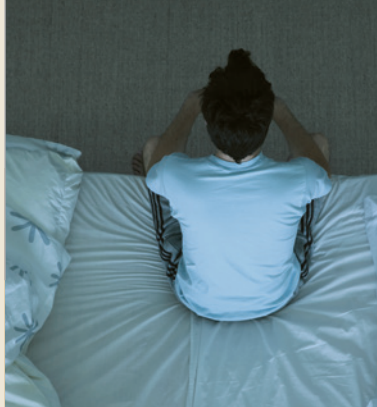
The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the American Beverage Association (ABA) continue to maintain that aspartame is safe to consume. The ABA cited the Department of Nutrition and Food Safety announcement, which described the evidence for aspartame causing cancer in humans as "not convincing."

The FDA, which approved aspartame in 1974, stated it "disagrees with IARC's conclusion that these studies support classifying aspartame as a possible carcinogen to humans."

The agency has previously set the acceptable daily intake of aspartame at 50 mg per kilogram of a person's body weight. So, for a 150-pound person, approximately 3,400 mg a day is deemed safe.

A 12-ounce can of diet soda contains around 200 mg of aspartame. (For more on the downsides of sugar alternatives and sweeteners, tune in to this *Life Time Talks* episode: ELmag.com/sugaraltpodcast.)

— JEMIMA COOKE



Signs That Your Mental Health Needs Attention

YOU KNOW WHEN a cold is coming on thanks to telltale symptoms like a sore throat or stuffy nose. But you may not be quite so attuned to the signs of oncoming mental troubles.

When we understand the warning signs, we can prepare for rather than react to psychological issues. Not all of these are certain indicators of mental health concerns, but they may be something to keep an eye on.

You're sleeping poorly. Sleeping more, less, or poorly is a symptom *and* cause of mental health issues. When we're depressed, anxious, or reeling from stress, our sleep often suffers.

Conversely, inadequate rest impairs a range of cognitive and physiological processes essential to mental well-being, leaving us vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Other warning signs are excessive sleep — especially if you remain unrested even after sleeping in — and persistent nightmares.

Your stomach feels off. Gastrointestinal (GI) issues can both cause and result from psychological distress. That's because the GI system

and the brain are closely connected, so it's crucial not to dismiss cramps, indigestion, bowel issues, and other GI concerns as purely physiological — especially if you can't identify an obvious trigger.

Your eating habits change.

Depression can influence food cravings. Because carbs trigger serotonin release, we are more likely to reach for carb-heavy comfort foods when we're depressed.

Poor eating habits, like stress eating, can also be a sign that you aren't addressing stress in a healthy way.

You can't get motivated. Lack of motivation is a hallmark of several mood disorders. It may stem from difficulties honing attention and shaking off critical self-talk.

Procrastination in response to activities you genuinely dislike should be little cause for worry. But struggling to keep up with daily responsibilities for several weeks may be a sign of mounting mental problems.

You don't enjoy things that usually matter to you. Depression saps the joy from life, which is why anhedonia — the inability to experience pleasure —

is considered one of the most reliable symptoms of depression.

Studies have linked depression with reduced reward sensitivity. When we're depressed, this means our brains don't release as much dopamine, even during situations that normally make us feel good.

You don't feel like leaving the house. Isolation can signify a variety of mental health issues, depending on the context. Staying home due to a lack of motivation or a sense that you won't enjoy yourself may be a sign of depression.

Isolating out of fear that something bad might happen is a feature of certain anxiety issues, including social anxiety disorder, which involves fear of judgment or ridicule from others. Agoraphobia involves fear of being unable to escape from or get help in a dangerous situation.

Isolation can also be a response to trauma. We're prone to avoiding situations that remind us of a traumatic experience, even if we don't always consciously recognize it.

You've been snappy lately. Finding yourself constantly on edge,

YOGA FOR THE AGES

People have done yoga — one of the world's oldest health practices — for centuries to improve well-being. The benefits are myriad and, as several recent studies have found, perhaps even more important and potent as you get older.

Not only does yoga encourage healthy aging, but it may actually counteract aspects of the aging process when practiced over the long term.



A 2021 *Advances in Geriatric Medicine and Research* summary report of 43 studies concluded that integrating yoga into exercise regimens as an older adult builds mobility, flexibility, and strength; improves sleep health; helps protect against cognitive decline; and offers many other mental health benefits.

frustrated, or angry may be a sign of underlying psychological concerns. Studies suggest that chronic stress and worry can impair functioning in the part of the brain responsible for crucial executive functions, including attention and emotion regulation — hence our tendency to feel edgy when we're anxious.

Irritability may also signify depression. Anger is more emotionally accessible than sadness for some of us, which is why persistent irritability merits a closer look.

THESE SIGNS NEED not always be cause for alarm, since emotions such as grief can affect us similarly. But if you feel like you may need help, consider therapy. And reach out to people you love and trust: Connection is one of the most powerful protective measures we can take.

— ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC



LEARN MORE

For a longer version of this article — including warning signs of more-serious mental health issues — see [ELmag.com/warningsigns](https://www.elmag.com/warningsigns).

THE HIGHS — AND LOWS — OF Blood Pressure

Nearly half of all adults in the United States have high blood pressure, or hypertension, a condition that can lead to stroke or heart attack. Symptoms might include headaches, nosebleeds, shortness of breath — or nothing at all. It's often called the "silent killer."

Less familiar is hypertension's opposite: low blood pressure, known as hypotension. Researchers during the past half-century have debated the notion that the risk of death declines as blood pressure falls, and then increases if it sinks below recommended levels. This so-called J-curve thesis remains controversial.

Doctors generally agree, however, that certain symptoms signal dangerously low levels. These include:

- Lightheadedness
- Fainting
- Nausea
- Fatigue
- Blurry vision

One cause of these symptoms may be an excessive dose of blood-pressure drugs, Richard Klasco, MD, writes in the *New York Times*. "If you have symptoms, your doctor may decrease your dose, discontinue one of your medications, or switch to a different medication," he notes. "Your doctor can also evaluate whether you have heart problems or other conditions that may be making your blood pressure low."

(For more on managing blood pressure, see [ELmag.com/bloodpressure](https://www.elmag.com/bloodpressure).)

— CC



A small study published in 2022 found that healthy elderly adults who practiced hatha yoga for two years performed better on cognitive tests of executive function and reaction time compared with a control group. No significant difference was found between the groups in episodic memory and sustained attention.



Yoga will not stop or reverse the aging process, but it can have benefits at the cellular level, according to a study in *Oxidative Medicine and Cellular Longevity*: Participants showed significant improvements in biomarkers of cellular aging, oxidative stress, and telomeres, the cellular clocks that shorten with each cell replication.

Yoga offers basic yet essential social rewards. Classes can provide a sense of community, whether they're in person or online. 🧘

— LAURA MOKAYA

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KIT UP NOW

STILL STOKED



PHOTOS BY KWAKU ALSTON

Snowboarding legend Shaun White on big air, big hair, big crashes, big wins — and his big plans for the future.

BY MICHAEL DREGNI

SHAUN WHITE has spent much of his life on a snowboard. The world has thrilled to his feats, his grace, his skill at spinning and flipping through the air.

Now, at 37, White has retired from the sport he personified. But what does the lord of the board do after winning 23 X Games medals and three Olympic golds? After being hailed as an icon, a legend, the GOAT?

“As long as I can remember, this is what I’ve done,” he has mused. “I just don’t know who I am without it.”

A SPEEDY TALENT

White was born with tetralogy of Fallot, a rare congenital heart disorder caused by four coronary defects; he underwent two open-heart surgeries before he was a year old. Such a condition might have been expected to slow him down, but as his parents remember, White also seemed to have been born without fear.

By age 5, he was following his older brother, Jesse, to ride at a neighborhood skateboard park. He began snowboarding at 6. The definition of a grommet — board slang for an enviably precocious punk kid — White was soon being mentored by skate ace Tony Hawk.

On winter weekends, his family loaded their snowboards into their van and trekked from their home near San Diego to the San Bernardino Mountains. The five of them hit the slopes, then slept in the van and snuck into resort bathrooms to brush their teeth before buckling in again the next day.

“From a young age, I realized I had a talent for eyeballing speed and distance,” White recalls. Still, he can’t

shake the recollection of his knees quaking as he dropped in for his early competitions. But his prowess won him the weighty nickname Future Boy — as in the future of the sport.

White inked a sponsorship deal with primo snowboarding gearmaker Burton at 7. By the time he was 12, he was placing in pro events. “All of a sudden,” he recalls, “I’m a millionaire at 15.”

And that’s when things began flipping out of control.

“It’s not just walking away from the sport:
It’s walking away from a piece of identity.”

HEAVY MEDALS

Thanks to his unruly mane of ram-bunctious red hair, White soon became known as the Flying Tomato. He shredded the slopes, went airborne, unreeled seemingly impossible flips, and won big. He took home his first Olympic gold at Torino 2006, then was victorious again at Vancouver 2010.

What White hadn’t learned to control was life off the board. From Future Boy, he became a bad boy: He crashed his snow-white Lamborghini. He partied hard. He was arrested for vandalism and public intoxication. And he issued his fair share of public apologies.

As part of his bid to grow up, he cut his hair, jettisoned the madcap nicknames, and sought to discover who Shaun White really was.

Then at age 31 came the crash that made him reassess everything.

He was practicing in New Zealand in 2017, striving to perfect what was considered snowboarding’s most daunting trick — a back-to-back double cork 1440, essentially spinning twice while flipping four times. But he missed and slammed into the 22-foot superpipe. Medevacked to a hospital, he was treated for a head injury and a lung contusion and received 62 facial stitches.

“All of a sudden, the record stopped turning,” he recalls. “It’s gotten harder. I don’t flip as fast as I used to. I know what’s looming in the distance: If I could just win the next Olympics, then I could retire.”

He spent the next four months recovering and rethinking things. By the time of PyeongChang 2018, he was ready again to drop into the halfpipe. He fell on his second run. On his third shot, he landed a spectacular frontside double cork 1440 and cab double cork 1440 combo — a historic first. Gold was once again his.

After the X Games and Olympic glory, stepping aside was not easy. “It’s not just walking away from the sport: It’s walking away from a piece of identity,” he confesses.

But White has not set aside his board. “Retirement is a pretty ugly word,” he has said. Instead, he’s created an active lifestyle brand, Whitespace, which designs and engineers snowboards and outerwear. And this project gives him a chance to give back, allowing him to mentor the next generation of boarders.

We caught up with White in Los Angeles to talk about his outlook on the future.



Q & A

WITH SHAUN WHITE

EXPERIENCE LIFE • You talk about how so much of your identity was tied up in your athletic career. Now that you've stepped away professionally, who is Shaun White today?

SHAUN WHITE • So much of my persona was wrapped up in the sport. I was in the driver's seat and just had my foot on the gas; I wasn't really stopping to look at things and wonder, *What's next?*

Now, to my surprise, with or without competing, I'm still who I am and what I've accomplished still stands. It's a nice feeling to know that my whole world just hasn't done a full 180. I get to kind of live in this glow of my sporting career.

At the same time, a new door has opened, and I really feel like I'm more myself now than I've ever been. I feel like there was the competitor in me, and that's still in me. But I feel like I have a new take on everything — a new take on life.

EL • Finding balance in life can be difficult when you're passionate about something — it can feel like all or nothing. What does balance look like for you now? What has surprised you?

SW • When you get consumed by something, like the way I was with snowboarding and skateboarding, it's an amazing feeling to just lose yourself and get fully engulfed in it. And I think at times I definitely dipped into this unhealthy space of being consumed by the sport and winning and what's next and not really enjoying the process as much.

I don't think I would have continued to be a professional snowboarder if it hadn't been for skateboarding. You have to have that balance; you have to have other interests in your life.

It's tough to walk away, but I find that taking a break really lets you hear the tune in a different way. I try my best — and I think now that I've gotten older, I feel like I've got a better balance with it. But there's always room for improvement.

EL • Of all the things you've learned over the course of your life and career, what is one lesson that you consistently go back to that keeps you moving forward?

SW • I forget who told me this, but they said, "Look, as long as you've learned something from whatever you're doing, then there are no mistakes." Everything's a learning curve. But if you can take the mistakes and turn them into wins, it can propel you forward.

"Everything's a learning curve. But if you can take the mistakes and turn them into wins, it can propel you forward."

Now, that's a challenge if you ever find yourself in a hospital in New Zealand with your face ripped open and you're holding this bucket to spit blood into because your lungs are filling with blood, and somebody comes in and tells you to look at the bright side. Yeah, I get it — it's hard in those moments to ask, *Well, what am I learning in this moment?*

While waiting for surgery, I found myself at my lowest of lows. I couldn't look in the mirror — it was awful. And I was just like, *What is to be learned from this?*

Asking myself that question changed everything. I remember really wanting to go to the Olympics and wanting to win and wanting to succeed, but at that point I was like, *No, I need to. I have to. I can't have let this happen to myself for nothing.*

I started diving deep within myself, asking *What went wrong? How can I change?* And then I reorganized my career path to that Olympics, and it set the tone for the rest of that season.

I ended up winning even when the odds were really stacked against me.

You know, I think it was that moment when I looked at that situation and found a positive within all that chaos that propelled me forward. So, it's kind of like a muscle if you can build that sort of insight. It really helps.

EL • The sport of snowboarding is largely on the map because of you. How are you working to pass the torch to the next generation?

SW • Snowboarding is an individual sport, so I was always like, *What am I doing? What's next?* And I didn't really take the time to let too many new people into my world.

Now, I've jumped to the other side of things: I started Whitespace with my brother and my friend, and it's exciting in a whole new way. We're building these product lines that I get to test and approve — and I just try to keep that competitive part of my brain going.

It's been amazing also because now I'm on the other side of the fence looking at sponsoring and mentoring young, talented snowboarders just like people did for me — and it's just been so rewarding. The next generation of talent is just incredible, and I'm so excited to see where they take this sport that I love so much. 🌟

MICHAEL DREGNI is an *Experience Life* deputy editor.



BEHIND THE SCENES

For a peek at our photo shoot with Shaun White, visit ELmag.com/shaunwhite.



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Sit on the Floor

A boon to longevity, regularly sitting close to or on the ground can improve your health and mobility. Make it a daily practice with this month's challenge.

BY *EXPERIENCE LIFE* STAFF

WHY

Sitting or squatting on or close to the floor can pay big dividends in hip mobility, spine health, and kinesthetic awareness. Researchers have also connected sitting on the floor (along with the ability to stand back up unassisted) with longer lifespans.

HOW

Make it a daily practice to sit on the floor while doing other activities, such as watching TV, eating, or reading. Use the floor space in your office while on calls or in webinars. Sit tall and avoid arching your back. Shift positions and use a cushion or rolled yoga mat as needed.

TAKE ACTION

Discover ways to sit, kneel, or squat more often; find exercises and a sit-stand test to track your progress; and learn about other health markers of longevity at [ELmag.com/onehealthyhabit](https://www.ELmag.com/onehealthyhabit).



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The Real Win

A 60day Challenge winner reflects on the whole-body health benefits he received when he began focusing on his fitness.



Clockwise from top left: Brad Jones on the pickleball court with Sarah Winchester (left) and Catalina Gibson in November 2022; training with Sarah in August 2023; with Life Time team members Kyle Rosen, Angela Chandler, Jorge Aristizabal, David Freeman, and Bryce Morris.

BY BRAD JONES

WHEN I ROLLED into the Life Time in Frisco, Texas, in June 2022, I didn't know what to expect. As a paraplegic who'd been using a wheelchair for 32 years, I felt limited in most gyms. At the least, I hoped to find an upper-body ergometer (a.k.a. an arm bike) and a swimming pool with a lift. I was excited to discover that the club had both.

From the start, the club felt different from other gyms. I could sense how supportive and encouraging the community was, even on the tour. I felt welcome and seen.

This feeling deepened when I made eye contact with a personal trainer who gave me a smile and a look that said, *I can help this guy*. I was startled — I hadn't met a PT who had experience working with people in wheelchairs — but something about her struck me. I learned her name was Sarah Winchester and immediately set up a training session with her.

It turned out Sarah had taught adapted physical education, coached Special Olympics athletes, and worked with wounded veterans. Her extensive experience with adaptive training was just what I'd been looking for.

In addition, her passion was palpable. When she looked at me, she saw my capabilities rather than my disability. It felt like a door was opening.

After three decades of feeling restricted in terms of fitness, I was ready to explore what I could do beyond the handcycle and pool.

A LONG FALL

I grew up in Madison, Wis., playing football, basketball, golf — I'd jump into any sport. I learned a lot about fitness from my uncle John, who manufactured weightlifting equipment. I remained active into my 20s, when I began working construction.

I've gained a new excitement for life.
I'm eager to continue my journey toward becoming the best possible version of me.

That all changed in February 1990, when, at 24, I was injured at a worksite. I was setting roof trusses on a new bank office outside of Milwaukee. When the trusses collapsed, I fell 25 feet onto concrete. I broke my back and was instantly paralyzed.

I knew I was never going to walk or run again after the accident. Even so, I felt OK mentally while I was in the hospital. The environment was accessible for people in wheelchairs, and the com-

munity there was really supportive.

When I returned home, however, the reality of how much my life had changed hit me hard. I realized that not all buildings are accessible, doorways often aren't wide enough, and streets and sidewalks are difficult to navigate. I learned to adapt, but it was tough. My mental health declined.

Fitness was a struggle too. Thanks to my uncle John, I knew how to exercise in a gym. But things were so different now. I didn't know where to start. I didn't watch my diet either; I consumed fast food, soda, and chips and dip the way I always had.

THE SAME OLD CYCLE

A couple of years later, I found a company that built a handcycle: a tricycle powered by the arms rather than the legs. This was great because I needed to do more cardiovascular exercise and gain strength in my arms, which would help me get in and out of my chair more easily.

In 1995, I moved to Texas and built a house with a pool. I hit the gym regularly with a good friend, Chad, using free weights and machines I could transfer onto for upper-body work. I kept in decent shape. It felt like a turning point.

I sustained this momentum until 2001, when I fell and broke my leg

while transitioning from my wheelchair to my office chair. Making matters worse, I developed a severe pressure wound from the cast, leaving me bedridden for three months.

After recovering, I struggled to start and maintain a fitness routine again. The resulting muscle loss and weight gain made it harder for me to get around.

As the years passed, my shoulders and elbows were under incredible strain. I experienced substantial back pain, so it was painful to sit in my chair for long periods of time.

By early 2022, I knew something had to change. I was tired of repeating the same cycle, in which I tried and failed to meet my goals. It was taking a toll on me mentally and physically.

I needed a coach, someone who could help me find better ways to move and fuel myself. That's when I found Life Time and Sarah.

CHALLENGE ACCEPTED

When Sarah and I started working together, the first thing she wanted to address was my back pain. She saw how weak I was in my core — which can contribute to back pain — so strengthening that became our first priority. We started using bands, battle ropes, and weighted medicine balls.

Within two weeks I noticed that I could sit in my chair longer. I was transferring myself with more stability. I had more energy. I was excited to do stuff again. The progress was promising.

Still, when Sarah after a few weeks mentioned the 60day Challenge, I laughed. I wasn't even close to being ready for something like that.

Sarah was smart, though. She let it be for a few days, then brought it up again. This time, I considered how much I had accomplished over the previous two months. I figured, *Why not?*

The 60day Challenge started in September. My goals were to eat more-nutritious meals, establish a consistent workout routine, and lose weight.

The numerous recipes provided by Life Time were a huge help on the nutrition front. I never had to eat anything twice if I didn't want to. I continued working with Sarah, who gave me

additional nutrition advice and kept my workouts interesting.

For example, she encouraged me to try pickleball and Pilates. Although I was initially skeptical, I took to both. Pickleball quickly became one of my favorite activities. It's such a fun way to get moving and socialize with others. Pilates surprised me too — it's a more intense workout than I expected.

Throughout the Challenge, the furthest thing from my mind was winning. I was focused on using the structure of the program to progress toward my goals.

It paid off — I remained consistent with my workouts and meal plan, which helped me build muscle, increase my range of motion, and lose weight. Other people noticed my progress as well, and to my surprise, I was selected as one of 20 finalists.

BEYOND THE WIN

Heading to the club on the day the winners were announced, I reflected on how far I had come. I wanted to be with Sarah when I got the news because she had been such a big part of my journey. I wanted to let her know how much she had helped me.

The moment I rolled through the doors, cannons of confetti went off and air horns blew — I was one of four national winners! Nearly every staff member was there in the entryway to celebrate. I was completely overwhelmed and so honored. At that time, it was the most surreal thing that had ever happened to me. I'll remember that moment for the rest of my life.

I'm grateful to Sarah for opening my eyes to a new and healthy way of life, and for providing invaluable guidance and support. Winning the 60day Challenge demonstrated to me that my only limitations are those I place on myself, and I couldn't have reached this point without her.

Today, I'm 58 and feel better than I have in years. Most important, I've gained a new excitement for life. I'm eager to continue my journey toward becoming the best possible version of me, with the confidence that I can accomplish more than I ever dreamed I could. 🌟

Brad's Top Takeaways

1.

Good nutrition matters. "You can spend 12 hours a day in the gym, but you won't get healthier if you fill your body with junk," Brad says.

2.

Sweat the small stuff. "Fitness technology tracks micro measurements that keep me motivated."

3.

Community creates accountability. "As I worked with Sarah, other staff offered words of encouragement. Fellow members would too. When I didn't feel like going to the club, I knew those people would be looking for me," he says.



TELL US YOUR STORY

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

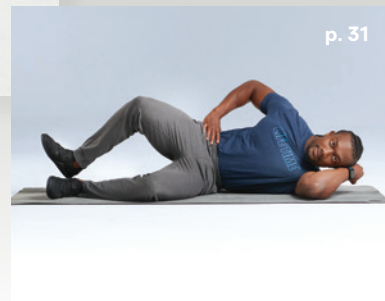
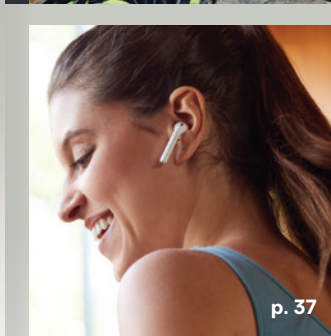
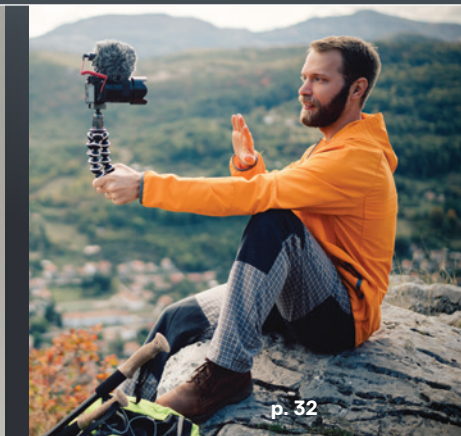
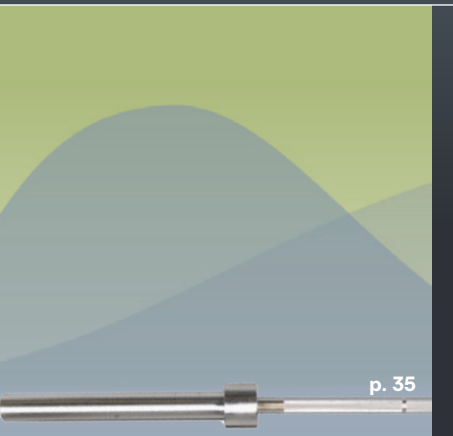


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REAL FITNESS



SEEKING A STRONG FITNESS FOUNDATION? Escalating Density Training is an effective approach to “get more done in a shorter period of time,” explains Life Time master trainer Joe Meier, CSCS, PN2. Find the nine-week program he designed — which can be done in less than three hours per week — on page 26.

STRONG, FAST, AND FIT:

Escalating Density Training

Short on time? This nine-week program will get you strong — in less than three hours a week.

BY **ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS**

STRENGTH TRAINING is chock-full of variables: Sets and reps. Volume and intensity. Weight lifted, rest taken, the frequency of training sessions — the list goes on. One variable that can get a little lost in it all is density, which describes the amount of work performed in a time frame.

Focusing on density when lifting weights — an approach known as Escalating Density Training (EDT) — can maximize workout efficiency and minimize fatigue without sacrificing powerful strength gains.

“You get more done in a shorter period of time,” explains Life Time master trainer Joe Meier, CSCS, PN2.

This is what EDT looks like in practice: Select an exercise, set a time limit, and complete as many good-form reps as you can within that allotted time. Note your total reps, and in your next training session — without increasing weight — try to do more reps in the same amount of time.

Density increases — and pretty soon, so does your strength.

Meier designed the following nine-week EDT program, composed of three weekly workouts of one hour or less, to help you get seriously strong without compromising recovery.

Ready to get started? Grab your timer and let's go!



The 9-Week Program



The program is divided into three three-week blocks. For the first three weeks, you'll do the same workout — Workout A — three times a week. For weeks four to six, you'll perform a different workout — Workout B — three times a week. And for the final three-week block, you'll complete Workout C three times a week.

You'll do each workout a total of nine times; each time you repeat a workout, the goal is to perform more reps than the time before.

For each exercise in the program that requires a weight, choose one that allows you to do 10 reps — and no more — with great form. This weight is known as your 10-rep max, or 10RM, and varies significantly from person to person and exercise to exercise.

If you're not sure what your 10RM is, spend time at the start of the first workout of every training block to test which weight is best. Remember: This is the weight that you'll stick with for the full three-week block.

Begin each session with a five-minute warm-up. Then set your timer for the indicated length of time (10, 15, or 17 minutes). Once the clock is running, alternate between the two moves in a set of exercises in a circuit fashion, performing five repetitions of each move (or five reps per side, as indicated). Move with control and rest as needed.

When your timer goes off, rest only as long as it takes to set up for the next set of exercises. Make sure to note how many total reps of each exercise you completed. The sample chart provided with each workout can help you track your progress.

In each subsequent workout, try to perform more total reps with the same weight in the same time period.

Workout A

WEEKS **1** **2** **3**

Repeat the following workout three times a week for three weeks. Perform the paired movements in a circuit style, doing five reps of each to complete as many rounds as possible in the 10-minute time allotment. Using the same weight from session to session, attempt more rounds — and hence more total reps.

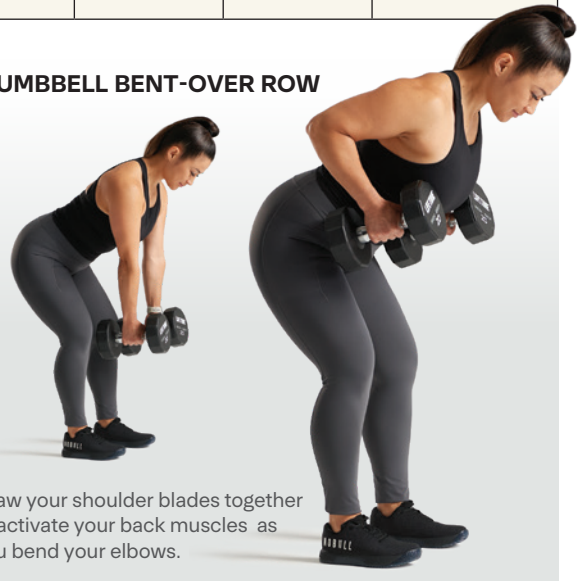
EXERCISE	WEIGHT	TIME	TOTAL REPS
1A: Dumbbell Bench Press		10 minutes	
1B: Dumbbell Bent-Over Row			
2A: Kettlebell Goblet Squat		10 minutes	
2B: Hanging Leg Raise			
3A: Barbell Sumo Deadlift		10 minutes	
3B: Barbell Shoulder Press			
4A: Pull-Up		10 minutes	
4B: Cable Pallof Press			

1A: DUMBBELL BENCH PRESS



Squeeze your pectorals (chest muscles) as you press the dumbbells straight up. Feel a stretch in your pecs when you lower the weights.

1B: DUMBBELL BENT-OVER ROW



Draw your shoulder blades together to activate your back muscles as you bend your elbows.

2A: KETTLEBELL GOBLET SQUAT



Keep your chest up, elbows in, and weight close to your chest throughout the movement.

2B: HANGING LEG RAISE



Maintain an active hanging position, with your shoulders and core engaged. Avoid swinging or swaying as you raise your legs.

Workout A, Cont.

WEEKS **1** **2** **3**

3A: BARBELL SUMO DEADLIFT

Assume a wide stance, with your toes turned out slightly, and take a shoulder-width grip on the barbell.



3B: BARBELL SHOULDER PRESS

Engage your core and glutes to maintain a neutral spine as you press and lower the weight.



4A: PULL-UP

Use a resistance band to provide assistance; avoid swinging your body up.



4B: CABLE PALLOF PRESS

Maintain core engagement and avoid rotating through your torso as you press the band forward.



VOLUME VS. DENSITY

To understand density, it's first important to understand volume. The volume of a workout is determined by multiplying the total number of reps by load.

For instance, let's say you complete three sets of five goblet squats holding a 20-pound weight. To determine the volume, you would multiply your total reps (15) by the load (20). Your volume would be 300.

Density takes volume one step further by placing a time constraint on it. Following the same example, let's say you perform the same volume — 300 — in 10 minutes one day

and in nine minutes during your next training session. The volume hasn't changed, but the workout became denser.

There are multiple ways to play with volume and density: You can change the time frame, as described in the example above, but you can also change the load or the total number of reps. For the purposes of this program, the load and time stay the same in each three-week block, so all you need to think about is the total number of reps. Do more reps from one session to the next, and your workout will become denser.



Workout B

WEEKS **4** **5** **6**

Repeat the following workout three times a week for three weeks, for a total of nine times. Perform the paired movements in a circuit style, doing five reps of each to complete as many rounds as possible in the 15-minute time allotment. Keeping the weights the same from session to session, attempt to complete more rounds — and hence more total reps.

EXERCISE	WEIGHT	TIME	TOTAL REPS
1A: Dumbbell Incline-Bench Press		15 minutes	
1B: Single-Arm Dumbbell Row			
2A: Dumbbell Thruster		15 minutes	
2B: Dumbbell Pullover			
3A: Barbell Romanian Deadlift		15 minutes	
3B: Triceps Dip			

Workout C

WEEKS **7** **8** **9**

Repeat the following workout three times a week for three weeks, for a total of nine times. Perform each trio of movements in a circuit style, doing five reps of each to complete as many rounds as possible in the 17-minute time allotment. Keeping the weights the same from session to session, attempt to perform more rounds — and hence more total reps. 🏋️



EXERCISE	WEIGHT	TIME	TOTAL REPS
1A: Barbell Bench Press		17 minutes	
1B: Side-Plank Hip Dip			
1C: Dumbbell Reverse Fly			
2A: Barbell Back Squat		17 minutes	
2B: Chin-Up			
2C: Arnold Press			
3A: Barbell Sumo Deadlift		17 minutes	
3B: Stability-Ball Body Saw			
3C: Dumbbell Overhead Triceps Extension			



GET MORE ON THE MOVES

For full exercise instructions, visit ELmag.com/EDT.



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



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The Clamshell

Strengthen your hips and glutes with this lower-body isolation move.

Raise the top knee only as high as you can without rocking or shifting the hips.

Initiate the movement from the hips.

Prop yourself up or rest your head on your bottom arm.



Maintain an active bottom leg by gently pressing it into the floor.

Keep your core engaged throughout the movement.

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

THE GLUTEUS MEDIUS is often overlooked — and underworked. Responsible for hip abduction, the so-called side butt is essential for activities like running and squatting. The clamshell is one great way to activate and strengthen this small-but-mighty muscle.

The clamshell looks exactly like it sounds: Lying on one side, ankles together, hinge at the hips to raise and lower the top knee — a move that resembles a clamshell opening and closing. This low-impact move requires little space and no equipment.

It sounds simple — easy, even — but the clamshell's apparent simplic-

ity is exactly what can stand in the way of its effectiveness.

The clamshell isn't simply raising and lowering the knee. It requires engaging the glute med of the top leg to initiate the open-close motion.

Moreover, it is not just the top leg that is working. To maximize the clamshell's benefits, it's important to engage the bottom leg, too, creating tension by pressing it gently against the floor.

For some people, building the mind-body connection to isolate the glute med will be the first (and possibly ongoing) challenge. Start with body weight only. Once you can control the

full movement, progress by looping a small resistance band around your thighs just above the knees.

Another common pitfall is focusing on raising the knee as high as possible while ignoring the need to keep the hips stacked and squared in front of you. Rocking, swaying, or otherwise moving the hips and pelvis to achieve greater knee height not only diminishes the glute med's work, but it can result in discomfort. Move slowly and with control, keeping the focus on the hips rather than on the knees.

Get the most out of your clamshell with the following tips.

INSTRUCTIONS

1.

Lie on one side with your knees bent and feet in line with your shoulders and hips.

Make sure your ankles, knees, and hips are stacked.

2.

Keeping your body squared in front of you and your feet together, engage your hips to spread your knees open.

3.

When you reach the end of your range, hold the top position for a moment. Then reverse the movement with control.

4.

Repeat for reps. Begin with three sets of 10 reps per side and build up to three sets of 20 per side.

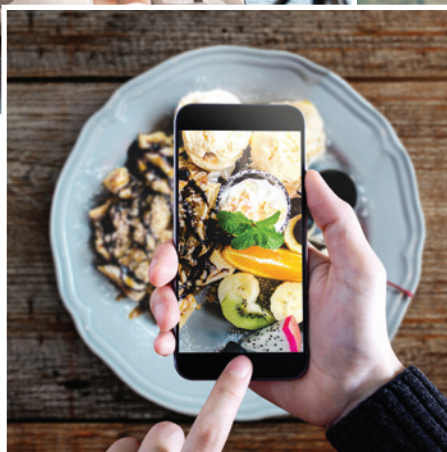


PROGRESS THE MOVE

For four clamshell variations, visit ELmag.com/clamshell.



The Dos and Don'ts of Following "Fitfluencers"



Want #fitspo you can trust? Experts offer advice on engaging mindfully with fitness-themed social media content.

BY KATIE VIRNIG

FITNESS ADVICE LOOMS

large on social media, but the saturation isn't synonymous with credibility or service. Quite the opposite: Several recent studies have found that, far from being helpful, much online fitness-related content does more harm than good. (Learn more in "The Ugly Side of #Fitspo" on page 10.)

This is grim news for health-minded folks who seek out information and inspiration on social media. It's also disconcerting even if you aren't specifically looking for fitness content. The suggestive algorithms of various platforms make it likely that many users are engaging with fitness content from influencers who may lack expertise or credentials — but do have a financial interest in selling products, like fitness gear, outfits, and supplements.

So, what's a modern exercise aficionado to do? While deleting apps is one option, going cold turkey isn't the only way forward. Our experts offer their top dos and don'ts for engaging mindfully with fitfluencer content.

DO

TAKE AN INVENTORY

As a first step, Jessi Kneeland, an author, speaker, and body-image coach, advises taking careful stock of the accounts you already follow and interrogating how that content makes you feel. If a brand or influencer sends you down a comparison spiral or makes you feel insecure, Kneeland, who uses the pronouns they/them, suggests you remove that content from your feed without remorse.

"A lot of people, especially women, often feel guilty or invalidate themselves for being triggered by a person online," they say. "But if it impacts you, that's enough of a reason to unfollow or mute someone, whether you know the person or not."

DON'T

MISTAKE THIN FOR INSPIRATION

Be wary of accounts that promote specific and unrealistic body ideals. Studies have shown that exposure to images and messaging that urge

fat loss and thinness can have an adverse effect on body satisfaction, mood, and self-perceived sexual attractiveness. This environment can also foster disordered eating.

You can expand your digital sphere of influence by searching hashtags like #healthateverysize, #normalizenormalbodies, and #joyfulmovement, says Kneeland. But they note that this isn't a sure-fire way to avoid thinspiration; some creators will co-opt unrelated hashtags to boost their content.

DO

LOOK FOR EXPERTISE

Too often, "we end up hearing the loudest voice in the room, which isn't always the best perspective to follow," says Andrew Moran, DPT, a physical therapist who specializes in working with endurance athletes. To help you separate the quality content from the clickbait, Moran recommends some healthy skepticism of the content creators who fill your feed.

Ask yourself: *What fitness credentials and training background does this influencer have? Is the advice backed by science, or is it purely anecdotal? Does the account feature heavily edited, filtered, or otherwise doctored images? Is the person or brand pushing a one-size-fits-all solution to a problem or a single definition of health or fitness? Are they more focused on selling products than sharing information?*

These questions don't necessarily have right or wrong answers — selling a product, for instance, doesn't automatically equate to low credibility — but taking the time to answer them for each account you follow can alert you to red flags that may otherwise go unnoticed.

DON'T

OVERCOMMIT YOURSELF

It's easy to be lured to the profiles of personal trainers or professional athletes sharing snippets of their routines and to be tempted to take their methods for a test drive. But before you commit to hourslong sweat sessions or completely changing your approach to nutrition, athletic counselor Eiron Sanchez, MSW, recommends asking yourself: *How much change can I withstand now?*

"What works for one individual might not work for the masses," says Sanchez, a mental health and mental performance coach who works primarily with collegiate and professional athletes. "The athlete or fitness account you're following might have been training for 10, 15, or 20 years, depending on their level. Ultimately, you might want to see yourself in a similar position, but the key is determining the first step."

Meet yourself where you are right now and consider your current fitness, energy, and overall stress levels to determine next steps. Make one or two changes at a time for a routine you can sustain.

DO

CHALLENGE YOUR BIASES

Just because a fitfluencer might have what conventional standards would



Meet yourself where you are right now and consider your current fitness, energy, and overall stress levels to determine next steps.

deem a fit body doesn't necessarily mean their advice is best. Seek out different viewpoints by filling your feed with marginalized bodies and various identities within those body types.

For example, if you're an able-bodied marathoner, consider following runners with disabled bodies. If you're a thin, cisgender yoga practitioner, seek out instructors who are fat and queer. Engage with accounts that expand the culturally defined standards of health and fitness.

By diversifying the body types you follow, you might also discover a need to confront your misperceptions about what exercise can and should look like. "Begin to see these people through the lens of compassion and empathy," Kneeland says. As we humanize people and their lifestyles, we cultivate broader social acceptance.

DON'T

FORGET YOUR SELF-DIRECTED PREJUDICES

Challenging your biases includes analyzing those you've internalized against yourself. Follow fitfluencers whose bodies look like yours, advises Kneeland. Expose yourself to people who possess — and even celebrate — your biggest insecurities. By normalizing those areas, you can reprogram prior beliefs about what your body looks like and how it functions.

DO

REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE IN CONTROL

Navigating a social media account does

not have to be a passive experience. Though Instagram's algorithm is powerful, users can have some control over their feeds. Be intentional about hitting the "Follow" button — research the content creator's bio and affiliations before you do — and don't feel guilty about unfollowing or muting any account that doesn't satisfy your needs.

To hide a suggested post, click the three dots above that post and click "Not Interested." You can also hide some ad content: Click your profile picture, navigate to Settings, and find the Accounts Center. Go to Ad preferences, then Ad topics, and use the search bar to add a "See less" filter to topics you'd rather not see.

None of these stopgaps is perfect — if you need to break up with an app for your physical or mental health, you can delete it. Remember, fitness advice, inspiration, and accountability exist beyond the confines of our smartphones. (For tips on finding and working with a trainer, visit ELmag.com/personaltrainer.)

DON'T

FORGET YOUR WHY

Social media can siphon your energy if you're not a conscious player in that environment. And if fitspiration is what you're after, it does little good to close the apps feeling too exhausted and unmotivated to pursue your fitness goals.

One way to stay present online and combat comparison fatigue is to use the initialism WWW. Coined by journalist Catherine Price, author of *How to Break Up With Your Phone*, it stands for: "What for? Why now? and What else?" When you opened Instagram, what were you looking for? Why are you scrolling right now? What else could you be doing?

If you're going to engage with fitfluencer content, doing so with your purpose in mind can help save your sanity. (For guidance on articulating your *why* and shifting your fitness mindset, check out ELmag.com/fitnessmindset.)

KATIE VIRNIG is a Minnesota-based writer.



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Cortisol & Exercise

How do your fitness efforts influence this critical hormone?

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

AS WITH MANY fitness questions, the answer to this one is “it depends.” It’s true that exercise has the potential to help balance the stress hormone cortisol. But this benefit hinges on the balance of all life’s stressors, including exercise. Here’s what you need to know to find the balance that’s right for you.

CORTISOL 101

Despite its reputation, “cortisol isn’t a bad hormone, but like everything else, the dose makes the poison,” says Monique Class, MS, APRN-BC, a family nurse practitioner and clinical nurse specialist in holistic health at the Center for Functional Medicine.

In the right dose, cortisol serves many functions. It helps regulate the body’s stress response, releases glucose, helps modulate inflammatory processes, and turns down the parasympathetic “rest and digest” system to help deal with a perceived threat. Ideally, once the threat has passed, cortisol levels return to normal.

At least that’s how it’s supposed to work. Chronic stress can increase cortisol levels, creating a disrupted cycle of feeling wired or tired.

THE EXERCISE Rx

We’ve long been taught that exercise is a great way to unwind, de-stress, and balance cortisol.

The part of the story that often gets left out is that exercise is a stressor too. As such, it causes a cortisol spike.

But that spike isn’t necessarily bad. This postexercise bump is short-lived, lasting about one to two hours after a workout; it can enhance your workout recovery and train your body to handle cortisol more efficiently.

“A regular workout routine can help you adapt to stress through various mechanisms, including improving your blood-sugar regulation, resilience, confidence, and outlook,” says Samantha McKinney, RD, CPT, Life Time national program manager for nutrition and metabolism. This may help your cortisol levels return to normal more quickly after a stressful event.

Exercise, then, can combat stress. But not all exercise is created equal. Again, the right dose is important, and that specifically comes down to exercise intensity and timing.

Intensity: Research has shown that high-intensity workouts create greater immediate cortisol bumps than low-intensity forms. Sounds like a win for high-intensity workouts — but these benefits hold true only when we’re operating in our optimal states.

When we’re working with disrupted cortisol rhythms, it can be helpful to temporarily reduce exercise intensity or duration and pay careful attention to our recovery strategies in between tougher workouts.

Timing: Because intense exercise raises cortisol levels, it can be great for an energy boost in the morning or midafternoon. But a high-intensity workout in the evening, when the cortisol curve is naturally tapering to its lowest levels to facilitate sleep and recovery, can be disruptive to some. For people struggling with insomnia or anxiety, this disruption can be particularly taxing.

FINDING BALANCE

None of this means that you should cut out intense exercise completely or even avoid it at night. Remember: Intense workouts are potentially great for managing stress in the short and long term. It just means you need to be

mindful of how and when you go about it, taking note of your current stress levels, sleep patterns, and nutrition.

We can handle only a certain amount of stress without noticeable disruptions in how we feel and function, McKinney explains. That stress can come from anywhere — relationships, work, finances, diet, pain, lack of sleep, or exercise. Some stress is inevitable.

But if you add stressors like physical activity without easing into them, your cup could eventually overflow. When this happens, you may experience a number of symptoms, including chronic fatigue, digestive issues, aches and pains, and a drop in workout performance.

“When your stress cup is overflowing, you may need to temporarily scale back on exercise intensity or duration to keep things balanced,” McKinney says. Great options include low-intensity activities like walking, gentle yoga, or light resistance training.

Observe and track how specific types of exercise make you feel and whether they affect your sleep or energy levels, she adds.

Stay open to modifying your workouts — and whatever you do, don’t skip exercise altogether. A sedentary life is stressful on the body too: Lack of movement can also contribute to cortisol disruption.

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



THE CORTISOL CURVE

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Listening Games

Music-based workouts are a fun way to mix up a treadmill routine. Our fitness editor shares a favorite playlist.

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

THE FIRST listening game I ever played in a fitness class had simple instructions: Rack and load a barbell for high-rep back squats and queue up Moby's "Flower," a song that repeats the phrase "Green Sally up and Green Sally down" (often misquoted as "Bring Sally up and bring Sally down") 30 times. Hit play, unrack, and listen. Every time you hear "Sally down," squat down. Every time you hear "Sally up," stand back up. The rest of the time, hold still at the top or bottom of the squat — and whatever you do, don't rerack the bar.

As my gym friends and I prepped our squatting stations and hyped ourselves up, the fitness studio rumbled with murmurs of "You can do anything for three minutes" and whispered attempts to calculate 30-rep maxes. "This will be fun," our coach said — a warning as much as a promise.

Three minutes and 25 seconds later, our class of 15 avid lifters was sprawled on the floor. It had been fun. Kind of. It had also been hard, humbling, kind of terrible. And if the smile on my face was any indication, it had also been the best.

I've only done the Moby challenge a couple more times in the decade since — the pace is well suited for strength moves like squats, pushups, and pull-ups if you're interested in doing them for high reps without a break, which I rarely am these days. And yet it has inspired me to work listening games into my cardio routine.

Specifically, listening games turn my otherwise tedious treadmill sessions — the only way I run through the cold and dark of Minnesota winters — into some of my most smile-inducing workouts.

Here's how I do it: After choosing a song with a repetitive word or phrase, I hit play and begin jogging. Each time the word or phrase repeats, I add 0.1 or 0.2 mph to my speed. In between, I hold the new speed until it's time to add again.

By the conclusion of the song, I'm running fast — even sprinting, depending on the song. Occasionally, a song will have so many adds that I'm sprinting by the end of the first chorus. In that case, I'll reset to my jog and hold that pace until the chorus picks up again.

I always begin these sessions with dynamic stretching and a five-minute warm-up jog. Between efforts, I recover for at least a minute or for the length of another song by walking or jogging.

If you're new to listening games, start with one or two songs, resting as needed in between, and extend your runs as your fitness improves. (I like to line up three to five songs that will help me progressively pick up my speed or incline, but you do you.)

Why does this music-based approach make me so happy? Well, research has shown that music can boost mood and motivation, pushing athletes to work harder and longer while helping them dissociate from fatigue.

Listening games, more specifically, evoke childhood memories of playing Simon Says and Red Light, Green Light — infusing workouts with a sense of play.

Plus, listening closely to a song — extra closely when it's not in English — reconnects me to a sense I often take for granted (my hearing). Best of all, it can transform any treadmill sesh from a slog into a party.

Hit Play

These are a few of my current favorite listening-game songs.

Songs With 10 to 24 Repetitions

- **"Fill Me In"** by Craig David: Add speed on "fill me in."
- **"Hollaback Girl"** by Gwen Stefani: Add speed on "hollaback girl."
- **"It's All Coming Back to Me Now"** by Céline Dion: Add speed on "it's all coming back."
- **"Simon Says"** by Megan Thee Stallion: Add speed on "Simon says" during chorus.

Songs With 25 to 39 Repetitions

- **"Pump Up the Jam"** by Technotronic: Add speed or resistance on "make my day."
- **"Con Altura"** by Rosalía and J Balvin: Add speed on "con altura."
- **"Everybody Everybody"** by Black Box: Add speed on "everybody."
- **"Bruk Off Yuh Back"** by Konshens: Add speed on "bruk off yuh back."

Songs With 40+ Repetitions

- **"What U Gon' Do"** by Lil Jon & the East Side Boyz: Add speed on "what they gon' do."
- **"Baby"** by Justin Bieber: Add speed on "baby."
- **"Shake It"** by Bow Wow: Add speed on "shake it."
- **"Rollin' (Air Raid Vehicle)"** by Limp Bizkit: Add speed on "rollin'."



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



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LIFE TIME

REAL FOOD



ROOT VEGETABLES have a long litany of unsung health benefits. For instance, the nutrient-packed carrots — like those in the Carrot “Chorizo” Tacos pictured above — can reduce the risk of heart disease and improve brain health. For more on the nutritional boons of root veggies, as well as a few recipes that highlight them, see page 50.



Food & Mood

How diet can make (or break) your mental health.

BY CHRYSTLE FIEDLER

MAYBE YOUR MOOD is stubbornly low, or your anxiety is relentlessly high. Either way, you've got company. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about one in five American adults will experience a mood disorder at some point in their lives. And many of us just feel . . . moody.

It's easy to attribute these feelings to straightforward depression. Yet mood challenges can also be a signal that your body is calling out for better nutrition. "Your brain cells are your most metabolically active cells. This means they're your hungriest cells, composed of the things that you eat," says nutritional psychiatrist Drew Ramsey, MD, author of *Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety*.

Meanwhile, Ramsey notes, our brains are often undernourished. "The standard American diet is missing the nutrients that the brain needs to grow and function, in addition to causing inflammation and gut dysfunction and affecting how we feel."

What's more, the foods we use to soothe ourselves are often the same ones that spur negative mood states.

"High-sugar, high-fat, ultraprocessed 'comfort foods' that we seek out when we're stressed or depressed tend to be the biggest triggers that disrupt mood," explains integrative and functional nutritionist Cindi Lockhart, RDN, LD, IFNCP. "But we crave and eat them because they trigger an opioid-like reaction in the brain, making them addictive."

Few of us grew up understanding how food affects our mood, and the mental health effects of food aren't always immediate. "Often, people are surprised by the connection between food and mood," says integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD. "It may take years of eating poorly before it really starts to affect their mental health."

But there is good news: We can learn to eat in ways that truly comfort us (more on that in just a bit).

BAD-MOOD TRIGGERS

Building a solid nutritional foundation for mental health starts with recognizing how food may be contributing to low mood. These are some of the factors.

BLOOD SUGAR

Some of us are more vulnerable to becoming hangry than others, but no one is immune. “If your blood sugar isn’t stable, it can mirror mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and fatigue,” says Lockhart.

The brain runs primarily on glucose, and unstable blood sugar deprives the brain of that steady source of fuel. For example, when we haven’t eaten and our blood sugar dips, the brain doesn’t get the energy it needs to function well.

On the other hand, eating foods that cause blood sugar to peak and then drop quickly — think refined sugars and other simple carbohydrates — can lead to insulin resistance.

Insulin helps maintain our energy levels by shuttling glucose into our cells, explains Lockhart. When we consume a lot of sugar, there’s abundant glucose in the blood, and the cells are constantly exposed to insulin. Over time, this ongoing exposure makes them less sensitive to insulin’s signals — and this harms mood, among other things. “Depression is twice as likely if you have type 2 diabetes,” she notes.

Conversely, well-managed blood sugar can have notably positive effects on the brain. “Keeping your blood sugar stable affects almost every aspect of brain function and energy production and protects your brain as you age,” says Emmons. “It also helps reduce inflammation, which goes a long way toward preventing dementia, Alzheimer’s, and other forms of cognitive decline.”

NUTRIENT DEFICIENCY

Too much sugar isn’t the only diet-related challenge to mental health. The brain requires specific nutrients, and it often doesn’t get them.

“For proper brain and mood function you need to have the right elements, like protein,” says inte-

grative psychiatrist Hyla Cass, MD. “[Protein] contains amino acids that produce neurotransmitters that regulate mood.”

If we’re low in serotonin, Cass explains, we tend to be depressed. Likewise, insufficient gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) is linked with anxiety, and a lack of dopamine may affect focus.

These are some of the nutrients the brain needs most:

Protein: In addition to providing amino acids to build neurotransmitters, protein supports mood by how it helps stabilize blood sugar — and most of us can feel it.



B vitamins: These nutrients, which act as antioxidants, help transform food into glucose. Specifically, folate (B9) and B12 help produce neurotransmitters necessary for brain function, says Cass. Depression is a common symptom of folate deficiency.

Omega-3 fatty acids: The brain is more than 60 percent fat. “Omega-3’s essential fatty acids support neuronal-tissue synthesis, membrane fluidity, and serotonin metabolism,” says Lockhart. “These mechanisms help to ease anxiety and depression.”

GUT DYSBIOSIS

When our gut is disrupted, our mood often reflects it. That’s partly because the gut communicates with the brain

directly through the gut-brain axis, a complex pathway linking the central nervous system and the gastrointestinal tract, where many neurotransmitters are forged. “Friendly bacteria in the microbiome are important for making serotonin, dopamine, and GABA,” says Cass.

This is why the gut is sometimes referred to as the second brain. Some estimates suggest that up to 90 percent of the body’s serotonin is produced by gut bacteria. Glutamate, which contributes to learning, memory, and cognition, is also produced in the gut. (For more on the connection between the gut and the brain, see ELmag.com/gutbrain.)

This relationship goes both ways, notes Emmons. “Gut issues, like cramping, bloating, and constipation, are signals that you are stressed or out of balance,” he explains. “They mean that your gut and your brain need your attention.”

FOOD ALLERGIES AND SENSITIVITIES

Food allergies and sensitivities can trigger inflammation in the gut. “When the gut is inflamed, so is your brain, putting you at risk for anxiety and depression,” says Emmons.

Gut inflammation can lead to a condition called leaky gut syndrome. When the delicate, single-cell barrier of the gut becomes damaged, it enables food particles to leak from the gut to the bloodstream; the immune system recognizes these particles as invaders and launches an attack.

This is how inflammation that starts in the gut spreads systemwide. Antigens crossing the blood-brain barrier can trigger inflammation in the brain. Neuroinflammation is associated with a range of mood and brain-health issues, including cognitive decline. (For more on leaky gut syndrome, see ELmag.com/leakygutfaq.)

8 WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR MOOD WITH FOOD

There are no instant solutions to mental health challenges, but a few relatively easy dietary interventions can help stabilize and improve your mood over time.

1. EAT MORE PLANTS

Many traditional foodways offer a helpful framework for upgrading your diet, and most give pride of place to vegetables and fruits — unlike the typical American diet.

Of all traditional diets, the Mediterranean may be the best studied. “The Mediterranean diet is a great mood-supportive way of eating and living,” Lockhart says. “It focuses on nutrient-balanced meals that include vegetables, fruits, nuts, and legumes; healthy fats, like extra-virgin olive oil; and wild-caught fish and whole grains.”

This approach provides the abundant fiber, protein, and healthy fats necessary to maintain a steady mood. “The Mediterranean diet contains nutrients for the brain that promote neuroplasticity; helps populate the microbiome with good bugs; and stabilizes blood sugar,” says Ramsey.

One study found that a third of clinically depressed participants following a Mediterranean diet for depression were in remission by the study’s conclusion.

2. MIND THE CAFFEINE

For some, a daily cup of coffee or tea is an antidote to depression. For others, caffeine exacerbates anxiety and disrupts sleep. If a racing mind and restless nights are among your challenges, consider cutting back on or eliminating caffeine to see whether you notice improvements. (For more on detoxing from caffeine, see [ELmag.com/caffeine](https://www.ELmag.com/caffeine).)

3. FOCUS ON HEALTHY FATS

The omega-3 essential fatty acids found in coldwater fish like salmon,

mackerel, anchovies, sardines, and herring are especially key for brain health. (You can remember this fish list with the acronym SMASH.)

“Make it your goal to eat two to three meals that feature SMASH fish each week,” Lockhart advises. “Omega-3 fats increase cell-membrane fluidity, neurotransmission, and neuroplasticity.”



4. FEED YOUR FRIENDLY GUT FLORA

Fermented foods help support the beneficial flora in your gut, where so many neurotransmitters are produced. Try including something fermented each day. That could be plain yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi, or fermented vegetables. (For more on probiotics and brain health, visit [ELmag.com/probiotics](https://www.ELmag.com/probiotics).)

5. INCREASE FIBER

Fiber is key for both gut and brain health. Whole grains like quinoa, for example, can help keep blood sugar steady and increase the levels of serotonin in your brain, says herbalist Brigitte Mars, AHG,

coauthor of *Natural Remedies for Mental and Emotional Health*.

Another way to support the gut microbiome is with more prebiotics. These are a type of fiber that feed good bacteria, and they’re found in onions, leeks, garlic, Jerusalem artichokes, asparagus, apples, and konjac — a high-fiber tuber commonly consumed as an ingredient in shirataki noodles.

Mars notes that these fiber-filled foods also offer other benefits. “Oatmeal, for example, has antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties because it contains carotenoids, vitamin E, flavonoids, and polyphenols.” (For more on fiber, visit [ELmag.com/fiber](https://www.ELmag.com/fiber); for more on prebiotics, visit [ELmag.com/prebiotics](https://www.ELmag.com/prebiotics).)

6. AVOID FOOD-SENSITIVITY TRIGGERS

Because food sensitivities and allergies can contribute to systemic inflammation, eliminating problem foods can often make a big difference in your overall mood, says Emmons.

“Finding out how differently you feel when you avoid foods that you react to is often an aha moment for many people.”

If you suspect you have food sensitivities but aren’t sure, Emmons recommends trying a modified elimination diet. This starts with eliminating common allergens, such as gluten, dairy, eggs, peanuts, soy, and corn, for several weeks.

During the reintroduction period, you’ll add foods back one at a time, which allows you to identify which ones — if any — cause a reaction. (For more on elimination protocols, visit [ELmag.com/eliminationdiet](https://www.ELmag.com/eliminationdiet).)



7. CONSIDER MEAL TIMING

Maintaining a 12-hour fasting window between dinner and breakfast can help stabilize mood by balancing blood-sugar levels, Emmons notes. “Ayurvedic medicine suggests that you go about 12 hours between supper and breakfast each day,” he says. “This helps your gut to take a break from digestion, allows your blood sugar to even out, helps with insulin regulation, and reduces inflammation.”

For some people, eating four to six smaller meals daily, rather than three big ones, is also useful for supporting mood.

“Eating whole foods more frequently helps you avoid a drop in blood sugar and the anxiety and depression that can result,” says Mars. “It’s important not to get too hungry.”

Lockhart notes that consuming most of your calories earlier in the day can balance blood sugar. “Breakfast is key, as our insulin receptivity is greatest in the first half of the day,” she says. “So is our metabolism and digestion.”

A study published in *Obesity* found that when subjects ate half of their calories at breakfast, 36 percent at

lunch, and 14 percent at dinner, it led to lower fasting blood sugar and better insulin levels. (For more on time-restricted eating and fasting, visit ELmag.com/intermittentfasting.)

8. LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

While the brain and body do have baseline requirements, the best dietary protocol for your mood will be based on the needs and preferences of your unique body.

“The body and brain can thrive with the right ingredients, but one diet may not work for everyone,” says Emmons. “If you’re anxious, the best diet for you will be different than for someone who is depressed or sluggish.”

Finally, remember that good mental health involves being kind to yourself. That can mean saying yes to dessert from time to time.

“Occasional sweets are OK,” Emmons advises. “Just be sure and eat them in small amounts with protein and fat to avoid spiking glucose levels.”

CHRISTLE FIEDLER is a Florida-based health journalist, author, and editor.

KEY NUTRIENTS FOR MOOD SUPPORT

According to nutritional psychiatrist Drew Ramsey, MD, these are the most important nutrients for supporting your mental health:

IRON is essential for forming hemoglobin, the protein in red blood cells that helps transport oxygen from the lungs to the brain. **Food sources:** red meat, pumpkin seeds, oysters, and spinach.

MAGNESIUM regulates neurotransmitters that stabilize mood. **Food sources:** almonds, cashews, and spinach.

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS, such as long-chain EPA and DHA, promote neuroplasticity and neurotransmission. **Food sources:** wild salmon, anchovies, walnuts, and flaxseeds.

POTASSIUM is necessary for neurotransmission. **Food sources:** bananas, broccoli, sweet potatoes, and white beans.

SELENIUM helps thyroid function and regulates mood. **Food sources:** Brazil nuts, sardines, and eggs.

VITAMIN A supports neuroplasticity. **Food sources:** leafy greens, orange and yellow vegetables, and beef liver.

VITAMIN B6 aids brain growth and function. **Food sources:** chickpeas, beef liver, and leafy greens.

VITAMIN B12 helps produce the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine. **Food sources:** clams, dairy products, and nutritional yeast.

FOLATE, or B9, is critical for mood. **Food sources:** Brussels sprouts, leafy greens, and beef liver.

THIAMINE, or B1, supports energy production for brain health. **Food sources:** nuts, legumes, and beef.

VITAMIN C is a powerful antioxidant that fights inflammation. **Food sources:** citrus, red peppers, broccoli, leafy greens, and strawberries.

ZINC can aid neuroplasticity. **Food sources:** pumpkin seeds, oysters, and beef.

A MOOD-FRIENDLY MEAL

This brain-supportive brunch recipe from *Eat to Beat Depression and Anxiety*, by Drew Ramsey, MD, offers satisfying flavor and abundant nutrients without the postmeal crash.

GREEN SHAKSHUKA

This dish delivers ample B vitamins, which are key for a stable mood and a calm mind. Make this year-round with any leafy greens you love — collards in winter, Swiss chard and kale in the spring, and spinach in the summer. Or combine them to your liking. Serve it with crusty bread if you wish, though the pepitas provide plenty of texture and crunch without it.

Makes four servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 25 minutes

- 2 tbs. olive oil
- 2 large bunches Swiss chard (about 1½ lb.), stems and leaves coarsely chopped and kept separate (about 9 packed cups total)
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- ¾ tsp. kosher salt, plus a pinch
- ½ tsp. smoked paprika
- ¼ tsp. red-pepper flakes
- ¼ tsp. ground turmeric
- ½ cup vegetable broth
- 8 large eggs
- 3 oz. feta cheese, crumbled (about ¾ cup)
- 2 tbs. chopped fresh cilantro
- 2 tbs. chopped pepitas

Warm the olive oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add the Swiss chard stems and onion, and cook for four to five minutes, until tender.

Add the garlic, cumin, ¾ teaspoon salt, paprika, red-pepper flakes, and turmeric. Cook, stirring, for one more minute or until fragrant. Stir in the Swiss chard leaves and vegetable broth, and cook for two to three minutes, until the leaves are tender and most of the broth has evaporated.

Reduce the heat to medium-low. Using the back of a wooden spoon, create eight divots in the chard mixture. Crack an egg into each. Season the eggs with a pinch of salt. Cook until the whites are almost set, five to seven minutes. Sprinkle the cheese over the top, then cover and cook until the whites are set and the yolks are cooked to your liking, two to four minutes more.

Serve in shallow bowls garnished with the cilantro and pepitas. 🍴



CRAVING PANCAKES?

Find a recipe for Buckwheat Cacao Pancakes With Raspberry Compote at [ELmag.com/foodmood](https://www.ELmag.com/foodmood).



LIFESHOP



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Avo-Cottage Toast

BY GRACE KENNEDY

Makes two servings
Prep time: five minutes
Cook time: two minutes



2 slices bread of choice



1 garlic clove, halved



1 cup organic, full-fat cottage cheese



1 avocado, thinly sliced



1 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil



2 tsp. toasted sesame seeds



½ tsp. red-pepper flakes



Flaky salt, to taste



BREAKFAST BALANCE

This high-protein recipe also includes carbohydrates and healthy fats to help power you through your day.

Toast the bread to your desired color and rub each slice with the cut side of the halved garlic cloves.

Spread ½ cup of the cottage cheese onto each slice of the bread and lay the sliced avocado on top.

Drizzle with the olive oil and sprinkle with the toasted sesame seeds, red-pepper flakes, and flaky salt.

If desired, garnish with lemon juice and fresh herbs, like parsley, dill, or cilantro.

GRACE KENNEDY is a Philadelphia-based food writer.



Keep It Real

Watch out for imposters among these five favorite foods, and learn how to be sure you're buying the real deal.

BY LAUREN DAVID

WHEN YOU PURCHASE

a tub of grated Parmesan at the supermarket, you expect to get cheese. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Some items on grocery shelves are not what they claim to be.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) calls this problem "economically motivated adulteration," or food fraud, which occurs "when someone intentionally leaves out, takes out, or substitutes a valuable ingredient or part of a food." It could simply be a food product that's cut with other ingredients — like "honey" that's mostly corn syrup.

Or it could be a substance masquerading as something healthier and more expensive — like cheap vegetable oil being sold as 100 percent extra-virgin olive oil (EVOO). It could also be a misleading label with words that could deceive an unsuspecting consumer, like "blend," "fruit-flavored," or "natural."

"When consumers are ill-informed or they are faced with incomplete information, these substitutions become very easy, profitable choices to make, especially at a huge scale," explains David Dellanave, an olive-oil importer based in Minneapolis.

Food is big business, of course, and companies are always looking to boost their bottom line. "The only reason people counterfeit food, adulterate food, and mislead consumers is to make a profit," says Larry Olmsted, author of *Real Food/Fake Food: Why You Don't Know What You're Eating and What You Can Do About It*.

No one wants to waste money on fraudulent foods. Plus, food fraud can mean you're also missing out on the benefits of healthier fare. "The real thing is more likely to have the naturally bioavailable nutrient forms and complementary polyphenols and micronutrients to most effectively nourish your body," explains Samantha McKinney, RD, CPT, national program manager for nutrition and metabolism at Life Time. "And you're more likely to know how your body will tolerate it."

Food fraud affects up to 1 percent of the global food industry, according to independent expert estimates cited by the FDA — though it's difficult to say just how often it occurs "because food fraud is designed to avoid detection." Be especially mindful when shopping for the following five foods, so you can avoid the imposters and get real value for your money.

Coffee

Java offers a host of health benefits, including polyphenols. These powerful micronutrients can quell inflammation, protect against heart disease, and lower your risk of type 2 diabetes.

Coffee is also one of the world's most commonly adulterated products, says Olmsted. Due to rising global demand — and the toll climate change is taking on production — some producers will cut ground coffee with filler ingredients to increase their profits. "You can't tell whether that brown stuff is ground-up coffee, ground-up burned paper, or ground-up burnt twigs — all of which have been added to coffee over the years," he cautions.

THE REAL DEAL

Olmsted recommends purchasing whole beans and grinding them at home to ensure your coffee is free of fillers. (Bonus: Grinding your own coffee has the added benefit of making a fresher, more delicious cup of joe.) If possible, purchase your beans from a brand you trust — or, even better, direct from your local roaster.

Extra-Virgin Olive Oil

Olive oil is one of the healthiest cooking oils, largely because it's rich in monounsaturated fats and their anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Unfortunately, it's also a common target for food fraud, says Olmsted.

"Olive oil is easy to adulterate, and it's difficult or impossible to test for authenticity," explains Dellanave. The fake stuff is often diluted with cheaper oils, such as sunflower, canola, soybean, or hazelnut oil.

THE REAL DEAL

The best way to find the real deal is to learn from a trusted source what good olive oil tastes like. "If a retailer won't let you taste test the oil, go somewhere else to buy it," advises Dellanave. "The only reliable way to know that you're getting olive oil is by knowing your source."

Another option is to skip the imported stuff and look for the California Olive Oil Council seal. Olive growers in California, which produces approximately 99 percent of domestic olive oil, submit their product for chemical analysis and taste testing before getting the stamp of approval. (Get more EVOO tips at ELmag.com/realEVOO.)

Honey

Like other items on this list, honey contains powerful antioxidants and is both antibacterial and anti-inflammatory. But it's easy to fall for imitation honey. "Because honey is a semi-transparent, brownish liquid, it's difficult to tell by looking at it whether or not it's honey or corn syrup," says Olmsted.

Indeed, some honey bottlers have diluted their product with rice syrup and other inexpensive sweeteners to increase profits — a process known as "honey laundering." According to the Honey Authenticity Network, one-third of honey on the market is either adulterated or fake. Some beekeepers point out that adulterated products ultimately drive down prices for the real stuff, making it difficult for them to maintain their hives and their livelihoods.

THE REAL DEAL

Because the best honey comes from beekeepers, shopping at a farmers' market is a good way to find a connection. You can also look for local honey brands at your grocery store.

"Honey is one of the easiest products to buy from someone in your community," Olmsted says. (For more on the health benefits of real, local honey, see ELmag.com/honey.)



Maple Syrup

Made from the sap of maple trees, maple syrup is mostly sucrose — but, because its glycemic load is lower than table sugar, it raises your blood sugar more slowly. It also contains essential minerals, including calcium, potassium, and manganese, making it a popular pick among health-conscious shoppers. But some folks could be duped by "pancake syrups," which look similar but are usually made with corn syrup and artificial flavors.

THE REAL DEAL

Inspect labels closely: Imposter syrups may say "maple breakfast syrup" or "pancake syrup." Also, true maple syrup has only one ingredient: maple sap, which is boiled until it thickens to a syrupy consistency. "There's no water or sugar added," says Olmsted. "If you see anything else on the list, there's a problem."

Parmesan Cheese

True Parmigiano-Reggiano is a strictly regulated product, made of milk from dairy cows that graze pastures in specific provinces of Italy. It's long-aged and carefully inspected before making it to the market.

But because U.S. trademark law applies only to the Italian name, most U.S. "Parmesan cheese" products adhere to no such standards.

This is particularly true of grated Parmesan, which is often cut with cheaper cheeses as well as with cellulose, a food additive that keeps the cheese from clumping in the container — and from melting properly when heated.

THE REAL DEAL

Parmigiano-Reggiano that meets Italian standards will have the name stamped in pin dots on the rind. "If you're buying a wedge, no matter how little cheese you're buying, you should be able to see some of those dots," Olmsted explains.

He warns against buying grated Parmesan, but if you must, look for "Parmigiano-Reggiano" on the label. If possible, pick a Parm that was grated and labeled at the grocery store, rather than a commercial product processed in a factory, to increase your chances of getting the good stuff. 🍷

LAUREN DAVID is a writer based in the San Francisco Bay Area.



ROOTING FOR VEGETABLES

Celebrate the colorful, flavorful, and nutritious varieties of root veggies this winter with these enticing recipes.

BY KATE MORGAN

I TRY TO EAT WITH THE SEASONS. Sure, I crave the occasional midwinter cantaloupe, but for the most part, I prefer to stick to produce that's at the height of its natural growing season — and, ideally, available from farmers in my community. In the winter months, that means root vegetables.

They may not win any beauty contests, but taproots and tubers are the perfect nourishing cold-weather staples. Often the most nutrient-dense part of a plant, roots are full of antioxidants, minerals, vitamins, and carotenoids — natural pigments that can reduce inflammation, boost immunity, and even fight cancer.

Some of my favorite root veggies have a long litany of unsung health benefits. Sweet potatoes can support skin and eye health; garlic can help lower blood pressure and prevent the common cold. Radishes have natural antifungal properties. Sunchokes, also known as Jerusalem artichokes, are a great source of gut-balancing inulin, and nutrient-packed carrots can reduce the risk of heart disease and improve brain health.

Whether roasted or raw, starchy root vegetables are incredibly versatile ingredients that transform savory and sweet dishes. You won't find any plain mashed potatoes here: Instead, these recipes use veggies in surprising ways that'll brighten your plate on even the dreariest winter day.

Braised Daikon Miso Soup

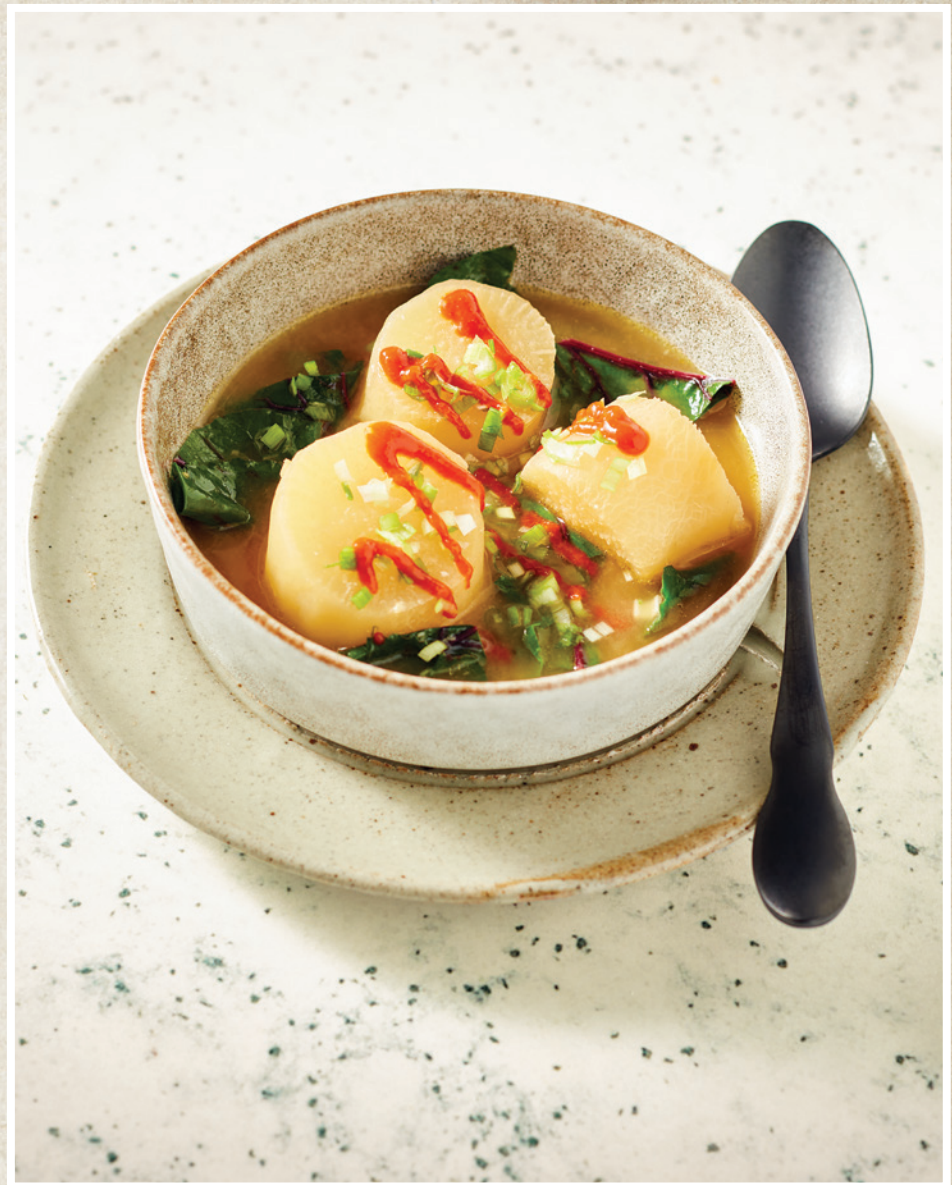
Makes four servings
Prep time: 10 minutes
Cook time: 45 minutes

- 1 large (or 2 medium) fresh daikon radishes
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp. minced garlic
- 1 tsp. minced fresh ginger
- 2 tbs. tamari, soy sauce, or coconut aminos
- 2 tbs. mirin
- 3 tbs. white miso paste
- 3 cups water, divided
- 2 cups vegetable broth
- 1 large bunch beet greens (or greens of choice)
- ¼ cup minced scallions
- Sriracha sauce, to garnish (optional)

Peel the daikon and slice into 1-inch-thick rounds. Place a large, heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat and add the olive oil. When the oil is shimmering, sauté the garlic and ginger until fragrant, about a minute. Add the tamari, mirin, miso, 2 cups water, and broth, and bring to a simmer.

Add the daikon pieces to the simmering broth, then turn the heat to low and cover the pot. Braise the daikon until tender, about 40 minutes.

Divide the soup among bowls and keep the pot over low heat. Add the remaining water and greens to the pot, and stir until the greens are wilted. Use a slotted spoon to add some greens to each bowl, and top the soup with scallions and sriracha to taste.



Carrot “Chorizo” Tacos

Makes four servings

Prep time: 20 minutes, plus four hours
of inactive marinating time

Cook time: 40 minutes

FOR THE “CHORIZO”:

- 4 cups shredded carrots
- 2 ribs celery, roughly chopped
- 1 cup water
- 1 tsp. ground coriander
- 1 tbs. dried oregano
- 1½ tbs. cumin
- ⅛ tsp. allspice
- ⅛ tsp. nutmeg
- 1 tbs. paprika
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ¾ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp. onion powder
- 1 tsp. garlic powder
- ¼ tsp. chipotle powder
- Chili powder to taste
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

FOR THE TACOS:

- 1 cucumber, seeded and diced
- 1 habanero (or pepper of choice), seeds removed and finely diced
- ⅛ tsp. sea salt
- 1 lime
- White corn tortillas
- 4 tsp. sour cream
- ¼ cup queso fresco

In a blender, purée 2 cups of the carrots and the celery ribs with the water until smooth. Scoop the mixture into a mesh sieve, pressing the solids to encourage the liquid to drain out.

Reserve the liquid for another purpose (or drink it — it’s delicious!). Add the pulp to a medium bowl with the remaining carrot shreds. Add the seasonings and olive oil, and mix well to combine. Cover and marinate overnight or for at least four hours.

Cook the carrot mixture in a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium heat, frequently scraping the bottom of the pan, until edges begin to brown and crisp, about seven to 10 minutes.

Toss the cucumber and habanero with the salt and juice from half of the lime. Lightly toast the tortillas on the stovetop until they’re warm and soft. Assemble the tacos by spreading about a teaspoon of the sour cream on each tortilla; add a scoop of the carrot chorizo, and top with the cucumber slaw and queso fresco. Serve with additional lime wedges, if desired.



ENJOY MORE!

To find recipes for Maple Sweet-Potato Crème Brûlée and Creamy Roasted-Garlic Gnocchi (shown above), visit [ELmag.com/rootveggierecip.es](https://www.ELmag.com/rootveggierecip.es).



Sunchoke and Brussels Sprout Salad

Makes four servings

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 15 minutes

- 1 cup water
- ½ cup plus 1 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 cup pearl couscous, dry
- 3 large (or 6 small) sunchokes, peeled
- 12 to 20 Brussels sprouts
- 1 cup mint leaves, loosely packed
- 2 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 2 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1 tbs. honey
- 1 lemon
- ¼ cup crumbled feta
- Sea salt, to taste

In a medium pot, bring the water and 1 teaspoon olive oil to a boil, then add the couscous. Cover and lower the heat to simmer. Cook until the couscous is tender and the water is absorbed, about 10 minutes.

Remove from the heat and let cool or pour into a colander and rinse with cool water.

While the couscous is cooking, use a mandoline or sharp knife to thinly slice the sunchokes and Brussels sprouts.

In a blender or food processor, combine the mint, remaining olive oil, garlic, mustard, honey, and juice of the lemon. Pulse until emulsified and smooth.

In a large bowl, toss the Brussels sprouts, sunchokes, couscous, and dressing. Top with the feta. Salt to taste and serve. 🍴



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



THE BEST WORKOUT?

SPOILER:
THERE ISN'T ONE.

As much as we try to pit activities or exercises against each other to find the ultimate fitness path, the real answer is, *It depends.* Top trainers break down how to choose what's best for *you.*

BY **SARAH TUFF**

SHOULD I WORK OUT in the morning or evening? Should I run or walk? Should I do squats or hip thrusts? These smaller queries all lead up to the Big Question: What is the best workout?

The answer is frustratingly simple: There isn't one.

“Exercises should be considered in the context of the person who is doing them, as there are numerous ways to move toward a goal,” says Life Time master trainer and nutrition coach Joe Meier, CSCS, PN2. “Comparing exercises and saying one is right or wrong usually does more harm than good.”

That context includes your current fitness level, past exercise experience, short- and long-term fitness goals, abilities and disabilities, and personal movement preferences, not to mention other facets of your life, which is full of responsibilities, priorities, and stressors. These factors are uniquely combined for each person — and, notably, will show up in various ways over the course of a person's lifetime.

“It's unrealistic to assume that, with a world population of more than 8 billion people, we are all meant to do the same thing, and have the same results, when it comes to fitness,” says personal trainer Jacque Crockford, ACE, DHSc.

What's best for one person might not be best for someone else. And what's best for you today might not be what's best for you next year, or even tomorrow.

With all this in mind, we asked experts to weigh in on some of the exercises, workouts, and fitness concepts that are most often pitted against each other. The resounding answer is that we, collectively, need to move past the mindset of either-or.



MORNING VS. EVENING WORKOUTS

“The most important thing in terms of scheduling your workouts is a consistent schedule,” says Alec Blenis, CSCS, CES, PN2, a strength and endurance coach and ultraendurance hybrid athlete. This enables your body to anticipate the effort and get into a rhythm and mindset of *OK, it’s time to exercise now* or *It’s time to cool down and relax*.

Keeping a relatively consistent schedule for exercise, meals, and sleep is a key component of fitness success. The more consistent you are, the more your circadian rhythms stay steady, enabling you to get into a flow state and tap into necessary energy when you need it — and to relax when you need to, as well.

Research has shown that morning and evening workouts both offer amazing benefits. According to a recent study published in *Frontiers in Physiology*, morning exercise reduces abdominal fat and blood pressure in women; evening exercise increases muscular performance in women and lowers blood pressure in men.

The key is finding the schedule that works and feels good for you, Blenis says. Workout times must account for any personal factors influencing exercise — so it’s easier to stick with your schedule without worrying about work meetings or dropping off kids at daycare.

“Everyone’s schedule in life is so different and everyone has different priorities,” says Blenis. “I encourage people to have consistency because it helps with habit formation and making workouts more enjoyable.”

But remember, the timing doesn’t have to be perfect. “Getting your workout done is better than skipping it just because you couldn’t do it at your preferred time,” he adds.



RUNNING VS. WALKING

Running is often considered the ultimate exercise — it gets your legs moving and your heart pumping, and it calms your mind. There’s a reason that the feeling of aerobic exercise-induced euphoria is called the runner’s high.

Walking, too, is a fitness darling. Research highlights its numerous benefits: boosting immunity, releasing endorphins, and reducing high blood pressure and cholesterol. Plus, it’s a great way to stay mobile.

“As we age, being able to get around via walking is arguably the most important functional capacity one should try to maintain, making walking consistently throughout the lifespan a great addition to a healthy lifestyle,” Meier says. (Learn more about the health benefits of walking at ELmag.com/walking.)

Despite each boasting many benefits, these activities are often pitted against each other because of how much impact they have on joints, with the understanding that walking has less than running.

But less impact doesn’t mean zero impact, Blenis warns.

“Walking has different types of impact [than running],” he says. “The stride is different, and the cadence is different. There’s impact from both running and walking, so I don’t think one’s necessarily better than the other as far as impact is concerned, provided you’ve gradually increased your tolerance for it.”

With walking, it’s possible for most people to increase volume while avoiding injuries to the knees, feet, and ankles. That’s not to say there’s no risk — walking too much, too fast can result in soreness and issues like shin splints and plantar fasciitis — but the risk is typically lower than with running. Running can be trickier to manage in terms of how quickly you ramp up your distance and intensity.

Just keep in mind that “while running does come with a bit more injury risk, less impact doesn’t make an activity better outright — impact stimulates important fitness adaptations too,” Blenis says. “Everyone should be mindful of doing an appropriate amount of impact for their bodies.”

If you increase your mileage slowly and invest in recovery time, either activity can be a great way to get outdoors, socialize, and train the cardiovascular system. “From a general health perspective and a weight-loss perspective, both running and walking can be fantastic,” explains Blenis.

(For a beginner-friendly 5K program, check out ELmag.com/5kplan.)

FASTED VS. FED TRAINING

“Fasted training” refers to working out after you have stopped processing and breaking down food, forcing your body to use stored fat as a fuel source. People often do fasted training in the morning before breakfast or six to eight hours or more after a meal.

But working out on an empty stomach doesn't suit everyone. “There is insufficient data proving that fasted training leads to better fat loss over time, which is one of its common claims,” says Meier, a certified nutrition coach. “Choosing between fasted versus fed training simply comes down to an individual's preferences and goals.”

Some data shows that longer-duration workouts benefit from fed training, but shorter-duration workout performance can be similar whether fed or fasted, experts say. However, during a shorter fasted workout, the type of fast and certain medical conditions could lead to side effects, like dizziness, low blood sugar, or lightheadedness.

Work with your coach and a trusted medical professional to determine if fasted workouts are right for you. Meier notes that if your energy is sustained throughout your planned workout, you're on the right track.

Most individuals who choose to eat before training should consume easily digested foods that are high in carbs and protein and low in fat and fiber. (For preworkout snack ideas, visit ELmag.com/workoutsnacks.)

And remember: Whether you prefer fed or fasted training, staying hydrated is essential. (Learn more about what to drink and when at ELmag.com/hydrate.)

“Choosing between fasted versus fed training simply comes down to **an individual's preferences and goals.**”



SQUATS VS. HIP THRUSTS

Your glute muscles are the foundation for almost every activity, whether it's leaping for a pickleball shot, hiking to a summit, or simply bending to tie your shoes. "Strong glutes are especially important if you play explosive sports or lift heavy weights," strength coach and biomechanics researcher Bret Contreras, PhD, CSCS, has said. "They'll help you sprint faster, jump higher, and twist more explosively — and they'll also help prevent injury."

Larger, well-defined butts are trendy in fitness circles and beyond. With this convergence of function and fashion, it's no wonder many people seek advice on building a strong rear end — only to find that opinion is divided into two vocal camps: Team Squats and Team Hip Thrusts.

Squats are a full lower-body exercise targeting the glutes, adductors, and quads. Hip thrusts hit the glutes without putting as much load on the quads and adductors.

But there's no reason to choose. Both movements have their place in a progressive strength-training plan.

Blenis says squats improve overall lower-body strength as well as mobility; hip thrusts target the glutes in a shortened position, so they're important for sprinting and jumping.

Both can help manage recovery, he notes: Training a muscle in its fully lengthened position (e.g., squatting) tends to produce more soreness, while training a muscle in a shortened position (via hip thrusts) tends to result in less soreness.

"We want our muscles to be strong throughout their full range," Blenis says. "Squats and hip thrusts are complementary to one another."

(For a glute workout designed by Contreras, visit [ELmag.com/glute-workout](https://www.elmag.com/glute-workout). Progress your glute routine with the eight-week program at [ELmag.com/glutehamstringworkout](https://www.elmag.com/glutehamstringworkout).)

STANDING ABS VS. FLOOR ABS

For years, supine exercises — like crunches and sit-ups — were considered the optimal way to train abs. Then came a rise in popularity of prone moves like planks and mountain climbers, which were considered more functional and less likely to cause neck or back pain. Now, the trend is standing abs routines, which include standing crunches, wood chops, and marching in place.

Proponents of core exercises that require you to get on the floor explain that floor workouts are more stable and more likely to be performed correctly, due to the support of the ground beneath you. They leverage gravity and the weight of a person's trunk to challenge and improve strength. Floor-based exercises are especially good for people with mobility limitations or balance issues, like vertigo.

Standing abs aficionados, such as functional-movement specialist Gary Gray, PT, FAFS, note that most daily activities requiring core activation happen on two feet. Moreover, reaping benefits from floor-based core work is dependent on maintaining perfect form and muscle activation, which can be a tall order.

Standing abs are ideal if you experience joint issues, such as neck, lower-back, and wrist pain, while doing floor exercises, says Crockford. They're great for small spaces, building proprioception and balance, and training power. And they can be safe for prenatal workouts and for people recovering from injuries.

Crockford notes that it's important to not think of standing abs as easy and floor-based core as advanced. Either can be modified to suit your fitness level, so choose one — or a combination of both.

(New to standing abs? Find a six-move functional routine from Gray at [ELmag.com/abstrength](https://www.elmag.com/abstrength).)



YOGA VS. PILATES

Yoga and Pilates are often conflated or considered two sides of the same coin, yet they are quite different. Yoga is an ancient, multipronged spiritual practice that includes physical elements but was not meant to be a form of physical exercise. Pilates, on the other hand, was developed in the 20th century as a mode of rehabilitation focused on core stability, efficiency of movement, postural alignment, and balance.

But they do have things in common. Yoga and Pilates are both practices that foster the mind-body connection, building psychosomatic awareness while simultaneously challenging the physical body, explains Pilates instructor Sonja R. Price Herbert, a social worker, author, activist, and founder of Black Girl Pilates.

Moreover, “if you look at the asanas of yoga and you look at the exercises of Pilates, some of them look similar,” says Herbert. For example, the boat pose in yoga looks like the teaser in Pilates — both require strength, balance, coordination, and focus — but the execution and purpose of each are different.

“Yoga is about finding yourself through movement, while Pilates is intended to be a workout first,” says Herbert. “Is Pilates challenging your body and your strength, and is it challenging your mind? Absolutely. But it’s different from what yoga [was created to do].”

In today’s fitness landscape, where mind-body practices are lauded on their own and combined into new methodologies (yogalates, anyone?), yoga and Pilates can be complementary. Both practices have been shown to increase bone density, and both offer tremendous benefits for healing while challenging practitioners to focus on the mind-body connection, experts say.

It’s OK if one makes you feel better, or you simply just love one more than the other one. You can’t go wrong with either. And if you can’t choose just one, you can always incorporate both into your life. 🧘

SARAH TUFF is a Colorado-based outdoors, health, fitness, and nutrition writer.





Self-Talk

Our inner voices can
be merciless critics.

These strategies
can help us change
that conversation
for the better.

BY ELIZABETH MILLARD

BEFORE I EVEN LEFT the driveway for a weekend yoga retreat, the rude comments began: *Remember not to talk too much; you're not as interesting as you think. Don't make so many jokes; that looks desperate. Don't be a nuisance by latching on just because you feel awkward or lonely; people don't like neediness.*

If this had been a partner or friend talking, I likely would have thrown the car in reverse, politely asked them to get out, and happily gone to the retreat solo. But I was already alone.

“Self-talk comes in a lot of different forms, and the kind that’s critical really is trying to anticipate danger and steer you away from it,” says Kristin Neff, PhD, associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*.

My own inner critics may have meant to keep me safe, but their ultimate effect was sabotage. I followed their advice to keep quiet, and my yoga weekend became a tense, uncomfortable disaster. Many of us could tell similar stories.

Still, though it may often be the loudest, self-criticism isn’t the only voice in our heads. There are four general categories of self-talk, according to Thomas Brinthaup, PhD, a psychology professor and self-talk researcher at Middle Tennessee State University:

- Self-management — the voice that helps us get things done.
- Social assessment — rehearsing what we’re going to say or rehashing our conversations.
- Self-reinforcement — affirming ourselves and our choices.

- Self-criticism — judging ourselves and our choices.

Any type of self-talk can be a product (or producer) of mental stress, but these types differ from the auditory hallucinations that may accompany a mental health diagnosis like schizophrenia. In those instances, one’s inner voices seem to come from outside entities, like voices on a radio. This can be a frightening experience, as though someone else has literally gotten into our heads.

With everyday self-talk, we aren’t confused about where the voices are coming from. Our inner dialogue may direct our choices or judge them mercilessly, but we recognize that these thoughts come from our own minds.

And this means we have the power to change the conversation.

YOUR BODY IS LISTENING

It can be hard to grasp that my brutal self-criticism before the retreat was my brain’s attempt at protection, but self-preservation is the core function of most self-talk, Neff explains.

“Our brains evolved to do this — it’s an instinctual response designed to get us to safety,” she says. “The problem is that it’s not doing that most of the time. Instead, we start looping, so we’re stuck in these negative thoughts, and that can have a physical effect.”

Most notably, she adds, self-critical rumination can raise cortisol levels. We have natural fluctuations of this hormone throughout the day, but chronic elevation triggered by distressing thoughts traps us in a fight-or-flight response. This can prompt headaches, digestive issues, higher blood pressure,

tightness in the muscles and joints, and sleep disruption.

On the other hand, beneficial self-talk can regulate cortisol more effectively, and that offers bigtime physical and mental advantages, says Neff. These include deeper sleep, better cardiovascular function, improved focus and memory, and better-regulated stress responses.

Unsurprisingly, self-talk also influences our relationships. Imagine having a conversation as your inner critic is hollering about how unlikeable you are, Neff suggests. Now imagine having the same conversation while an inner voice reminds you how much your auntie loves you. In each case, you’re likely to interact with others very differently.

Studies suggest that the intensity and frequency of self-talk tend to increase when we’ve experienced early trauma and isolation. Peter Zafirides, MD, a psychiatrist and cofounder of Central Ohio Behavioral Medicine, says these early experiences can set us up for a lifetime of negative internal chatter.

“From childhood, our brains have a negativity bias, which means we will always default to the negative first,” he explains. “If [negative] thoughts are reinforced when you’re still young, you may stay in a pattern of self-criticism that’s difficult to break, especially if you haven’t developed mental coping strategies that help you reframe [them].”

Fortunately, we can learn how to redirect our inner conversation, no matter how sticky that sabotaging self-talk has become. Experts suggest the following strategies.

6

Strategies

to help soften your self-talk.

All these patterns of self-talk can harm your well-being and relationships — **and you can't shift them until you know they're there.**



1.

START WITH AWARENESS

Because self-talk is largely habitual, it tends to run in the background. Simply being more aware of what your voices are saying can help, says Ashley Smith, PhD, a psychologist in Kansas City, Mo.

“Awareness is always the first step in understanding the impact of your self-talk, good and bad,” Smith says. “Just sitting quietly and observing your mind for a while can help you become more aware of what’s going on.”

This can be harder than it sounds. One reason people find meditation difficult or even distressing when they first start, she notes, is that it’s rough to face our “monkey minds.” If our thoughts are leaping at a frantic pace, sitting in stillness means we can hear all the worries and complaints those monkeys are chattering on about. (For more on the monkey mind, visit ELmag.com/monkeymind.)

Yet if we want to understand and change our self-talk, hear it we must, she insists. “Simply observing and noting without judging if you have a very critical form of self-talk . . . can help you have more conscious recognition of what might be sabotaging you.”

You might discover that you’re taking other people’s moods personally; catastrophizing; or believing other people are foolish and beneath you. All these patterns of self-talk can harm your well-being and relationships — and you can’t shift them until you know they’re there.

Awareness also allows you to consider the context for your self-talk, notes psychologist Michelle Drapkin, PhD, founder of the Cognitive Behavior Therapy Center in New Jersey.

“If you’re especially self-critical right now,” Drapkin suggests, “ask yourself: *What might be going on to drive that? What’s underneath this?* It might not have a specific cause, but even asking those questions can interrupt those thoughts and defuse them.”

A wide range of factors can trigger a negative internal dialogue: not enough sleep, low blood sugar, hurt feelings, job-related overwhelm, even dehydration.

If you can’t pinpoint an exact cause, knowing something external could be causing your harsh self-talk can help you take that much-needed step back, she says. This can be enough to break a negative spiral.

2.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR BODY

Given how much our physical and mental states affect our perception, tending to basic bodily needs is key. When you notice self-talk starting, Zafirides recommends, do something physical or change your routine. Work out. Visit the farmers' market. Hit up the bike trail. Embrace an earlier bedtime.

Consider what happens when we *don't* take care of ourselves, he says. When we're sleep-deprived, eating junk food, and neglecting our need to move, we're much likelier to be reactive and critical compared with when we feel nourished and rested. This is physiological reality.

"[Exercise] can provide a cascade of responses, including less inflammation throughout the body and brain and a release of feel-good hormones, like endorphins," Zafirides says. "That's directly related to lowering symptoms of depression and anxiety. . . . The same is true if you're having difficulty with critical self-talk. It can help you gently shift those negative thought patterns when you feel better in your body."

It's the same for other keystone habits, such as getting quality sleep, staying hydrated, maintaining strong social connections, and eating plenty of vegetables. They won't single-handedly silence a ruthless inner critic, but taking good care of yourself can turn down the volume.

3.

REVISIT SUCCESSES

Highlighting perceived threats is what your inner critic does best, says Zafirides, and anything unfamiliar threatens an activated brain. This makes it tricky to break a pattern of negative self-talk, because redirecting our focus to something new is . . . well, new. The alarm bells ring and the brain doubles down on its old self-critical pattern.

Still, we can game this system. Recalling past successes gives us a self-esteem boost that can bypass that mechanism. That's because past positive experiences are known and therefore not a threat. (Are you listening, brain?)

"Revisiting your strengths, skills, and successes in a similar situation can help you see that you've done difficult things before, and that can supply a boost of self-confidence," says Drapkin.

This takes practice, she adds. It's easy to get stuck on past mistakes or questionable decisions. "We often put ourselves down for what we think we've done wrong or ways that we perceive we're falling short. We don't tend to remind ourselves of how often we do well."

Yet we should: Positive memories also have a way of leading to more positivity. We might remember the time we checked in to support a friend who was struggling, which reminds us of a time we showed compassion and openness in a tense conversation, and then how we made a joke that lit up a room.

The more often we cultivate confidence and recall successes, the more automatic creating a positive outlook becomes. Over time, this can have a significant effect on the brain's default setting.



The more often we cultivate confidence and recall successes, **the more automatic creating a positive outlook becomes.**



As you seek to ease your self-criticism, **aim for a more neutral perspective.**

4.

KEEP IT REAL

Despite the overly rah-rah quotes and phrases that swamp social media (“You got this, #rockstar!”), Neff argues that replacing your inner critic with a louder cheerleader doesn’t work for most people.

“Positive affirmations tend to help only if you already have high self-esteem and a sunny outlook,” she says. “For everyone else, they tend to backfire and make your critic dig in and get louder. Despite the ‘fake it until you make it’ theory, your brain recognizes when a message feels false.”

As you seek to ease your self-criticism, aim for a more neutral perspective. Neff suggests experimenting with more realistic and gentle phrasing that resonates with you. It could sound like this: *I’m nervous going into this job interview, but I’m also well prepared, and I’ve aced interviews in the past. I’m well qualified for this job, so I’m excited to talk about that.*

This statement allows you to acknowledge your nervousness — which is a natural response, Neff says. At the same time, you’re reinforcing positive messages that you already believe.

5.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Zafirides jokingly calls himself a below-average guitarist. Whenever he's learning a new song, every chord feels awkward; he feels sure that he'll never master it or improve his playing at all. Then, several sessions later, the song falls into place, and he feels as if he's been playing it all his life.

"This is a good analogy for changing negative self-talk, because you're asking your brain to perform a new task," he says. "We shy away from what's unfamiliar, so there may be resistance. You may even feel like you're getting worse. But for many people, at some point, it clicks into place and gets easier."

Because self-talk is mostly unconscious, practicing new patterns at a conscious level is an important part of mastery. For example, instead of solely chasing after the fixes — such as trying to interrupt negative self-talk with reminders of past successes — adopt some preventive habits. You might even tie them to another routine behavior: Every time you brush your teeth, for instance, consider a time you've been proud of your work. Or each time you make dinner, recall at least one time you shared supportive words with a friend or family member.

"What you'll find is that there's an ebb and flow when you try to change your thought patterns," he notes. "It may feel difficult and strange for a while, until it becomes more familiar, and that's when you start to develop a habit through regular practice."

6.

AIM FOR GOOD ENOUGH

Negative self-talk is hardwired into the brain's survival system, so expecting it to vanish completely is unrealistic, says Neff. We all have tough days. And if we're tired, nervous, stressed, sick, or overwhelmed, negative forms of self-talk will be louder.

Their job is to protect, and they're trying to guard against these threatening conditions.

Still, once you've become more aware of where these unwelcome thoughts originate, they'll lose some of their power. Silencing the inner voices is impossible, but they can be gently guided toward being quiet.

This happened for me just a few days after that yoga retreat. Reflecting on how it unfolded, I recalled that I'd also attended numerous retreats where I'd met new people, told plenty of jokes, talked as much as I wanted, and took deep and luscious breaths on my mat without feeling any disapproval from others or myself.

With that, I signed up for the next one — and this time, I knew which inner voice I'd be taking along. ☺

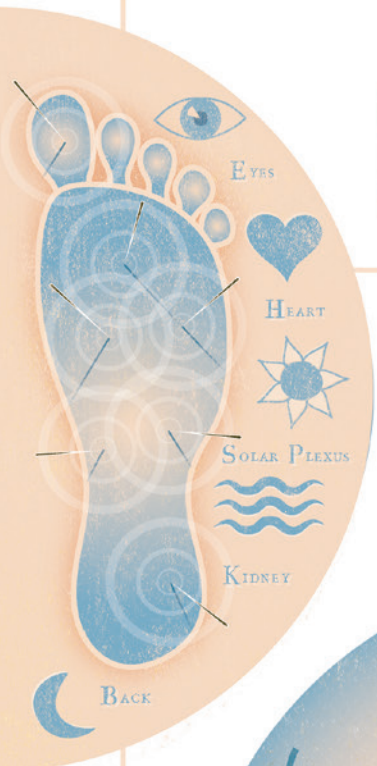
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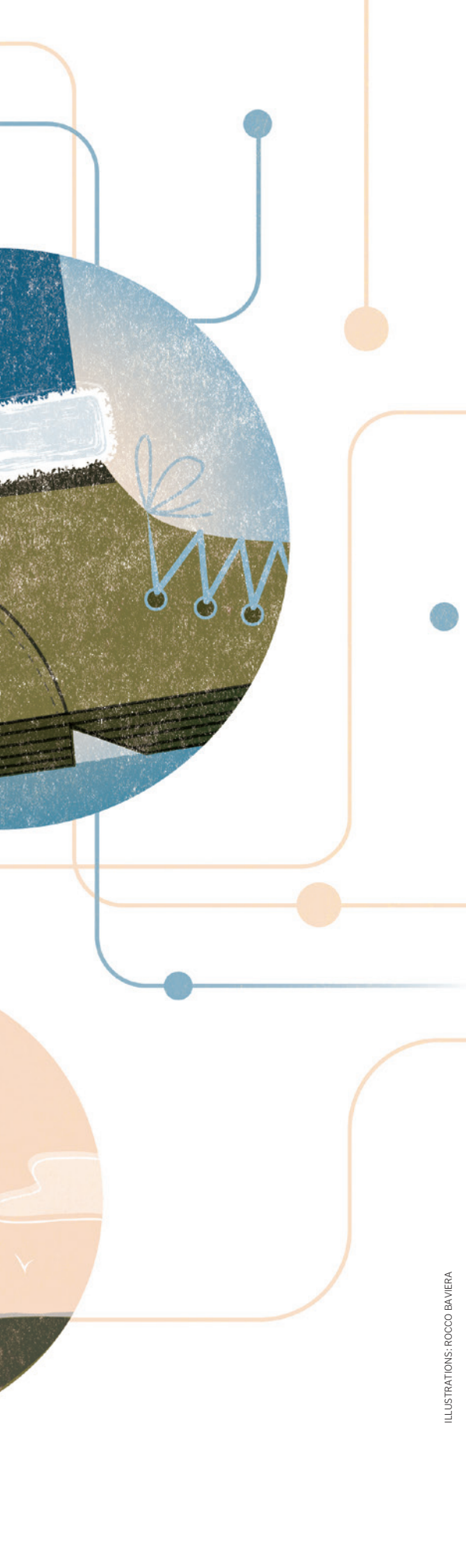
ELIZABETH MILLARD is a Minnesota-based writer and editor.





What
**YOUR
FEET**
Are Trying
to Tell You





Six common foot complaints — and proven steps for relieving them.

BY **MO PERRY**

AS THE LITERAL FOUNDATION of our bodies, our feet are crucial to keeping us active and healthy. It's easy to take these workhorse appendages for granted, but when problems arise, the ripple effects make the feet hard to ignore.

“When something goes wrong in your foot, your whole body usually has to deal with it,” says biomechanist Katy Bowman, MS, author of *Simple Steps to Foot Pain Relief*. Even a small area of soreness or irritation can be enough to keep you from your daily walk or cause other body parts to compensate in ways that lead to further issues.

“The average person takes thousands of steps every day, and if there's something a little bit off in the biomechanics — meaning the structure or function of the foot — it won't just affect the foot; it's going to have a domino effect all the way up the body,” notes Robert Kornfeld, DPM, a holistic podiatrist at the Chronic Foot Pain Center in New York City. The reverse is also true: It's not uncommon for knee, hip, and back pain to resolve after foot issues are addressed.

Many of us are unaware that the feet can be harbingers of systemic health problems. “The foot is a mirror of what's going on in the rest of the body. Podiatrists are often the first ones to diagnose vascular and neurological problems, thyroid conditions, and diabetes,” Kornfeld says.

Let's delve into six common foot complaints and the systemic issues they may be signaling, plus strategies for addressing them.

ILLUSTRATIONS: ROCCO BAVIERA



1 STIFFNESS

Possible causes: Inactivity, inflammation from arthritis, constrictive shoes

The main contributor to stiff feet also leads to inflexible shoulders and hips — **lack of regular and thorough movement.** “Even though the foot is small, it has a large number of hinges, and each of those hinges needs to be moved,” Bowman says.

Sitting for hours is surprisingly hard on the feet. “Inactivity, which tightens the hips and pelvis, can then tighten the feet, because your feet and hips are very much connected,” says Emily Splichal, DPM, a functional podiatrist at the Center for Functional and Regenerative Podiatric Medicine in Chandler, Ariz.

Systemic **inflammation**, often a feature of arthritis, also contributes to stiff feet. “Inflammation can be thought of as stickiness — it causes a lot of soft-tissue adhesions,” says Splichal. Regular movement reduces stickiness and keeps the joints of the lower body strong and flexible.

Footwear is another important player. “Most of the time, our feet are wrapped in something very stiff that immobilizes their parts,” Bowman

notes. Imagine wearing tight, rigid mittens on your hands every day: Your wrists and forearms would compensate as you learned to use each hand as a single digit, losing the

usually prop our heels above our toes, and leave no room for our toes to move,” Bowman says. This leads to weak, underdeveloped foot muscles and puts stress on the lower leg, as well as on the joints, fascia, and ligaments in the feet.

“Our feet, in shoes and on flat concrete, are sort of like our digestion on a crappy diet — they’re starved of the nutritious movement inputs they need for health,” she notes.

Foot arches that are either flat and weak or high and tight are also a sign of inflexibility. Bowman describes the arch as an action by the muscles in the feet and hips. A flat foot indicates a lack of the strength needed to create an arch, while high, inflexible arches can point to excessive tension.

Either can stop the midfoot from stretching out and springing back up again to cushion our steps. And both can be helped with exercises to build strength and flexibility in the feet. (For feet-strengthening exercises, see ELmag.com/footstrength.)

“Our feet, in shoes and on flat concrete, are sort of like our digestion on a crappy diet — **they’re starved of the nutritious movement inputs they need for health.**”

muscular control and flexibility to separate them into their constituent parts. This is essentially what modern footwear has done to our feet.

“Compared with our feet’s natural, unshod state, our shoes are stiff,

2. TOE PAIN

Possible causes: Gout, bunions, ingrown toenails

When you think “toe pain,” diet might not be the first culprit that springs to mind. But diet-related **gout**, an inflammatory condition that causes swelling and pain in the joints, often shows up first in the foot. “It’s a red, hot, inflamed big-toe joint where even the blankets on your bed are enough to cause pain,” Splichal explains.

Gout can have a genetic component, but diet is usually the biggest contributing factor. Red meat, seafood, sweetened drinks, and alcohol all contain high levels of compounds called purines, which the body breaks down into uric acid. These acid crystals can accumulate in the joints, leading to pain and inflammation. Dietary changes are the first line of defense here. (For more on uric acid, see ELmag.com/uricacid.)

On the other hand, a **bunion** — which appears as a bony bump on the joint at the base of the big toe — is usually a “purely biomechanical issue,” Kornfeld says. Bunions can form due to gait patterns, instability in the first metatarsal (the bone extending toward your ankle from the big toe), and overpronation, and they are exacerbated by narrow shoes that force the big toe toward the pinky. They tend to occur more frequently in women and older people, possibly due to relatively weaker connective tissue and the cumulative effects of biomechanical dysfunction.

If the ligament holding the first metatarsal is loose or unstable (possibly from insufficient collagen, which stabilizes ligaments), it can cause retrograde forces to push the bone out to form a bunion. But corrective exercises can improve joint stability, even in people with a genetic tendency toward lower collagen levels.

And minimizing time in high heels, which put the body’s weight right over the big-toe joint, can be preventive. “Intervention is critical in the early stages of bunion formation so it doesn’t progress into a deformity that creates problems wearing shoes, causes pain, and limits activity,” Kornfeld says.

Ingrown toenails, in which the borders of the nail turn downward and dig into the skin, are a common cause of toe inflammation, redness, swelling, and pain. Again, tight shoes can be to blame, Splichal explains. “If your shoes are pushing the edge of the nail into the skin, that could contribute to an ingrown nail.”

Bunions can be a factor here, too, because of how they change the angulation of the step and push the nail into the skin. And cutting toenail corners too aggressively allows the skin to lift above the nail border, so the nail grows into the skin. Podiatrists recommend cutting toenails straight across to avoid this.

“I’d also encourage a patient to use toe spacers if they have a bunion, find better-fitting shoes that don’t push the nail in, and possibly put urea on the nail to soften it so it’s not so hard and painful,” says Splichal.



3. HEEL PAIN

Possible cause: Plantar fasciitis

Plantar fasciitis is inflammation of the thick band of fascia that runs from the heel bone to the toes. It can be caused by a one-time event in which you overload the tissue, such as walking for miles on vacation in new shoes. Or it can develop over a longer period in response to posture or mobility issues in the feet, says Bowman.

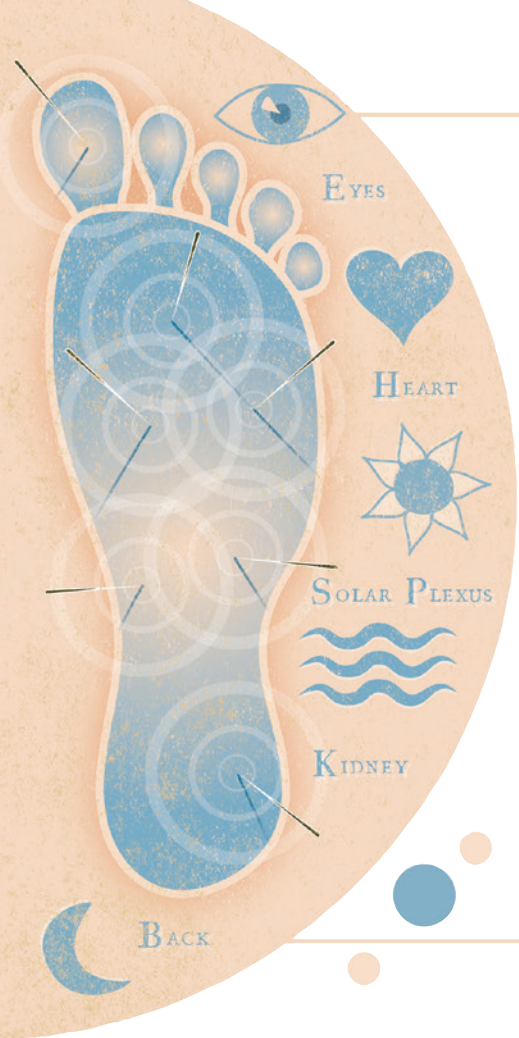
“Plantar fasciitis is biomechanical in origin,” Kornfeld explains. “One typical cause comes from the calf muscle being overly tight in compensation for hypermobility in the forefoot. The tighter the calf muscle gets, the greater the pull and stress on the plantar fascia, which can injure cells and cause them to become chronically inflamed.” Small tears may also develop in the plantar fascia, adding to pain and inflammation.

The antidote, says Bowman, is mobilizing and stretching the foot. “You’ve got this stiff, tense wad of injured tissue, and you want to stretch and smooth it out like a ball of dough.” She suggests using targeted stretches and rolling the foot out on a ball. “These are ways of waking up this tissue that’s clumped to protect itself.”

Other strategies include getting a biomechanical evaluation to help identify problematic gait and posture habits, changing your footwear, and trying acupuncture.

While some may benefit from taping or using an orthotic or brace, Bowman stresses the importance of identifying the underlying cause. “You want to get your foot working better for you without all that gear, or else you’re not really getting to the root of the problem.”





4. NUMBNESS AND TINGLING

● **Possible cause:** Peripheral neuropathy

When nerves in the hands and feet are damaged, **peripheral neuropathy** can result. Symptoms include numbness, tingling, loss of balance, weakness, or a wound on the foot that won't heal.

Diabetes (both type 1 and type 2) is the most common trigger: High blood-sugar levels can damage nerves over time. Other potential causes include vitamin B12 deficiency, physical injury to the nerves, chemotherapy, medication side effects, drinking too much alcohol, or viral illness.

"I have quite a few patients who developed post-COVID peripheral-nerve inflammation and symptoms," notes Splichal. Shingles is also known to be a potential trigger for neuropath-

ic pain or numbness. Lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and other autoimmune conditions can contribute by creating inflammation in peripheral nerves.

Key to relief from all these conditions is reducing that inflammation. Splichal recommends an anti-inflammatory diet that supports stable blood sugar, nutrient balance, and microcirculation. "All of our blood vessels have tiny branches that go to the nerves, so you need to think of microcirculation to support nerve health," she says.

Splichal also treats her neuropathy patients with red-light therapy. And some people find transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) and acupuncture helpful.

5. SWELLING

● **Possible cause:** Fluid retention

Swollen feet and ankles may be related to **edema**, when too much fluid becomes trapped in the body's tissues. Edema can be caused by poor venous return (when the body's ability to pump blood up and away from the feet is compromised), eating too much salt, being pregnant, being premenstrual, or sitting or standing in place for too long.

It may also be a side effect of certain medications or a sign of insulin resistance. "Uncontrolled blood sugar creates free radicals and inflammation that damages collagen in the blood vessels, so they start to lose integrity," Splichal says.

Edema can signal even more serious conditions, including problems with the kidneys, liver, or heart. If you have persistent swelling in

your feet and ankles, it's wise to check with your healthcare provider.

Whatever the underlying issue, swelling in the feet and ankles is usually relieved by elevating them. And while taking a walk can sometimes increase swelling (especially in hot weather), walking provides a net benefit. The calves are known as the "second heart" because of the role they play in pumping blood through the lower part of the body.

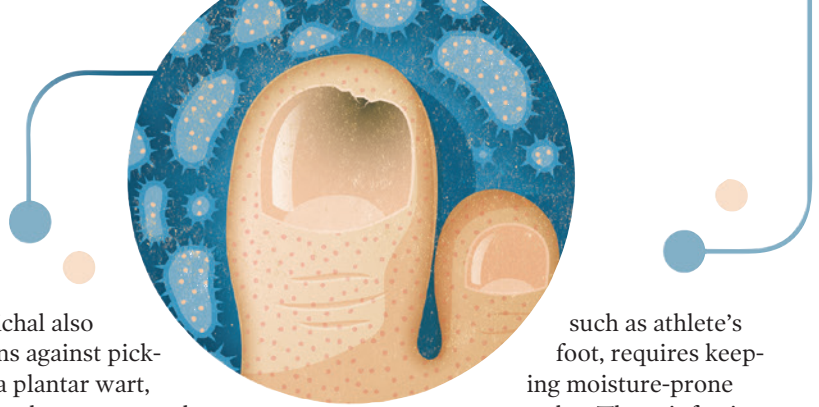
"The feet, being farthest away from the heart, run the greatest risk of poor circulation; your cardiovascular system depends heavily on the movement of the muscles in the feet and lower legs," writes Bowman in *Simple Steps to Foot Pain Relief*.



The best way to lend the heart a hand is to get moving. "You need a pumping mechanism to get the blood back up to the heart, and walking is a great way to activate that calf pump," Splichal explains. (For more on your calves and cardiovascular health, see [ELmag.com/secondheart](https://www.ELmag.com/secondheart).)

6 SKIN CONCERNS

Possible causes: Plantar warts, fungal infections, gut dysbiosis, thyroid issues



Our feet are subject to lots of rubbing, friction, and contact with moist environments, from the insides of our socks to the shower floor at the gym. While blisters and calluses can be handled with a little TLC and a change of shoes, warts and persistent fungal infections are tougher nuts to crack.

"Plantar warts are associated with the human papillomavirus [HPV]," Splichal notes. Genetics and overall immune status can affect how well someone fights HPV. Some may develop small warts that self-resolve, while others end up in long battles with warts that refuse to disappear.

"Warts like dark, wet environments," she says. "If you're keeping your feet in socks for 10 hours a day, that's a perfect breeding environment." She suggests exposing your feet to open air as much as possible to dry them out.

Splichal also cautions against picking at a plantar wart, because they can spread to your hands or your other foot.

For small warts, applying a topical salicylic acid might do the trick, she notes. "But when they get larger, you want to go to a podiatrist or dermatologist so they can freeze or burn it off."

Meanwhile, dry, itchy skin on the feet usually signals **fungal infection**. Fungus can infect the nails, the skin between the toes, or the bottom of the foot. "They're all treated a little bit differently," Splichal says.

An infection under the nail might require oral medications. "If you just put something topical on, it's hard for the medication to get through the hard nail to reach it."

Treating a fungal infection that starts between the toes and spreads,

such as athlete's foot, requires keeping moisture-prone areas dry. These infections can usually be treated with antifungal creams or sprays. Tea tree oil is a natural antifungal treatment for athlete's foot.

Some providers see fungal infections on the feet as a sign of **gut dysbiosis** and an excess of fungus in the GI tract. "When we address what's going on at a gut level, we have a much better opportunity to get rid of it," Kornfeld notes.

Finally, itchy feet can occasionally signal a problem with the thyroid. **"Thyroid dysfunction** causes problems [with] replenishing and replacing skin cells," he explains. That can lead to dry and dead cells accumulating on the surface of the skin, causing itchiness.

FIND YOUR STRIDE

Noting that prevention is the best cure of all, Splichal offers these four tips for daily foot maintenance:

- 1. Release** tension in the feet with active stretches or massage.
- 2. Activate** the muscles with simple exercises.
- 3. Engage** the foot muscles and create stability with single-leg balancing for 10 seconds on each side.
- 4. Stimulate** sensation by spending time barefoot.

Bowman reminds us that our feet deserve at least as much attention as our other body parts. "If you do pull-ups or upper-body exercises, make sure you're giving your feet the same courtesy. You're going to ask more from your feet than you are from your arms and shoulders throughout your lifetime." 🧘

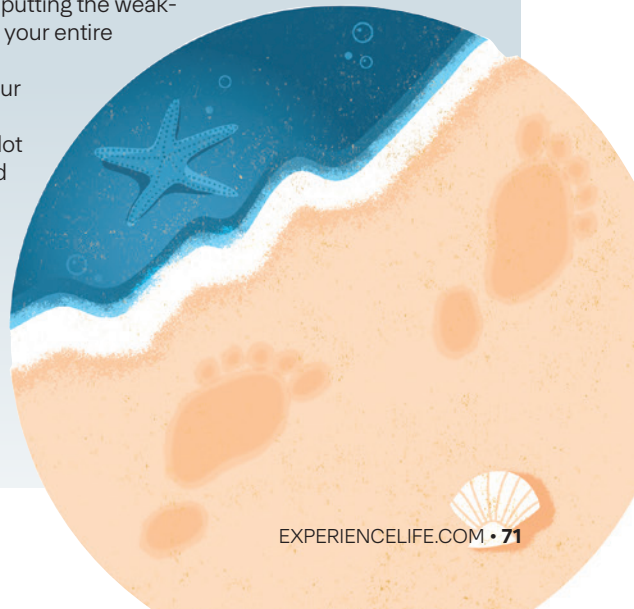
MO PERRY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

WHY GO BAREFOOT?

To develop strong muscles, dense bones, and healthy nerves, our feet need to be worked just like other body parts. That's why some podiatrists recommend spending as much time as possible barefoot — or in minimalist footwear that protects the skin and allows the foot its full range of motion.

"Tissue needs to feel load in order to adapt," explains biomechanist Katy Bowman, MS, author of *Rethink Your Position*. "If you've cushioned and immobilized your feet with rigid shoes, they no longer feel load. So, you're putting the weakest part of you underneath your entire body weight."

Still, don't just chuck your Chucks and head out for a barefoot sprint. "There's a lot of transitional work needed if you've been wearing shoes for decades," she cautions. "Exercises and awareness can help you transition successfully." (For more on barefoot training, see ELmag.com/barefoot.)



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REAL LIFE



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SOUND BATHS ARE BECOMING MORE COMMON in the United States, typically at spaces dedicated to healing and wellness. They might involve singing bowls, gongs, or drums, and the goal can be as simple as relaxation or as significant as altering your state of consciousness. Learn how sound healing could work for you on page 79.



Have a Laugh

Laughter has surprising benefits for your mood, your mind, and your body. Try these tips to make more space for it in your life.

BY JESSIE SHOLL

EARLY ON A MONDAY morning, Johanna Meyer — an actor, dancer, and teacher in New York City — was exiting her usual train in the Bronx. Ahead of her was a steep hill: about six blocks up, then six blocks down. Unlike most Monday mornings, however, she didn't feel dread when she faced the long trek required to get to her early class.

"Instead of my usual exhaustion, I was so full of energy," she said about her walk that day. Meyer was confused at first, but then she remembered how she'd spent her Sunday.

As part of her acting program, Meyer had participated in a three-hour clown workshop involving improv sketches. "It was really hilarious," she recalls. "I hadn't laughed that hard in a long time — and it was as if that laughter had just cleared something inside of me."

A reservoir of energy isn't the only reward regular laughter can offer. It also mitigates the effects of stress, reduces inflammation, and boosts immune-system function. The American Lung Association even extolls its benefits for your cardiovascular, pulmonary, and respiratory systems. That's because laughing tightens your diaphragm, chest, and abdominal muscles, encour-

aging your lungs to force stale air out and allow fresh air in.

The emotional rewards are equally impressive. Shared laughter can diffuse tension in social settings and help build social bonds and a sense of community. On an individual level, it can stave off depression, provide comfort, and smooth the sharp edges of loneliness.

It's particularly helpful during difficult times, says comedian and psychologist Brian King, PhD, author of *The Laughing Cure*. "It's a mechanism to help us reduce the impact of stress in our lives."

But it's not necessarily about laughing in the midst of stress. After all, King adds, "if there's a situation that I absolutely have to take charge of — say I'm being attacked by a group of wild bears — then in that situation, I'd need to get stressed to help me to survive."

However, laughter can prepare you for those challenging situations by helping you cultivate resilience. "If we're pretty good at laughing stuff off," he explains, "then if something comes along that would cause us some stress, we're probably not going to be as damaged by it."

Bring more laughter into your life with these methods.



SEEK OUT LAUGHTER

Whether you enjoy live standup shows at a comedy club or prefer watching funny videos online, amusing entertainment can guarantee giggles.

And it's not just a way to pass the time: Laughing boosts mental health by helping you reframe negative experiences, says King, who points out that a lot of comedy is based on painful history. "Many comedians bring their pain to the stage," he notes, whether it's joking their way through a breakup or unpacking their childhood trauma with a humorous slant.

"By making it funny, they are in fact changing the way they feel about that particular subject," he explains. And that reframing helps the audience, too, by creating laughter about the situation — and perhaps a point of connection as well, if they see themselves reflected in it.

And there's plenty of "clean comedy" for people who don't like to hear cursing or risqué stories. One popular destination is Dry Bar Comedy in Provo, Utah, which offers live comedy shows and a fully stocked YouTube channel.



DO LAUGHTER YOGA

Intentional giggles and gentle movement are both incorporated into laughter yoga. “The idea of being present and nonjudgmental is crucial,” explains Sarah Routman, a certified laughter yoga teacher.

Routman leads groups through exercises that are designed to generate chuckles “without relying on what’s going on outside you. It’s about using your imagination and play and laughing on purpose.”

Gathering with others for laughter yoga is particularly helpful for people living alone, Routman adds: We’re 30 percent more likely to giggle if we’re doing it with someone else.

One exercise she recommends is called “laughter breaths.” Inhale deeply, and then as you exhale, repeat “ha ha ha ha ha ha” as fast as you can. At some point you’ll feel it: “You’ll let go of the exercise,” she says, “and it’ll just become laughter.” (It may seem silly but it really works!)

Routman also leads a weekly “laughter call” on Monday mornings. Strangers and friends from more than 34 states have joined in the nine years since she started the ritual. For many callers, it’s become a community — a regular space for people to be silly and playful, with the simple goal of having fun together.



SMILE

No one likes to be told to smile more, but there may be something to this seemingly annoying advice: Namely, a smile is a precursor to laughter.

“You don’t see many people laughing before smiling,” Routman says. What happens in your body when you smile, she explains, is that you’re sending endorphins to your brain. “And then the door is open to dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. You start to feel better just by smiling.”

In one study, participants held a pen in their mouth one of two ways: either with their lips holding it so that the pen stuck straight out like a cigarette, which created an expression similar to a frown, or sideways in their teeth, which made their mouth look like a smile. The people who were “smiling” without realizing it “not only felt happier as a result, but also found cartoons more amusing.”



MAKE TIME FOR PLAY

As people get older and their lives become more complicated, they often think they need to take things more seriously, says King. “I’m a grownup now; I don’t have time to play. But research is showing that basic, fundamental behaviors that we all engage in and enjoy frequently when we’re younger turn out — surprise, surprise — to have a lot of health benefits.”

So, join a kickball team; play fetch with your dog; build Lego sets with your kids; take up roller skating. However you play, as long as you’re laughing, you’re reaping the benefits.

And if you start to feel guilty or irresponsible — like you’re not being adult enough — remember: You’re giving your lungs the gift of fresh air, perhaps meeting new people, and spreading good humor at the same time. (For more on the health benefits of play, see ELmag.com/powerofplay.)

However you play, as long as you’re laughing, you’re reaping the benefits.



GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO TRY

To truly laugh, you first need to open yourself up to humor, silliness, and levity. People often judge themselves harshly, Routman says, which can get in the way of laughter. That’s why some of the laughter exercises and games in her sessions are specifically designed to help jettison negative self-talk. (For more on how to quiet your inner critic, see “Self-Talk” on page 60.)

Like yoga, laughter is a practice, Routman adds — so the more you allow yourself to try laughing on purpose, the easier it might become to find the funny, surprising, or absurd in your everyday life. ☺

JESSIE SHOLL is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



The Stress of Chronic Complainers

Interacting with someone who's caught in a negativity spiral can be draining — and even contagious. These strategies can help you offer support without getting drawn in.

BY JON SPAYDE

LIFE FRUSTRATES or disappoints everyone from time to time. When friends and loved ones experience hardship, they may come to you to vent. Supporting someone when they express negative emotions can be a healthy part of a relationship because it helps the other person relieve stress and shows them they can trust you with their emotions.

On the other hand, some seem to

get stuck in negativity, constantly complaining about this person, that situation, the obstacles they face, the unfairness in their life. Being friends with, related to, or in a relationship with a chronic complainer can be emotionally draining — you may slip into their orbit of pessimism and find yourself emulating their attitude.

Yet with the right balance of curiosity, patience, compassion, and

connection, you can find mutual understanding and interrupt the negativity spiral.

Brie Vortherms, MA, LMFT, a Minneapolis-based family and couples therapist and the director of Life Time Mind, has some practical suggestions for relating to habitual complainers while caring for your own mental and physical needs.

STRESS SOURCES

You want to help the other person. The constant complaining indicates that this friend, relative, or partner is habitually unhappy. Because you care about them, you'd like to help ease their burden. But you aren't sure where to start — and you might not be qualified.

You've complained to them in the past. Maybe they listened to you sympathetically, backed your complaints as only a habitual complainer can — and the two of you bonded over this gripe session. It seems hypocritical to call them out now, when you're on the receiving end.

It feels easier to listen to the complaints than risk upsetting the complaining person. After all, nobody wants to become the next object of a chronic complainer's complaints, and it may not feel worthwhile to express your frustration.

You may be nervous about establishing a boundary. Establishing emotional boundaries without wounding or alienating the other person isn't easy, and the stakes are even higher with someone who plays a significant role in your life.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

See the complaining as a bid for connection.

"The first thing that we have to do as a listener to a chronic complainer actually happens in our own head," says Vortherms. "And that's understanding that complaining is usually an attempt to connect. Most often when people are complaining, they're sharing in order to be known, and that's one of our deepest human needs.

"The complainer clearly has enough of a trusting relationship with you that they're bidding for your attention, and that's kind of an honor."

Remember that you're in charge of your emotional reactions.

Vortherms points out that our discomfort listening to a chronic complainer partly stems from concern that their negativity might overwhelm us.

"But no one can really make you feel anything without your permission," she says. "We can decide to let in certain elements of what they're saying and to keep out other elements. It starts with the thought *Hey, this isn't mine. They're having feelings about it, but I don't have to. I can just listen.*" (Find more strategies at ELmag.com/emotionalreactions.)

Use empathy, but beware of entanglement.

You don't have to share the complainer's emotional reactions in order to empathize with them and affirm their feelings, Vortherms explains. "You can simply mirror back what you notice: 'Yes, you sound frustrated; you sound let down. I get how you're feeling; I'd be frustrated too if I were in that situation.' You're not joining the emotion; you're not saying, 'Yeah, me too.' But you're not mentally dismissing them either."

Don't assume that they want or need help.

The same self-protective measures apply to the issue of help. "You don't have to waste life energy in trying to help this person unless they ask for aid," Vortherms says. "Because, for the most part, when you start offering solutions or trying to fix someone's frustration, they're just going to keep

complaining. They don't feel like you're hearing them."

You can ask whether they want your perspective, she says. If they do, you can share something that you've done in a similar situation. But more often than not, they'll tell you, "No thanks. I'm just complaining."

Set the first verbal boundary: Do you need help?

In many cases, the complainer may tone down or cease the complaints if they feel you hear them and realize you're not going to join in their negativity.



If they continue, you can set up a boundary peacefully and lovingly by asking them to own the problem, says Vortherms. "You might say, 'I think I've actually heard you talking about this before, and I'm wondering if you are looking for some type of solution or if it's an ongoing problem in your life. Do you need help solving it?'" Sometimes this will stop complainers in their tracks."

Set the second verbal boundary: This affects me.

If the complainer persists, Vortherms advises that "you can reinvolve them in the problem more forcefully by letting them know — again, without anger — how the complaining is affecting you: 'I think I'm stuck here and I'm having a hard time. Because I'm on the receiving end of what you're saying about your problems, I get really worried about what you need, and it kind of leaves me feeling crappy.'"

This way, you aren't taking on their negativity, but you also aren't fighting back or running away, she adds.

Make a shift. If maintaining a relational moment just isn't working or is too much of a strain for you, you can shift the topic or the scene. "Suggest that you talk about something else, or walk into another room or an outdoor space," Vortherms says. "Neuroscience tells us that a shift like this may break up a thought pattern that the complainer is stuck in."

Take a break. If all else fails, she says, you can go beyond a boundary and take a break. It doesn't need to be a forever break; it can just be a break from the conversation.

"You can do this mentally, simply by remembering that you don't need to engage, or verbally: 'I work really hard to keep my own happiness. I love you, but sometimes it's really hard to listen to you when you are in a complaining mood, and I think that I have to give myself some space right now.'"

Use lovingkindness meditation.

To support these strategies and avoid getting angry, Vortherms recommends formal or informal lovingkindness meditation: "When you're not with them, you visualize them in front of you, and you send them a mental message: *I hope for some healing and joy for you.* You send some positive, healthful, relational energy from your heart to theirs."

Clear the slate. Vortherms recommends doing an energy cleanse after being on the receiving end of negative energy. "Literally shake your body off, put your bare feet on the ground, visualize it rinsing off of you in the shower," she says. She also recommends a more formal practice, like emotional freedom technique tapping. 🎧

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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What Is Sound Healing?

For better and for worse, sound has measurable effects on our health.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE



A CIRCLE OF translucent singing bowls rest on the floor at the front of the dimly lit room. A woman in a sundress sits behind them, while the rest of us lie on blue blankets in the low amber lighting.

We're here for a sound-healing session. The woman will play the crystal singing bowls, cousins to the metal singing bowls often used as sound bells during meditation practice. She begins instructing us to let go of our worries and listen to our breathing so we can be ready to receive the sound of the bowls.

And then, deep in someone's bag, a cellphone starts to ring.

I do not, as recommended, welcome this sound to come and go. Instead, my heart races and my face gets hot. My thoughts, already leaning skeptical, go on a full offensive — ruthlessly judging me, the other attendees, and the whole idea of sound healing. I feel uncomfortable and restless and angry.

When the ringing finally stops, my body's stress response continues to reverberate like a bell. But it starts to dissipate when the singing sound of the bowls begins, a choir of gentle gongs. Before long, I have completely forgotten about the cellphone. And an hour later, when the sound of the bowls fades to silence, I feel quiet, too. Surprisingly so.

Apparently, sound has more of an effect on me than I suspected. Experts in sound healing, however, know all about it.

RINGS TRUE

Hearing is one of the first senses we develop and may be the last one we lose. When we talk to babies in the womb, or to dying loved ones who appear unconscious, they can hear and be soothed by our voices. Yet most of us spend our time bathing in sounds that are not soothing at all — traffic noise, arguing voices, and, of course, ringing cellphones.

"We are living in a society that is mainly experiencing only the adverse effects of sound," explains neurologist Kulreet Chaudhary, MD.

In addition to everyday aggravation, people living in loud neighborhoods experience higher rates of heart disease and diabetes. Children in schools near airports score lower on reading tests than those in quieter neighborhoods. Correlation is not causation, but there are concrete reasons to believe that noise pollution affects our health.

"We have evolved to be giant sound conductors," Chaudhary writes in her book *Sound Medicine: How to Use the Ancient Science of Sound to*

Heal the Body and Mind. "Our skin, bones, and ears, as well as the water that makes up a large percentage of our bodies, [are] all picking up sound waves — it makes sense that both inaudible and audible vibrations would have a profound effect on us."

Likewise, using sound to heal is not a new idea, nor is it alien to Western medicine.

Ultrasounds deploy sound waves to examine

masses and monitor fetal development.

A technique called lithotripsy uses sound vibrations to break up kidney and gallbladder stones. In

2015, the FDA approved

high-intensity focused ultrasound, a promising approach that can be used to treat prostate cancer.

Chaudhary incorporates sound healing into treatment plans for her neurology patients. The primary difference between Western medical techniques and traditional practices like Siddha and Ayurvedic medicine, she notes, is that Western medicine relies on inaudible vibrations, while traditional practices use sounds we can hear.

"We have evolved to be giant sound conductors."



USING SOUND TO HEAL

History and research both show that a variety of sound-healing techniques can benefit our bodies and minds, reducing stress, improving sleep, and even relieving physical pain. Many approaches involve practices we can do on our own, including these:

Mantra Meditation

Chanting a mantra — silently or aloud — helps still the mind, Chaudhary notes. And because mantra sounds are vibrational in nature, she adds, they help open the mind to the “boundary-less shared energy of the universe.”

A mantra can be simple — such as the “om” chanted before and after a yoga practice — or complex, like the traditional chants sung during ceremonies, called kirtan. This form of devotional singing centers on traditional mantras that tell a story. (You may have heard kirtan recordings played during a yoga class.)

The mental and physical benefits of mantra practice are visible in the research on Transcendental Meditation (TM), a form of silent mantra meditation from India that was introduced in the United States in 1959. Studies have shown that practicing TM for 20 minutes twice daily corresponds to improved symptoms of depression, ADHD, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress.

In 2017, the American Academy of Cardiology recommended meditation

as an adjunct treatment for coronary heart disease.

Sound Therapy

Sound baths like the one I attended are becoming more common in the United States, typically at spaces dedicated to healing and wellness. They might involve singing bowls, gongs, or drums, and the goal can be as simple as relaxation or as significant as altering your state of consciousness. (Recorded sound baths are abundant on YouTube for anyone who would like to experience one.)

Music Therapy

Most of us know music can affect our moods. Just consider how good it feels when a great song starts playing in the coffee shop. And studies have found that listening to relaxing music before a stressful event helps shorten the body’s recovery time.

Music as therapy is also used in clinical settings, particularly neurological ones. The Johns Hopkins Center for Music and Medicine conducts research into the effect of music on patients who’ve had a stroke and those with epilepsy, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s.

Because musical memories persist even when other recollections disappear, singing and other shared musi-

cal experiences are sometimes used as a means for people with dementia to connect with loved ones.

Time in Nature

There are many reasons a walk in the woods or along a beach is restorative; the soundscape is one of them. “Humans evolved, after all, to constantly process the sounds of nature; these sounds exist at the core of auditory perception,” explains Chaudhary.

A British study published in 2017 found that when we’re in nature, our attention naturally focuses outward — on the sound of birds, or water, or wind. This redirects the mind away from the inward focus that’s characteristic of anxious and depressive states.

Notably, the participants who showed the greatest calming response to natural sounds were those who were the most stressed when the study began.

“Sound impacts the reptilian brain because of its link to basic survival and needs,” says Chaudhary. “This part of the brain has a tremendous effect on our emotional well-being.”

“Humans evolved, after all, to constantly process the sounds of nature; these sounds exist at the core of auditory perception.”

COURTNEY HELGOE is the *Experience Life* features editor.

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Take the Polar Bear Plunge

Looking for an instant boost to your health and mood? Go jump in a (frozen) lake.

BY MICHAEL DREGNI

THERE'S NO WAY to truly prepare myself. I know it's going to be cold — *really* cold. I tense my muscles, perhaps in the vain hope of retaining body heat. But when I hit that icy water, it's colder than I could ever have imagined.

That's when it sinks in that a midwinter swim is named after polar bears for good reason.

The scene is a January eve on the Kawishiwi River in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness near Ely in far northern Minnesota. This is the land where wolves still howl at the moon and the aurora borealis shines bright. Snow blankets the hibernating earth and the night air hovers at 10 degrees F: This means that the water in the hole chopped through the ice is quickly covered by a glaze.

In the interest of full disclosure, my compatriots and I are not doing much actual swimming. And we've just emerged from a sauna's fiery glow; so, while our bodies hold that wood-fired warmth, it also makes the frosty river seem even frostier by comparison. We make the leap, descend deep down into the dark chill — and then shoot out again like Fourth of July fireworks.

Back in the sauna's embrace, I surprise myself by yearning to do it all over again.



Just as “cold” cannot begin to describe the water, “invigorated” fails to explain how alive I feel afterward.

THE BIG WHY?

A cold plunge is a wintertime dip in a river, lake, fjord, sea, ocean — or even glacial waters. Such ice bathing dates back centuries in Russia, Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

In 1903, the Coney Island Polar Bear Club founded the first U.S. winter-bathing club. Today, polar plunging is a hot trend in cold spots around the globe. New Year's Day has been christened the official Polar Bear Plunge Day, on which folks are ready to charge the freezing water for fundraisers or simply for “fun.”

But the real question is, *Why?*

It's a bragworthy challenge, certainly. But extreme cold-water bathing also boasts some surprising health benefits and healing powers.

“The immediate impact of cold water on our bodies can be uncomfortable, if not downright painful. It is therefore understandable why some might be reluctant to willingly submit to that discomfort,” writes “the Iceman,” Wim Hof, who has set some two dozen Guinness World Records, including several for braving the coldest of cold.

As part of his prescription for living fully, which he outlines in *The*



Wim Hof Method: Activate Your Full Human Potential, Hof recommends daily deep-breathing exercises and icy showers. To paraphrase the old saw, he preaches that cold water every day keeps the doctor away.

Cold-water exposure prompts vasoconstriction — a shrinking of the blood vessels — especially in the peripheral parts of the body, such as the arms, hands, feet, and ears. Your body counters with vasodilation, enlarging those arteries, veins, and capillaries to flood them with fresh blood. This supercharges your cardiovascular system, spurs metabolism, and helps restore cells after secondary injury.

Some adherents also report that taking the plunge lowers their resting heart rate and consistently elevates their heart rate variability. (For more on cold conditioning, see ELmag.com/hotcoldtherapies.)

Cold-water exposure also helps restore your body by quelling inflammation and reducing swelling. This can ease aches and pains and boost both exercise and injury recovery. (For more on the benefits of cold for recovery, listen to Life Time master trainer Danny King on the *Life Time Talks* podcast at ELmag.com/coldtherapypodcast.)

Still, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of cold-water exposure is how it effects your brain and your mind.

THE MIND GAME

In her book *Wintering*, Katherine May describes feeling frozen in life. She — very reluctantly — goes for a winter swim with another woman and finds comfort in the cold: Plunging into the North Sea brings a “high” and produces an antidepressive effect.

“Encountering the extremes of cold drew us both into that most clichéd space, the Moment, forcibly pulling our minds away from ruminating on the past or future, or tilling over an endless to-do list,” May writes.

Cold water jolts the body into releasing a rush of hormones, including mood-boosting norepinephrine neurotransmitters and pain-relieving endorphins that can reduce stress, improve sleep, and boost overall mood. One study found that cold-water immersion raises levels of the brain’s feel-good chemical dopamine by a whopping 250 percent.

“Regular cold-water swimming creates the same chemical mix in your bloodstream that ecstasy does,” May explains in the online journal *Maple*. “You feel incredibly euphoric but also blissful and peaceful. It’s a really lovely feeling. You get a massive dopamine hit; you get loads of serotonin flowing through your bloodstream.

“It’s very hard to pinpoint, but it happens as soon as you get in the water. There’s this kind of shedding of stress. . . . There’s good evidence that it alleviates depression and anxiety. Specifically, putting your head under the water helps to sort of soothe the vagus nerve that runs from your brain right down into your lower body.”

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Once winter arrives, Barbara Powell goes ice swimming most weeks in Minneapolis’s Cedar Lake. “I adore the entire chilly, uncomfortable experience!” she says.

Wearing naught but a bathing suit, mittens, hat, and slip-on shoes, Powell joins a group of like-minded friends for a five- to 10-minute soak. “We treat the plunge as a place of community, just like you would a weekly coffee get-together or church service.”

Powell, MA, NBC-HWC, is a Life Time Mind coach, and beyond the physical sensations of the plunge, it’s the heady effects that she appreciates most.

“Getting in — I just have to do it. No thoughts. Just feet first, hop down,” she explains. “The first 30 to 60 seconds are the worst. It’s a shock; the body and mind do not like it. It’s important for me to calm my mind through nose breathing.

“I am typically flushed with a euphoria immediately after that lasts about an hour or so. My world looks brighter, I feel quite alive, and I really enjoy the thrill of my body reacclimating to ‘regular’ temperature air.”

MICHAEL DREGNI is an *Experience Life* deputy editor.

MORE WAYS TO CHILL OUT

You don’t have to make like a polar bear to expose yourself to intense therapeutic cold. Try these other ways to get chilly.

- Take a dip in a cold-plunge tub or schedule a cryotherapy session at your local health club or spa. (For more on cryotherapy, visit ELmag.com/coldconditioning.)
- Draw your own ice bath at home any time of the year or take cold showers.
- Go for a swim in the ocean, one of the Great Lakes, or a mountain stream — it can get your system racing, even in the summertime.

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Time to Reflect

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

Happy New Year! To kick off my series of columns this year, I'm sharing an excerpt from the final chapter of the book I've been writing for the past few years. This passage is a reflection on curiosity — and on learning to balance what we know with what we don't and possibly won't know. It's a reminder to appreciate the time we have and to remember what matters most in the grand scheme of it all. I hope it inspires you to reflect for a few moments as the new year begins.

— BA

IT'S ALWAYS amazed me that, out of the millions of species on this planet, humans are the only ones with an insatiable sense of curiosity and the innate desire (not to mention the physical ability) to ask *Why?*

From measuring picometers between atoms to the light years between celestial bodies, we have gone (and continue to go) to unimaginable lengths to investigate and understand the unknown. We are persistent in our questions: Is this an accident? Is it the result of synchronicity or a divine kind of happenstance?

Why are certain gifts given to some but not others? What are the lessons here? Do other creatures hold answers to these secrets, but they just can't tell us?

With the understanding that some things are beyond our comprehension and that there will always be answers that evade us, it becomes our life's work to balance all we know with what we don't — to keep seeking a greater understanding while enjoying our time here and the beautiful experience of being human.

I am fascinated by the science and psychology of this, intrigued by how we arrived at our place here on Earth. And my interest in the miracle and potential of our human existence only grows. There are days when I am in awe of both what I've personally come to understand and what we've collectively discovered as a civilization.

The most important thing I've learned? How little we actually know. Think about it: Relative to the universe, Earth is unimaginably small. Yet despite its minuscule size, we continue to think it's important to know why we are here.

We are persistent in our questions: **Is this an accident? Is it the result of synchronicity or a divine kind of happenstance?**

We dig and dig, wanting to know what happened billions of years ago. We think ahead, innovating so we can move forward and learning how to not only survive but thrive on this planet.

We are eager to embrace the here and now *and* contribute to the future; we are intrigued to know what happens once we're gone.

I'm not the first, nor will I be the last, to wonder about our existence and what happens when our time is up. Poets, scientists, philosophers, and astronomers have studied, pondered, and hypothesized about this. It's not a secret that life is fleeting, so it's important that we remember:



Time goes fast, so make the most of it. Take the time to know who you are and be grateful for the gifts you've been given.

Maximize your strengths. Acknowledge your weaknesses.

Pay attention — to the mountains, oceans, trees, birds, rivers. Protect fellow humans and fellow species. Guard the planet. Give more than you take and put relationships before everything.

Take risks. Make decisions. Welcome challenges, obstacles, and hardships.

Thank your teachers for gifting you some of life's greatest lessons.

Give it your all without taking it all too seriously. Be tough and strong yet sweet and humble. Be sensible and sincere yet laugh uncontrollably.

We're in this together, more alike than we are different. Let's work toward collective goals, dream dreams, and set intentions. Find joy in our accomplishments.

It's a magical ride, this experience called life. It will startle you, how quickly you travel it. In a moment, you are gone. Again, the inexplicable.

This is your time in this universe. So, live — aware you are nothing, yet confident you are everything.

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



“We cannot be happy if we expect to live all the time
at the highest peak of intensity.
**Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance and
order and rhythm and harmony.”**

— Thomas Merton





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