

Experience Life

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL.

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2026

START THE YEAR STRONG

WITH A FITNESS ROUTINE
THAT FITS YOUR GOALS

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KEEP IT SIMPLE

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HEALTH AND FITNESS ENTREPRENEUR

BRIAN MAZZA

ON THE REWARDS OF FACING
PERCEIVED LIMITATIONS AND STEPPING
BEYOND YOUR COMFORT ZONE.

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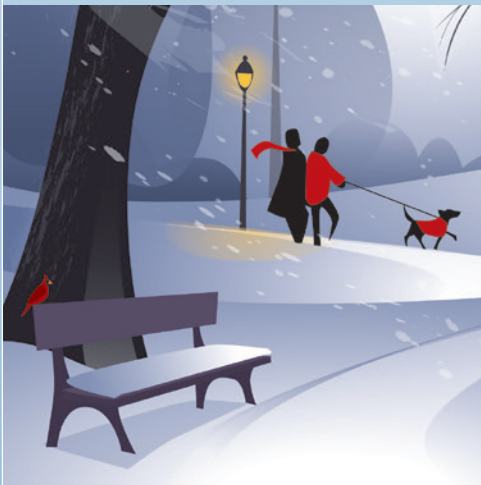


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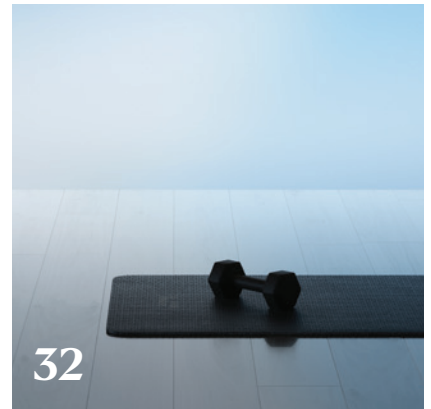
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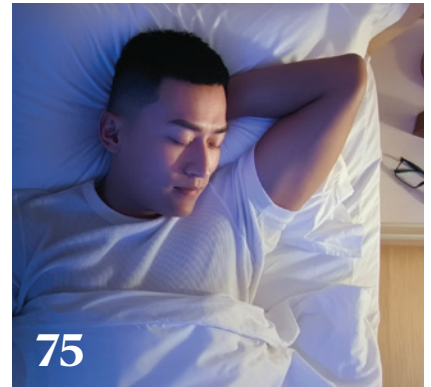
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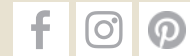
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Experience Life DIGITAL



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COPING WITH A NARCISSIST

Five tips for dealing with a narcissistic personality.

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How to Create a Winter Morning Routine

Many of our morning routines — working out, journaling, a short meditation — are constant throughout the year. But to truly optimize our health and well-being, it can help to sync our daily habits with the season.

In winter, especially, our bodies may benefit from a slower start to the day. We've interviewed some health experts and put together a list of ideas to help you curate your winter morning routine.

Scan the QR code or go to [ELmag.com/winterroutine](https://www.ELmag.com/winterroutine) to read the article.





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Cover, p. 16–17 (left), and p. 18 (top): **Andy Anderson** (photographer), **Lisa Chamberlain/The Rex Agency** (grooming).

Page 7: **Sara Rubinstein**; p. 23: **Luana Bogomolov Photography**; p. 32–33: **Piranha**; p. 55: **David Imms**; p. 85: **Terry Brennan**. Stock images: **Getty Images**.

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EXPERIENCE LIFE Magazine (ISSN 1537-6656) is published six times a year — January/February, March/April, May/June, July/August, September/October, and November/December — by LIFE TIME, 2902 Corporate Place, Chanhassen, MN 55317. SUBSCRIPTION RATE: One year (6 issues) \$27.95; two years (12 issues) \$44.95. LIFE TIME MEMBERS: For member questions, cancellations, or change of address, call Account Services at 888-430-6432 or email accountservices@lifetimed.com. NON-LIFE TIME MEMBERS: For nonmember questions, cancellations, or change of address, call 800-897-4056 or email ELFCustserv@cdsfulfillment.com. Periodicals postage paid at Chanhassen, MN 55317 and additional mailing offices. ISSUE DATE: January 2026. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Cole Luskey, EXPERIENCE LIFE Magazine, 2145 Ford Parkway, Suite 302, St. Paul, MN 55116.

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LIFE TIME
HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

EVER EVOLVING

AS I SAT DOWN to write this column, it occurred to me that it's been about a decade since I began the transition into the role of editor in chief for *Experience Life*. Ten years. Some days it seems like so long ago; others, it seems like yesterday.

It's remarkable to look back at all that's happened and all that we've covered in these pages during that time. While a lot has changed (the team, the number of issues per year, the amount of digital-first content we create), some important things have stayed the same — namely, the factors that form the foundation of a healthy way of life.

Pick up any past issue and you'll find that fitness and movement, nutrition and healthy eating, mental health and mindset, community and connection, stress and sleep management, and time in nature are referenced in every one.

While that might seem boring or repetitive, it's the nuances of these elements, along with how they're applied in different circumstances, that keep them interesting and fresh from issue to issue.

For instance, we know that having a consistent exercise routine is important — but my fitness goals and how I integrate movement into my daily life are likely different than how you approach it. That's why I love the four goal-oriented templates in “A Fitness Routine That Fits” (page 52); they allow each of us to create our own fitness adventure, but with proven guidance that can help us make meaningful progress.

“Power Up Your Plate” (page 40) is about eating well by strategically adding rather than subtracting from our diets. My favorite line from the article reads, “Experts say that white-knuckling your way to healthy eating by depriving yourself of the foods you love is a recipe for misery.” We offer ways to do the opposite and get more nutrients — as well as satisfaction and pleasure — from our meals.

Creativity, as described in “Free Your Mind” (page 72), is a path to cognitive flexibility. It's a mindset and practice that ultimately sets us up to be more adaptable and open to new ideas and perspectives.

I encourage you to notice how all these factors are covered in this and future issues. They are essential to maintaining a healthy life, making sustainable change when you need to, and addressing many lifestyle-related health issues if and when they arise.

Now for what's changed. Led by Maggie Fazeli Fard, our editorial director of fitness, our “Real Fitness” section is refreshed with four new departments: Form Check (page 31) offers targeted cues for improving your lifting form, one move at a time; Level Up (page 32) focuses on training strategies that can take your physical efforts to the next level; True or False (page 35) sets the record straight on common fitness beliefs; and The Long Game (page 37) provides guidance on how to keep moving at any age.

There's also Perfectly Imperfect (page 79), a new column by author Oliver Burkeman, who encourages letting go of unreasonable expectations and embracing our humanness so we can experience more joy in the day to day.

Just as many of us start a new year by reflecting on what's working in our lives (and what's not) and identifying new goals, we're doing the same with *Experience Life*. We've listened to your feedback, noticed trends, and made some updates, all with the intent of supporting you, our readers, as you move toward your goals, whatever they may be. With that, cheers to the start of another year and all the possibilities it brings.



Just as many of us start a new year by reflecting on what's working in our lives (and what's not) and identifying new goals, **we're doing the same with *Experience Life*.**



**YOUR
THOUGHTS?**

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TALK TO US

DIGNITY FOR THE DECEASED

[On “Your Guide to Eco-Friendly Burial and Cremation Options,” September/October 2025]

👤 Thanks for the thoughtful article, and for the list of resources — I am adding this information to my advance healthcare directives.
Opie R.

✉ I appreciate the attention this article brings to new burial practices, but caring for the dead is not a matter of opinion or trend — it is a timeless truth that honors the dignity of every human life.

Some newer methods, such as human composting or water cremation, claim ecological virtue but reduce the body to soil or chemical residue. True stewardship of creation can never come at the expense of reverence for the dead. Funerals are not disposal; they are acts of love, memory, and hope.
Sandra L.

A VESTED INTEREST

👤 I am beginning treatment for breast cancer with an estrogen blocker added to my daily meds. I’ve been researching weighted vests in order to add to my arsenal to help delay or stop the negative effects on my bone density. Thank you for your article “The Benefits of Adding a Weighted Vest to Your Fitness Routine” (September/October 2025). As always, *Experience Life* teaches me things with every issue!
Kathryn G.

PRESCRIPTION FOR STABILITY

👤 I’d suggest that anyone suffering from dizziness try the Epley maneuver and a good acupuncturist (“How to Recover From Vertigo and Inexplicable Dizziness,” September/October 2025). The Epley maneuver helped me some. The acupuncturist got rid of the rest after a few treatments.
Suzanne C.



AUTOIMMUNITY AND AGRICULTURE

👤 Autoimmune diseases are becoming more common because modern farming practices are depleting magnesium from the soil (“Are Auto-immune Diseases Becoming More Common?,” September/October 2025). According to a 2018 study in the journal *Nutrients*, “the average mineral content of calcium, magnesium, and iron in cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, and spinach has dropped 80–90 percent between 1914 and 2018.”
Scott H.

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Letters to the Editor
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ON HEALTHY AGING

👤 Yes, the key to longevity is walking daily (“Why Physical Activity Is the Best Predictor of Mortality,” August 2025). My grandmother lived to be 102 years old. I visited her in my early teen years, and she was an inspiration for me. We walked every day for 2 miles. I’m now turning 62 in November, and I never miss a day.
Brenda F.

👤 Knitting actually provides a meditative experience and a chance to master new skills (“Lessons Worth Learning,” August 2025). There are quite-active social groups on Ravelry (a huge, free database on all things fiber) that offer supportive friends as well as skill development. And because it’s an international network, you are exposed to other cultures. Win-win-win when you end up with a knitted project.
Judith F.

PAYING FORWARD

👤 Editor Craig Cox continues to inspire and inform (“Healthy Helpfulness,” August 2025). Whenever I do something as simple as picking up a discarded paper cup in a parking lot or helping a less-nimble-than-me senior lift a grocery bag into a car or step more safely off a curb, benefits accrue to all concerned.
Seth H.

RISING HOPES

👤 After nearly 30 years of desk work, I find my aging body can no longer rise from the floor, which I know is an independent key predictor of longevity (“6 Exercises to Help You Get Down on the Floor — and Up off the Floor — With Ease,” January/February 2023). I have to fire up my lower leg muscles and work with my weak ankles and messed-up feet (from an accident years ago). These great exercises give me a good starting point. I *will* achieve this by the end of the year, when a second grandbaby arrives.
Cynthia

MOVE FOR YOUR MIND

IF YOU WORRY about cognitive dysfunction as you grow older but struggle to perform the 150 minutes of weekly exercise recommended to protect against it, you'll find good news in recent research. Even 25 minutes of moderate movement in a week may contribute to a bigger, healthier brain.

"You hear that you need 10,000 steps a day or 150 minutes a week," Cyrus Raji, MD, PhD, tells *The Washington Post*. "But [those goals are] very hard to reach." Indeed, a 2023 study reviewing the exercise habits of American adults found that only 28 percent managed to meet those guidelines.

So Raji and his team set out to determine whether a more manageable exercise regimen might deliver similar cognitive outcomes.

"We wondered, if we chose a very low threshold of exercise, what would we see?" he says.

Researchers reviewed the brain scans of 10,125 healthy volunteers between the ages of 18 and 97, along with their medical histories and self-reported exercise data recorded in the two weeks before the scans.

Dividing the participants into two groups — those who exercised 25 minutes or more a week and their less-active counterparts — the researchers used the scans to compare

the brain volumes of each group's members.

They found that the brains of more physically active participants were larger than the brains of those who were more sedentary. The differences in volume appeared throughout the brain, including in white matter known to facilitate cellular connections.

The brains of the exercisers also displayed a larger hippocampus — a key player in memory. That area tends to shrink as we grow older.

Raji suggests in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease* that the salutary effects of moderate exercise on the brain could be due to reduced neuroinflammation and increased levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, which helps grow new brain cells and blood vessels.

"Due to the multiple mechanisms through which physical activity can improve brain volumes, there are important implications for this approach for optimizing brain health and improving dementia," he notes.

The results might offer hope to those who are unable to get to the gym on a regular basis.

"This is an exciting finding," says David Raichlen, PhD, a professor of biological sciences and anthropology at the University of Southern California who was not involved in the study. "And [it] gives us more fuel for the idea that being physically active can help maintain brain volume across the life span."

—CRAIG COX

"Due to the multiple mechanisms through which physical activity can improve brain volumes, there are important implications for . . . **optimizing brain health and improving dementia.**"

EXAMINING THE TRAUMA-ADHD CONNECTION



New research has identified an association between childhood trauma and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

"Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have been found to be probably significant predictors of many health conditions," including ADHD, state the authors of a systematic review and meta-analysis, published in *Brain and Behavior*. The researchers examined 70 studies involving nearly 4 million participants.

ACEs are experiences that threaten a child's bodily, familial, or social safety. They can include experiencing or witnessing violence, maltreatment, bullying, crime, or discrimination, or growing up in a household with parental separation, mental health issues, or economic insecurity.

"Our findings support the hypothesis that ACEs are associated with ADHD to a certain extent, especially for individuals who ever experienced multiple ACEs and females," the study's authors write.

Still, trauma can be difficult to diagnose and assess as a cause of ADHD, explains Maria Romaszkan in an *ADHD Online* article. "Screening tools for trauma are still scarcely used, and clinicians often rely on parents during ADHD assessments in children."

That makes it hard to tell whether ACEs increase the probability of being diagnosed with ADHD, or if having ADHD puts someone at greater risk of experiencing childhood trauma, Romaszkan says. "It's possible the association between ADHD and childhood trauma can go in either direction."

This all highlights the need for trauma-informed therapeutic approaches for the treatment of ADHD, writes psychotherapist and author Kaytee Gillis, LCSW, in her blog, *Invisible Bruises*.

"Adverse childhood experiences have been found to be probably significant predictors of many health conditions."

"With this increasing prevalence of ADHD diagnoses in our younger population, finding trauma-informed ways to support them is crucial," she notes. "As a clinician and fellow survivor, I often wonder if earlier intervention could have helped my clients (and myself) minimize symptoms later in life."

— MICHAEL DREGNI

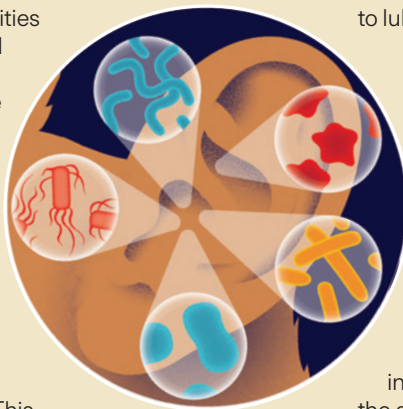
THE EARS HAVE MICROBIOMES — AND THEY PLAY A ROLE IN HEARING

Considering recent insights about the body's myriad microbiomes, it's probably not surprising that our ears, too, are homes to microbial communities that host a multitude of bacteria, fungi, and other tiny organisms.

In fact, our ears appear to have multiple microbiomes — in the middle ear, ear canal, and inner ear — and bacteria from one can cause issues in another.

But they typically work together to support the health of our ears, including by playing a role in our hearing.

Our ears have "a unique self-cleaning mechanism" that helps keep these communities healthy, explain the authors of a study in *Otology and Neurotology*. It's called cerumen, better known as earwax. This underappreciated substance may serve several key



functions, including "acting as an antimicrobial by maintaining the acidic environment" of the ear canal, and helping to lubricate and protect the ears.

In addition, researchers have proposed an "auditory-gut-brain axis," according to a review in *Frontiers in Neuroscience*. "The ear has a microbiome of its own, which would be expected to communicate and interact with microbiomes located in other parts of the body, including the gut," the authors write. And poor gut health can have a negative effect on hearing.

A review in *Audiology Research* suggests it may soon be possible to counteract common auditory disorders, including hearing loss and tinnitus, by way of the gut, with the help of probiotics, prebiotics, and a healthy diet.

— MD

GUT PUNCH: ALCOHOL AND YOUR MICROBIOME

Heavy alcohol consumption has long been traced to a litany of health conditions, including liver and heart disease, as well as various types of cancers. And evidence has been mounting in recent years suggesting some of that trouble may begin in the gut.

A study published in 2017 found that the gut microbiomes of alcohol-dependent participants with liver cirrhosis contained proinflammatory bacteria and an overall depleted microbiota.

More recently, a review published in 2024 concluded that alcohol-induced gut imbalances may even affect a drinker's mental health.

"Preclinical studies have indicated the influence of gut microbiota in the gut-brain axis and the bidirectional interactions between the central nervous system, the enteric nervous system, and the gastrointestinal tract, potentially affecting mental health outcomes," writes lead study author Ilias Koutromanos, MD.

And there's a link between the microbial imbalance alcohol can create and increased cravings for alcohol, according to a study published in 2023. Researchers recruited 71 volunteers between the ages of 18 and 25 who had not been diagnosed with alcohol use disorder (AUD). Participants reported their drinking habits at the beginning of the study and again three months later.

After controlling for general dietary patterns, researchers found that those who had engaged in binge drinking displayed gut-microbiome imbalances associated with increased alcohol cravings.

Researchers suggest that new treatment approaches aimed at restoring microbial health may help reduce alcohol cravings.

"The gut microbiome represents a promising therapeutic target for the treatment of AUD," Koutromanos notes.

—CC



RED-LIGHT THERAPY FOR PERFORMANCE AND RECOVERY

The sooner and better you recover from a workout, the sooner you can jump into your next one. Red-light therapy can help: It reduces inflammation, aids muscle recovery, and heals injuries.

This therapy is a type of photobiomodulation, or the use of light at specific wavelengths for health benefits. The treatment can be applied in a variety of ways, from sitting in a small, red light-infused room to using devices like a red-light panel, blanket, or face mask.

Red light, which is visible, differs from infrared light, which is on the invisible-light spectrum.

Red light penetrates your body's tissues to affect cellular function. The light is absorbed deeply enough to excite mitochondria, the powerhouses of our cells, which in turn promotes tissue regeneration and healing, explains Juan Gonzalez, PhD, CSCS, an associate professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Red light can be applied at surface level — think antiaging skin treatments purported to promote collagen production. It can also be used at deeper muscular and fascial levels to reduce inflammation, support wound healing, and generally diminish aches and pains.

"Red light helps your body recover by sending more blood flow to tired muscles, rebuilding tissues that have been torn down,

and decreasing inflammation," Gonzalez explains.

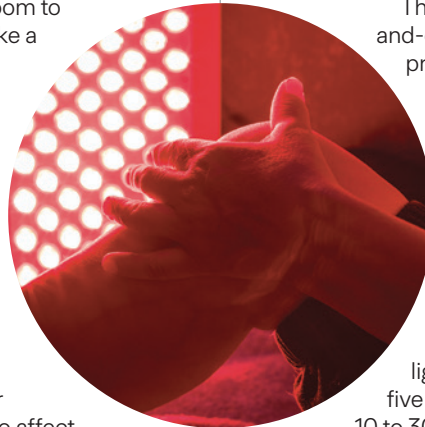
This can be especially helpful for older athletes. "I personally got into red-light therapy because I wanted to enhance recovery," he says. "I'm 62, and I was looking for ways to recover faster from running. What once took me three days of recovery after a single run now takes me just one after using red-light therapy regularly."

This isn't a one-and-done recovery protocol, explains Danny King, master trainer and manager of performance and recovery at Life Time. "In most of the studies you see, people are using a red light three, four, five times a week for 10 to 30 minutes. Fre-

quency does seem to matter here. Do it once and you're going to be like, *That didn't change my life*. But that's not how this works. We're looking at small benefits over time."

Adds Gonzalez, "Red-light therapy is not a cure. It doesn't replace the medical expertise of a physical or occupational therapist, and it doesn't replace smart training practices." But it can still be a worthwhile way to unwind postworkout.

— JESSICA MIGALA



DELVE DEEPER

For more on red-light therapy, see [ELmag.com/redlighttherapy](https://www.ELmag.com/redlighttherapy).

How Your PHONE HABIT Affects Your Body

Can't ignore the ping of your phone alerts? Do you have more conversations via text than via voice?

Americans send some 227 million text messages an hour; that's 6 billion a day. And then there's all the other time we spend on our phones — talking, surfing the Web, and using apps.

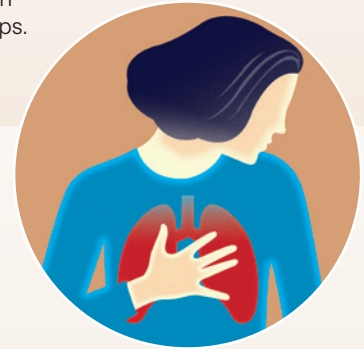
All that fiddling with our phones can have negative effects on our bodies, including the following.



ACHING NECK AND SORE BACK

Texting's habitual head-down posture can put substantial pressure on the spine, according to orthopedic surgeon Kenneth Hansraj, MD. An adult head weighs 10 to 12 pounds (about the same as a midweight bowling ball), and as we tilt it forward, it exerts pressure — up to 60 pounds at a 60-degree angle. That can result in a sore back or neck.

What You Can Do: Raise your phone and keep your head upright with your ears directly above your shoulders.



BREATHING ISSUES

Our forward-leaning posture can impede breathing. Dropping the head and rounding the shoulders makes it harder to take full, deep breaths.

Moreover, our ribs cannot move properly in this position, and that decreases the ability of our heart and lungs to function effectively. Finally, researchers have found that we often hold our breath or breathe shallowly while computing or texting — a habit they term "screen apnea." The result is increased stress and heart-rate levels.

What You Can Do: Take a break now and then to breathe slowly and deeply. Get up and stretch every hour or so. Set a timer on your phone to remind yourself.

TEXT CLAW

Because texting requires fine motor activity, it may lead to "text claw" — a habitual clenching that can lead to inflammation and repetitive stress injuries, such as tendinitis or carpal tunnel syndrome.

What You Can Do: Regularly stretch and move your hands and wrists through their full range of motion.



TEXT THUMB

Gripping cell-phones can constrict our flexor tendons.

Because our thumbs do not have the dexterity of our other fingers, excess texting can result in pain on the outside of the thumb and down toward the wrist or even a decrease in grip strength or range of motion.

What You Can Do: Use your phone's voice-recognition feature rather than texting manually. Or try incorporating other fingers into your texting method.

EYE STRAIN

The bright light — especially the blue light — from screens can boost our mood and alertness but also tire our eyes. In addition, it can disrupt our circadian rhythms and make it more difficult to get a good night's sleep.

What You Can Do: Set your phone to dark or night mode, particularly during evening hours. This softens screen brightness, and the warmer colors are less likely to confuse your body into thinking it's daytime. And avoid using screens one to two hours before bedtime. 📵

— HEIDI WACHTER



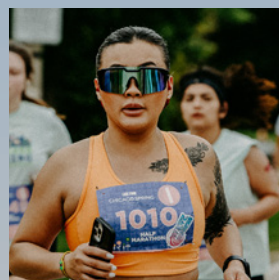


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Events

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With 30+ premium experiences nationwide including the Miami Marathon and Half, Leadville Trail 100 Run and MTB, and the Chicago Half Marathon, Life Time Events provide a platform for athletes of all levels to highlight and fulfill their training goals.

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BUILT TO GROW

Health and fitness entrepreneur Brian Mazza is pushing people to get outside their comfort zones — and creating stronger individuals and communities in the process.

BY **JAMIE MARTIN**

PHOTOS BY **ANDY ANDERSON**





HPLT participants — including Mazza (center) — during their Navy SEAL activation in May 2025 (inset photos provided by HPLT).



HIGH PERFORMANCE LIFE TIME summits aren't for the faint of heart. The multiday HPLT events are immersive, intense, and intentionally designed to push participants' physical, mental, and emotional limits. Think high-intensity workouts in uncomfortable environments programmed alongside mobility, recovery, and breath work. There are also educational sessions and fireside chats led by thought leaders and health experts — plus plenty of good food and company.

“It's all about bringing together like-minded individuals and helping them tap into certain sides of themselves in order to progress in life, to achieve certain goals, and to live their best life,” explains founder and health and fitness entrepreneur Brian Mazza.

A lifelong New Yorker, Mazza spent the first 15 years of his career in the Big Apple's hospitality industry.

“Throughout that time, I was figuring life out — what I wanted to do, who I wanted to be. I was always an athlete, but I felt like I had lost that side of myself,” the former Division 1 soccer player recalls. “I was partying, I was drinking, I was living that New York life. Something had to give.”

So, in 2017, Mazza stepped away to focus on “becoming better every day.”

He began taking what he describes as a 360-degree approach to performance.

“To me, it's who you surround yourself with, what you take in, what you listen to, what you watch, how you train, how you eat. It's about all of that working together.”

He leveraged connections from his hospitality days, reaching out to contacts in different sectors and industries.

“Selfishly, I wanted to create an environment where I could be around people who were better than me so I could learn from them,” he says. “I was in a transition period in my life where I was a new dad and my second child was on the way, and I needed people around me who were going to push me in a direction that was all about progression, self-fulfillment, and becoming better.”

The result? HPLT, which launched in 2018. Since then, Mazza has seen countless individuals go through the experience and come out on the other side with fresh perspectives and renewed energy for living their most meaningful, fulfilling lives. In early 2025, Life Time purchased the HPLT event series.

We recently sat down with Mazza to talk about what he means by “high performance” and how we can all tap into our potential, whether or not we ever attend an HPLT summit.

Q&A

WITH BRIAN MAZZA

EXPERIENCE LIFE • When people hear “high performance,” physicality often comes to mind. But your definition is broader than that — tell us why.

BRIAN MAZZA • High performance means something different to everyone — and athleticism and fitness are a sector of it. To me, it’s about showing up as the best possible version of myself every single day. How am I being the best friend, best parent, best partner, best colleague for people? In doing that, I’m going to have to sacrifice certain things to achieve high performance.

And that’s where a lot of people get caught up. They don’t want to look in the mirror and see the things they’re doing incorrectly or face that noise that something has to change if they want to make any progress in life. It’s consistent, small wins every single day that are going to lead to success.

EL • You’ve described HPLT as creating a community for like-minded people. Can you say more about that? What qualities and values do they have in common?

BM • When I created HPLT, it brought me back to being a kid again — to being on a team and the camaraderie of chasing a common goal. My dad always says, “Hang out with people who are smarter and fitter and all these things, and your life will get better just by the people you surround yourself with.”

So, a lot of participants are regular people who want to level up in some way. They want to change their job or relationship or do something that makes them happy, but they don’t know how to do that yet. So they come to a summit, hear from different experts, train in uncomfortable environments, and then leave having a whole new perspective on who they are as an individual and what they’re capable of.

EL • Let’s talk about those uncomfortable environments. Why do the events often start with a Navy SEAL-style activation?

BM • No matter how fit you are, [this activation is] not something you can

prepare for. And an intense physical experience like this requires being vulnerable and open. You’re doing it alongside people who start off as strangers but whom you quickly come to rely on because you all have to work together.

It sets the stage for a weekend of growth, because you’ve surrendered. It’s in that unknown moment where you meet a version of yourself that you have not seen before. And you’re standing there with 30 or 40 other people in the same rawness.

EL • How do you counter that physical intensity?

BM • Since the start, we’ve incorporated breathwork sessions and recovery experiences like sauna and ice baths — it’s when our bodies and minds get to process what they’ve experienced.

HPLT was recently acquired by Life Time, so we’ve incorporated more mind-body training focused on mobility and building neuroplasticity through MB360 in our most recent events. That — along with other relevant Life Time offerings — will be part of every experience going forward.

EL • On a more personal note, how do you balance the pursuit of self-optimization and avoid burnout in fitness and in life?

BM • In all honesty, I don’t think there is a balancing act in something that you’re super passionate about. If you’re dialed in and it’s for the right reason, I don’t feel like burnout is going to creep into your life.

Now, there are times when you obviously have to disconnect from things — you can’t have a mindset of no days off. That’s old school. Maybe you didn’t get a good night’s sleep because your kids were up last night. So you give what you can give, and that’s good enough.

You have to understand that there are levels to this. Some days you give a little more, some days you give a little bit less. My kids keep me grounded in this too.

EL • What’s next for you?

BM • With the Life Time and HPLT collaboration, we’re focusing on creating more versions of HPLT, including half- or single-day opportunities for people to experience our events, which is exciting. It’s opening the door to scale up and help more people discover what they’re personally capable of. And it’s an opportunity to amplify the



amazing talent and programs in the Life Time ecosystem.

I’m also working on a book that will come out in 2027 — it’s all about high performance. I want it to be a playbook that people can refer to when times are good, when times are bad, or when they need a little pick-me-up.

And, you know, just being a good dad, coaching my kids and being there for them. So long as I can continue to do that, I’ll be a happy camper. 🏡

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



Check out our cover shoot at ELmag.com/mazzavideo.

Try Brian Mazza’s eight-week strength-building program, available Jan. 12 in the Life Time app.



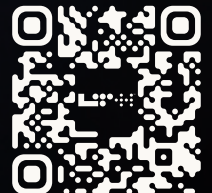


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What Do You Have for BREAKFAST?

EL staffers share their typical morning menus.

A cup of green tea and an **"EVERYTHING" SMOOTHIE** — banana, almond butter, coconut yogurt, chia and flax seeds, greens powder, flax oil, maybe some maca or ashwagandha or another random adaptogen, all slurried together with grapefruit juice.

— **Courtney Helgoe**, executive editor

I love a thick, **PROTEIN-DENSE SMOOTHIE** in the morning. My favorite flavor variations are mixed berry, strawberry cheesecake, and spinach with peanut butter.

— **Molly King**, senior editor/lead fact checker

Find some tasty EL smoothie recipes at ELmag.com/smoothies.

NOTHING. I practice intermittent fasting, so I don't eat until about 11 a.m., which has been a total game-changer for my energy levels.

— **Anjula Razdan**, senior director—digital

My go-to breakfasts are protein shakes and overnight oats. If I forget to plan ahead, I'll do **GREEK YOGURT** with protein powder and berries — fast, easy, and filling.

— **Carrie Stafford**, senior manager—business and circulation

Some mornings, something extravagant. Most mornings, something simple. Every morning, **COFFEE.**

— **Tatyana McNamara**, senior manager—multimedia

In a calmer environment, I would make myself over-easy eggs, sausage, hash browns, and buttered multigrain toast with black coffee and orange juice. But usually, amid the chaos of getting my family ready for the day, I just grab the **TWO BITES OF EGGS** or half a bagel my toddlers don't finish.

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



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Finding a New Rhythm

After experiencing a severe atrial fibrillation event at 58, I dedicated myself to being my own caregiver — and became stronger and healthier than ever.



Clockwise from top left: Emily on a yoga retreat in 2023; with Dylan Mills (left) and Eric Cassara at Life Time in 2025; and with her family in 2017.

BY EMILY NIKOO

ON THE EVENING of May 5, 2024, I was leaving the pickleball court after playing for nearly three hours. I was drenched in sweat, flushed, and laughing — but as I got into the car to head home, something felt off. My hands started to tingle, I felt dizzy, and my breathing turned shallow.

It was subtle at first — easy to dismiss. But by the time I got home, I knew something was wrong.

I went to the hospital and was admitted with a heart rate of nearly 200 BPM and a blood pressure reading of 220/150. I was experiencing a severe atrial fibrillation (A-fib) event that would last all night and through the next day.

A-fib, which can be episodic or chronic, is a serious cardiac arrhythmia in which the heart beats rapidly and irregularly. It can be triggered by an underlying heart condition or, as in my case, a combination of genetic predisposition and lifestyle factors, such as stress, dehydration, physical inactivity, excessive caffeine consumption, and poor diet.

I was only 58 at the time, which is relatively young for an A-fib episode. It certainly came as a shock to me — and it made me realize I couldn't afford to continue ignoring the signals my body was sending. It was time to truly prioritize my health.

A PERFECT STORM

Although fitness and sports had always been a part of my life, my exercise routine had become sporadic. I might have worked out once a week or even multiple times a week — but without consistent commitment. Some months I'd find a rhythm, but pain, stress, or more pressing obligations would knock me off track.

I had developed several painful health issues after giving birth to my second child, in 1997. I'd returned to activity before fully recovering from the birth and suffered a herniated disc. I also had neuropathy in my feet, which led to instability and multiple ankle injuries.

In my 40s, I underwent two back surgeries and continued to struggle with foot problems. My focus became pain management, so my activity was often limited to what I could do in physical therapy or in low-impact settings, like water therapy.

Other responsibilities at the time made prioritizing fitness even more difficult. In addition to working full time, I was the primary caregiver for my father, who suffered from multiple acute health issues — including A-fib. I maintained this caregiving role until he died, in 2016.

That same year, I became a caregiver for my husband after he was diagnosed with brain cancer.

My injuries and caregiving responsibilities took a toll. I was constantly fatigued and in pain. I was also anxious and overwhelmed. I didn't know how to prioritize my own well-being, so I was often running on fumes.

In 2023, a few years after my husband's successful cancer treatment, I decided it was time to get my life back on track. That meant addressing my chronic pain, building strength, and regaining a sense of joy and control.

After connecting with a new pain-management and physical therapy team, I joined the Life Time Middletown club near my home in New Jersey. I started working with a personal trainer, Dylan Mills, in February 2024. He was attentive, knowledgeable, and willing to listen. He didn't try to force me past my limits. Instead, he focused on form, safety, and building a foundation I could sustain.

Even so, I continued pushing myself hard. After spending so long prioritizing other people's health, I'd become desensitized to my own needs. My diet included a lot of highly processed foods, salty snacks, some alcohol, and four cups of coffee a day. I didn't drink enough water.

My body still held the anxiety from so many years of caregiving, and my stress level was sky-high from work. I was still mentally and physically overloaded.

All of this was a perfect storm leading up to the A-fib event.

A CHANCE TO REBUILD

Despite my father's history of A-fib, my own episode surprised me. I was now at higher risk for stroke, blood clots, and heart failure — even at my relatively young age. I knew what that could mean: constant monitoring and daily doses of medication, including a lifelong regimen of blood thinners. But I couldn't accept that reality. I wanted to reclaim my health on my own terms.

I was discharged from the hospital with a list of restrictions to lower my risk of complications, and I embraced a new mission: to protect my heart and build resilience from the inside out.

I needed to reduce inflammation in my body, and two primary recommendations were cutting down on alcohol and stimulants like caffeine and increasing my hydration. I also wanted to reduce my intake of highly processed foods, limit sugar and salt, and adopt a mostly plant-based diet.

It wasn't easy. I had to make gradual changes to ensure they would stick. Dylan and Life Time nutritionist Eric Cassara helped me break everything down into manageable steps. I introduced new initiatives one at a time: a plant-based protein shake, then a new hydration strategy, then meal planning. Eric helped me track macronutrients to

be sure I was getting enough fiber and clean protein.

Returning to exercise was slow too. I started with walking and gentle strength work — just body-weight movements or

light bands or machines. I had to monitor my Apple Watch closely to keep my heart rate under 110 BPM to help prevent another A-fib occurrence, which meant I rested frequently.

As I got stronger and my recovery improved, I was able to tolerate more cardio and attend some higher-intensity classes. Dylan adapted our sessions accordingly, helping me rebuild strength without spiking my vitals.

Little by little, the changes accumulated. Physically, I began feeling lighter, stronger, and more energetic. My doctors and I were thrilled by my progress, and my medical team took me off blood thinners, which felt like a major milestone.

On the emotional side, I felt grounded for the first time in years — less reactive, more stable, and genuinely happier. After enduring years of stress, I finally felt like I had the clarity and capacity to enjoy my family, my work, and each day as it came.

A LIFE TRANSFORMED

I now work out six days a week, and I love it. My workout varies by the day: You might find me in a Pilates reformer class, a personal training session, or a friendly pickleball match with my husband.

Since my hospital stay, I've maintained my muscle mass (while losing more than 50 pounds), avoided another A-fib episode, and improved my quality of life. The Life Time community has played a big role in my success: The support, energy, and camaraderie I've received from Dylan, Eric, and the people I meet in classes help keep me going.

I still monitor my heart rate, heart rhythm, and blood pressure daily, but there's less anxiety around it. It's simply part of my routine now, like drinking water or prepping meals. I build in time for recovery too, including sauna and cold-plunge sessions, rest days, and stress-management practices, like tai chi and deep breathing.

My goal is sustainability. Throughout this experience, I've learned that health isn't about extremes; it's about consistency, community, and listening to your body. And I'm determined to carry these pillars into my next decade and beyond. 🌱

Emily's Top Takeaways

1.

Build a support team. "It took years for me to find the right professionals, and the right gym community, to help me meet my goals," Emily says. "But it's absolutely worth the time and effort."

2.

Be your own caregiver. "Prioritize your well-being and put yourself first."

3.

Take action now. "If you're worried about your heart health, don't wait. Ask for help. Take small steps. It's not too late to rewrite your story," she advises.



TELL US YOUR STORY

Have a transformational healthy-living tale of your own? Share it with us at

**ELmag.com/
myturnaround.**



Emily playing pickleball at a Dinks and Drinks party in March 2025.

INTRODUCING A WHOLE NEW LOOK

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REAL FITNESS

A NEW YEAR often brings new fitness goals — and for many, the pressure to go after them with gusto. But motivation alone is a fickle resource, and it often runs out. On **page 32**, learn how to nurture and develop sticky habits, which offer a better chance at sustained success.

SLOW STRENGTH

Build a strong foundation with this eight-week eccentric-training program.



BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

WHEN IT COMES to strength training, faster isn't necessarily better. An approach known as eccentric training — which often involves slowing down the negative, or lowering, portion of an exercise — is a proven method for challenging the muscles, making you stronger and more resilient.

Some benefits of eccentric training include better body control, improved lifting form and technique, increased muscle mass, and stronger connective tissues. (Learn more about these and other benefits at ELmag.com/eccentrictraining.)

According to Mike Thomson, a Life Time strength and running coach, these rewards are the result of a simple fact of exercise physiology: We're all stronger in the eccentric (lowering) phase than in the concentric (lifting) phase.

How much stronger?

"You can eccentrically control about 130 percent of what you can concentrically push," says Thomson, who uses eccentric training to help clients build base strength.

Here's what this looks like in practice. Let's say you can back squat 100 pounds with control. What you may not realize is that while this weight tests what you can stand up with, you're probably strong enough to safely lower as much as 130 pounds. It might feel impossible to bridge that gap — you don't want

to safely lower 130 pounds to the bottom of your squat only to get stuck there (or worse, injure yourself trying to stand up).

This is where eccentric training comes in. By slowing down the lowering portion of the 100-pound squat, you increase the time under tension on the way down. This allows you to maximize the strength-building potential in the phase where you are strongest, without compromising your form and safety during the concentric phase as you stand up.

To indicate how slowly to move, fitness coaches use a common notation system consisting

of four numbers, Thomson explains.

- The first number refers to the duration of the eccentric (lowering) phase.
- The second number refers to the duration of the pause you perform after you've lowered the weight.
- The third number describes the duration of the concentric (lifting) phase.
- The fourth number refers to the duration of the pause after you've completed the lift.

For example: In doing back squats with a tempo of 3010, you would take three seconds (3) to descend as deeply as you can into the squat position. Without pausing (0), take about one second (1) to ascend to the starting position. Then start the next rep without pausing (0). (Learn more about tempo training and notation at ELmag.com/tempotraining.)

Eccentric training... is a proven method for challenging the muscles, **making you stronger and more resilient.**

THE PROGRAM

The following program, created by Mike Thomson, consists of two strength workouts.

1x-2x

Perform each workout one or two times per week, alternating between the workouts on nonconsecutive days.

8 weeks

Increase how much you lift over the eight weeks so long as you can maintain body control at the prescribed tempo.

3010

Perform each exercise at a tempo of 3010 — three counts for the eccentric, one count for the concentric, and no breaks at the top or bottom of the movement.



DO THE WORKOUTS

Download a mobile-friendly version at ELmag.com/slowstrength.



WORKOUT 1

SUPERSET

A

Complete 10 reps per exercise. Once you've done all reps for the first exercise, move on to the second.

Rest for 75 seconds. Repeat the superset for a total of four rounds.

A1 DUMBBELL SPLIT SQUAT

Perform a split squat, taking three slow counts to bend both knees and lower your back knee toward the floor.



A2 DUMBBELL BENCH PRESS

Perform a bench press, taking three slow counts to bend your elbows and lower the weights to your chest.



SUPERSET

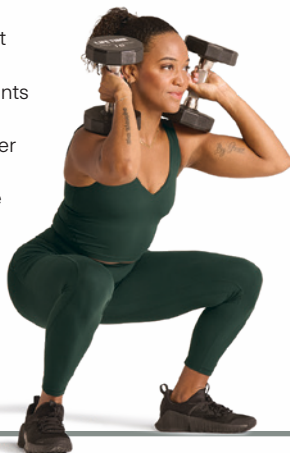
B

Complete 10 reps per exercise. Once you've done all reps for the first exercise, move on to the second.

Rest for 75 seconds. Repeat the superset for a total of four rounds.

B1 DUMBBELL FRONT SQUAT

Perform a front squat, taking three slow counts to bend your knees and lower your hips until your thighs are about parallel to the floor.



B2 SINGLE-ARM BENT-OVER DUMBBELL ROW

Perform a bent-over row, taking three slow counts to extend your arm and lower the weight toward the floor. Repeat with your other arm.



SUPERSET

C

Complete 10 reps per exercise. Once you've done all reps for the first exercise, move on to the second.

Rest for 75 seconds. Repeat the superset for a total of four rounds.

C1 STABILITY-BALL HAMSTRING CURL

Press your heels into a stability ball and lift your hips. Take three slow counts to extend your legs straight out, then reverse the movement while keeping your hips elevated.



C2 SINGLE-ARM DUMBBELL SHOULDER PRESS

Perform an overhead press, taking three slow counts to lower the weight to your shoulder. Repeat with your other arm.



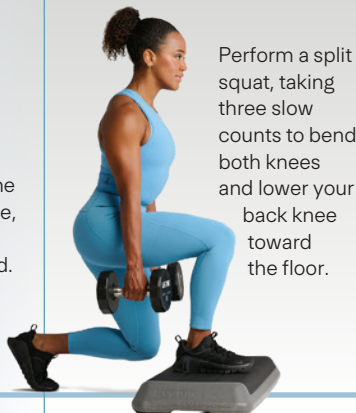
WORKOUT 2

TRISSET

A

Complete 10 reps per exercise. Once you've done all reps for the first exercise, move on to the second exercise and then the third.

Rest for 75 seconds. Repeat the triset for a total of four rounds.

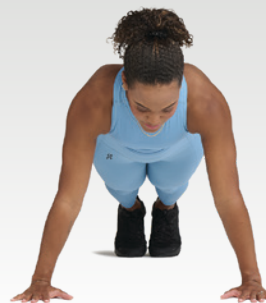


A1 FRONT-FOOT ELEVATED DUMBBELL SPLIT SQUAT

Perform a split squat, taking three slow counts to bend both knees and lower your back knee toward the floor.

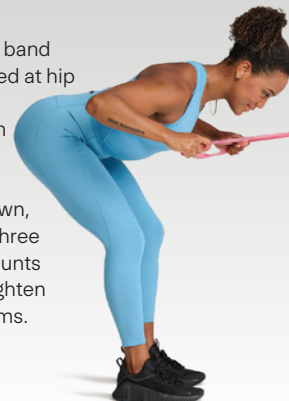
A2 PUSHUP

Perform a pushup, taking three slow counts to bend your elbows and lower your chest toward the floor.



A3 BENT-OVER BANDED LAT PULL-DOWN

Using a band anchored at hip height, perform a bent-over lat pull-down, taking three slow counts to straighten your arms.



SUPERSET

B

Complete 10 reps per exercise. Once you've done all reps for the first exercise, move on to the second.

Rest for 75 seconds. Repeat the superset for a total of four rounds.

B1 DUMBBELL ROMANIAN DEADLIFT

Perform a deadlift, taking three slow counts to press your hips back as far as you can. Keep your spine straight and shins vertical.



B2 BANDED SEATED ROW

Sit with a band anchored at chest height. Perform a row, taking three slow counts to straighten your arms.



SUPERSET

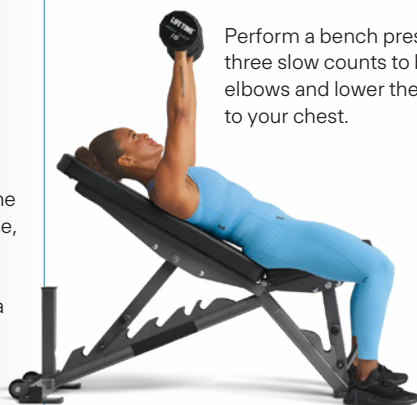
C

Complete 10 reps per exercise. Once you've done all reps for the first exercise, move on to the second.

Rest for 75 seconds. Repeat the superset for a total of four rounds.

C1 DUMBBELL INCLINE BENCH PRESS

Perform a bench press, taking three slow counts to bend your elbows and lower the weights to your chest.



C2 POWELL RAISE

Lie on your side and, holding a light dumbbell, extend your top hand straight toward the ceiling. Take three slow counts to lower the weight to the floor in front of you. Repeat with your other arm. 🔄



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THE BULGARIAN SPLIT SQUAT

Four cues to fine-tune your form.

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

THE BULGARIAN split squat, also known as the rear-foot-elevated split squat, is a powerhouse move for building lower-body strength. But proper positioning is everything. These are four simple tips to help you nail your next split-squat session.



1. Use a knee-high platform to elevate your back foot. A racked barbell wrapped in a foam pad or yoga mat is the most customizable option, but a box, bench, or step also works. If the available platform is too high, prop up your front foot with a weight plate so the rear platform is at knee height.

2. Find your stride at the bottom of the lunge. Aim for your front knee to form about a 90-degree angle and your back knee to line up beneath your hips. Tweak the position to your comfort to avoid a too-long or too-short stance.

3. Press through your whole front foot. Imagine tiny jets underneath your front heel and the balls of your big and little toes, a tripod of energy pushing against the floor as you bend and straighten the front knee. Don't push through your back foot.

4. Use a support for balance. While this move can help build balance, it is not exclusively a balance exercise. So if you feel too wobbly to add a sufficiently challenging weight, hold on to something — a pole, a wall, or a squat rack — for assistance.

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

SHIFT YOUR WEIGHT TO MEET YOUR GOALS

Bulgarian split squats work the quads and glutes, and small tweaks can bias the move to support one or the other.



To emphasize the glutes, imagine you're an escalator:

- Shift your torso slightly forward.
- Maintain a more vertical shin with your front knee over your ankle.
- Push your hips back as you lower.



To emphasize the quads, imagine you're an elevator:

- Keep an upright torso, aiming to stack shoulders over hips.
- Allow your front knee to track forward over your toes.
- Push your hips forward as you lower.

STICKY HABITS

Relying on motivation alone to reach your fitness goals often isn't enough. Instead, learn how to leverage behaviors that work for you.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

WHETHER WE'RE experienced exercisers reaching for a new personal best or newcomers taking the first steps to fitness, the line from where we are to where we want to be is guaranteed to involve loops and zigzags. And the journey is often made more difficult by the myth that motivation is the only fuel we need.

"The mistake we make is that we lose motivation when we think we've failed," says behavior expert and habit-change researcher Kyra Bobinet, MD, MPH, author of *Unstoppable Brain*. "If we expect to be motivated and then one day we don't feel like going to the gym, we blame ourselves for not being motivated."

This apparent failure activates a part of our brain called the habenula, a pea-size structure that acts as a master switch for mood and behavior. Specifically, it regulates motivation and plays a role in the brain's "antireward" system.

"The habenula detects failure," says Bobinet. "And then, if failure is detected, it kills your motivation to keep trying that thing. This is good if what you're trying is risky or dangerous but bad when it comes to trying to do things that are good for you. When it comes to behavior change, the primary thing we're trying to do is overcome the feeling of failure."

To manage motivation loss, some behavior-change experts emphasize the role of habits. If a behavior becomes a habit, you're likely to do it regardless of how you feel at any given time.

"Habits become automatic — your default," says Lindsay Ogden, Life Time master trainer and nutrition coach. "When you embody a habit, you no longer need to rely on motivation."

The following steps can help you create sticky habits that work for you in exercise and beyond.

5 STEPS TO HEALTHY HABITS

1.

CHOOSE BEHAVIORS THAT MATCH YOUR INTERESTS AND LIFESTYLE.

Trying to develop a habit around a behavior that you dislike or that doesn't fit into your lifestyle increases the likelihood that you're going to feel a sense of failure and lose your motivation before the behavior can even resemble a habit.

On the contrary, the more enjoyable something is and the more seamlessly it fits into your routine, the more easily it will become a habit.

"It's important to know yourself," says fitness coach Scott Schutte, cofounder of the Healthy Behavior Institute. "So much of figuring out a plan is determining what is the best fit for you, based on your environment and your personality."

2.

CURATE YOUR CUES.

A cue is the initial trigger that tells your brain to practice a behavior. Cues can be external: For example, packing your gym bag before bed might trigger you to work out the next day. Or they can be internal: Feeling low energy during work could trigger a break to stretch or walk.

"When a cue is built into your environment, it becomes an effortless reminder for your new habit," says behaviorist Janine Stichter, PhD, also a cofounder of the Healthy Behavior Institute. "If you want to start walking your dog in the morning, try leaving your running shoes and the leash by the door. It's a simple nudge that makes it easier to follow through."

Recognizing already-established cues and habits can help you develop new behaviors through a practice called habit stacking — adding a new behavior to an existing habit until the new behavior becomes automatic.

Over time, these habits create a symbiotic system that makes it easy to work toward your goals. "Structure creates freedom," says Ogden. "If you have solid processes in place, that's going to free up your mental space, your energy, and your time to focus on what matters."

3.

SOFTEN YOUR RIGIDITY.

“A lot of people think building a habit means doing the same thing at the exact same time every single day,” Stichter says. “But being that rigid actually trips most people up. What works better is setting a general guideline and aiming for consistency — not perfection.”

To work around the all-or-nothing mindset that so often accompanies a training regimen, Ogden uses the “feeling it in five” rule. “Basically, even if I don’t feel like it, I have to get my butt to the gym as planned,” she explains. “But if I’m not ‘feeling it’ within five minutes, then I will just walk and listen to a podcast, stretch, or leave the gym completely.”

Ogden says that nine times out of 10, showing up and getting started is enough. “I have a great workout that I didn’t think I was going to have.” And if she leaves after five minutes, she does so without guilt.

4.

FIND YOUR POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT.

Rewards help habits stick. You might think that seeing results would be the reward for working out, but “results are a lagging indicator of habits,” says Ogden. It might take months or years to reach certain goals.

For more immediate positive feedback, engage in activities you genuinely enjoy. If you’re not sure what those are, start with ones you don’t hate, and pay attention to how they feel in your body. Notice how you feel powerful while engaging your muscles during strength training. Notice how you smile when dancing to your favorite music. Notice the sights and sounds of your backyard as you work in the garden. Notice the sensation of your breath in your nostrils during yoga.

What feels good? Take note and revisit that activity.

Sometimes, you’ll want to get positive reinforcement from a behavior that’s not naturally rewarding for you. In that case, pair the behavior with something positive: Put on a playlist you love while doing lunges. Hike with your best friend. Stack a challenging group fitness class with a relaxing sauna session.

“What your brain does over time is create an association so that the desired habit in and of itself becomes a positive experience on its own,” says Stichter.

5.

BE PREPARED TO PIVOT.

For a behavior to hold up over time, it helps to understand that failure is inevitable. A disciplined runner who has built a habit of logging 25 miles a week might get injured. A new mom who once loved her habit of working out at night might find herself too exhausted by the end of the day.

Rather than seeing these circumstances as reasons to give up, view them as opportunities to iterate, says Bobinet. “Iterating means tinkering, tweaking, adapting — doing it a slightly different way.”

That might mean making subtle changes to an activity — time of day, duration, complexity, choice of workout partner — or even changing the activity altogether, she explains.

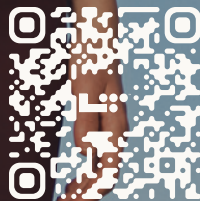
“It might also mean reevaluating the goal you set in the first place,” Bobinet adds. “Make iterations to your effort to increase success, avoid failure, and protect your motivation.” ➔

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



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Exercise and Cortisol

True or false: For optimal hormone health, it's best to avoid activities that spike your cortisol.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

FALSE. You may have heard that low-intensity workouts are best for hormone health — and, conversely, that high-intensity workouts wreak hormonal havoc.

But regular exercise that includes a balance of varied intensities is one of the best ways to establish a healthy cortisol rhythm and regulate other hormones, including testosterone, estrogen, insulin, serotonin, and dopamine, says Samantha McKinney, RD, director of LTH Nutrition at Life Time.

So why has this bit of misinformation created such a buzz?

In part it's because exercise — especially moderate-to high-intensity exercise — does, in fact, cause your body to release cortisol. And chronically elevated cortisol levels can cause a range of health issues, including weakness, fatigue, mood changes, sleep issues, low immunity, muscle breakdown, and fat gain, McKinney says.

When cortisol spikes too often or takes too long to return to normal — for instance, if someone exercises too much without managing their nutrition, sleep, or stress — the body might keep baseline cortisol levels high, even at rest.

But when exercise is approached in a balanced manner, and overall stress is managed with recovery, the cortisol spike is not only temporary but desirable, explains Brad Dieter, PhD, MS, scientific advisor for the National Academy of Sports Medicine.

UNDERSTANDING THE CORTISOL CURVE

Cortisol is nicknamed the stress hormone because it helps the body respond to stress. Because exercise is a form of stress, cortisol kicks in when you work out; it stimulates your body to produce more glucose and release fat from storage sites. That process provides the energy needed to sustain your workout, Dieter explains.

This is healthy, normal, and beneficial. Cortisol typically returns to baseline levels (or below) shortly after a workout, usually within 60 to 90 minutes.

Over time, these cortisol bursts train your body to better adapt to stress, no matter the source. So it's inaccurate to say that you should avoid activities that spike cortisol. "Especially when there is evidence to show the metabolic benefits of higher-intensity exercise," Dieter says.

THE HEALTHY HORMONE ROUTINE

When it comes to exercise, a varied workout routine is the best way to support your hormones. "Including a variety of different training modalities can create a more balanced exposure to different hormones and help build a more robust physiology," Dieter notes.

What follows is a look at various activities and intensities that you might include in your routine and how they affect hormones.

Resistance training:

Whether you lift barbells, use weight machines, or stick to body-weight activities like vinyasa yoga, Pilates, and calisthenics, resistance training releases testosterone and growth hormones, which play key roles in building new tissue. Do at least two full-body strength workouts weekly, using a resistance or load that is challenging but that still allows you to maintain good form.

Low-intensity exercise:

Gentle, low-intensity workouts, like restorative yoga and walking, lower cortisol in the moment. These activities can be done most days with minimal risk of overdoing it. They're also helpful for staying active on

recovery days or calming your body in times of stress.

Moderate-intensity cardio:

Performing activities like running, cycling, swimming, and hiking at a moderate intensity helps your body become more receptive to insulin, a hormone that regulates blood-sugar levels. Aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity per week.

High-intensity efforts:

High-intensity exercise also has a positive effect on insulin and can help balance testosterone. For most people, McKinney suggests sticking to just one or two higher-intensity workouts per week.

Intentional recovery:

Making time to refuel and restore your body between workouts has numerous benefits. Among them, proper recovery "allows the body to reset hormone levels to baseline," Dieter says.

To best support your fitness and hormones, prioritize sleep, nutrition, and stress management. (Learn more about optimizing your rest days at ELmag.com/recoverydays.)

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



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Best Foot Forward

Foot weakness is a predictor of both impeded mobility and fall risk as you age. Try these exercises to keep your feet functional and strong for the long haul.

BY JESSICA MIGALA

WITH 26 BONES, 33 joints, and more than a hundred muscles, tendons, and ligaments — not to mention some 200,000 nerve endings — your feet are crucial to keeping you active and healthy.

“Feet are the foundation to the body. Every step, jump, or lift starts at the feet,” says Angela Metrou, MA, a Chicago-based mobility coach specializing in joint strength and longevity.

The feet are often first in line for age-related complications: Stiffness, pain, numbness, and tingling are just a few of the common complaints that pop up as you get older. Some of the causes, like the thinning of fat pads and skin, are hard to prevent entirely. But one major contributor to foot problems — the loss of strength and mobility in the lower legs — is relatively easy to address with targeted exercises.

Strong ankles, arches, and toes play a key role in keeping you, well, on your feet. This speaks to those body parts’ highly proprioceptive nature, “their ability to sense where you are in space and adjust your body accordingly,” explains Life Time’s Wes Pedersen, CSCS, an Irvine, Calif.-based strength and running coach. If you feel like you’re about to

fall, the feet’s nerves, muscles, and connective tissues work together to keep you upright.

Because of their intermediary role between the ground and your brain — helping relay information that dictates your ability to move and stabilize — Metrou calls feet “your ears on the ground.”

But, she notes, “we start losing sensation to our feet as we age.” This loss can contribute to mobility decline. You may walk less and differently, switching to a shuffling gait. As the quantity and quality of your movements change, this can lead to weakness and pain not only in the feet but also up the kinetic chain, into the knees, hips, and spine. Because of this cascading effect, foot weakness is a strong predictor of fall risk as you age.

To preserve — or reclaim — function, Metrou and Pedersen recommend focusing on two attributes: ankle mobility and toe strength.



ASSESS YOUR FOOT FUNCTION

To test your toe strength and ankle mobility, head to ELmag.com/footfunction.

3 EXERCISES FOR STRONG, MOBILE FEET

Aim to incorporate the following three exercises, provided by Metrou and Pedersen, into your daily routine. Doing them first thing in the morning is a great way to shake off stiffness in your feet and ankles, but work them in anytime you can do them consistently.

TOE SPREADS

- To the best of your ability, spread your toes apart from each other. Try to use only the strength of your foot muscles to create space between your toes.



- Relax and allow your toes to return to their resting position.
- Repeat 10 times per foot.

TOE WAVES

- Raise your toes off the floor. Press only your big toe down, keeping the four other toes elevated. Then elevate your big toe while pressing the other four toes to the floor. Repeat five times per foot.



- Next, raise your toes off the floor. To the best of your ability, try moving each toe individually: Lower each toe, one by one, back to the floor. Reverse the movement: Raise each toe back off the floor, one toe at a time. Repeat five times per foot.

STEP-DOWNS

- Stand with both feet on one step of a staircase, facing the lower landing. Hold on to the handrail for balance.

- Lower your right foot and touch the next step below with your entire sole while keeping your left foot down fully on the original step.

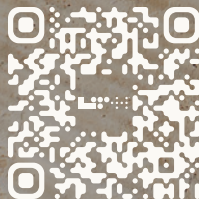


- Hold this position for a moment, then step your right foot back up to meet your left.
- Repeat 10 times per foot.

JESSICA MIGALA is a writer specializing in health, nutrition, fitness, and beauty.



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REAL FOOD

THE TIME AND ENERGY required to cook a healthy meal aren't always available, especially on a weeknight. But the wholesome one-pot meals starting on **page 48** are low-fuss, nourishing options that don't result in a sinkful of dishes. If you want to make the Unstuffed Peppers pictured here, find the recipe at ELmag.com/onepotmeals.

POWER UP YOUR PLATE

You don't necessarily need to overhaul your diet to eat well. Some easy add-ons can get you more of the nutrients that matter.

BY CATHERINE GUTHRIE

DIETARY CHANGES are usually more enjoyable when you're adding rather than subtracting. So why ring in the New Year with diet overhauls that turn January into a pressure cooker of dietary discipline?

Experts say that white-knuckling your way to healthy eating by depriving yourself of the foods you love is a recipe for misery. That's because restricting specific foods can make you crave them even more, says registered dietitian Nichola Ludlam-Raine, author of *How Not to Eat Ultra-Processed*. "We are not robots. Cutting out our favorite foods can lead to a restrict-and-binge cycle, which can then turn into shame and guilt. It's a downward spiral."

On the other hand, including more whole foods in your diet delivers more nutritional oomph while sidestepping deprivation. And those extra nutrients might just fill you up faster and keep you going longer — effortlessly lowering your desire for snacks and sweets.

Functional dietitian and sports nutritionist Barbara Lewin, RDN,

CSSD, LDN, often sees her clients succeed using this approach. Instead of telling them what *not* to eat, she recommends one simple goal: Aim for at least 30 grams of fiber per day.

That one dictate changes everything, she says. Being focused on fiber redirects people's attention toward the cornucopia of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. "It's not about what they *can't* have but what they *can* have," she says. "It's a different way of thinking about food."

The same redirect can be applied to protein and antioxidants. And, naturally, in the Venn diagram of nutrients, many of these add-on tips overlap. For instance, beans are a win-win-win, because they deliver copious amounts of all three: fiber, protein, and antioxidants.

Get curious about how many nutrient-rich whole foods you can add to your favorite meals and make the coming year one of pleasure and abundance instead of subtraction and sacrifice.



FIBER

If you've got the will to focus on only one nutrient, make it fiber. Fiber feeds healthy gut bacteria, aids in the regulation of blood sugar and cholesterol, and helps keep you full longer. A fiber-rich diet also lowers your risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and colon cancer.

"Fiber is one of my favorite things," says Amber Hanson, LN, CNS, a functional nutritionist in Minneapolis. "No nutrient by itself is magical, but fiber is as close to magic for the body as you can get."

Most people miss out on the magic. Some estimates suggest that upward of 90 percent of Americans fall short of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's daily fiber recommendation of 28 to 34 grams, which varies by sex and age. With stats like those, says Hanson, any fiber is a welcome addition, so try some of the following tips.

Toss a handful of veggies

into almost any stovetop dish as it cooks. For instance, throw spinach, cherry tomatoes, or red peppers into a skillet of scrambled or fried eggs; stir a cup of diced mushrooms into meat sauce; or add a half-cup of frozen corn, frozen green beans, or frozen bell peppers into a pot of chili as it simmers.

Replace salad croutons

with crispy roasted beans. Lewin likes to rinse and dry a cup of canned chickpeas or edamame, then toss them with avocado oil and teriyaki sauce and roast them on a

sheet pan at 400 degrees Fahrenheit for 30 minutes, giving the tray a gentle shake every 10 minutes or so.

"You want them to be crisp and crunchy," she says, which is why the drying step is key. "They are delicious on salads, but you'll probably want to eat them straight out of the oven."

Stir puréed beans into soups and stews as a thickener and to "gently bump up the nutritional density of a meal," says Hanson. Beans are a fiber powerhouse: Depending on the type of

bean, you're looking at 8 to 16 grams of fiber per cup.

Hanson likes to swap puréed white beans for the cream in tomato soup. "The soup still has a creamy texture, but the fiber from the beans leaves me feeling more satisfied."

Keep the peel on vegetables and fruits: These outer layers contain a healthy portion of fiber. This is an especially good idea with organic fruits and veggies. "Just give them a good scrub before chopping, slicing, or dicing and adding them to your dish," Hanson advises.

Toss whole grains into soup. "Instantly add fiber to a meal by stirring in a quick-cooking whole grain toward the end of a favorite soup recipe," she says.

Quick-cooking versions of grains like farro, bulgur, and barley can be ready to eat in 10 to 20 minutes. Because each has its own flavor and texture, the key is to find one you enjoy. "Don't try to convince yourself you love quinoa when you don't," she adds. "There is probably a whole grain you'll like if you just keep sampling."



PROTEIN

Protein plays a role in many of the most critical bodily processes. It's used to make our muscles, bones, skin, and hair. Proteins create protective antibodies and can even act as hormones.

Getting enough of the nutrient is especially important as the body ages, says Ludlam-Raine. "Without enough protein, you have less energy, your muscles fatigue more quickly, and your body heals more slowly from injury and illness."

While protein needs vary depending on age, activity level, and health goals, most active people can benefit from 20 to 30 grams of protein at each meal. Take your protein content up a notch with these ideas.

Fall in love with eggs.

Adding an egg to a meal is one of the easiest ways to ratchet up protein. A single large egg delivers about 6 grams. A hardboiled or jammy egg can lift the protein score of ramen noodles, Caesar salad, avocado toast, and more.

If you like stir-fried rice, try adding an extra egg to the recipe. Or consider putting a veggie-packed omelet, quiche, or shakshuka into your weekly dinner rotation to get more protein, fiber, and antioxidants in one dish.

Toss beans or lentils into pasta sauce. Canned beans and lentils are inexpensive, shelf-stable, and packed with protein. A single cup of lentils delivers approximately 18 grams of protein.

Try adding chickpeas or white beans (such as great northern or cannellini) to white sauce-, cheese-, or oil-based dishes, like Alfredo or pesto. Heartier tomato

saucers, like a Bolognese, can easily embrace black beans, kidney beans, or lentils, says Ludlam-Raine. If the texture is a turnoff, she says, purée the beans first.

Sub quinoa or soba noodles for rice in almost any grain-forward dish or bowl. One cup of quinoa boasts 8 grams of protein. A cup of soba noodles, which

are made from buckwheat flour, offers 6 grams. Both are complete proteins, meaning they deliver all nine essential amino acids the body needs.

Ahead of a busy week, Lewin cooks a pot of quinoa so she has a ready-made foundation for grain bowls and salads for maximum ease.

Add some spinach to your soups and scrambles. Spinach is an excellent source of high-quality protein, says Peter Horvath, PhD, associate professor emeritus of exercise and nutrition sciences at the University at Buffalo.

A cup of cooked spinach has more than 5 grams of protein — but don't be fooled by the smallish number. Spinach also contains all nine essential amino acids, plus antioxidants and fiber, making it another triple-win food. It might surprise most people, he says, but for high-quality protein, "spinach can't be beat."

Sprinkle seeds liberally. Whether you're eating a salad, oatmeal, yogurt, or grain bowl, a handful of seeds adds flavor, crunch, and protein. One caveat: Many seeds have a protective outer layer, the seed coat, that must be crushed to access the nutrients inside. Bigger seeds, such as pumpkin and sunflower, are easily chewed. But smaller seeds, like flax or sesame, often pass through the body without ever giving up their goods.

As a workaround, Horvath puts chia and hemp seeds with flaxseeds in a blender

and pulverizes them. Then he sprinkles the seed mix on his favorite foods, especially yogurt and salads. To keep the mixture fresh, he stores it in the refrigerator.

Get to know "nooch."

Nutritional yeast is an inactive version of the same kind of yeast used to bake bread and brew beer. Two tablespoons of the cheesy yellow flakes pack about 5 grams of protein. Nutritional yeast has an umami flavor that plays well with most everything, including popcorn, pasta, and green salads. Lewin keeps a jar in the fridge and uses it liberally on veggies like broccoli and cauliflower.

Try sprinkling nooch on top of cooked veggies, or make a quick sauce by blending it with some pan drippings while cooking. It can even replace the cheese in pesto for a great-tasting sauce.



ANTIOXIDANTS

Antioxidants protect cells from oxidative stress, which can occur when the body accumulates too many free radicals — as a natural byproduct of metabolism as well as a response to external factors, such as sunlight and pollution. Years of oxidative stress can contribute to issues often linked to aging, such as heart disease, stroke, and even wrinkles.

“Eating a variety of antioxidants is one of the best ways to reduce inflammation, support long-term health, and keep your body functioning at its best,” says Lewin. “Think of them as your body’s natural defense system.”

One simple trick for dialing up your antioxidant intake, according to Hanson, is to seek out colorful foods — color is a strong indicator of antioxidants. “When you look at your grocery cart, how many colors do you see?” she asks. “If you don’t see that many, what can you add to your next grocery list to bring more variety into your home?”

These tips can help you prioritize antioxidants.

Try your favorite vegetables in different colors to get a variety of benefits. For instance, yellow and purple carrots have a different antioxidant profile than their orange brethren. Yellow carrots get their sunny hue from xanthophylls — plant compounds linked to healthy eyesight — and purple carrots contain anthocyanins, the same potent antioxidants contained in blueberries and blackberries.

That advice extends to other veggies as well.

“Little tweaks can make a big difference,” says Hanson. She encourages people to buy the variety pack of yellow, orange, and red cherry tomatoes; try pink, purple, and white radishes; cook with red, blue, and purple baby potatoes; and experiment with orange, purple, and green cauliflower.

Enjoy berries year-round. Berries are some of the most antioxidant-rich foods on the planet, and winter is the perfect time to explore the many uses for frozen berries;

they contain about as many phytochemicals and antioxidants as fresh ones.

Lewin likes to pour a cup of frozen berries into a large container of Greek or plant-based plain yogurt. The berries defrost in the yogurt, making breakfast even easier. If she’s feeling more creative, she’ll make parfaits in small canning jars by layering yogurt, frozen berries, walnuts, flaxseed meal, and warming spices, like cinnamon. The thawing berries help keep the parfait cold until she’s ready to dig in.

Lean into seasoning. Busy home cooks can be tempted to skimp on (or even skip) a recipe’s herbs and spices. But this is a missed opportunity, Hanson says. “Not only will herbs and spices give you a wide array of antioxidants, but they also offer so much more flavor variety, which leads to more satisfaction and pleasure.”

If chicken is a part of the weekly dinner rotation, use herbs and spices to stave off boredom. Perhaps one week

you could make a chicken dish inspired by Vietnamese flavors, like lemongrass, mint, and ginger. The next week you could try a Mediterranean-style chicken spiced with oregano, thyme, and sumac.

“Novel spices are interesting to your palate, which is one of the reasons why a new flavor of potato chip is so appealing,” Hanson says. “Adding more interesting seasonings to foods you make at home can give your taste buds that excitement without looking to a big food manufacturer to do it for you.”

Make your own spice blend. Lewin makes a batch using mostly Ceylon cinnamon along with ginger, cloves, and nutmeg to taste. She chooses these spices for their potent antioxidants, including quercetin, eugenol, gingerol, and cinnamaldehyde. Every morning, she stirs a teaspoon of the spice blend into her yogurt and berries.

This blend adds flavor without extra sugar and gives a concentrated boost of antioxidants. It can also be sprinkled

on oatmeal or blended into a smoothie. “Keeping this spice blend on my countertop means I don’t have to hunt and peck for various spices,” she says. “If you make it easy to eat well, you’re more likely to stick with it.”

Sneak saffron into your coffee. Always on the lookout for ways to get more antioxidants, Lewin adds a few threads of the golden spice to her coffee beans before grinding them. Saffron is a rich source of antioxidants, including crocin and crocetin.

“I can’t taste the saffron,” she says, “but it gives me an extra dose of antioxidants every morning. It’s a subtle way to elevate your morning coffee with a nutrient boost.”

Yes, she acknowledges, saffron is expensive. But she finds that a small bottle lasts her several months. “If I spend a bit more on groceries,” she says, “I see it as an investment in my health.”

CATHERINE GUTHRIE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

Sick-Day Chicken Soup

Cure what ails you with this soothing, comforting recipe.

BY KAEALYN RILEY

AS A KID, I rode out every cold I ever caught with a self-prescribed diet of Sprite and saltine crackers, alongside repeated viewings of *The Princess Bride*. In adulthood, I find that a sick day still calls for that same simplicity and comfort I craved when I was young — but now that I'm older and arguably wiser, I also want a much heftier dose of truly nourishing ingredients.

For me, a sick-day recipe has to satisfy an array of competing impulses. I want it to be packed with nutrients yet easy to digest. It's got to be soothing and cozy but so simple that I can still throw it together when I can hardly stand upright. I need something flavorful enough that I might want to eat it when I don't feel like eating much of anything, but it can't require any ingredients that I don't typically keep stocked in my fridge, freezer, or pantry.

Of course, chicken soup is practically the platonic ideal of a sick-day food, and for good reason: While there is no cure for the common cold, numerous studies suggest that some of the ingredients in chicken soup can help relieve certain cold symptoms.

The broth provides fluid and electrolytes, both of which are crucial for supporting immune function and maintaining body temperature. The steam from the hot soup can help alleviate nasal congestion, and the chicken and vegetables supply important nutrients, like protein and vitamin C, to aid tissue repair and support the immune response.

This soup also contains healthy doses of garlic and ginger, which are potent anti-inflammatory ingredients. Research suggests that gingerol, a compound found in fresh ginger, can reduce the risk of both bacterial and viral infections — and one 2024 study found that those antiviral effects are more potent when the ginger is combined with garlic.

Allicin, the compound that gives garlic its pungent scent and its antibacterial and antiviral properties, forms when the cloves are chopped or crushed. For that reason, I like to follow the “10-minute rule” when cooking with garlic: I mince it up and let it stand on the cutting board for at least 10 minutes to give the allicin time to develop. This enhances the flavor as well as the health-promoting com-

pounds. For this soup, I'll prep the garlic and ginger first, so they can rest while I prep the rest of my ingredients and sweat the onions.

Beyond its combination of nourishing ingredients, one of the greatest strengths of this sick-day soup is its adaptability. You could swap the chicken breasts for thighs, use frozen spinach instead of fresh, or choose a different leafy green entirely, like kale or Swiss chard. You could replace half of the water with bone broth for an extra boost of protein, vitamins, and minerals (just be sure to halve the salt too).

Cooked in the amount of liquid this recipe uses, the rice will begin to break down and form a thick, velvety consistency similar to a rice porridge or a Chinese congee. This makes the rice easier to digest, and the comforting soup can be a blank canvas for whatever toppings you're craving.

Maybe you want yours with an egg on top, or with a sprinkle of crispy shallots or crunchy cashews. My husband always adds a generous drizzle of chili oil. I'll take mine with extra lemon juice and a fistful of fresh herbs — and, of course, the story of Inigo Montoya's revenge on the six-fingered man.



Makes eight servings
 Prep time: 10 minutes
 Cook time: 40 minutes



1½ tbs. extra-virgin olive oil



1 large yellow onion, sliced



½ tbs. sea salt, divided, plus more to taste



8 cloves garlic, minced



2 tsp. grated ginger



1 cup arborio rice (or other short-grain white rice)



1½ lb. chicken breasts



2 tsp. black pepper, plus more to taste



4 cups fresh spinach, chopped



Juice of 2 lemons, plus more to taste

Place a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat, then add the olive oil and heat until shimmering. Add the onion and ½ teaspoon of the salt and cook until softened, about eight minutes.

Add the minced garlic and grated ginger and cook until fragrant, about one minute more.

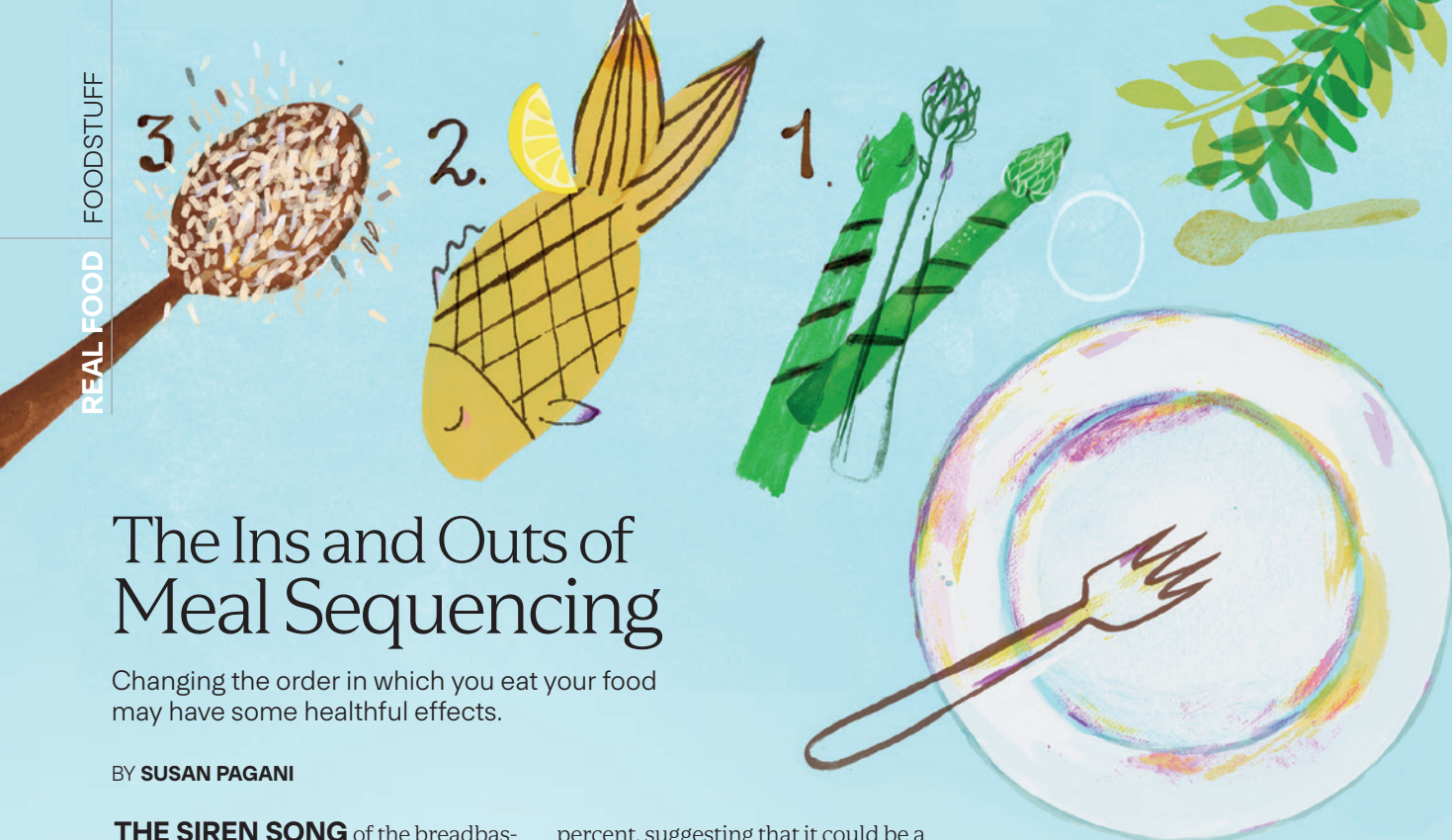
Pour in 10 cups of water, then add the

remaining salt, rice, and chicken breasts. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook until a meat thermometer inserted into one of the chicken breasts reads 160 degrees F, about 10 to 15 minutes.

When the chicken breasts are done, remove them from the pot and let them cool slightly while the rice continues to simmer. After five minutes, shred or

chop the chicken and return it to the pot. Add the black pepper and chopped spinach. Cook until the chicken has heated through and the spinach is wilted, about two minutes more.

Turn off the heat and stir in the lemon juice. Taste the soup and add more salt, pepper, or lemon juice as needed. Serve with toppings as you wish. 🍴



The Ins and Outs of Meal Sequencing

Changing the order in which you eat your food may have some healthful effects.

BY SUSAN PAGANI

THE SIREN SONG of the breadbasket is many a diner's favorite tune. Yet as we slather butter on those pillowy-soft rolls, a voice in our head pipes up: *Are you sure you want to front-load those carbs?*

Maybe not, say proponents of meal sequencing. There may be benefits to eating fiber-filled, nonstarchy veggies first; then moving on to protein and fat; and *then* digging into your carbohydrates and starchy vegetables.

In fact, in one study, this approach lowered glucose peaks by more than 50

percent, suggesting that it could be a great tool for blood-sugar control.

"As we eat, carbs, proteins, fat, and fiber are digested and absorbed at different rates," explains Jessica Hernandez, RD, LD, a registered dietitian at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. "They each trigger various hormonal and metabolic responses. So the order in which you eat your macronutrients impacts your body's response."

Meal-sequencing advocates claim the method can flatten postmeal

blood-sugar curves, support nutrient absorption, and increase satiety. Some even claim it can help you lose weight or skip that after-lunch nap.

That sounds fantastic, but can simply switching the order of your meal really make that much difference?

While the research suggests there are benefits, some dietitians say that meal sequencing isn't right for everyone. We spoke with experts in metabolic health to get the answers.

Can meal sequencing help manage blood glucose?

Yes, possibly, says Barbara Eichorst, MS, RD, CDCES, vice president of healthcare programs at the American Diabetes Association. Eating protein, nonstarchy vegetables, and healthy fats before carbohydrates may help protect you from postmeal blood-glucose spikes.

That's because fiber and protein slow gastric emptying, Eichorst explains. This means that food transfers more slowly from the stomach to the small intestine, where nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream. The fiber and protein essentially create a buffer, so carbs don't enter the bloodstream as quickly — which results in a lower and more gradual blood-glucose rise.

"Over time, minimizing these spikes lowers inflammation, supports heart health, and contributes to better blood-sugar control," says Hernandez. Sequencing can also help improve insulin sensitivity — a major risk factor for prediabetes, type 2 diabetes, and polycystic ovary syndrome.

For people who already have prediabetes or diabetes, Eichorst says, bringing blood-sugar spikes down could potentially reduce the amount of insulin they need and improve hemoglobin A1c, a measure of average blood-glucose levels over three months.

Can meal sequencing make me feel less sluggish after meals?

Food coma, post-prandial somnolence, the after-dinner dip: Whatever you call it, we've all experienced the energy crash that can follow a meal.

One way to mitigate that effect is by helping your body manage blood-sugar fluctuations. "Meal sequencing could potentially improve how someone feels after eating, since you are slowing down digestion and reducing the sharp rise in blood sugar that often leads to fatigue," Hernandez says.

"People often report having more steady energy, fewer cravings, and improved focus when using the approach," she adds. "It's a fairly easy adjustment that makes a difference in how your body responds to food."

Can meal sequencing increase GLP-1 production, and might it help me lose weight?

Glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) is one of our body's natural hunger and metabolic hormones. Everybody's talking about it these days, thanks to a spate of type 2 diabetes and weight-loss medications, like Ozempic, that are designed to mimic it.

GLP-1 has a few important jobs. It slows down gastric emptying, so food stays in the stomach longer. It tells our brain we're satisfied, so we can comfortably stop eating. And it stimulates the pancreas to release insulin, which helps lower blood sugar.

Starting your meal with fiber and protein helps trigger the release of GLP-1, and some studies show that its production is higher following meals during which diners eat carbs last. Hernandez says this can help you feel fuller for longer, which may naturally reduce overall caloric intake. And keeping blood-sugar levels down can encourage fat burning rather than fat storage.

"Unlike restrictive diets, meal sequencing doesn't require eliminating foods," says Hernandez. "It's simply reshaping how you eat them, making it a sustainable tool for weight management."

Who can benefit from meal sequencing?

Meal sequencing is safe for most people, Hernandez says, though she adds that the method is most helpful for those with prediabetes, type 2 diabetes, and polycystic ovary syndrome because of its effects on blood sugar.

For some people, it may be healthier to avoid meal sequencing. Strict rules around food may cause anxiety for people with a history of disordered eating. And children or growing adolescents probably don't need to be focused on their macronutrients.

Eichorst warns against anyone with gastrointestinal issues trying meal sequencing without consulting their physician. Eating large amounts of fiber and fat can worsen common GI symptoms, like nausea and bloating. The same goes for conditions that require limited protein intake, like chronic kidney disease.

Can meal sequencing support nutrient absorption?

The research is still limited, and Hernandez says she doesn't know of any human studies that link meal sequencing to increased nutrient absorption. Still, "there is physiological evidence that suggests it can support better digestion and nutrient uptake," she says. "With the slow gastric emptying and improved hormonal and metabolic response, meal sequencing may enhance how well we absorb key nutrients, like fat-soluble vitamins, magnesium, calcium, and amino acids."

There's also evidence that meal sequencing can help people include more essential nutrients in their diets. In 2023, one group of researchers found that a carbohydrate-last food order (along with relevant nutritional counseling) significantly increased participants' vegetable intake over the course of a 16-week study. That's nothing to sniff at: Currently, only 10 percent of Americans get the recommended daily amount of vegetables.

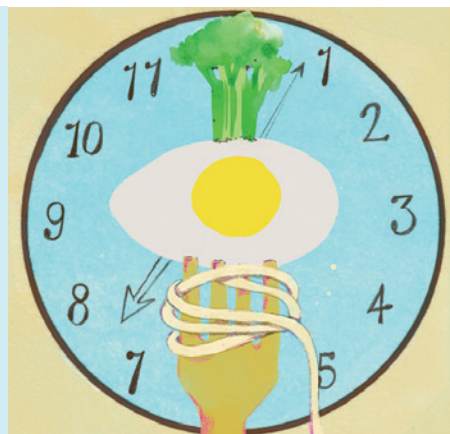
Are there drawbacks to meal sequencing?

When managing blood sugar, there are considerations far more important than food order, says Jill Weisenberger, MS, RDN, CDCES, author of *Prediabetes: A Complete Guide*. "I'd rather see folks put their energy into food quality, balance, and portion size."

Adhering to meal sequencing can be challenging. In one study, 44 percent of participants reported that it reduced their enjoyment of meals. The approach can be limiting, especially when it comes to sharing a meal with others. As Weisenberger says, "It's hard to follow meal-sequencing guidelines if you're offered a sandwich or a casserole."

She stresses that many other lifestyle changes can positively affect blood-sugar levels, like exercising frequently and limiting ultraprocessed foods — habits that come with other health benefits too.

These changes can also help reduce persistent thoughts about food that can derail healthy habits. "I've often heard from clients that once they improve the quality of their food and balance their plates, they're more satisfied, think less about the next meal or snack, and even have fewer cravings," Weisenberger says.



Where should I focus if I want to give meal sequencing a try?

Food can be emotionally complex for a lot of us, and with dietary guidelines shifting all the time, it can also be confusing. "Enjoyment in meals is important," says Hernandez, "and strict rules around eating can take that away."

Her advice? Don't overcomplicate it. If you're trying meal sequencing for the first time, focus on being intentional about the order in which you eat rather than on changing what you eat.

"Dinner is often the easiest meal to start with," she advises. "It tends to be more structured and eaten at home. Once you're comfortable, you can apply it to another meal."

The bottom line, Hernandez says, is that meal sequencing is a great tool if your goal is to help reduce blood-sugar spikes or your risk of insulin resistance. But it's not the only worthy tool. You won't be able to do it at every meal, and that's OK. You don't have to be perfect to be healthy. 🍌

ONE-POT WEEKNIGHT

Enjoy a complete dinner minus the sinkful of dishes with these low-fuss, high-protein recipes.

BY MADDIE AUGUSTIN

NO MATTER the time of year, my kitchen is one of my favorite places. For me, cooking is a meditative, peaceful process. The rest of the world quiets down as I work to make something nourishing and delicious for myself.

But like most people, I don't always have the time and energy to prepare a complicated meal. And despite how much joy I feel from getting creative in the kitchen, staring down a sink filled with dirty dishes will send me crashing back to reality.

That's why I think one-pot meals like these belong in everyone's recipe repertoire. Whether you're a seasoned home cook or a first-time meal prepper, these wholesome recipes can help you start the new year with healthy meal options — and minimal cleanup.





Creamy Chicken and Rice With Sun-Dried Tomato

Makes eight servings
Prep time: 15 minutes
Cook time: 50 minutes

CHICKEN AND RICE

- 1 tbs. butter
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 lb. boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- ½ tsp. sea salt, plus more to taste
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper, plus more to taste
- 1 large yellow onion, sliced
- 16 oz. cherry tomatoes, halved
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tsp. dried oregano
- 2 tsp. dried parsley
- 1 tsp. red-pepper flakes
- 1½ cups white rice, rinsed
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 4 cups baby spinach, chopped
- ¼ cup fresh basil leaves, thinly sliced

SAUCE

- 3 oz. Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
- 1½ cups cottage cheese
- ½ cup milk of choice
- ½ cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, drained

Place a large Dutch oven over medium heat, then add the butter and oil and heat until the butter has melted. Season the chicken breasts with salt and pepper. Sear the chicken until golden brown, about three to four minutes per side. Remove the chicken from the pot.

Add the onion and tomatoes to the pot and cook until the tomatoes have shrunk and the onion is tender, about six to seven minutes. Add the garlic, oregano, parsley, and red-pepper flakes, and cook until fragrant, about one minute more.

Add the rice, stirring to coat it with the oil and seasonings. Pour in the broth, return the chicken to the pot, and bring the mixture to a steady simmer. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to low, and cook until the rice is tender, about 25 to 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, make the sauce: Add the sauce ingredients to a blender and blend until smooth.

Once the rice is tender, remove the chicken breasts from the pot. Stir the spinach, basil, and sauce into the rice mixture, and cook until the sauce is heated through and the greens are wilted, about two more minutes.

Remove the pot from the heat, then taste and adjust the seasoning as needed. Place the chicken breasts back on top of the rice and serve.

Greek Meatballs With Lemon Orzo

Makes eight servings
Prep time: 30 minutes
Cook time: 45 minutes

MEATBALLS

- ½ cup oat flour
- ½ cup milk of choice
- 2 lb. ground turkey
- 2 eggs
- 2 tbs. minced fresh mint
- ⅓ cup minced fresh parsley
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- ¾ tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tbs. butter

LEMON ORZO

- 1 medium shallot, diced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp. lemon zest
- ½ cup white wine
- 16 oz. orzo
- 4 cups chicken broth
- ½ tsp. sea salt, plus more to taste
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper, plus more to taste
- 6 oz. baby spinach, chopped
- 2 tbs. lemon juice, from about ½ lemon
- 4 oz. crumbled feta, for garnish

In a large mixing bowl, combine the oat flour and milk, and set aside to soak for five minutes.

To the soaked oat flour, add the ground turkey, eggs, mint, parsley, garlic, salt, and pepper. Mix with clean hands until well combined. Lightly oil your hands and roll the mixture into 24 1½-inch meatballs.

Place a large Dutch oven over medium heat, then add the olive oil and butter and heat until the butter has melted. Working in batches, sear the meatballs until browned all over, about 10 to 12 minutes per batch. Remove the meatballs from the pot, leaving the fat behind.

Start the orzo: Add the shallot to the pot and cook until tender, about three to four minutes. Add the garlic and lemon zest and cook until fragrant, about one minute more. Add the wine to deglaze the pot, stirring to

scrape up anything that has stuck to the surface. Cook until the wine has reduced by half, about two minutes. Add the orzo, broth, salt, and pepper, and bring the mixture to a simmer.

Return the meatballs to the pot, cover, and cook for 10 minutes.

Once more, scrape up anything that may be sticking to the bottom, then stir in the spinach, cover, and cook until the orzo is tender, about two minutes more.

Remove the pot from the heat, stir in the lemon juice, and taste; adjust the seasoning as needed. Garnish with the crumbled feta and serve.



COOK WITH EASE

Download a mobile-friendly version of these recipes — plus one for Unstuffed Peppers — at ELmag.com/onepotmeals.



Sweet Potato and Chickpea Curry Soup

Makes eight servings
Prep time: 20 minutes
Cook time: 35 minutes

CURRY PASTE

- 6 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and chopped
- 1 small white onion, halved
- 2 Roma tomatoes, halved
- ¼ cup ghee
- ½ tbs. whole cumin seeds
- 2 bay leaves
- 5 green cardamom pods
- 2 tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. ground turmeric
- 1 tsp. Kashmiri red-chili powder (or 1 tsp. sweet paprika plus ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper)
- 1 tbs. ground coriander
- ½ tbs. ground cumin

SOUP

- 2 large sweet potatoes, diced
- 4 Roma tomatoes, diced
- 2 15-oz. cans chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 2 14-oz. packages silken tofu
- 6 oz. baby spinach, chopped
- ¼ cup minced fresh cilantro

Make the curry paste: Place the garlic and ginger in a high-speed blender and blend into a thick paste, adding a splash of water as necessary. Transfer the garlic-ginger paste to a small bowl, then add the onion and two Roma tomatoes to the blender and blend until puréed.

Place a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat, then add the ghee and heat until shimmering. Add the cumin seeds, bay leaves, and cardamom pods, and cook until aromatic, about two minutes. Reduce the heat to medium, add the garlic-ginger paste, and cook for one

minute more. Add the salt, turmeric, chili powder, coriander, and cumin, and mix into a thick paste. Pour the blended onion-and-tomato mixture into the pot, stir, and simmer until the tomato and onion are cooked and the oil begins to separate from the paste, about eight to 10 minutes.

Add the diced sweet potatoes to the pot and stir to coat them in the curry paste. Cook until the potatoes have begun to soften, about four to five minutes. Add the four Roma tomatoes, the chickpeas, and 4 cups of water, and bring the mix-

ture to a steady simmer. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to low, and simmer for 10 to 12 minutes, or until the potatoes are nearly tender.

Use a ladle to scoop about 1 cup of the broth into a blender, then add the silken tofu and blend until smooth. Pour the blended tofu into the soup, add the spinach, and cook until the spinach is wilted and the tofu is completely dissolved, about five minutes more. Pluck out the bay leaves and cardamom pods. Garnish with fresh cilantro and serve. 🍴





A Fitness Routine That Fits

These four training templates can help match your routine to your goals, whether you're embarking on a new exercise journey or building onto your existing practice.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS

THE BASIC BUILDING blocks of any workout program are cardio, resistance training, and mobility.

This is true whether you want to play pickleball or roll with your jiu-jitsu pals, hit the yoga mat or head to the lifting platform, or safely conquer household chores or lift a squirming toddler.

But the balance of those foundational elements will be unique to your specific interests, fitness level, and goals. Creating and following a plan with the appropriate ratios and level of detail might sound complicated

and time-consuming — but it doesn't have to be.

To prove it, we asked a team of experts to create four training templates that take the guesswork out of how to spend your limited and valuable time.

Each template prioritizes a goal — building strength, boosting endurance, improving mobility, or supporting general health and longevity. Each one also lays out a well-rounded protocol that guarantees the rest of your fitness won't suffer as a result of your focus.



GET ONE MORE

For a bonus training template to support hybrid training, visit ELmag.com/fitnesstemplates.



So you want to get strong...

Primary goal: Strength
Secondary goals: Endurance and Mobility

Muscular strength is often prized for athletics and aesthetics, but the benefits go deeper. Being strong makes you better able to handle everyday tasks: Climbing stairs, carrying groceries, and even navigating uneven sidewalks all require strength. Muscle mass keeps you in the game of life.

“There’s a direct link between longevity and muscle mass,” says Angelo Poli, ISSA elite trainer, strength coach, and neuromuscular specialist.

Without strength training, he explains, we lose a portion of our total muscle mass each decade after age 30 — a slow erosion in function that can have serious consequences by the time we hit 60 or 70.

Regular workout sessions may not only stop age-related muscle loss in its tracks but can also prevent minor falls and mishaps. Plus, they keep you

functional and strong enough to stay adventurous and active your whole life.

So, what does a strength-focused fitness program look like? Your body has more than 600 muscles, but you don’t need to worry about training each one individually. A well-rounded full-body strength program incorporates the following five movement types:

- **Core exercises** work the front, sides, and back of the waist. Examples include planks, side planks, and rotational movements.

- **Lower-body pulling exercises** work the legs, especially the hamstrings (back of the thighs) and glutes (butt muscles), and the lower back. Think deadlifts and Swiss-ball leg curls.

- **Upper-body pulling exercises** work the back, biceps (front of upper arms), and gripping muscles. These include pull-downs, rows, and pull-ups.

- **Lower-body pushing exercises** work the legs, especially the quadriceps (front of the thighs) and the glutes. That means squats, leg presses, and lunges.

- **Upper-body pushing exercises** work the chest, shoulders, and triceps (back of your upper arms). Some examples are pushups, bench presses, incline presses, and overhead presses.

The simplest approach to strength training is to perform one move from each category — thus hitting all your major muscles — every time you work out.

“[For] full-body workouts, three times a week is plenty for the vast majority of people,” says Poli. “Once or twice a week is better than nothing, but three is where the magic happens.”

Because muscles take about 48 hours to recover from a moderately difficult strength-training session, it’s best to perform these workouts on nonconsecutive days.

If you’re just starting out, perform one or two sets per exercise, and focus on learning excellent form for each move. As you progress, you can increase the number of sets to as many as five.

The number of reps you perform in each set matters less than how hard you work on each set. “We used to think that you had to perform at least eight reps if you wanted your muscles to grow,” says Poli. “The newest research suggests that you can perform as few as five reps and as many as 30 reps of each set; as long as those last few reps are close to maximal effort, you’ll make progress.”

For this template, fit in 10 minutes of mobility work before or after each strength workout. Additionally, complete two or three sessions of cardio per week: Start with one shorter session and one longer session of lower-intensity cardio. Add a short, higher-intensity cardio finisher to the end of a strength session, as time and energy allow.

For a beginner-friendly, progressive, full-body strength program, turn to “Slow Strength” on page 26.

For a strength-supportive mobility routine, visit [ELmag.com/targetedstretching](https://www.ELmag.com/targetedstretching).

For 5-, 10-, and 15-minute cardio finisher ideas, check out [ELmag.com/takefive](https://www.ELmag.com/takefive).

SAMPLE STRENGTH SCHEDULE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Rest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • Full-body strength workout 	30 minutes cardio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • Full-body strength workout • Finisher 	Rest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • Full-body strength workout 	60 minutes cardio



So you want to boost your cardio...

Primary goal: Endurance
Secondary goals: Strength and Mobility

Endurance is the ability to continue moving for long periods. When you train for endurance, you do activities with a high oxygen demand — such as running, cycling, swimming, stair-climbing, or rowing — and keep it up at an intensity that allows you to converse (but not sing) easily, for at least 20 minutes.

“Endurance is present in all facets of our life,” says distance-running coach Frankie Ruiz, Life Time’s chief running officer and cofounder of the Life Time Miami Marathon. “[It’s] anything you want to continue for long periods without slowing down.”

Though endurance training requires lots of work from the biggest muscles in your arms, legs, and torso, it primarily exercises your heart and lungs. The more oxygen you can process, and the more oxygen-rich blood

your heart can pump to your working muscles, the longer and harder you can continue your chosen activity.

If you’re new to endurance training, says Ruiz, “your first milestone is the 20-minute mark.”

“If you can jog for a minute before you have to walk or stop, that’s what you do,” he suggests. Catch your breath, start again, and repeat until you’ve been going for a total of 20 minutes, resting and running combined. Take a day off, come back, and repeat the process, gradually trying to reduce the amount of time spent resting.

Avoid the common pitfall of doing too much too fast, Ruiz advises. Be patient and stick to that conversational pace.

Do these brief workouts three nonconsecutive days a week until you can perform your activity of choice for 20 minutes nonstop. Don’t push too hard: Aim for an effort level of six or seven out of 10. Even your longest session should feel relatively easy.

From there, work your way to 30 minutes per workout in the same manner, alternately walking and jogging (or cycling and resting, or swimming and standing) for 60 seconds each, before gradually reducing the rest periods.

Once 30 minutes becomes doable, experiment with a few additional training techniques:

- **Hills** improve your running or cycling form and offer a greater cardiovascular challenge than moving along flat ground. Run or ride up an incline for one to two minutes at a medium-hard pace, then descend for the same duration. Repeat for up to 10 reps.

- **Long sessions** give you additional physical and psychological stamina,

training you to stay focused for longer periods. Roughly every two weeks, do a session that’s 30 percent longer in duration than your typical weekly long workout.

- **A high-volume program** exposes your heart, lungs, and muscles to more frequent stimulation, increasing your fitness at a faster rate. So instead of three cardio sessions per week, go for four or five. Ruiz advises working out multiple days in a row (say, Monday through Thursday) before taking the rest of the week off to facilitate recovery.

- **Intervals or sprints** in which you work at a higher intensity for several short bursts, each followed by a rest period that lasts as long as or longer than the high-intensity portion, help improve your form and increase your top-end speed. If you’re a beginner, Ruiz suggests, see a coach before you start working with intervals.

For this template, fit in 10 minutes of mobility work prior to each workout and five minutes after it. Also complete two or three sessions of full-body strength training per week. Because your primary goal is endurance, rather than strength, perform just one or two sets per strength exercise.

For a strength program broken into upper- and lower-body days, visit ELmag.com/splittraining.

For a 10-minute mobility routine to warm you up, visit ELmag.com/perfectwarmup.

Find restorative post-workout stretches at ELmag.com/cooldown.

SAMPLE CARDIO SCHEDULE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • Lower-body strength • Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • 30 minutes cardio (easy pace) • Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • 40 minutes hills or speedwork (2 minutes uphill/medium pace, 2 minutes downhill/easy pace) • Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • 30 minutes cardio (easy pace) • Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • Upper-body strength • Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobility • 55 minutes cardio (easy pace) • Mobility 	Rest



So you want to move with ease ...

Primary goal: Mobility

Secondary goals: Strength and Endurance

Mobility is the capacity to move through your full range of motion without pain — to raise your arms comfortably overhead, touch your toes easily, and extend, bend, and flex your spine in all directions. It's also the capacity to coordinate your movements efficiently, creating flowing, balanced, and integrated movement.

Without regular practice, mobility can erode over time, says personal trainer and movement coach Jolie Kobrinsky, CPT, RKC. "If you don't mobilize your joints a little bit most days, you'll get creaky."

As with muscle loss, joint stiffness can creep up over time, gradually reducing your ability — and motivation — to perform all types of move-

ment, including lifting, cardio exercises, and activities of daily living.

Mobility training can take many forms: simple and traditional, like with an overhead reach or a toe touch; meditative and slow, as with restorative yoga; or sweaty and dynamic, like during a high-knee jog or improvised dance. The only constraints are that the movement is low intensity (relative to your current level of fitness) and that it takes at least one of your joints through a significant range of motion.

Mobility work may be easiest to incorporate prior to or directly after a strength or cardio session.

Before a workout, Kobrinsky says, "I'll use dynamic mobility drills to prime my body for the movements I'm going to do." If you plan to jog, for example, you might perform high-knee marches, high leg kicks, calf stretches, and a few arm swings beforehand.

Extended, deep stretches are best saved for after a workout, when

meditative movement and long, deep breaths can activate the parasympathetic nervous system.

If you're looking for a mobility activity, yoga is the most popular. And don't worry if you aren't very flexible — start where you are. "There are a lot of hardcore ideas about yoga, but it's really just stretching, moving, bending — moving your body around," Kobrinsky says. "Yoga is the OG mobility practice."

In yoga class, you'll hold stretched positions, sometimes for longer periods, shifting attention to different areas and developing new levels of appreciation for the intricacies of movement.

A simple way to emphasize mobility in your workout program is to extend the duration of your pre- and postworkout stretch sessions and reduce the time you spend on cardio and strength. So instead of stretching for 10 minutes at the beginning of your workout and five at the end, double it to 20 at the beginning and 10 at the end, reducing the duration of the session in between accordingly. And consider attending a yoga class one or two days a week.

For a full-body stretching and mobility routine, visit [ELmag.com/mobilityworkout](https://www.ELmag.com/mobilityworkout).

For a 10-minute restorative-yoga routine, visit [ELmag.com/restorativeworkout](https://www.ELmag.com/restorativeworkout).

For more on dynamic mobility, visit [ELmag.com/perfectwarmup](https://www.ELmag.com/perfectwarmup).

SAMPLE MOBILITY SCHEDULE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Rest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 minutes dynamic mobility • Full-body strength • 10 minutes stretch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 minutes dynamic mobility • Cardio • 10 minutes stretch 	Rest or yoga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 minutes dynamic mobility • Full-body strength • 10 minutes stretch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 minutes dynamic mobility • Cardio • 10 minutes stretch 	Yoga



4.

So you want to sustain an active life ...

Primary goal: Longevity
Secondary goals: Cardio, Strength, and Mobility

Exercise is a huge contributor to longevity and long-term health. A study involving 122,007 adults, published in *JAMA Network Open* in 2018, found that as cardiorespiratory fitness increased, longevity did too. There was no upper limit to this correlation: Fit people had better outcomes than unfit people, and the fittest people had better outcomes than people with average fitness.

When you're just starting out, what you do matters less than doing *something* and doing it consistently. So choose a physical activity that interests you and gets you moving continuously for a sustained period: walking, gardening, hiking, golfing, tennis, cycling, or anything else you enjoy.

You don't have to do the same thing every day; some people change activities seasonally or as the weather permits. But if you make regular physical activity a habit for an hour or more most days of the week, you'll take a huge step toward increasing your longevity.

Once you've developed the habit of moving regularly, you can start to slot in activities that directly fight some of the effects of aging:

- **Gentle stretches**, performed before and after a workout and throughout the day
- **Balance exercises**, such as standing on one leg and walking heel to toe in a straight line
- **Strength training and lower-impact cardio**, with one or two sessions of each per week

Depending on your age, you may need to modify your approach to these activities, especially if you're taking them up later in life. Recovery

from hard exercise and even minor injury takes longer once you pass middle age, so you might have to take more time to prepare for and recover from workouts than you once did.

That doesn't mean you should stay away from intensity altogether. Change requires fairly hard work no matter your age.

Since you're not trying to maximize any particular trait, there's no need to specialize in any one activity. Instead, spread your focus out to cover every aspect of fitness while keeping motivation high and your nervous system engaged with new challenges. 🧠

Learn more about longevity-focused fitness at [ELmag.com/fitforlife](https://www.ELmag.com/fitforlife).

Improve your flexibility, balance, and power with a six-move workout at [ELmag.com/getupstandup](https://www.ELmag.com/getupstandup).

SAMPLE LONGEVITY SCHEDULE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
90 minutes easy cardio (hike, walk, row, cycle, SkiErg, or a combination)	Full-body strength	30 minutes easy cardio or sport/activity of choice	Rest	Sport/activity of choice	Full-body strength	Rest

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



KEEP IT SIMPLE

Practical suggestions for decomplicating your life.

BY CHRISTINE SCHRUM

WE LIVE IN COMPLICATED TIMES.

The world is full of unfolding stories we can't control, and our lives often brim with overlapping commitments and relentless digital distractions. It can be difficult to process it all.

After a while, we might get so used to the energy of chaos that we forget how to slow down and connect with ourselves and each other. Sometimes that's even the point: Staying busy — with work, social obligations, community activities, anything — may feel easier than being vulnerable and open to life.

"Busy has become the default state for too many of our lives," writes minimalism expert Joshua Becker on his blog *Becoming Minimalist*. "[But] busy is not inevitable. Each of us can take intentional steps to unbusy our lives."

"Unbusing" is one of many ways we can reduce some of the complexity — at least those

aspects of it that are within our control. And the joys of greater simplicity are many.

When we simplify our schedules, we have more time for the people we really want to spend time with, including ourselves. When we simplify our work lives, we can be more productive and creative. When we simplify our financial lives, we may spend less time worrying about money.

In short, making more space for what matters allows us to fully inhabit our lives, says therapist Robin Stern, PhD, associate director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. "The reward is living authentically, in alignment with what's actually going on inside of you."

If that sounds good, try some of these straightforward strategies for finding a little more breathing room in your own life.

SIMPLIFY YOUR WORK LIFE

Work necessarily involves pressure, but decomplicating some aspects of your professional life can help you reduce needless stress.

Tidy your desk(top).

There's a link between clutter and anxiety. Time you spend looking for a lost document or apologizing for a missed email is time you spend anxiously not doing the rest of your job. Princeton University researchers have found that our brains prefer order and that visual reminders of disorganization can zap our energy and reduce our focus.

At the end of each workday, try setting aside a few minutes to close documents and tabs and flag important emails to address the next morning. Then clear the surface of your workstation, suggests Becker. This routine can also serve as a boundary, marking the end of the workday and helping you shift out of work mode.



Schedule routine tasks.

Creating workplace routines can preserve your energy and free your bandwidth for creative work, explains Georgetown University computer science professor Cal Newport, PhD, in his book *Slow Productivity: The Lost Art of Accomplishment Without Burnout*. Try answering emails only at designated times during the day. Save busywork for Fridays, when you're likely to be out of creative gas.

Whatever the routine, the goal is to reduce unnecessary chaos and make your overall efforts as seamless as possible.

Focus on one thing at a time.

Setting more goals than you can reasonably accomplish in a day is not just exhausting — it's counterproductive. "Our brains work better when we're not rushing," Newport explains.

He suggests focusing on one major task per day, working at a comfortable pace with a focus on quality over quantity. If your job involves doing multiple tasks in a day, try setting aside time blocks in which you work solely on one project before moving on to the next. This protects against burnout and makes your efforts more sustainable over time.

Mind your boundaries.

It can be tempting to overperform at work, but we're far more effective when we take care of ourselves. "Just because you're at work doesn't mean you can't set limits," explains therapist Nedra Glover Tawwab, MSW, LCSW, in her book *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*.

Here are some boundary practices: Arrive and leave on time. Take your lunch break away from your desk or workstation. Heed your body's call for a walk outside in the fresh air. If your contract says 40 hours per week, there's no need to put in 45 — you'll do better work if you're rested.



Use your PTO.

Half of all American employees don't use all their time off; most of that segment reported feeling too busy to go on vacation. But we all require time away for rest and relaxation — and to regain our perspective. Cleveland Clinic experts argue that vacations help reset your brain, broaden your thinking, and leave you more creative, focused, and decisive.

SIMPLIFY YOUR FINANCES

Money is stressful for almost everyone, but creating a few fundamental routines can dramatically reduce financial anxiety.

Track your expenses.

Not knowing where your money is going is inherently stressful. Tracking expenses is one way to relieve that particular worry. Try saving receipts or using an app, such as Monarch Money or MoneyMinder, that syncs with your bank. Don't overthink the tool: Whatever system feels good to you is the right one, suggests financial therapist Bari Tessler, MA, in *The Art of Money: A Life-Changing Guide to Financial Happiness*. The point is to create ease. "Simply pausing and saying, 'Yes, I'd like a receipt' at the register can bring a small breath of mindfulness to your money relationship," she writes.



Create a money-managing routine.

To bypass any resistance that financial tasks may trigger, set up automatic payments for bills and deposits. Then, once a week, set aside a quiet time to tally your receipts and balance your accounts. Routine financial check-ins may initially feel awkward, Tessler explains, but "over time, your nervous system will relax into the reassuring repetition."

Pause before you purchase.

Compassionately tuning in to your body's signals may help alleviate the numbness that can lead to overspending, Tessler notes. So before you click "buy," pause — and ask yourself how you're feeling. Make it a habit to leave things in your online shopping cart for 24 hours before purchasing. Slowing down and checking in sends the message that you matter, she adds. "What's arising inside you deserves attention."

Appreciate what you have.

Contentment is "the key to overcoming the passion for possessions," Becker notes in his book *Things That Matter*. Relishing what we already have can be a shortcut to satisfaction and an easy antidote to overspending. Contentment brings health benefits too: It can lower your stress levels, improve your outlook, and boost your overall happiness.



Give a little.

Though it may sound counter-intuitive, being generous with your money can help curb money anxiety. Try buying someone a cup of coffee or donating a little to a cause you care about. Now check to see if you're still OK financially and whether you feel less anxious. "Notice how your needs are being met and how you had extra to spare," suggests Becker. This can go a long way toward reducing scarcity thinking.

SIMPLIFY YOUR SOCIAL CALENDAR

Overcommitting socially can leave you feeling harried and resentful. These tips can help you honestly acknowledge your capacity — and allow for more authentic connection.

Take a beat before committing.

If you have a hard time saying no, you're likely operating in people-pleasing mode, says Stern. Taking a pause can help you sync up with your own needs. When someone makes a request, don't answer right away; tell them you'll get back to them after you check your calendar. Then ask yourself, *Do I really want to do this?*

If you don't, it's OK to say no — without an elaborate explanation. "'No' is a complete sentence," Stern notes. "It's just that simple. But, in order to make that simple decision, you need to have a quiet mind."



Step back from draining relationships.

Sometimes people unwittingly zap our energy — particularly if they are chronically negative, are critical of us, or demand a lot without reciprocity, says Stern. If you notice yourself consistently feeling exhausted after your interactions with someone, it's fine to take some space. This doesn't necessarily mean eliminating them from your life; that may be impossible if they're part of your family, workplace, or social circle. Just aim to limit your exposure. See them only in groups. Stick to neutral facts during conversations and avoid emotional topics. And when necessary, politely excuse yourself from their company.

Align yourself with people who uplift you.

It may seem obvious, but it's perfectly acceptable to prioritize connections that just *feel* better. This one change can really improve your social life. "Emotions drive relationships," says Stern. "When you start to recognize what feels good, and who it feels good to align yourself with, then you can invite more of that into your life."



Embrace "scruffy hospitality."

Spending time with others is vital to our well-being — particularly for the many of us who report feeling isolated and lonely. Yet we often feel like we need an elaborate menu and a pristine home before inviting people over. You can avoid this pressure by embracing scruffy hospitality, a term coined by Anglican priest Jack King and shared by Oliver Burkeman in his book *Meditations for Mortals*.

Scruffy hospitality means you don't insist on making your house perfectly tidy before you invite people over. Likewise, you don't worry too much about the menu.

A good pot of soup and some wine is more than enough to offer the people you love. Wipe down the bathroom and you're ready to host. Keep your gatherings simple and you might find yourself hosting a lot more of them.

SIMPLIFY YOUR COMMUNITY WORK

Being of service can be great for your mental health, but it can lead to burnout when you're volunteering, donating, and giving beyond your capacity. These tips can help you direct your limited resources where they'll make the greatest impact.

Think small.

You don't have to fix everything to make a difference in the world. Walk a neighbor's dog. Donate food to a local shelter. Invite a new family on the block over for a potluck.

Small acts of service can pull us out of our own complicated lives and leave us feeling more spacious inside. "When we shift our focus off ourselves," Becker writes, "we live lives of greater meaning and greater contribution."

Don't underestimate the impact of small gestures, either. You may never know if that friendly greeting offered to a stranger on the sidewalk makes a big difference in their lives, but it might. And either way, being kind will probably make *you* feel better.

Choose one or two worthy causes.

There's a lot to be concerned about in the world at large, and it can be difficult to know where to direct your attention. While each call for donations or volunteer hours may be worthy of your money and energy, there is only so much any one of us can do.

In his book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, Burkeman suggests focusing your energy on one or two causes. Volunteering at your local food pantry or donating to a refugee fund doesn't mean you don't care about deforestation, he points out. It just means "you understand that to make a difference, you must focus your finite capacity for care."



Manage your news consumption.

You can stay informed without endless doomscrolling, Newport explains in his book *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. He suggests identifying a few reliable news sites and using an app to save noteworthy articles for later. Select these articles during the week and read through them on a Saturday, he suggests. Do it over a cup of tea or at your favorite coffee shop. Giving yourself time in a pleasant environment can help you absorb and reflect on the information.



SIMPLIFY YOUR PARTNERSHIP

Our intimate relationships can be a refuge. But, as with any close connection, they can also get . . . complicated. Whether you're seeing someone casually or living with a longtime partner, these strategies can keep things simple.

Set clear expectations.

Making your desires known — ideally, early on — helps avoid needless confusion, Tawwab explains. "The biggest fear about being honest is that you might scare people away," she notes. "But this is true only if they aren't interested in what you present."

If you'd really like to get married one day — or absolutely object to it — say so. The same applies to raising kids or any other substantive shared reality. Being honest keeps your communication free of guesswork.



Take a breath.

Whenever you feel a sense of urgency, pause before communicating. If you're about to say something sarcastic or fire off a heated email or text, "take three mindful breaths and consider what you'd truly like to convey," suggests meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg in *Finding Your Way: Meditations, Thoughts, and Wisdom for Living an Authentic Life*.

It may take a tiny bit longer, but beginning a difficult conversation in a calm state can save you time (and cleanup) later.

Unplug every night.

The average American looks at their phone every five minutes. These habitual checks make it nearly impossible to give others our undivided attention — even those we care most about. Becker recommends removing social apps from your home screen and silencing your notifications at the end of the day so there's nothing to distract you from your partner and family. This act can deepen those connections more than you'd expect.

Practice little rituals.

Conflicting schedules, workplace stress, and competing needs can strain a relationship. But you don't need an expensive vacation to reconnect. Instead, you can create daily "rituals of connection," suggest marriage researchers Julie Schwartz Gottman, PhD, and John Gottman, PhD. These can be simple: an evening stroll. A morning check-in. A kiss goodnight.

The idea, says John Gottman, is to "make emotional connection intentional and a priority in your life."

Cultivate positivity.

Make positivity a habit. The Gottmans' research shows that when you adopt a negative lens, you can overlook as much as 50 percent of your partner's generous, relational behavior. But when you're deliberate about feeling and showing appreciation, you start to notice more of the good stuff. Look for opportunities to express genuine gratitude and admiration: "Thank you for walking the dog." "I'm proud of you for nailing that project." "I love how you look in that shirt." This single shift can significantly improve the quality of your connection.

Embrace imperfection.

We can run ourselves ragged trying to be, or find, the perfect partner. But setting the bar impossibly high — for ourselves and others — inevitably leads to disappointment.

It's also a barrier to love, according to Salzberg. "Real love is not about distinct objects presenting their perfections to each other," she explains in *Finding Your Way*. "There is perfection in the connection to our shared vulnerability, not in a perfect life that guards against having any vulnerabilities at all."

Sometimes the simplest thing to do is also the hardest and the most worthwhile: Just be yourself. 🧘



WHAT THE HEART REALLY NEEDS



EIGHT WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR CARDIOMETABOLIC HEALTH.

BY **MO PERRY**

DESPITE DECADES of awareness campaigns, cardiovascular disease (CVD) remains the leading cause of death in the United States, claiming some 2,500 lives every day.

Heart disease is largely preventable. Yet in the United States, CVD-related deaths increased 9.3 percent between 2019 and 2022, reversing years of progress. The COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed (the virus can harm blood vessels and lead to cardiovascular damage), but CVD mortality rates continued to climb even after the pandemic. This suggests deeper issues are at play — and that our prevention strategies may need improvement.

For decades, prevailing wisdom about preventing CVD focused on lowering fat intake, reducing cholesterol, and hitting the treadmill for cardio workouts. But as our understanding of heart disease has grown, so has the concern that these measures are not enough.

“In the conventional model of cardiology, we focused on lipids — and LDL [low-density lipoprotein] cholesterol in particular — as a major risk for cardiovascular disease,” says Sanjay Bhojraj, MD, FACC, an interventional cardiologist in Newport Beach, Calif. “But now we’re learning that there are factors beyond just cholesterol that are equally, if not more, significant.”

Enter the concept of cardiometabolic health. This framework considers blood pressure and lipids but also focuses on insulin sensitivity, inflammation, stress, sleep, and environmental exposure.

“Heart health and metabolic health are not really different,” explains Mimi Guarneri, MD, FACC, a functional-medicine cardiologist in La Jolla, Calif., and president of the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine. “People who have metabolic syndrome have all the cardiac

risk factors: central weight gain, high triglycerides, elevated blood sugar. They’re intrinsically linked.”

Advocates of a cardiometabolic view suspect the laser focus on cholesterol and saturated fat has been leading healthcare providers — and millions of patients — down the wrong path. Or at least an incomplete one.

In *The Great Cholesterol Myth*, Jonny Bowden, PhD, CNS, and Stephen Sinatra, MD, FACC, note that this approach has led us to ignore other contributors to CVD, including inflammation, oxidation, sugar, and stress.

Along with a broader view of CVD’s causes, a cardiometabolic approach offers a wide range of lifestyle-based strategies for prevention — beyond a strict focus on cholesterol levels. What follows are some powerful contributors to good cardiometabolic health.



WHOLE FOODS

Don't obsess over specific macronutrients in isolation, says Joseph Marine, MD, FACC, a clinical cardiac electrophysiologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital. He offers simpler advice: Eat more fresh whole food and stay away from highly processed stuff. "Focusing too much on specific ingredients is more confusing than it needs to be," he says.

Plant-forward diets with plenty of healthy fats are associated with a reduced risk of a variety of diseases, including heart disease. The Mediterranean diet is the best studied and is backed by substantial research. The protocol is relatively low in processed carbohydrates, emphasizing vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans and lentils, nuts, garlic, and olive oil. It also includes seafood — especially small, fatty fish, such as sardines — and meat in moderation. (For more healthy plant-forward food traditions from other cultures, check out ELmag.com/heritagediets.)

"Whole, unprocessed foods are pretty anti-inflammatory by default," says Bhojraj. "And the different colors in plant-based foods come from phytonutrients and phytochemicals that have specific roles in combating inflammation."

In addition to their abundant antioxidants and healthy fats, plant-forward diets are rich in fiber, which binds to cholesterol in the gut and carries it from the body. Fiber helps stabilize insulin levels, nourish the gut microbiome, and reduce the oxidative stress that can lead to vascular damage.

Guarneri recommends some supplements, but only as complements to a healthy diet. Deficiencies in vitamin D and antioxidants are common, and vegetarians may require extra B vitamins.

Supplements can also be used therapeutically: Omega-3 can lower inflammation and triglycerides; red yeast rice can lower cholesterol; and berberine can lower blood sugar. These are potent treatments — red yeast rice contains a naturally occurring statin, for instance — so work with your healthcare provider if you plan to take them.

QUALITY FATS

We've long been advised to minimize fat and cholesterol for heart health. But research shows that the relationship between diet and cardiovascular health is more complex. While trans fats are demonstrably harmful, several large-scale studies have challenged low-fat orthodoxy.

Omega-3 fatty acids from fatty fish, flaxseeds, walnuts, and other sources have been consistently linked to reduced inflammation and better heart health. A landmark 2013 study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that participants who followed a Mediterranean diet, which features plenty of extra-virgin olive oil and nuts, had fewer cardiovascular events compared with those on a low-fat diet.

Similarly, a seven-year randomized controlled trial published in *The Lancet* in 2022 followed 1,002 patients with established coronary heart disease.

Participants ate either a Mediterranean diet rich in monounsaturated fats or a low-fat diet higher in carbohydrates. The group on the Mediterranean diet experienced a 26 percent lower risk of heart attack and stroke compared with those on the low-fat protocol.

Multiple meta-analyses, too, have shown that total saturated-fat consumption is not reliably associated with heart disease risk. What's more, replacing fats with refined carbohydrates may increase that risk because low-fat, high-carb diets tend to elevate blood-sugar levels.

"There is some research that suggests that saturated fat can raise your LDL cholesterol, but that data shows that it's probably more of an increase in those big, less-toxic LDL than the more dangerous smaller ones," says Bhojraj. (For more on LDL, see page 69.)

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2





3.

RESTORATIVE SLEEP

Sleep has a powerful impact on heart health. Chronic sleep deprivation and disrupted sleep patterns have been linked to elevated blood pressure, insulin resistance, inflammation, and an increased risk of heart disease.

A 12-year prospective study of 20,432 healthy men and women in the Netherlands found that those who slept poorly for six hours or less per night had a 79 percent higher risk of heart disease than those who slept well for seven or eight hours per night. And a recent Swedish study reported that just three nights of restricted sleep (about four hours per night) triggered higher blood levels of inflammatory proteins known to damage blood vessels and raise CVD risk.

The prevalence of poor sleep in the U.S. may be one reason the rate of CVD continues to climb. According to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, approximately 5.9 million U.S. adults have been diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnea, and an estimated 23.5 million remain undiagnosed. The condition disrupts

breathing and hampers sleep quality.

"Anyone who's waking up in the middle of the night, even if they think it's just to go to the bathroom, or [who] is tired during the day — we should be checking them for sleep apnea," says Guarneri. Left untreated, sleep apnea can contribute to high blood pressure, arrhythmia, and even heart failure.

Once you've ruled out sleep apnea, aim for a consistent bedtime routine and prioritize getting seven to nine hours of sleep per night. (Reducing your screen time in the evenings can make falling asleep easier.) As Bhojraj notes, "When you reset the body's sleep rhythm, everything else starts to fall into place."

4.

BALANCED INSULIN

Insulin may not be among the first hormones you associate with heart health, but growing evidence suggests it deserves to be. In addition to being a hallmark of type 2 diabetes, insulin resistance has been linked to hypertension, stroke, and buildup of arterial plaque.

When insulin is properly regulated, it circulates in the bloodstream before being taken up by the cells. If the body becomes insulin resistant, the cells stop responding to insulin's signals, leaving glucose lingering in the blood. This leads to a traffic jam of excess glucose, which can trigger the inflammation and oxidative stress that promote the oxidation of LDL particles. Oxidation damages the particles' structure, and they become the "bad" LDL cholesterol that is more likely to get trapped in artery walls.

"This is where cardiometabolics come into play," Bhojraj explains. "Because when you are insulin resistant, you have a lot more circulating damaged LDL particles. That accelerates atherosclerosis."

You can detect early insulin resistance by having your elevated fasting insulin or A1c levels tested. And continuous glucose monitors can offer real-time insight into how different foods, sleep patterns, and stressors affect your blood sugar.

Ultimately, keeping insulin in check is about consistency, Guarneri says. "What reverses insulin resistance? Intermittent fasting, getting the weight down, and getting off [added] sugar and simple carbs. If you get your habits right, the ripple effects on heart health can be profound."





PLENTY OF MOVEMENT

Physical activity has a positive influence on nearly every biomarker associated with cardiovascular health: It helps lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol, and reduce inflammation.

"Exercise is really the best medicine," says Marine. "If you look at the benefits that have been documented in study after study, it's hard to find any intervention in all of medicine that is more effective in improving cardiovascular health."

Aerobic exercise — think walking, running, cycling, or swimming — has long been the centerpiece of cardiac rehabilitation and prevention. It strengthens the heart muscle, improves circulation, and enhances the body's ability to use oxygen. The American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise per week, which breaks down to about 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Strength training offers key benefits too. Greater muscle mass improves glucose metabolism and reduces the risk of insulin resistance and inflammation.

Finally, regular movement supports emotional well-being, reduces stress, and enhances sleep — all of which are key for cardiometabolic health. Marine notes that mind-body practices, like yoga, can be especially powerful in this regard. "There are a number of intriguing studies showing that yoga can reduce and mitigate heart disease," he says.

If you've experienced a cardiac event, return to exercise slowly, in a supervised program.



6. GOOD ORAL HEALTH

It receives less attention than other factors, but poor oral health has long been correlated with a risk of CVD, says Marine. Chronic oral inflammation creates a persistent source of harmful bacteria that can gain direct access to the bloodstream through damaged gums. Once these microbes are in circulation, they can wreak havoc on blood-vessel linings, contribute to arterial plaque formation, and amplify systemic inflammation.

Poor oral hygiene also increases the risk of heart infections, including endocarditis, a rare but serious condition in which bacteria infect the inner lining of the heart. This risk is especially high for those with existing heart conditions or artificial heart valves, where novel bacteria can quickly take hold.

Fortunately, the remedy is simple: Brush, floss, and see your dentist regularly. (To learn more about the oral microbiome, visit ELmag.com/oralmicrobiome.)



5.





LESS STRESS

Chronic stress is the enemy of a healthy heart. It raises blood pressure and promotes systemic inflammation. It also leads to the overproduction of cortisol, a stress hormone that stimulates the body to store more visceral fat — a key feature of metabolic syndrome and a risk factor for CVD.

“Stress is probably a key root cause of heart disease in 95 percent of patients that I work with,” Bhojraj says.

“By its nature, stress is an adaptive response to help us,” he continues. “But it’s supposed to be brief exposures to stress, not chronic, long-term stress — which is what our modern lifestyles deliver. These normal,

physiologic responses then start to have unintended consequences that really put our bodies out of balance.”

Social connection is a powerful stress reducer and proven supporter of heart health. Studies have shown that people with strong, supportive rela-

tionships are less likely to develop CVD and more likely to recover well after cardiac events.

So connect with your friends and family. Enjoy relaxed, convivial meals. “Loneliness is as toxic to the heart as smoking or obesity,” Guarneri says.

Dramatic actions like quitting a job or moving to another country may feel like the best way to break the stress cycle, but simple, daily practices are probably more effective. Breathing, meditation, prayer, gentle movement, and time in nature have all been shown to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping shift the body into rest-and-digest mode. Seek out ways to slow the pace of life.

Guarneri encourages patients to identify daily rituals that offer holistic support. “Ask yourself: *What did I do today for my body, mind, emotions, and spirit?*”

It could be meditation, yoga, journaling, or just sitting calmly with a cup of tea. Any quiet, peaceful activity that settles your mind can support your heart. ➔

HEAT THERAPY

Several studies — most notably from Finland, where sauna culture is ingrained — have linked frequent sauna use with lower rates of CVD and sudden cardiac death. Regular sauna use has also been associated with lower levels of systemic inflammation and better blood-vessel function.

This may be because the body responds to a sauna as if it were moderate aerobic exercise. “The heat from a sauna dilates the blood vessels, reduces blood pressure, and improves how your cells work,” Bhojraj says. Over time, this mild cardiovascular stress can help condition the heart. (For more on the benefits of saunas, check out ELmag.com/thermalstress.)



THE STORY BEHIND LDL CHOLESTEROL

The distinction between high-density lipoprotein (HDL) and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol was first explored in the 1950s. Since then, multiple studies have shown that having higher “good” HDL and lower “bad” LDL cholesterol is associated with a lower risk of heart attack.

Statin drugs that lower LDL cholesterol do appear to reduce the risk of cardiac events, particularly in those who already have heart disease. Yet recent research suggests the relationship between cholesterol and heart health is more nuanced, and that the complexity lies in the type and behavior of the LDL particles themselves. “LDL itself is not inherently harmful,” explains integrative cardiologist Mimi Guarneri, MD, FACC.

The risk comes when LDL particles are small, dense, and oxidized, making them more likely to penetrate

blood-vessel walls and contribute to plaque formation. In the presence of inflammation, these particles become particularly damaging.

“We’ve learned that two people could have had the exact same LDL level, but if one had inflammation, that’s the one who did worse,” Guarneri says.

Because of this, many integrative practitioners now favor advanced lipid and inflammation testing. The following tests consider factors beyond total LDL.

- **LDL particle number (LDL-P):**

Even when total LDL cholesterol appears normal, a high number of LDL particles might indicate a greater risk of plaque formation, especially if they’re small and dense.

- **Apolipoprotein B (ApoB):** This is a measure of the number of plaque-forming lipoprotein particles.

- **High-sensitivity C-reactive protein (hs-CRP):** This marker of

systemic inflammation can make otherwise-benign LDL particles more damaging.

- **Lipoprotein(a) (Lp(a)):** A form of LDL, elevated Lp(a) levels are associated with an increased risk of heart attack and stroke, regardless of other lipid markers. Some people have a genetic variant that predisposes them to elevated Lp(a).

- **Triglyceride-to-HDL ratio:** A high ratio (typically above 2:1) can signal insulin resistance and metabolic dysfunction.

These more granular markers help practitioners get a clearer sense of a patient’s cardiovascular risk and offer more targeted, personalized prevention strategies.

While LDL isn’t off the hook, it’s no longer the lone villain in the cholesterol story. It’s part of a much larger picture that includes inflammation, metabolic health, and lifestyle.

WHEN LIFESTYLE ISN’T QUITE ENOUGH

Even with optimal diet, exercise, and stress management, some cardiovascular risks may be hardwired into your DNA. It’s possible to carry a genetic variant that makes you more susceptible to higher levels of lipoprotein(a) (Lp(a)), a specific LDL particle that carries unique risks for heart health.

Lp(a) includes an added protein that makes it extra sticky, inflammatory, and clot-promoting. It can silently increase the risk for heart disease, even if other lipid levels look normal. Levels below 50 nanomoles per liter are generally considered within the optimal range, while levels above 125 nanomoles per liter are associated with a higher risk of cardiovascular disease.

Unlike traditional LDL, Lp(a) is not directly affected by diet or exercise, making it frustratingly resistant to the usual heart-health strategies. Statin drugs do not lower Lp(a) levels and can sometimes even increase them, though statins’ overall LDL-lowering effects may still provide a net benefit for those with elevated Lp(a).

Currently, there’s no proven treatment for lowering Lp(a) that alters CVD outcomes. “We don’t have clear evidence yet that manipulating or reducing Lp(a) changes risk, but the pharmaceutical industry has developed drugs that lower Lp(a), and large-scale clinical trials are being done right now,” says Joseph Marine, MD, FACC, a clinical

cardiac electrophysiologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

In the meantime, there’s increasing consensus among experts that it’s worth having your levels tested. “Everyone should have Lp(a) measured at least once in their life,” says integrative cardiologist Mimi Guarneri, MD, FACC.

Because elevated levels are usually genetically determined and not subject to much fluctuation, a one-time test can offer valuable insight into your baseline cardiovascular risk. The European Society of Cardiology already includes it in its guidelines; U.S. guidelines may soon follow suit.

While pharmaceutical interventions are in development, some functional-

medicine practitioners have used supplements to address elevated Lp(a), including niacin, CoQ10, estrogen (in women), and aronia berry. Responses to these supplements are highly individual and not always clinically significant, notes Guarneri.

What is clear is that elevated Lp(a) acts as a force multiplier, compounding the risks of high LDL, inflammation, and insulin resistance. The presence of elevated Lp(a) is a good reason to double down on anti-inflammatory habits and take a comprehensive approach to managing all other risk factors for heart health, including using a statin to lower overall LDL if your provider recommends it.

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A woman with a backpack and trekking poles is walking on a wooden bridge that spans across a deep canyon. The canyon walls are covered in dense green vegetation and red rock formations. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. The woman is smiling and looking towards the camera.

WHEN HIKING the 20-some-mile rim-to-rim trek across the Grand Canyon, giving up isn't really an option. Our fitness editor (pictured), who recounts her experience on **page 80**, began having serious doubts about finishing the journey soon after the halfway point, when the trail went nowhere but up. Then she discovered what one can learn from the depths of a challenge.

REAL LIFE



Free Your Mind

Hone your cognitive flexibility with these creative practices.

BY JESSIE SHOLL

IF YOU ASK three experts to define creativity, you'll probably get three different answers. But the responses will likely have one thing in common: Creativity isn't an action; it's a way of being.

That way of being is characterized by an openness to new concepts and connections. This attitude helps us devise unique solutions to problems, develop novel ideas, and produce great artwork.

Still, creativity isn't just for artists and innovators. It's a tool we all can use for dealing with life's stressors and navigating a dynamic world. Creativity is associated with cognitive flexibility — the ability to change our minds. This primes us to respond

effectively to new information or a changing environment.

Studies have confirmed the advantages of cognitive flexibility in times of change. During the sudden transition to online learning in 2020, for example, students who demonstrated flexibility in their thinking fared better psychologically, according to one 2024 analysis.

A study of 328 university students found that cognitive flexibility "significantly decreased the risk of experiencing academic stress" during the pandemic.

Because creativity and cognitive flexibility are so closely linked, one way to strengthen mental flexibility is to activate our creative muscles.

We can do this in a variety of ways. Board-certified music therapist Elisha Ellis Madsen, MSW, MT-BC, ASW, awakens her creativity by playing guitar. "It transports me, helps me tap into my emotions, and then I let myself feel them."

Other people may connect with their creativity when they're tending their gardens, clearing out their garages, or playing pickleball. "For my husband, who has a very analytical mind, creativity is getting into an Excel spreadsheet and organizing baseball statistics," Madsen says.

There are plenty of other ways to strengthen your creativity and create a more flexible mind. What follows are just a few of them.



LOOK UP

For his latest book, *Learning to See: Inside the World's Leading Art and Design Schools*, Keith Sawyer, PhD, interviewed more than 100 art and design professors working and teaching in 20 different disciplines. "People who are creative, the professional artists and designers I talked to, see things that the rest of us don't," he says. "And they told me that seeing is the main thing — once you learn to see, then creativity flows from that."

The first step is to simply cultivate a practice of noticing, says Sawyer. When you're out walking around, for example, look somewhere you never look — like the tops of buildings. "There's always going to be something up there that is hard to explain."

He also recommends picking a shape in the morning and spending the rest of the day noticing objects with that shape. "You're probably going to see a street sign that's shaped like a circle. You might see a manhole on the road."

With these practices, you'll start finding connections where none existed before and find new significance in things that you normally wouldn't notice. That's creativity.

PLAY

Clinical psychologist Michael Alcée, PhD, author of *Therapeutic Improvisation*, describes cognitive flexibility as "the capacity to be flexible and inventive with new ways of thinking or experiencing, but still staying yourself." It's similar to play, he adds.

And play typically occurs without the pressure of feeling that *if I don't do this right, that's it*.

People are often conditioned out of play and creativity as they get older, Alcée argues. "Kids stop asking, 'Why?' They stop asking all the tangential, creative questions."

But he believes that that wild, trickster part of us can be recovered. One good starting point is simply getting playful and taking (safe) risks. Go on that rollercoaster, use that watercolor set, take an improv class.

Alcée emphasizes that cognitive flexibility requires us to be empathetic with ourselves and with each other. We have to feel that it's OK to be wrong or partially wrong. To get to that point, he says, we need to feel safe.

If you're not able to feel safe, Alcée suggests, enlist a therapist's help. That could be someone who specializes in creativity, like a music therapist, or a conventional counselor. "Good therapy allows you to be more creative by allowing you to not just tolerate but also have permission to think and feel things, even temporarily, that you might not have support with otherwise."



EMPLOY GUARDRAILS

When you're learning or practicing something new, a guiding structure can be helpful. "Just handing someone a paintbrush is not going to make them cognitively flexible," Sawyer says. That's because when most people encounter a completely open-ended project or question, they fall back on what is familiar and comfortable.

He recognized this while researching his book. "Professors in schools of art and design — and this was a surprise to me — create highly structured assignments for the students," he says.

In a painting class, for example, there might be a two-page, single-spaced handout explaining an assignment. These guidelines may appear overly specific and restrictive, but they actually encourage students to step outside their comfort zone and try something new. "Otherwise, the students will just do what they already know how to do."

You don't have to be a student to embrace guardrails. The next time you're struggling to innovate in your creative practice, consider setting some guiding boundaries by using a prompt or a project outline.

MAKE IT A LIFELONG PRACTICE

Cognitive flexibility tends to decline with age, but regularly engaging in creative practices can help us retain flexible thinking patterns as the years go by.

Maintaining a creative practice encourages us to recapture the curiosity we employed in our younger years, says Madsen. "Look at how a child can see a flower and just marvel at it with awe and wonder — that, to me, is creativity. The ability to look at something and be wowed by it."

Curiosity is similar to creativity, in that it may come to us more naturally in childhood. But it's also something we can cultivate at any age. Every time we step into unfamiliar territory — whether by noticing a novel connection, trying something unfamiliar, or asking a question — we train our brains to welcome new opportunities.

"Be a dilettante," Sawyer advises. "Get interested in things you wouldn't have before." If you run into someone exhibiting model airplanes in an airport (as Sawyer did not long ago), ask them about it and listen to their stories. Sign up for that new class you've been eyeing. Buy a magazine about something you're a teeny bit interested in, or even one about something you're not. You may be surprised.

As we learn to reclaim the curiosity and creativity of our childhoods, we stretch our minds — a benefit worth pursuing at any age.

Madsen agrees. "Our creativity is our core. It is the center from which we operate. It's a built-in feature that must be nurtured, honored, and supported throughout our lives." 🌱



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Behavioral Rx for Mental Health

Four daily habits to support mental resilience.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD

GOOD MENTAL HEALTH may seem like a matter of luck. Or like something that's only possible once we've healed all our personal wounds, found a fulfilling relationship, and engaged in meaningful work. But developing resilience and emotional well-being doesn't require that we have everything else sorted out first. It is more often built, brick by brick, by our daily choices and habits.

I'd like to share the behavioral practices I prescribe most often to my patients; they happen to be the same ones I practice myself. I know from experience that these work. And there's robust research to support them all.

While most of us have a sense of what kinds of habits support mental health, practicing them regularly is a different matter. I get it — routine sounds boring, especially to someone like me who loves variety.

But the need for structure is woven into our physiology. Daily habits give our bodies the regularity they crave. They align us with the rhythms of nature, which include circadian rhythms — our 24-hour internal clocks — and ultradian rhythms, shorter cycles within each day that we often overlook. Tending to ultradian rhythms can support focus as well as productivity.

Finally, for anyone dealing with anxiety or mood problems, the repetition of healthy practices is both grounding and calming. That repetition can be one of the most important aspects of healing.

Now for my behavioral prescription.

SLEEP: THE LINCHPIN OF MENTAL HEALTH

If you had to pick one area of focus that eases all things related to mind and body, choose sleep. Put this one at the top of your priority list, especially if you sleep poorly. These simple changes can help get your sleep back on track:

- Avoid caffeine after noon.
- Don't drink alcohol after dinner.
- Dim the lights for the last two hours before bed.
- Stay away from screens for the last hour before bed.
- Get up within an hour of the same time every day.

EXERCISE: BETTER THAN MEDICATION

Exercise is more than a healthy habit — it's a bona fide treatment. I know of nothing else that can so easily lift mood within minutes, treat and prevent depression, lower stress and anxiety, and improve sleep. When researchers put exercise up against antidepressants in a 2022 study, the treatments elicited similar results. This is my ultrasimple prescription for exercise that supports mental health:

- Spend 45 minutes doing moderate-intensity cardio activity four or five days per week.
- Do more as you're able.

SOCIAL CONNECTION: THE MOTHER OF ALL HABITS

Depression and anxiety can make it difficult to connect with other people, but healthy social connection has been shown to stimulate the production of new brain cells, improve longevity, and prevent depression — so it's worth the effort. Here's how to make it a habit:

- Go for quality over quantity. You don't need that many close friends — one or two will do. Three to five is even better.
- Embrace small interactions. Microconnections can measurably improve your baseline mood. That could be an upbeat conversation while waiting in line, a compliment to a coworker, or a quick voice note to an old college friend.
- Be patient. Routine connection is a practice, and you might be a little rusty. Don't give up if it doesn't come easily at first; it gets easier after a little repetition.

SAVORING: TAKING THE EFFORT OUT OF MOTIVATION

Simply knowing that something is good for us is not usually enough to keep us motivated. We have to *experience* that it's good for us if we're going to stay engaged. That means learning to notice the good parts.

So, here's a fourth practice: savoring. This is the art of paying attention to something you enjoy.

- Practice savoring your experience in situations that already offer casual pleasure. Linger over a good meal, for example.
- Take a slow nature walk while attending to all the sounds and smells.
- Spend some unstructured time with friends or family, and really enjoy each other's company.

After a while, you can use those savoring skills for more challenging activities, like exercise, where you may feel some resistance. When you start savoring how regular exercise gives you more energy, better concentration, and easier sleep, you may find it's easier to clear your motivational hurdles.

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

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Let go of morbid thoughts and regret.

Despite its name, death cleaning is all about life. In her book, Magnusson writes that the practice can make your life more pleasant by removing unnecessary things and making your home nice and orderly. "It is about a permanent form of organization that makes your everyday life run more smoothly."

Guntur adds, "It's about making sure your possessions live on. Though you might feel like *I really love this item — I'm attached to it*, when you see the joy of the person who gets to use and appreciate it, that tends to offset that feeling. You're making conscious decisions about where your items go, not leaving it up to chance. I think that's very life-affirming."

Start before the last act of life.

Guntur acknowledges that the elderly are more likely to think about their legacy and downsize, but the work can start at almost any adult age. "After all, we really don't know when the end is going to come, do we?" she says. "It's never too early to get your affairs in order."

Start small. The key to any kind of organizing, Guntur says, is to begin with one small goal; tackling something manageable will usually generate momentum. "The idea is just to get the ball moving," she says. "And then, once it's in motion, it tends to roll on its own."

Take your time — especially with the things that matter most.

"Death cleaning is a dance between practicality and emotional well-being, as decluttering always is," says Guntur. "The amount of emotion and value an item holds should be equivalent to the amount of time you put into finding its new home."

Deciding on a home for a vase from a department store may take mere minutes. But finding a new home for something more valuable, like a signed piece of art, will take longer. You will likely keep many of these items to enjoy for yourself, but you can still communicate where you'd like them to end up.

Consider asking younger family members and friends to identify which of your objects they find meaningful.



And don't rush into deciding what will go to whom, particularly if more than one person identifies the same thing. Instead, spend time contemplating what feels right.

Tell stories. A big difference between decluttering and death cleaning is that the Swedish practice allows you to take time to appreciate and tell stories about important items, Guntur notes.

"What I normally tell people is to choose one thing that's important to you and that you want to pass on — maybe a family heirloom or a precious photo," she adds. "Tell the story behind it, so the story doesn't get lost. The process of sharing, and the appreciation that the recipient feels, can really work against overwhelm and make you say to yourself, *That was great! Now, what else can I do?*" The positive feelings that come with this process can help get reluctant relatives and friends on board, too.

Create a throwaway box. Consider filling a small box with personal items you can't bear to part with, such as old letters, photographs, mementos, and journals, things that are valuable to you and no one else. Indicate that the box should be thrown away when you are gone so that no one will feel obligated to keep or find new homes for those possessions.

Get help. You don't need to death-clean alone. Family and friends are natural allies, and you can also call on professional organizers. Guntur advises choosing one who understands death cleaning and the emotional, familial, and

legacy-oriented aspects of the process — usually someone who has been trained as a personal coach as well.

"A lot of organizers are trained to get the job done as fast as possible," she says. "But you want someone who is going to support you through a process that is slower and full of feelings."

Look far and wide for recipients.

Many of your possessions either won't be meaningful to those in your close circle or will add unwanted clutter to their homes. In those cases, try to remember that the rejection of your item is in no way a rejection of you as a person. It could feel like a slight, Guntur notes, but it's not. "Besides, if the person doesn't see the value of the object, they're not the right recipient anyway."

A little research can turn up those who will appreciate what you want to share, Guntur says. "A gentleman in one of my workshops said, 'I have all these old books and photos, and nobody in my family is interested.' What we came up with for him was, 'How about the local history museum?' He had amazing photos of how his town used to look, and a museum would love them."

Selling is your final option to keep your things out of the trash bin. Online marketplaces, such as eBay, Facebook Marketplace, and Poshmark, provide a wide pool of possibilities. You may also consider hosting a living estate sale, which can help you liquidate numerous belongings. After all, says Guntur, someone willing to pay for your object probably finds it valuable. 📍

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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The Awkwardness Principle

Why change often feels wrong — even when it's right.

BY OLIVER BURKEMAN

I KEEP COMING BACK to a line in the excellent book *Already Free* by the psychotherapist Bruce Tift: “The practices that carry the greatest potential for transformative change are usually counterinstinctual.”

I take him to mean that if you're trying to get better at life in some way — more patient, or better at listening, or less prone to procrastination or anxiety or self-sabotage — then the necessary actions are pretty much guaranteed not to feel especially good.

They're more likely to feel scary, or at least awkward, like wearing an ill-fitting shirt or writing with your nondominant hand. While learning to be patient, you should expect to feel restless. As you embark on a long-postponed creative project, you should expect to feel uneasy.

One way or another, change will likely feel somewhat crappy.

This shouldn't really come as a surprise. After all, you're attempting in some way to be different than you are. (That's true, by the way, even if your goal is to become more accepting of how things are.) Your entire personality, up to this moment, has been one long exercise in getting good at being who you are now.

So of course you feel ungainly when you try to do otherwise. If it feels disagreeable to learn to meditate, or time-block your day, or learn to finish what you start, that's often a good indication that you're on the right track.

The explanation for all this, from the viewpoint of old-school psychoanalysis, runs as follows: Due to the normal incompetence of almost all

parents, most of us grow up with the deep-seated belief that there are certain feelings we can't allow ourselves to feel.

Maybe you were raised with the message that you shouldn't depend too much on others, or that you shouldn't stand out from the crowd, or that you *should* stand out from the crowd. Or that you should always have a clear plan for the future, or guard against being taken advantage of. (Among my hang-ups, I've learned, is the belief that I need to put massive amounts of effort into work and life to justify my existence. So I do, then end up resenting it and going on strike.)

For a small child, falling in with these family patterns feels like a matter of survival. By the time you're an adult, you're deeply convinced that easing up on them — by allowing yourself to depend on others, or stand out, or operate without a clear plan — would be to invite disaster. No wonder the prospect seems utterly terrifying.

THE CHANGE YOU WANT MAY NOT BE THE CHANGE YOU NEED

The flipside of this is that if some new habit or practice strikes you as hugely exciting, there's a good chance it's the opposite of what you need. It's likely helping you to shore up your defenses rather than challenge them.

For instance, I've learned to be skeptical about how thrilled I get by any new system for scheduling my workday so as to achieve untold heights of productivity. That heady feeling isn't a good thing. It's a warning sign!

By contrast, the productivity technique I'm finding most genuinely use-

ful at present — aiming for lower, but consistent, volumes of daily output rather than working in binges — has felt uncomfortable, because refraining from cramming as much in as I possibly can makes me feel anxious.

(An aside: I'm talking here about acting against your instincts, but I don't think instincts are the same as intuitions. If you get the sense that, say, walking down a particular alley at night might be hazardous, or that someone you're dating is bad news, what you're experiencing is an intuition, a subconscious alert system that developed over hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. It's probably worth heeding.)

And, of course, the big revelation is that pushing through your resistance and experiencing the emotions you've been avoiding virtually never feels utterly terrifying at all. It usually feels just mildly uncomfortable. You realize that you'd been putting off a project you really care about, or failing to commit fully to a relationship, or holding back from speaking your mind, all to avoid a feeling that you imagined might kill you. Then the reality turns out to be roughly equivalent to sitting on a badly designed chair, or forgetting your umbrella in a rainstorm, or eating an overripe banana.

In other words: a little yucky, perhaps. But totally fine, really. Nothing you can't handle.

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

Reaching New Depths

Hiking rim to rim across the Grand Canyon.

BY MAGGIE FAZELI FARD

WE TOOK OUR first steps in the dark. Even with dozens of headlamps bouncing around me, the Grand Canyon wasn't immediately visible from the North Kaibab Trailhead. But I felt its immensity anyway. Perhaps as a primal reaction to approaching a giant hole in the earth, my instinctual spidey sense activated. My chest tightened. My breath hitched. And I second-guessed my life choices.

I trained for this moment, I reminded myself. The 20-some-mile path ahead is clear, and it's well marked.

But no amount of positive self-talk and logical reassurance could calm my nerves. So I decided not to worry about it: *I can feel nervous — scared, even — and do it anyway.*

I stepped gingerly, fiddling with

my hiking poles, adjusting and readjusting my pack. A fearless horde of young men parkoured off the rock-face to my left, overtaking me.

Within minutes, all the other hikers and trail runners embarking on this rim-to-rim trek — beginning at the canyon's North Rim, descending into the ancient Inner Gorge, and ascending the South Rim, all in a single day — had passed me too. I kept my eyes on what I could see, my focus on what I could control: the next step right in front of me.

"You don't need that anymore." I stopped in my tracks and turned to face a man tapping his forehead, indicating that I could take off my headlamp. "Look," he said, pointing out to the distance, and I did.

The mid-May sun was rising over the Grand Canyon. Dawn light limned the spruce-fir forest, still dotted with late-winter snow, and cast a golden-pink glow on the canyon's olive, rust, and beige rock walls.

"Wow," I tried to say, but the word came out as little more than an awed breath.

"Right?"

My rim-to-rimmate and I stood in silent reverence, looking out across the expanse. My brain called up some facts: The canyon is 278 river miles long, its widest rim-to-rim measurement is 18 miles, and its greatest depth is about 6,000 feet. Some of the rocks of the Inner Gorge are 1.8 billion years old. I cast my gaze around, trying to take in this stretch of space and



time. Trying to find what might be my finish line on the South Rim. My eyes burned at the impossible effort.

“Remember to stop and look up once in a while,” my new friend advised as he recommenced his descent.

I followed his cue, and tried to match his light, swift footfalls. But I soon fell behind. The words of my guide, Dave Koch, a Phoenix-based physical therapist who has been leading groups on rim-to-rim hikes for more than three decades, came back to me then: “Hike your own pace.”

I slowed down again, holding tight to the wisdom of those who already

On top of all that, the climb uphill was hard. Harder than I expected. Usually, ascents are the easy part of hikes for me. From traversing the Peruvian Andes to climbing Colorado 14ers, I have always loved going up.

Downhills, meanwhile, have historically been my kryptonite. Starting with the descent had felt like a blessed gift: I could get the hard part out of the way first and enjoy the climb to the finish.

But the heat, the fatigue, and the challenge only fed the gremlin inside me — the one that knows exactly what buttons to push to make me feel bad

had no cell service and couldn't order an Uber or call for help. Even if I were physically injured, I couldn't rely on emergency services reaching me easily or swiftly. And since I wasn't suffering from anything more than a bad mood, no one could save me but myself.

I wanted desperately to get out of the canyon. Maybe even more, I wanted out of feeling bad. The only option was to keep moving. And yet I felt stuck in place wishing it could be different. Easier.

As I forced down some fruit snacks and electrolytes, and delayed



I slowed down again, holding tight to the wisdom of those who already knew this place. **There's no need to rush. Take it all in. You'll finish when you finish.**



Maggie snaps a selfie at the start of her rim-to-rim trek as the sun rises over the Grand Canyon.

knew this place. There's no need to rush. Take it all in. You'll finish when you finish.

HURRY UP ALREADY

Eight hours later, I was gritting my teeth as I climbed up the South Kaibab Trail. Somewhere along the ascending switchbacks, my mindset shifted and my self-talk went from *Don't rush, you've totally got this* to *Why aren't you done yet? HURRY!*

It's not a total surprise that I was feeling crabby and being hard on myself. My muscles were fatigued from the slow, controlled descent to reach the base of the canyon. The heat — in the triple digits by the time I reached the Inner Gorge — zapped my energy and my mood. And the overall effort tamped down my appetite, making it difficult to fuel adequately and keep my energy up.

about myself. To make me want to give up.

To prevail over the gremlin, I pushed harder and dug deeper, only to find I didn't have more to give. I was already operating at 100 percent. It just wasn't enough. The gremlin fed off this realization and tried to convince me that I'm a failure. That I'm not fit enough and never will be fit enough. It's an old cycle — one that I am aware of but still get stuck in, especially when exhaustion meets expectations.

My rim-to-rim effort was no exception. Feeling sorry for myself, I plopped down on a rock and unclipped my pack. I was ready to give up.

But the thing about hiking in the Grand Canyon — and especially when doing a rim to rim — is that giving up isn't really an option. I couldn't turn around. I couldn't take a shortcut. I

the inevitable next step, my brain called up an Indigenous story I'd encountered in my research for this trip. According to the account, the Hopi — who have lived in the region for thousands of years and call the canyon Öngtupqa — believe that their ancestors emerged from the underworld through a sacred hole in the earth called the sipapu. Located within the canyon, a few miles from the confluence of the Little Colorado and main Colorado Rivers, the sipapu is believed to connect the “above” and the “below.”

I stood without my pack for the first time all day, stretched my arms out to catch the breeze, and cast my gaze about, looking for the sacred site somewhere in the inverted dome below me.

What I saw once again took my breath away. The afternoon light,

filtered through a dusty haze kicked up by the wind, highlighted the canyon's ruddy peaks and valleys. My eyes followed the outlines of the cliffs and the striations that appeared painted onto the canyon walls.

I understood, then, that I'd lost my way. Not literally, because indeed the path was clear and well marked. But on the inside, I'd forgotten why I was on the path in the first place.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, in a place I'd dreamed of hiking ever since I understood



Maggie and her fellow rim-to-rim hikers celebrate after completing the challenging trek.

the Grand Canyon was a real, but no less than magical, place. A place that, due to mounting challenges, might not be accessible for much longer.

Rushing wasn't the point. Achievement wasn't the goal. I'd committed to discovering what would happen if I hiked rim to rim in a single day. What would I see? What would I think? What would I feel? No more, no less.

With that, I changed my approach. Instead of hiking as hard and fast as possible and being miserable every step of the way, I gave myself a mission: Take 100 steps max, then find the nearest butt-shaped rock and sit — for as long as I wanted. I could snack, stretch, take pictures, journal, or talk to other hikers or animals that scurried by. Whatever felt right.

As I moved forward, one step, one switchback, and one rock-seat

at a time, my mind drifted to my late father. He'd been a mountaineer in his youth and loved climbing the highest, toughest peaks he could find. After his sudden death in 2024, my mom and I visited the Grand Canyon and left some of his solidified ashes on a quiet rock ledge. He never got to see the canyon, but we knew he would have loved it.

Climbing the South Rim, I felt my dad close by. There were the memories of Baba walking with me as a child, taking me to school and to the park, collecting fallen leaves and encouraging me to keep moving, even

What I was left with . . . was a profound sense of satisfaction and a little bit of disbelief.

when I got tired trying to keep up with his long, strong legs. And there was the more recent memory of the last time we walked together, arm in arm, down the hall of the hospital where he would die just a few days later.

I walked with his memory for a while, then took another seat and cried for the first time in a long time.

LET'S GO AGAIN

I crested the South Rim of the Grand Canyon at 6:30 p.m., more than 13 hours after starting my journey. My crabbiness had passed. So had my tears. What I was left with, as I took the final steps to the shuttle that would carry me to dinner with the rest of my group, was a profound sense of satisfaction and a little bit of disbelief.

When I sent my family proof of life — a tired but smiley selfie — I told them I'd never do a rim to rim again. That I was so glad I'd done it, and even

gladder that it was behind me. One and done, no question.

Early the next morning, as my friends and I stretched our tired limbs and sipped hot coffee, we debriefed about what had worked and what hadn't. We swapped stories and tips around fueling, hydration, gear, training, and photo ops. We discussed what we'd do differently next time. Next time. The resistance I'd felt the previous night was fading fast.

"Rim to rim 2026?" someone asked.

"2026," we all agreed.

Less than two months after our adventure, a wildfire blazed through the North Rim. The historic Grand Canyon Lodge, the only lodging on the North Rim and our group's refuge the night before our hike, was destroyed.

"I think this may be the end of trips to the canyon for a long time," our guide, Koch, wrote in an email to his contacts. The next guided trip, set for October 2025, was canceled. The May 2026 hike, too, seemed unlikely. The present was sad; the future uncertain.

But "a long time" for us is a drop in the ocean of time for Öngtupqa. The geology of the region has been significantly evolving for the past 70 million years, and the canyon itself, carved by the Colorado River, is more than five million years old. The canyon will survive this — will survive us. For now, for ourselves, we can do our part to ensure the protection of this and other national parks, and to sustain access for Indigenous communities.

And we can still hope. Rim to rim 2026? 🌄

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



GO RIM TO RIM

Find tips on preparing for your hike at ELmag.com/grandcanyon.

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3.

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¹Holzer R, et al. Continuous glucose monitoring in healthy adults—possible applications in health care, wellness, and sports. *Sensors*. 2022;22(5):2030

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With Gratitude

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

AS WE STEP into a new year, I find myself reflecting on gratitude. There are so many things to be thankful for, and one that I've been thinking a lot about is Life Time's team members and how they create what Life Time truly is.

Over time, I've learned that gratitude isn't just about saying thank you; it's about acknowledging the work, the effort, and the heart that goes into something. And what I see, every day, is humbling. Our company is made up of people who don't just show up and do their jobs but pour themselves into creating experiences that change lives.

If you're an early bird, you'll see team members arriving in the dark, at 4 a.m., to unlock the doors. You hear them when they greet you by name at the front desk. They ask how your knee is healing, remember your kids' names, or notice when you miss a morning.

Throughout the day, they stock towels, monitor the temperature in the pools and saunas, and wipe down equipment before you're aware it needs to be done. It can seem like they're waiting just for you, ready to blend that postworkout smoothie exactly how you like it.

They're on the courts coaching your daughter's backhand, in the studio perfecting their playlist (while working on their moves), and in the Kids Academy entertaining energetic toddlers and tweens.

And as evening arrives, they're leading a candlelit yoga class, spotting you on your last set, or holding the door with a smile as you head home.

Every week, they teach thousands of classes and lessons: group fitness, pickleball, tennis, swimming. They share your victories and successes and are by your side when you need

help recovering from an injury or restarting your routine, no matter the reason.

They answer questions, engage in conversation, and hold space for small moments, offering encouragement and asking a genuine "How are you doing?" that welcomes an honest answer.

What happens here is intentional at every level. From frontline team members to lead generals to the crew at the corporate office, there's a commitment to teamwork. They're also aligned through thousands of individual acts of care, repeated daily, that add up to something increasingly rare and incredibly valuable: a living, breathing community to which we truly belong.

Thank you for understanding that what we do matters. . . .
We are creating connection in a disconnected world, and that is everything.

And we need that more than ever. Regular community gatherings — in town squares, shops, church basements — aren't as common as they used to be. Despite the fact that we're more digitally connected than we've ever been, there's a collective sense of isolation. People feel alone.

After more than three decades in this business, the team at Life Time recognizes that people still want and *need* a place outside of their homes and work. Call it a third space — they need a home away from home.

Our nearly 50,000 team members create this space and this feeling every single day. They understand, deeply and instinctively, that our clubs are not just fitness centers.



They are communities that invite thousands of us to show up with intention to live healthier, and ultimately happier, lives.

Over the years, hundreds of thousands of team members have contributed to this effort. Some have been with me since that first club in a strip mall in Brooklyn Park, Minn. Others have joined for a season and then carried Life Time's spirit with them into new chapters. Each person has left their mark, not just on the company but on the lives of members who've felt seen, supported, and cared for.

So, to our members: We're beyond thankful for your loyalty. Your presence. Your trust. Your expectations. Because of you, Life Time is a magical place.


And to our team members: Whether you've been here since the beginning or just come on board, thank you. Thank you for your early-morning energy and your indefatigable late-night drive. Thank you for the care you take when no one's watching.

Thank you for understanding that what we do matters and extends far beyond the walls of our clubs. We are creating connection in a disconnected world, and that is everything.

Here's to another year of creating this beautiful place of community, together.



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



“Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.”

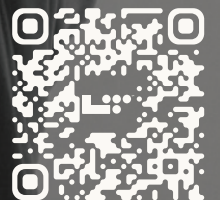
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