## Experience Life

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## FIND YOUR PEACE

INSPIRATION FOR PRIORITIZING YOUR EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

MAY/JUNE 2025

LIFETIME

# THE ONLY TRAINING GEAR YOU'LL EVER NEED





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roasted radishes — that harness the power of anti-inflammatory ingredients and eliminate candida-feeding sugars. Think fiber-rich veggies that nourish beneficial gut bacteria and goodfor-you fats that support both gut and skin health. Scan the QR code or visit ELmag.com/ candidafighters to check out the recipes.



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#### **EXERCISING THROUGH CANCER CARE**

Discover why physical activity is a powerful complement to cancer treatment. ELmag.com/cancerandexercise

#### **TICK SMARTS**

Lyme disease is one of the fastestgrowing infectious diseases in the United States. Climate change and expanding urban development are contributing to the spread of tick-borne diseases, but there are many ways to offset the risks of tick exposure and enjoy the outdoors. We've put together a collection of nine strategies for staying safe this summer. Scan the QR code or go to ELmag.com/ ticksmarts to download the guide.



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

#### TAKE FIVE

#### "MEDITATION IS THE ULTIMATE MOBILE DEVICE;

you can use it anywhere, anytime, unobtrusively," writes renowned mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg in her 2010 *New York Times* best-selling book, *Real Happiness: The Power of Meditation*. If only I turned to meditation as willingly and as frequently as I reach for my actual mobile device.

The reality is, of all the healthy-living habits we write about in *Experience Life*, this is the one I've had the most trouble making part of my routine. Though it's not for lack of trying.

Over the past 20 years, I've repeatedly attempted to adopt a meditation practice. I've bought books with daily prompts, downloaded apps with chimes and timers, and put reminders on my phone. For whatever reason, it hasn't stuck.

Wake up bright and early five mornings a week to work out? No problem. Take my vitamins and supplements like clockwork? Done. Maintain a decent sleep schedule? I've got that covered too (at least most of the time).

It's not for lack of awareness about meditation's many benefits. In these pages and elsewhere, I've learned how a meditation practice can help us develop focus, mindfulness, greater compassion and empathy, and other skills. Mentally and physically, it can help reduce anxiety and depression, lower blood pressure, and boost immunity.

So what's the deal with my resistance?

I think it comes down to accountability. I'm typically not doing my other health-supportive habits on my own. Connection and community — in some form or another — keep me on track.

But meditation is truly a solo endeavor, and when I'm accountable only to myself, I tend to let good habits slip. I'm aiming to change that this spring.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month — the inspiration for this issue's "Find Your Peace" theme. So I'm recommitting to prioritizing my mental well-being. Just as strength training is one of the tools I use to build my fitness, meditation will be a resource for supporting my emotional health.

I'll start small, with just five minutes a day. And, alongside thousands of others, I'll follow the guidance of the four-week mindfulness challenge in the Life Time app (free for everyone). Checking that box on the daily schedule — and knowing I'm not the only one doing so — might just be the motivation I need to finally make this habit stick.

In this busy phase of life, I'll also look for moments to slow down and just be. It might be dabbing an essential oil on my wrist and taking a few minutes to breathe. It might be devoting five minutes of my morning run to listening to the birds chirp. It might be breaking down a project into smaller parts so it feels more feasible. You get the picture. (For more ideas, see "Move for Mental Health" on page 52 and "Lighten Your Mood" on page 60.)

It's all about taking the time to care for myself amid all the other to-dos. Even if it's just five minutes, it's something. And that's way better than nothing.

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



Meditation is truly a solo endeavor, and when I'm accountable only to myself, I tend to let good habits slip. I'm aiming to change that this spring.



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### TALK TO US

#### **ORAL-MICROBIOME AWARENESS**

[On "Everything You Need to Know About the Oral Microbiome," January/February 2025] This article was right on time for me: I was just informed of a periodontal issue, and I'm scheduled to undergo treatment. I'm not happy about it, but now I'm even more anxious to take care of it. Once again, Experience Life comes through with practical, detailed insights.

f I've studied a bit about the gut microbiome and have known about the importance of oral health — especially regarding the cardiovascular system — but this gives me more to consider.

Lizabeth A.

#### **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

This is a very enlightening, comprehensive, and thorough article ("The Truth About Ultraprocessed Foods," March/April 2025). I've shared it with my family, and I hope they all read it. It's very important information to get out to the public. Sue H.

The article "12 Common
Questions About Sugar and Your
Health — Answered" (January/
February 2025) is one of the best
magazine articles about any subject
that I've read in a long time. I am
aware of the need to limit the amount
of sugar in my diet, but this article
presented the info in a clear, rational
manner, which has inspired me to
keep up the fight.

Janice R.

#### A GOOD RUN

I couldn't help but relate to Jamie Martin's story of her first marathon ("5 Lessons for 2025," January/February 2025). I send my congratulations. It was my first marathon in 1983, so I can relate to the months of training runs. Stick with it and run it again.

Gary H.



#### **MADE TO MOVE**

If Walking absolutely keeps my lower back from hurting ("Want to Reduce Low-Back Pain? Take a Walk," January/February 2025). It also helps curb neuropathy in your feet and helps your mood.

Kay D.

[On "Is Running or Walking a Better Workout?," January/February 2024]

Running is by far the better workout. I'm convinced that it's the very best exercise.

Joseph H.

The better workout is the one you will do.

Catherine L.

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

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#### QUESTIONABLE INTELLIGENCE

If AI often generates things that are simply not correct, and people believe it ("A Smart Move?," December 2024). We've already seen AI-generated mushroom-foraging information claiming that poisonous mushrooms are safe to eat. When we put AI in charge of more things, such as medicine, these mistakes have the potential to be lethal. AI has no ethics or morals. It cannot be held accountable for its actions. It cannot "decide" to do the right thing.

#### **REAL BEAUTY**

"What Does It Mean to Decolonize Beauty?," (November 2024) is one of the most beautiful, inspiring articles I have read as an aging African American woman. Thank you.

#### SUPPORT FOR SOBRIETY SEEKERS

Your magazine has helped to reinforce concepts I practice in 12-step recovery ("5 Tips to Stay Sober," October 2022). I am more peaceful and hopeful. It is good that you address the big picture from different perspectives; it helps to make them stick.

Joe P.

#### **POSITIVE VISION**

While sorting through more than 100 magazines I've collected over the years for a vision-boarding retreat I'm hosting, your September/ October 2024 issue stopped me in my tracks. I found myself cutting out something from almost every article. More impressively, I read every single article — something I rarely do with other magazines.

Your pieces on boosting neuroplasticity, moving as a family, the importance of daily reading, the terrain theory of cancer, breathwork, and more not only provided genuinely valuable information but were written in such a friendly and welcoming tone. Jennifer B.



WITH ALL WE ARE learning about the importance of sleep, it's easy to obsess about getting sufficient shuteye. Wearable sleep trackers and apps have arrived as an accessible way to quantify sleep quality. Yet the reliance on such data has raised a question among scientists: Are we sabotaging our sleep in our quest to improve it?

There's a name for the obsessive pursuit of optimal sleep — orthosomnia.

Orthosomnia has parallels to orthorexia, an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating characterized by a preoccupation with food quality. Orthosomnia is similarly perfectionistic.

We have long admired personalities who reportedly needed little sleep, including Thomas Edison and Margaret Thatcher. But it turns out that people who require less sleep—known as short sleepers—may have genetic factors that allow for it.

For the rest of us, a lack of sleep can be more detrimental. Research shows that disrupted sleep can heighten the risk of metabolic obesity and type 2 diabetes; cardiovascular disease; impaired immune function; Alzheimer's and Parkinson's; various mental health concerns; and certain types of cancer.

As far back as 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was warning that Americans were experiencing a sleep-deprivation epidemic. Since then, the CDC has

continued to warn that a third of Americans don't get enough sleep.

#### A SLEEP PARADOX

Upon their introduction in the 2010s, consumer sleep trackers expanded on the data gathering of fitness trackers by monitoring sleep-related biometric data, noise, and movement. They have been hailed by many sleep scientists: In his book *Why We Sleep*, University of California, Berkeley, neuroscientist Matthew Walker, PhD, focuses on sleep trackers as part of a transformative "new vision for sleep in the twenty-first century."

Some 35 percent of Americans have used a sleep tracker, according to a 2023 American Academy of Sleep Medicine survey; 77 percent of them found the tracker helpful and 68 percent said they have changed behavior based on what they learned.

It hasn't been sweet dreams for all, though. The term "orthosomnia" was coined in 2017 by sleep researchers in a collection of case studies in the *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, where the authors summarize their findings: "The patients' inferred correlation between sleep tracker data and daytime fatigue may become a perfectionistic quest for the ideal sleep in order to optimize daytime function."

Experts caution that these trackers provide inaccurate or incomplete data; others warn that fiddling with such devices in bed is bad sleep hygiene.

A 2023 editorial in the journal *Nature and Science of Sleep* sums up concerns, asking, "Could the widespread practice of self-monitoring of sleep...lead to a sleep paradox, in which preoccupation with perfect sleep induces stress, anxiety, and arousal, compromising rather than improving sleep?"

#### **HOW TO USE SLEEP TRACKERS**

The key with sleep trackers is mindful use, explains neurologist David Perlmutter, MD. He recommends focusing on trends over time.

"Recognize that nightly variations in sleep are normal," he says.
"It is reasonable to get a baseline assessment of sleep with a wearable device, and if the parameters are acceptable, it isn't necessary to track thereafter every night."

A sleep tracker can help pinpoint the effects of variables such as caffeine consumption, blue-light exposure, ambient light and sound, and alcohol consumption, says Perlmutter. "Once a person has achieved numbers that are acceptable, it makes sense to back off from the use of the device."

Overall, he adds, use sleep data as a general guide, not as an absolute measure. "Prioritize subjective feelings of restfulness and daily functioning over striving for idealized metrics."

- MICHAEL DREGNI

#### 7 WAYS TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM FOREVER CHEMICALS

"Forever chemicals" — also known as PFAS, short for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances — are insidious substances found in all sorts of things, from drinking water to clothing. And they pose serious risks for your health.

Reducing your overall load of PFAS involves minimizing exposure and supporting the body's detoxification systems. "We should do everything we can to decrease [our load]," says Joe Pizzorno, ND, a board member of the Institute for Functional Medicine and author of *The Toxin Solution*. These strategies can help.

1. Filter drinking water. "The majority of nonoccupational PFAS exposure is through drinking water," says Lyn Patrick, ND, medical director at EMEI Global. PFAS have been found in the drinking water and groundwater of more than 5,000 U.S. communities. Faucetmounted and under-sink systems with activated-carbon filters are relatively inexpensive and easy to install.

2. Avoid most freshwater fish. PFAS are also all-too common in our food, especially fish and seafood from contaminated bodies of water. Wild-

caught freshwater fish tend to be more contaminated than saltwater species.

3. Be mindful of food packaging. Many packages — including those for microwave popcorn and fast food — have historically contained PFAS because these chemicals repel grease and water. Avoid prolonged contact with plastic when you can.

#### 4. Avoid nonstick cookware.

When exposed to high temperatures, the PFAS in nonstick cookware break down and release toxic fumes. As nonstick coatings get scratched, PFAS particles can mix with food.

**5. Limit the use of treated fabrics.** Clothing and other fabrics that resist water, wrinkles, and stains may be convenient, but they often contain copious amounts of PFAS. Opt for natural fibers, like cotton, wool, and hemp.

6. Choose personal-care products with simple ingredient lists.
Everyday items such as makeup, lotions, shampoos, and dental floss often contain PFAS, so look for natural products with short, easy-to-parse ingredient lists.

**7. Support your gut.** "The long half-lives of PFAS mean that, while

avoidance is important, intervention is required to decrease body load," Pizzorno says.

You can do this by supporting your digestive system, a primary route by which the body rids itself of toxins and waste. Prioritize dietary fiber because it helps bind toxins in the gut and usher them out through stool. Bolster your gut microbiome with probiotics. And choose USDA-organic foods whenever possible because synthetic pesticides and chemicals are prohibited in these products.

- MO PERRY



#### **READ MORE**

For an extended version of this article, see ELmag.com/PFAS.

#### EYEWEAR'S POTENTIAL FOR PROVIDING MIGRAINE RELIEF

#### For many who experience

migraine, certain types of light can trigger a painful episode. In an effort to get ahead of this, researchers have begun developing glasses that block those troublesome wavelengths before they reach the eyes.

Two types show promise in reducing migraine symptoms. The most common of these lenses, invented in the 1980s by Arnold Wilkins, PhD, is the fluorescent 41 (FL-41). It filters blue and green light, which prevents them from reaching the cornea, where they can activate the trigeminal nerve and spark an attack.

"If that trigeminal pathway is primed for migraine, it's almost like . . . your

nerve endings tend to be hyperexcitable [and] different wavelengths of light can trigger a migraine attack," explains neuroophthalmologist Rudrani Banik, MD, in a 2020 podcast for the Association of Migraine Disorders.

In a study published in Headache: The Journal of Head and Face Pain, researchers found that FL-41 lenses reduced the frequency of migraine attacks in children by more than half, though they were not effective during an actual attack. Other studies have suggested the lenses reduce the impact of the episodes.

More recent research touts the benefits of certain



"blue cut" glasses, which filter blue light. In a 2022 study with 10 participants, these lenses appeared to reduce the frequency of headache days.

Despite the small sample, the authors concluded that the blue cut glasses offer "a simple and effective response to migraine photosensitivity."

Migraine glasses are not typically covered by insurance, so those who are interested may want to consult with an ophthalmologist prior to choosing a particular model.

— CRAIG COX



There are all sorts of reasons you might be clumsy, but the good news is clumsiness can often be mitigated. Follow these expert tips to build balance and coordination.

- Stay active. A simple way to reduce clumsiness is to exercise regularly. "Movement in general strengthens gross motor skills and balance," explains Life Time master trainer Lisa Hobson Stoner, CPT, RYT200. If you haven't been active, start with a walking routine: Simply shifting weight from one foot to the other with every step requires balance and coordination.
- Practice mindfulness meditation.
  Open-monitoring meditation a form of meditation that involves tuning in to feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations can boost body awareness by helping you recognize movement errors more easily, says University of Tennessee neuromechanics researcher Gary Wilkerson, EdD, ATC. Find a quiet place to sit or lie down for at least five minutes, close your eyes, and notice any feelings, thoughts, or sensations that arise.
- Stand on one leg. Unilateral (single-sided) exercises challenge your balance and help correct strength imbalances that may contribute to clumsiness. Start by standing on one leg for as long as you're able to balance (keep a chair nearby to steady yourself, if needed). Over time, aim to balance for longer periods.
- Close your eyes. This can improve your proprioception, or your awareness of where your body is in relation to your environment. It forces your muscles and nervous system to react more effectively to your surroundings. Start by closing your eyes while standing still with both feet on the ground, then progress to balancing on one foot with your eyes shut.
- Challenge your beliefs. How often have you thought, I'm just a clumsy person? If you want to become more graceful, start challenging the stories you tell about yourself. "If we always think of ourselves this way, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy," Hobson Stoner says. Switch to a more positive thought, like I'm working on my coordination.

- LAUREN BEDOSKY

#### WEARABLES SHOW PROMISE FOR IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH

**Activity trackers** allow us to measure our fitness progress, so could similar wearable devices allow us to effectively monitor — and even improve — our mental health?

That's the question researchers are exploring. They're intrigued by the gradual embrace of telehealth and the widespread acceptance of digital trackers among people of all ages.

And some researchers, including Nuno Gomes, PhD, and Matilde Pato, PhD, believe the answer is a resounding yes.

After reviewing existing literature, Gomes and Pato, along with their team, published a study in 2023 asserting that wearables could "revolutionize the way we monitor and manage mental health."

Writing in the journal Sensors, Gomes and Pato laud the ability of these devices to track changes in heart rate, which often signal stress or anxiety, and to monitor sleep quality and social interactions, which may reveal symptoms of depression. The real-time feedback can help individuals identify patterns and the need for intervention.

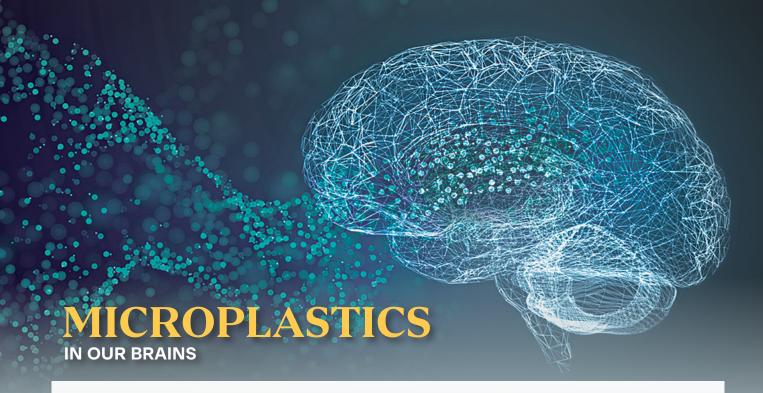
"Wearable sensors can offer several advantages over traditional methods of mental health assessment, including convenience, costeffectiveness, and the ability to capture data in real-world settings," they write.

More recently, a research project led by University of Exeter scientists looked specifically at the use of a cognitive behavioral therapy app among some 3,700 young adults aged 16 to 22. The researchers found the app stabilized depressive symptoms in those at high risk of the disorder but did little to improve the general well-being of those at low risk.

"Our results suggest that even when young people used the self-help app just a few times, there was a small but meaningful benefit," lead study author Edward Watkins, PhD, notes in a statement. "Because the app is scalable to large numbers of people in a cost-effective way, these effects have potential value as a public health intervention within a broader portfolio of digital and in-person services and interventions."







#### JUST ONE WORD: PLASTICS.

This classic line from the sign-of-thetimes 1967 movie *The Graduate* hailed plastics as the future. Now, thanks to an agglomeration of recent medical studies and environmental reports, plastic pollution has been called out as a "pervasive and growing threat" to the planet's overall health, as a landmark 2023 United Nations report warns.

A new study, in *Nature Medicine*, even finds that microplastics are infiltrating our brains. And the effects should sound an alarm about a global threat to human health, says the study's lead author.

Most plastic does not biodegrade but breaks down into ever-smaller particles: Microplastics are bits smaller than 5 millimeters in one dimension; nanoplastics are even tinier, less than 1 micron in size.

Microplastics now permeate our environment. They have been detected in crustaceans from the deepest, darkest part of the Pacific Ocean, the Mariana Trench, and atop Mount Everest. They end up in our water and food — and then inside us.

In recent years, microplastics have been discovered in various parts of human bodies, including hearts, livers, lungs, and even blood and bone marrow. A study published in 2021 reported the first evidence of microplastics in a human placenta, and other studies have detected them in baby poop.

The new study is the first to find that microplastics have passed through the protective blood-brain barrier and into our brains.

Researchers from the University of New Mexico (UNM) and their associates used a combination of scanning electron microscopy, transmission electron microscopy, and polarization wave microscopy to detect and characterize microplastics in brain-tissue samples.

Beyond the alarming presence of microplastics, the scientists found that the amounts in the brain samples had increased significantly over time. Samples collected in 2024 contained about 50 percent more microplastics than those taken eight years earlier.

The 2024 samples held about 7 grams of microplastics — the equivalent of a plastic spoon in weight.

"That would mean that our brains today are 99.5 percent brain, and the rest is plastic," says colead author Matthew Campen, PhD, MSPH, a UNM professor of toxicology.

These plastic particles may play a role in dementia. Brain tissue from people who had been diagnosed with dementia had up to 10 times more plastic than others, he says.

While there is a clear correlation, the study did not prove whether

higher levels of plastic in the brain lead to dementia, says Campen. "Right now, it is premature to say there are health effects being caused by plastics: We simply don't have quality data to make this conclusion."

Beyond their intrinsic dangers, microplastics can also act as carriers for other chemicals, such as the toxic additives used to make the plastics and the environmental pollutants they might absorb.

The study quantified 12 different plastic polymers in the brain tissue. The most common was polyethylene, which is widely used for food packaging and containers, such as bottles and cups.

The good news, however, is that our body may ultimately be able to rid itself of at least some of this plastic, including some of the plastic in the brain. "Our data also suggest that the amount of microplastics does not simply accumulate as we age, but probably gets cleared by our bodies, even if slowly," Campen says.



#### **GET INSPIRED**

For 18 ways to live with less plastic in your life, see ELmag.com/lessplastic.

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*memories."* GIADA DE LAURENTIIS

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**OLIVER BURKEMAN** is an expert in contrarian consolation. He's also a former columnist at *The Guardian* and the author of several books that offer antidotes to the excesses of self-help culture. "Excesses" here meaning the promise offered by many books and podcasts that we can learn to be wildly productive, perfectly calm, and totally on top of things at some future date, if only we follow their formulas.

Many of us are suckers for these. Yet somehow, those ideas rarely seem to cross over from fantasy to reality.

Burkeman takes the opposite approach. Rather than teasing us with techniques that promise to turn us into productivity wizards, his titles — Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals and his newest, Meditations for Mortals — put the reality of our limited time front and center. (Because we're all going to die, this focus also gives his work broad demographic appeal.)

Burkeman's gentle reminders of our finitude add up to a bracing call to action: We may as well do that thing we've been waiting to do, imperfectly and now-ish, rather than continue to waste precious time pursuing a mirage of perfection.

Meditations for Mortals is structured as a four-week retreat for readers, with 28 daily reflections on this reality-based approach to life. Burkeman recently shared with us some of the central ideas of his latest book.

#### **EXPERIENCE LIFE** • What is imperfectionism?

**OLIVER BURKEMAN** • Imperfectionism is my umbrella term for the approach to life that I'm trying to describe in the book—one I hope to embody myself someday. It begins with accepting our limitations.

Our time is finite. There will always be too much to do. We will never be able to know the future. We can only understand a limited amount about what's going on in the world. I wanted a name for the idea that says, OK, these limits are our reality. Now, how do we act in it? How do we do constructive, meaningful, difference-making things in it? Can we start from our lack of control and act anyway?

#### **EL** • You suggest the idea of "getting on top of things" is mainly fantasy.

OB • There's a pretty universal desire to get to some future point at which life is all smooth sailing. And there's plenty of productivity advice that suggests you can someday become efficient enough to handle everything that comes your way.

Yet the universe of meaningful things is much vaster than my individual bandwidth. It's impossible for me to ever get to everything that matters to me. Realizing this can be quite relaxing. I describe this as the liberation of realizing that it's worse than you thought.

#### **EL** • What happens when we realize that we'll never get everything done?

OB • If you believe that getting on top of everything is difficult but somehow possible, that's an agonizing way to live. But if you understand that getting completely on top of things is not just difficult but impossible, that may offer a relief; it's hard to beat yourself up for not doing something that you understand you can never do.

This frees up your energy to do a few things that really count. You become absorbed in the things that you're doing rather than seeing them only as steppingstones to a place of ultimate control. You get to stop postponing life.

### **EL** • What do you say to someone who's afraid that slowing down will destroy their productivity?

OB • This notion that we've got to go hard at ourselves or we'll completely slack off is not usually true. I do understand the panic in that question — the worry that you have to keep going at a breakneck pace because good results have come from it before.

If you can allow yourself to unclench a little bit, slacking off is not what happens — at least not in my experience. Not only do you continue doing things but you do them with more energy and focus. You do things better because you're no longer trying to spread your attention over absolutely everything.

#### **EL** • How does imperfectionism address the fear of failure?

OB • What imperfectionism says to worry is this: You will *certainly* get life wrong. If your goal was to do something completely perfectly, or to never waste a moment or disappoint a single person, it's too late. That ship has sailed.

When you're trying not to be a flawed human, you hold back. But you already are a flawed human. I find that thought motivating! If I'm already imperfect, then why not do the thing? This is definitely a contrarian form of consolation, but that's what works for me.

#### **EL** • How might imperfectionism help us make better choices?

OB • We spend a lot of time trying to figure out how to make decisions that don't cause any distress. But if we can accept that such consequences are unavoidable, every difficult decision becomes a question of weighing them.

Changing the time of a meeting may annoy your colleagues, but you choose to tolerate that so you can pick up your child from school. Or you accept the near-term agony of leaving an unhappy marriage to avoid the long-term suffering of staying. It's about asking yourself which problem you want to have. There's no way to have zero problems.

#### **EL** • What is scruffy hospitality?

OB • The phrase comes from the Anglican priest Jack King. He and his wife loved entertaining guests, but they also had this onerous checklist of tasks to complete before they'd have anyone over. So they decided to just invite people around and say, "This is how the house is, this is what we have in our cupboards, and this is what we've cooked for you."

In my experience, this might mean you slightly apologetically invite people into a house that's messy and serve them a bowl of spaghetti with tomato sauce, then find you're more relaxed and connected than if you'd overprepared.

We put a lot of effort into maintaining our façades; sometimes that's unavoidable. But whenever you lower them a little bit, you let people into your real life.

This is not just about dinner parties. It's also about sharing our feelings and our failures. You're saying that if you invite me around to your house, you don't need to make it pristine first. And that if you're ever feeling in a despondent mood when we hang out, you're allowed to tell me about it.

#### **EL** • What is resonance?

OB • This comes from German social theorist Hartmut Rosa. He uses the example of a first snowfall of winter. It feels magical because it's a gift; it isn't something you could go out and get. It wouldn't feel meaningful if it was a snow machine generating fake snow.

A relationship to the world that allows for resonance is, on some level, antithetical to control. We invite resonance when we aren't trying to force life to unfold on our terms.

It's not that all control is bad — to be completely at the mercy of your circumstances is horrifying. But you can be in a relationship with the world that's more of a dance. You have agency and you do things, then you wait and see how the world responds. •

**COURTNEY HELGOE** is *Experience Life's* executive editor.



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## SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

support your mental health?

EL staffers share theirs.



One of the most important things I do for my mental health is **read a book while eating breakfast.** This half-hour of calm in the morning helps ground me before I head to the gym, the office, or wherever else I need to go to start my day.

- Molly Tynjala, associate editor/fact checker

**RUNNING.** It's so difficult to be present. But when I'm running, I'm fully in the moment. I'm not thinking deep thoughts, I'm not solving problems, and, thankfully, I'm not ruminating. I'm just listening to the birds and feeling the air on my skin. I'm in tune with my body and, it seems, tuning my mental health.

Mike Oakes, senior copy editor

After a life-changing diagnosis in 2018, and still to this day, whenever anxiety about the future clouds my rational thought, **I repeat a mantra** that reminds me to take each day as it comes and fills me with gratitude for health restored and time reclaimed: *I am here. I am still. I am safe. Everything's OK.* 

- Jane Meronuck, production director

#### MORNING CUDDLES

with Cleo, my senior kitty, who loves to sleep on my neck and face. Cat purrs truly make everything better.

 Maggie Fazeli Fard, senior editor My motto is **Put water on it.** I get my kids (or
myself) in a pool, dip
my toes in a lake, or
soak in a bath.

 Laura Lineburg, director of digital marketing and media strategy



**GETTING OUTDOORS.** Whether it's simply walking the dog or biking to work or going for a longer outing, being outside provides a reset to my mood.

- Michael Dregni, deputy editor

My mental health rituals are the bookends to my days: caring for my two horses (pictured), my two little goats, and my darling barn cat. **The barn is my refuge** — it's home to the passion I've had for animals since I was a young girl, and time spent there never fails to clear my mind and renew my sense of gratitude and peace.

- Lydia Anderson, executive creative director







## The Right Focus

When a young tech entrepreneur shifts his attention to mindfulness, he realizes true contentment and success.



#### BY JAKE BERNSTEIN

**IN A MUAY THAI** kickboxing class in April 2012, during my junior year of high school, I felt shooting pains in my stomach and head. My instructor thought I was dehydrated and suggested I go home, but I collapsed in the parking lot before I could get into my car. An ambulance took me to the emergency room, where doctors gave me fluids and IV antibiotics.

The pain didn't go away. I was nauseous, lethargic, and barely able to walk. Over the next two weeks I went to several doctors who administered various tests.

Eventually, an echocardiogram revealed a benign tumor in my left atrium that was blocking half of my blood flow. I underwent open-heart surgery the next day to remove it. I was 17.

After I recovered from the surgery, my life's goals — and the speed at which I felt I needed to accomplish them — intensified. I had long been driven to succeed, but my health emergency took that drive to another level. I was compelled to work constantly and achieve all I could as soon as possible.

I maintained that pace for the next several years until, at 24, I recognized the toll it was taking on my mental and physical health. I was trying to get an e-commerce business up and running and wasn't sleeping enough. I was gaining weight, and I was depressed.

My commitment to success had failed to get me where I wanted to be mentally and physically. I felt burned out, gutted, and lonely. That's when I started to wonder: What if rushing toward my goals isn't the answer?

**I'm now feeling the best I've ever felt.** I'm more in the moment and at peace with my life.

#### **HIGH ANXIETY**

I am the oldest of three kids. I grew up in an emotionally turbulent home; my parents divorced when I was 8, and over the years I moved a total of 24 times.

I remember being stressed and anxious, but I didn't know what to call it at the time. To avoid facing these issues, I opted to stay busy playing sports — football, lacrosse, track, volleyball, wrestling, shot put, muay thai, and jujitsu. Yet I was never truly present in anything I did; I was always looking ahead to the next thing.

At 16, I listened to an audiobook about self-improvement, and I remember being amazed to hear that I could take control of my life. So many of my life circumstances had been out of my control, and this advice felt like permission to take the reins.

I began reading about evolutionary psychology and philosophy. I took advanced-placement classes and worked hard to get into the best college. I taught myself how to build software, program computers, and create apps. If I wasn't constantly reading a book, thinking about a problem, or doing something productive, anxiety would creep in.

I now know that I didn't have a healthy relationship with self-improvement. I was on an unrelenting quest to become the best version of myself and couldn't slow down. Striving was a way for me to escape anxiety rather than address the underlying issues.

My cardiac scare in 2012 showed me how precious and fleeting life is. Yet instead of realizing the importance of living in the moment, I became more preoccupied with my achievements and the future.

Even while I was recovering from the surgery, I was plagued by the thought of the opportunities I was missing.

#### SITTING STILL

In 2019, a couple of years after graduating from college, I was in the process of launching my business. I was committed to success, but I felt I had hit a brick wall. I was extremely tired and relied on caffeine to fuel my early morning workouts. My relationships were suffering too; I didn't let myself enjoy time with my family or friends.

Something had to give.

I'd problem-solve by going for walks. At the time I had been reading about the philosophy of Taoism, which struck me as a happier form of Stoicism; Taoism is about going with the flow of life and enjoying what's in front of you.

On one particular walk, a Taoist attitude rose to the surface. My overactive mind slowed down and landed on two words: *Resist nothing*. By the time I returned home, I'd decided to make mindfulness my top priority — a big part of that, for me, being meditation.

I had experimented with meditation since I was 16 and felt its positive effects, but I'd struggled to maintain a consistent practice. Now, embracing a meditative lifestyle was my top priority. My mantra became "presence over everything."

I began to sit in meditation each morning after brushing my teeth. I didn't have a goal in mind; the point was to focus on the sensation of air going in and out of my nose. When my thoughts wandered — and they always did — I brought my attention back to my breath. This simple daily practice helped me cultivate a more mindful life.



The old me might have scoffed at this, but the benefits were undeniable. I began to feel more at ease and found that I could think more creatively.

I also

noticed my

Jake, in April 2012, upon regaining consciousness after open-heart surgery.

attention span improving. I wasn't wasting time being anxious; I could give my full effort and attention to whatever task was at hand.

The benefits extended to my physical health. As I started living more consciously and acting less impulsively, I made intentional changes to my diet to support my well-being. I began choosing whole foods over more-processed ones and avoided ingredients that made me feel bad, like added sugar. I also gave up alcohol. As a result, my energy levels improved, and I lost weight and gained muscle.

#### **GIVING THANKS**

In 2023, I sold my business, acquired an exciting tech job, and moved to New York City with my best friends. People who noticed my transformation — not just the physical effects but also the mental and emotional ones — began asking me for advice.

I started working as a wellness speaker and facilitator in addition to working my tech job. In this role, I share how I've become more present in my life by adopting simple daily habits. I use my own experience to teach others how to overcome their stress and anxiety so they can become more present in work and in life.

I'm now feeling the best I've ever felt. I'm more in the moment and at peace with my life. I minimize screen time as much as possible, and I have become better at actively listening to others and loving people for who they are.

I also manage my workload differently: I get as much done in a day as I can while still leaving time for mindfulness. I know this will help me avoid burnout and accomplish more in the long run.

I didn't know how a meditative life could serve me until I experienced it for myself. I've always wanted to achieve so much, and I didn't think I had time to be present. Changing my perspective and lifestyle wasn't easy; it took a lot of faith. But I'm confident that this way of life will continue to support me and help me reach my future goals. •

#### Jake's Top Takeaways

1

#### Activate your senses.

Doing something that involves the senses gets you out of your head and into the experience your body is having.

7

Practice builds
permanence. If you
want to make something
a habit, add it to your
schedule. Treat it with
the same importance
as any other task on
your to-do list.

3

Journal. Set a daily end-of-day reminder that asks: "How did I feel today? And why do I think I felt this way?" Take five to 10 minutes to answer the questions.

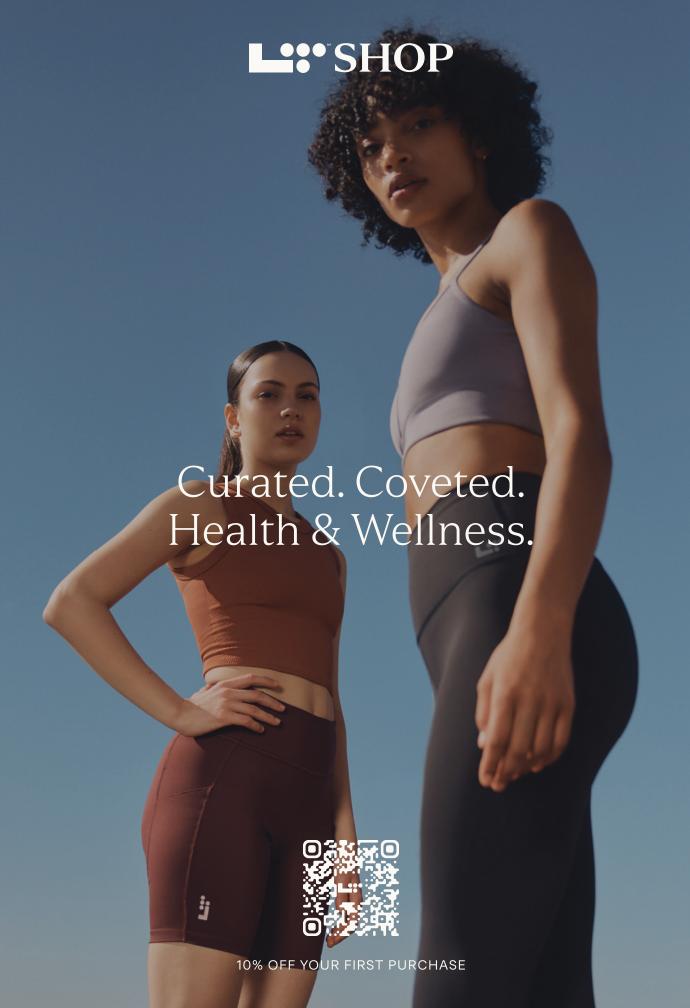


#### TELL US YOUR STORY

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

ELmag.com/ myturnaround.







## TRAINLIKE A HYBRID ATHLETE

Three workouts to help improve your strength and endurance.

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

IT'S NO SECRET that a well-balanced fitness routine includes resistance training and cardio. Often, these elements are parsed out and performed as separate workouts.

Yet combining strength and endurance and tackling both at once with intention — an approach known as hybrid training — can be effective and efficient.

"Hybrid training prioritizes strength and endurance simultaneously," says Cam Jorgenson, CPT, a Life Time performance coach and hybrid athlete.

This modality supports a wide variety of fitness goals, he says. "It can help change body composition, build muscle, boost cardiovascular capacity, improve athletic performance, and improve overall health and function in your daily life. And like all exercise, it is good for your brain."

Many people discover this training approach through hybrid fitness competitions like HYROX, DEKA, and the forthcoming LT Games.

"Hybrid training is trendy right now, but don't be fooled," says Jorgenson.
"It's not new, nor will it go away. It's for anyone who wants to train functional movements. For anyone who is looking to improve their quality of life and longevity. For people who want to train like an athlete, even if they don't plan to compete."

What exactly does a hybrid workout look like? Broadly speaking, it's done circuit-style, meaning you move back and forth between strength and cardio exercises. But, as with any strength or endurance program, a single workout won't lead to the physiological adaptations that make you stronger and fitter. A good hybrid program emphasizes four elements:

- **Progressive overload.** This strength-training concept refers to progressively increasing the challenge over time through weight and movement selection.
- Sustainable endurance efforts. While a hybrid program may include sprints and other high-intensity intervals, the focus is on maintaining a steady pace.
- Minimal rest. This trains the ability to sustain effort and move quickly between exercises while building the physical and mental fortitude to keep moving in a compromised state.
- Mindset. One of the biggest challenges that hybrid athletes face is moderating their effort so they can keep moving. It's tempting to push your pace in the first round just because you can, only to hit a wall in round two, explains Jorgenson.

Even though hybrid workouts include intervals, the experience is much like doing a long run or bike ride. "Find a way to keep moving," he advises. "Discipline in moments of long-duration work is crucial."

If hybrid training sounds tough, that's because *it is*. But it is also accessible and scalable to each individual, says Jorgenson, who works with hybrid athletes from a variety of training backgrounds and ranging in age from 15 to 70.

Keep an open mind about your own potential and work with a coach to adapt workouts to your fitness level and abilities. (Jorgenson issues a few caveats: If you're brand new to exercise, struggle with mobility or movement technique, or have a hard time processing a workout's multiple moving parts, you may not benefit from or enjoy the hybrid format.)

These workouts provide a sampling of what hybrid training has to offer.

#### THE WORKOUTS

After a dynamic warm-up, perform one of the following workouts. Push yourself at a challenging pace you can maintain. Aim for a rate of perceived exertion of 6 to 9 on a 1–10 scale or a heartrate zone of 3 or 4. Try to avoid maxing out your efforts.

### 28-MINUTE EMOM

This is an every-minute-on-the-minute (EMOM) workout, meaning you change movements at the top of each minute. Perform each exercise continuously for 60 seconds before moving on to the next. Continue rotating through the four moves for 28 minutes, aiming to maintain a steady pace throughout.



### PARTNER WORKOUT

Divide the reps and distances between partners to enable constant movement for the duration of the workout. When one is working, the other rests. (For instance, you might switch off every 20 lunges, every five burpees, every 10 thrusters, or every 250 meters of a run.) Note how long it takes to complete the workout.



finish each rep.

## 50-NINE2MOM This E2MOM variation calls for starting a new movement every two minutes instead of every minute. At the top of every

This E2MOM variation calls for starting a new movement every two minutes instead of every minute. At the top of every two minutes, complete the prescribed movement for the total number of reps. Use any time remaining in each two-minute block to recover and move to the next station. Complete five total rounds.



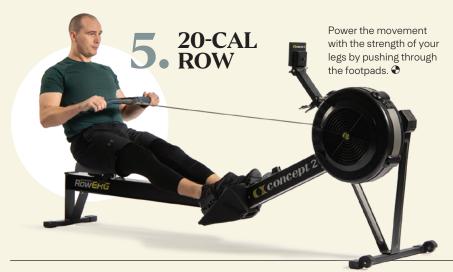
Reach as high as you can at the top of the movement, and pull the handles straight down to finish outside your legs. 2. 30 SEATED WALL BALLS

Maintain a tall posture and use the power of your upper body to bounce the ball off a target overhead.











#### **LEARN THE MOVES**

For workout tips and exercise demos, visit

ELmag.com/hybridtraining.







Build your lat strength and shore up core stability with this classic bodybuilding move.

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

A BASIC bodybuilding move, the dumbbell pullover primarily strengthens the latissimi dorsi, the wingshaped muscles of the back commonly known as the lats. It also works the pectoral muscles of the chest and activates the abdominals.

This powerful accessory movement can improve posture, offset the effects of sitting for long periods, and complement compound movements that require back strength, like squats, deadlifts, and pull-ups.

One common pitfall is performing the pullover

without adequate shoulder mobility (mobility requires both flexibility and strength). This forces other parts of the body, namely the spine and ribs, to compensate, negating the benefits of the move while increasing the risk of injury. (See "Are Your Shoulders Ready?" at right to learn how to test — and improve — your range of motion.)

Other missteps include using too much weight, moving too fast, and bending the elbows. This guidance can ensure you perform dumbbell pullovers the correct way.

#### ARE YOUR SHOULDERS READY?

**The dumbbell pullover** is a powerful but tricky upper-body strength move that requires decent, if not stellar, shoulder mobility.

For best results, begin with a range-of-motion test: Sit at the edge of a bench with your feet planted on the floor. Place one hand on your ribcage and extend the other arm straight overhead. Can you do this without flaring your ribs or bending your elbows to compensate for your shoulders? Try it on both sides.

If you can achieve this overhead position, great! Begin practicing pullovers.

If you can't, head to ELmag.com/shouldermobility to work on your shoulder mobility, then return to this article once your range of motion has improved. The pullover is worth this extra effort. (Meanwhile, strengthen your back with the rowing variations at ELmag.com/refinerow.)

1.

Holding a dumbbell in each hand, lie face-up on a bench. (Increase the weight as good form allows.) 2

Extend your arms above your chest with palms facing each other. Engage your core. 3

With control, extend your arms at the shoulders to lower the weights overhead. 4

Reverse the movement to pull the weights back up to the starting position over your chest. Continue for 10 to 12 repetitions.



#### MODIFY THE MOVE

Find options to mix up your pullovers at ELmag.com/ dumbbellpullover.

## ILLUSTRATIONS: JAMES CAREY

## Catch Some

Bolster your athleticism and safeguard your quality of life with this explosive vertical-jump progression.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS

IF YOU PLAY basketball, volleyball, or pickleball, you're all about jumping. It's the skill that lets you pull down a rebound, block a spike, or smash a lob before it sails over your head. Serious athletes work for months to increase their vertical. knowing every centimeter they gain gives them an edge over their more earthbound opponents.

The ability to propel your body weight off the ground — and land safely afterward — isn't just an advantage in athletics. It's an underrecognized key to health and longevity for everyone, says Marcus Filly, a strength-and-conditioning coach, functional-movement specialist, and founder of Functional Bodybuilding.

"Producing and accepting high amounts of force quickly is something that will definitely play a role in somebody's aging life when it comes to balance," he says.

Jumping calls on your large fasttwitch muscle fibers, which run parallel to the smaller slow-twitch fibers in your skeletal muscles, Filly explains. Fast-twitch fibers power fast-paced, tougher activities, like sprinting and heavy lifting; slow-twitch fibers are responsible for slower-paced, easier movements, like walking and rowing.

Both types are essential for dayto-day functioning, but age-related muscle loss disproportionately affects fast-twitch fibers. Over time, responding effectively to unexpected mishaps





- catching yourself in the event of a fall or grabbing a lamp before it topples off a table - becomes exceedingly difficult. This is where jump training comes in.

#### **BENEFITS OF JUMP TRAINING**

Jumping demands that you not only move a heavy load (your full body weight) but that you move it fast enough to get off the ground, Filly says. That's a double whammy for your fast-twitch fibers, the equivalent of an Olympic weightlifter snatching a barbell overhead or a shot-putter heaving a 16-pound shot down the field.

Landing presents another beneficial challenge. The instant you make contact with the ground, the muscles in your feet, ankles, knees, and hips come to attention, just as they do when you catch yourself after you stumble or trip. This makes jumping an effective way to prepare for falls and prevent fall-related injuries.

Studies suggest that jump training also stimulates an increase in bone density, helping stave off osteopenia and osteoporosis as you age. (Older adults or anyone with preexisting conditions affecting bone density should consult with a medical professional before beginning jump training.)

When it comes to jump training, a little goes a long way. "Jumping isn't a high-volume activity," Filly says.

Because your fast-twitch muscle fibers tire quickly, you don't need long workouts to stimulate them. "You don't get injured on rep No. 1; you'll injure yourself on rep No. 55."

So keep your volume — total rep count — low while keeping the quality and effort of each rep as high as possible. Progress slowly and cautiously and stop immediately if you feel pain. "We're talking maybe 60 seconds of work at first," Filly advises.

Do your jump training early in your workout, ideally after your warm-up and before any strength training or cardio movements. "If you wait till too late in your workout, you won't be able to move explosively," Filly says. "Think of jump training as an extension of your warm-up."

Follow this progression to become a better jumper — perhaps to grab the rim on the basketball court or just to feel healthier and springier in your everyday life.



#### Level 1

If the last time you jumped was in a school gym class, start here. "Before you do a lot of jumping, be sure that you're comfortable with a basic squat," says Filly. Squatting low and standing up from the squat — amounts to a slow-motion jump, so it's perfect practice for the real thing. Practice this move two or three times per week on nonconsecutive days to build strength in your legs.

#### **GOBLET SQUAT**

Perform 20 reps using a relatively light but challenging weight. Work up to squatting one-third of your body weight for 20 reps.



#### Level 2

Once you've developed basic leg strength, perform these two moves back-to-back on two separate workout days each week. Rest for a minute or so between exercises, working up to three rounds of each. If you start to develop soreness in your joints or connective tissue (particularly the Achilles tendon), back off.

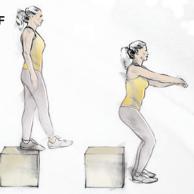
#### **POGO JUMP**

Keeping your torso rigid, bounce repeatedly up and down on the balls of your feet. Repeat for 20 seconds.



#### **BOX STEP-OFF**

Stand on a 6- to 12-inch box. Step off the box, landing on both feet as softly as you can. Repeat for six reps.



#### Level 3

Stick with Level 2 for three or four weeks, then switch to the following moves. Start with one set of each, then build up to three rounds, twice a week, for two or three weeks.



Bounce repeatedly up and down on the balls of one foot for 20 seconds. Switch legs and repeat.



#### **DEPTH JUMP**

Perform the box step-off (described above) from a higher box. Repeat for six reps.



Ready for some max-effort work? Try these two moves after your warm-up but before other strength-training moves. Work up to three or four sets of four to six reps on nonconsecutive days, twice a week.

#### **BROAD JUMP**

Drop into a half-squat and swing your arms back. Swing your arms forward as you jump off both feet as far forward as you can. Aim to beat your distance with each rep.







#### MAX-EFFORT VERTICAL JUMP

Drop into a half-squat and swing your arms back. Swing your arms forward and overhead as you jump as high as you can. 🕀





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"GET OUT OF your comfort zone." It's a piece of advice that people love to pass along, and it suggests that you're not really progressing — in fitness, in your job, in relationships, in life — unless you're borderline miserable. Is discomfort really the key to progress?

As a trainer and intuitive-movement coach specializing in trauma-informed exercise and injury rehab, I'd argue no, it's not — at least not if you're seeking sustainable growth. Instead of going from feeling totally chill to flat-out burned out, I like to conceptualize controlled discomfort as *just enough*. This means you push yourself but not so hard that you're wrecked. It's about doing just enough to grow without crossing into that zone where you lose control. It's growth without meltdown.

#### **CHANGE WITHOUT BURNOUT**

The comfort zone is more than a place where you feel safe — it's a state where everything is predictable, familiar, and often habitual. There's no risk, but there's also no real growth; it's simply a steady rhythm of what's known and expected.

Just beyond that comfort zone is where things start to get interesting. This is the space of *just enough*. Here, you're not throwing yourself into complete chaos, but you are stepping into the unknown. There's a bit of risk, but there's also wonder, curiosity, and the potential for change. It's the place where you push yourself beyond the routine, exploring new possibilities without diving so deep that you feel overwhelmed.

The progress you make here is more than simply checking a box or surviving a challenge. It's learning something new, getting better at something, or building the capacity to keep growing.

The best part? This kind of progress doesn't slip away once you've achieved it. You own it; you're not just renting it. Because you're working in the realm of *just enough*, you can recover faster and do it again tomorrow.

### CONTROLLED DISCOMFORT

None of this is to suggest that you should avoid discomfort altogether. The goal is to manage it. Discomfort plays a crucial role in growth but only when it's at the right level.

Think about doing a barbell back squat. If your mind's wandering during your lift and you're thinking about what to have for dinner or that text you forgot to send, you're still in the **green zone** — too comfortable. Safe, sure, but you're not growing.

Now, if you push too far into the **red zone**, that's when things go sideways. If the weight is so heavy that all you can think about is how hard it is to lift or whether you're going to get hurt, you lose focus. The discomfort is so great that you become overwhelmed and lose control.

The sweet spot? That's the **yellow zone.** This is where you're just uncomfortable enough that you have to be all in. You're dialed in, aware of your form, fully present. You feel the challenge, but you're not losing your mind over it. This is where the real work happens — on the edge but still in control.

Growth isn't about diving headfirst into the deep end or staying cozy where nothing changes. It's about finding that yellow zone — where you're just uncomfortable enough

to stay focused and push yourself, but you don't push so far that

you're overwhelmed.

Just beyond that comfort zone is where things start to get

This is the space of *just enough*.

interesting.

### PUSHING JUST ENOUGH

Next time you're working out, or even tackling something in life, pay attention to where your mind goes. If you're distracted,

you're too comfortable. If you're worrying about failing or getting hurt, you've gone too far.

Your challenge: Start small. Find moments when you can push just enough while staying fully present. Add a bit more weight to the bar, take on a slightly bigger project at work, or step into a conversation you've been avoiding.

Build a habit of stretching your limits without snapping. Keep showing up, keep working in that yellow zone, and watch your capacity for progress grow.



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# IODINE INTELLIGENCE

We need just the right amount of iodine for health — not too little, not too much. Learn how to strike a balance.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC

**HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED** why salt is iodized? Most of us take the fortification of this everyday condiment for granted, yet the iodization of table salt represents one of the most

surprisingly consequential — and little-known — U.S. public health initiatives of the 20th century.

In the early 1900s, iodine deficiency was rampant in much of the United States. Soil, particularly in the Great Lakes region, the Pacific Northwest, and the Appalachian Mountains, was low in the mineral iodine, and because most food was grown and produced locally, that meant people's diets were coming up short. This led to widespread cases of goiter, which involves a pronounced swelling of the thyroid gland, and these regions became known as the "goiter belt."

Meanwhile, scientists began to connect the dots between iodine and thyroid health. In 1922, University of Michigan professor David Cowie, MD, proposed fortifying table salt with iodine to prevent goiter. Cowie and colleagues lobbied salt companies, and in 1924 Morton Salt began adding iodine. By 1935, the incidence of goiter had fallen by as much as 90 percent in Michigan, and the remaining affected regions soon saw similar results.

We've learned a lot since then, including about the vital role iodine plays in human health beyond goiter prevention. Yet there's still more to learn. Researchers continue to explore exactly how much iodine is optimal, for whom, and in what circumstances.

#### WHAT IS IODINE?

Iodine is an essential micronutrient — "essential" in that it's required for your body to function, but your body doesn't make it, so you can get it only through your diet. Iodine supports virtually every aspect of health, primarily by helping create thyroid hormones. Iodine also has antioxidant, anti-infection, and potential anticancer properties.

A trace mineral, iodine is found in seawater as well as in certain rock formations and soil. Erosion and flooding have depleted soil iodine in many areas of the world, which has led to widespread iodine deficiencies and helps explain why iodine levels in food are so inconsistent (more on this later).

If you look at the periodic table of elements, you'll see iodine is a halogen, a category that also includes bromine, chlorine, and fluorine. Halogens and halogen-based compounds, called halides, are often used in commercial cleaning products, as well as in pharmaceuticals and food additives. Research has found that exposure to some of these halogen-containing compounds can block the absorption of iodine in the thyroid. However, experts disagree about how much everyday exposure may threaten thyroid health

Iodine supports
virtually every
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primarily by helping
create thyroid
hormones.

- and what to do about it.

"Iodine is unusual in a lot of ways," says Alan Christianson, NMD, author of *The Thyroid Reset Diet*. "It's a high-energy atom. It's further down on the periodic table than anything else we use nutritionally, so it's chemically reactive. It has the capacity to trigger a great number of chemical reactions in the body."

# HOW DOES IODINE SUPPORT THE THYROID?

The thyroid is a small, butterfly-shaped gland at the front of your neck that plays a key role in the endocrine system, your body's hormone-regulation network. Its two lobes contain tiny sacs, called follicles, that store thyroid hormones. These hormones affect metabolism, heart rate, breathing, digestion, body temperature, skin and bone health, fertility, and brain development.

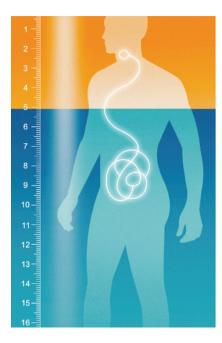
"The thyroid gland, acting through the hormones produced, has an effect on every body system," explains April Lind, MD, a board-certified internalmedicine, pediatrics, and functionalmedicine physician.

When the body needs thyroid hormones, the brain's hypothalamus sends a signal to the nearby pituitary gland to release thyroid-stimulating hormone. This tells the thyroid to make the hormones thyroxine (T4) and triiodothyronine (T3).

Adequate iodine levels are mission-critical to this hormone-synthesis process, as well as to the conversion of T4 to the more active T3 in organs and tissues throughout the body.

"Without consistent dietary iodine, your thyroid will under- or overwork to make thyroid hormones," writes Malini Ghoshal, RPh, MS, in *The Iodine Balancing Handbook*. "Both of these situations will cause multiple iodine-related health problems in the long term if they're not corrected."

Thyroid-hormone imbalances can affect energy, weight regulation, metabolism, and blood pressure.



# HOW MUCH IODINE DO I NEED?

The recommended daily allowance (RDA) of iodine for adults who are not pregnant or breastfeeding is a mere 150 micrograms. The upper intake level — the maximum daily amount considered safe — is 1,100 mcg, or just over 1 milligram.

"It's been called the Goldilocks mineral," says Christianson. "For most nutrients, you have a much bigger buffer zone than that."

The iodine you consume in food and drink is absorbed in your gut and circulated through your blood. If your iodine intake is sufficient, only 10 percent of circulating iodine is brought into your thyroid; the rest is excreted in your urine within 24 to 48 hours.

In healthy adults, the thyroid concentrates and stores enough iodine to meet your body's requirements for two to three months. It sends out a tiny amount of iodine per day, about 80 mcg, to make thyroid hormones.

If you routinely fall short on iodine, your thyroid gradually stops producing enough thyroid hormone to support your health.

#### I'M PREGNANT: NOW HOW MUCH IODINE DO I NEED?

If you're pregnant or nursing, you'll need more iodine to support the health and development of your child. Iodine deficiency in pregnancy can result in maternal and fetal hypothyroidism, as well as in miscarriage and preterm birth.

Insufficient iodine intake is considered the most common preventable cause of delayed brain development. "It's fundamental to a healthy baby," says Lind.

A developing baby's thyroid gland doesn't start making thyroid hormones until the second trimester of pregnancy. During pregnancy, your free T4 thyroid hormones contribute to the baby's total thyroid hormone levels. Further, babies are born with little stored iodine and "rely on breast milk or infant formula to meet their iodine needs to continue making T4," Ghoshal writes.

To accommodate these requirements, the RDA for iodine increases to 220 mcg per day during pregnancy and 290 mcg per day while nursing.

Anyone who's pregnant, planning to get pregnant, or lactating should supplement their diet with 150 mcg per day of iodine in the form of potassium iodide to ensure they meet these minimum levels, according to the American Thyroid Association, the Endocrine Society, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Still, because the window of tolerance is so small. many experts suggest talking with your doctor before adding supplemental iodine to your diet.

"Pregnant women are also more sensitive to big shifts in iodine," writes Ghoshal, referencing a study suggesting that "women who consumed more iodine-rich foods and who took an iodine-containing multivitamin had higher urine iodine levels and higher incidences of thyroid disorder than those with low or even more than adequate iodine levels."

Most experts suggest eating a well-balanced diet and being mindful of general trends in your iodine intake. Correcting an iodine deficiency — or surplus may require nothing more than small dietary adjustments.

#### WHY IS IODINE **CONTROVERSIAL?**



Some integrative-health practitioners see the recent rise in thyroid-related diseases including hypothyroidism and thyroid cancer - as evidence that we need more iodine than public health guidelines suggest.

"Many feel the current adult RDA of 150 mcg per day was provided as a baseline to prevent goiter and is not an appropriate level for ideal iodine balance to allow for its full range of benefits," explains Ghoshal.

Some also argue that our increased exposure to the iodine-blocking effects of halogens (including chlorine) and halides (such as fluoride) may require us to consume dramatically more iodine in order to push out these blockers and free up iodine-receptor sites.

But an approach like this can pose dangers, especially to people with hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism, or autoimmune thyroid conditions such as Graves' disease.

"If you have a preexisting thyroid condition or have experienced iodine deficiency in the past, you may be more vulnerable to thyroid disorders . . . if you take in too much iodine," explains Ghoshal. "This may happen even with small increases in iodine intake, but it's particularly risky if you're exposed to high levels of iodine for a long time or experience an iodine overdose."

This increased vulnerability may be due to something called the Wolff-Chaikoff effect. "Basically, your thyroid has a safety switch," Christianson explains in a blog post. "If too

much iodine comes in, rather than make lethal amounts of thyroid hormone, your thyroid shuts off. It is a great example of homeostasis and has been used . . . to slow the thyroid when it is overactive."

For most people, the Wolff-Chaikoff effect reverses once iodine levels normalize, but for people with thyroid problems, it can be permanent.

Christianson recommends that people avoid iodine supplements, and he views universal iodization to prevent goiter as an overcorrection. He points to research that suggests universal salt iodization has increased hypothyroidism, hyperthyroidism, and autoimmune thyroiditis in susceptible populations.

"The paradox is that populations that run on the low side of iodine have the lowest rates of autoimmune thyroid disease." he states.

"The benefits and the harms of iodine are a U-shaped curve," adds Lind. "If you have too little, it's a problem; and if you have too much, it's a problem."

# HOW CAN I LEARN MY IODINE STATUS?

If you experience symptoms of thyroid disease, your practitioner may assess your iodine levels. But unless you receive a full thyroid workup, getting an accurate measurement of your own iodine level can be tricky.

"There are many tests available for iodine, but none of them are perfect... because there's so much variability from reading to reading," says Christianson.

Some tests, such as spot urine iodine elimination tests, are good for providing a snapshot of population health, but they're not accurate for assessing individual iodine levels. Other urine iodine tests can be used for individuals but are often burdensome and expensive.

"The best way of understanding somebody's iodine status is a dietary history," says Lind.

#### **HOW CAN I STRIKE A BALANCE?**

Most Americans currently get enough iodine. Still, some remain at risk of deficiency, including women of reproductive age, children, and those without access to healthy foods.

Vegans face a higher risk because their diets don't include dairy, seafood, or eggs — all rich sources of iodine. Consuming a lot of soy and cruciferous vegetables may also exacerbate iodine deficiency because these foods contain compounds called goitrogens, which can block thyroid-hormone production.

On the other hand, it's also possible to get too much iodine. A quarter teaspoon of iodized salt contains nearly half the RDA of iodine, while many multivitamins deliver a full day's worth. Sea vegetables are exceptionally high in iodine, so if seaweed is a routine feature of your diet, you may actually be exceeding the sweet spot.

Further, iodine is hidden in the manufacturing and processing of

some foods. Commercial bread manufacturers use dough conditioners with iodine. Commercial milk may include iodine from animal feed and from certain disinfectants used in processing. The Food and Drug Administration does not regulate iodine in most food products.

Making it even more difficult to gauge how much iodine you consume, soil-iodine levels vary regionally, affecting the foods grown in those areas. Seafoods and seaweeds range widely in iodine levels depending on where in the ocean they originated.

Most experts suggest eating a well-balanced diet and being mindful of general trends in your iodine intake. Correcting an iodine deficiency — or surplus — may require nothing more than small dietary adjustments.

If you're not on a restrictive diet, suggests Ghoshal, your iodine intake is probably right where you need it to be. ◆





Rhubarb is good for so much more than pie.

#### BY KAELYN RILEY

I THINK RHUBARB is a bit misunderstood. To start, it's a vegetable. People often mistake it for a fruit thanks to its frequent appearances in pies, crumbles, jams, and other sweet treats. Tart and vegetal, rhubarb is genuinely too acidic to be eaten on its own — it needs some sweetness or fat for balance, which is one reason it's a common ingredient in American desserts.

That tart flavor comes in part from oxalic acid, a natural compound also found in other vegetables, including beets, spinach, and potatoes. Rhubarb leaves contain so much oxalic acid that they're considered toxic to humans (but don't be afraid — you'd have to eat quite a lot of the leaves to experience symptoms).

Even though the stalks are totally safe to eat, the leaves understandably put people off. Why bother with a sour celery that seems to want to poison you, when so many sweeter, more tender vegetables beckon from the produce section during rhubarb season?

I'll tell you why: Because rhubarb is the unsung hero of springtime vegetables. It's usually among the first produce ready for harvest, so when those pretty crimson stalks (which may also be pink or light green, depending on the variety) appear at the farmers' market, you can be sure we're truly leaving winter behind.

After months of carting home knobby root vegetables and bunch after bunch of hearty leafy greens, getting a few juicy stalks of rhubarb makes me feel like I'm breaking through the soil too, awakening from the winter and turning my face toward the sun. At this time of year, as the world around me is coming alive again, I can't get enough of rhubarb's tart, punchy flavor. When paired with a bit of sugar, it really is like nature's candy.

Except, of course, it's so much better for you. Rhubarb is an excellent source of dietary fiber, which is crucial for maintaining optimal digestion and gut health. The root and rhizome are even used in Traditional Chinese Medicine for constipation and other gastrointestinal issues.

Rhubarb is high in vitamin K, which plays a key role in bone health and blood clotting. And it's rich in anti-inflammatory antioxidants, including anthocyanins, which are responsible for rhubarb's red hue and

may offer protection against bloodvessel damage and certain types of cancer.

Given rhubarb's impressive nutritional profile, it's a shame that most people tend to think of it as a "pie plant." Sure, it adds a lovely sour dimension to lots of sweet dishes, but it's good for so much more — and resisting the urge to drown it in sugar can allow its natural flavor to really shine.

I love treating rhubarb like a vegetable and including it in savory recipes, like this salad. Roasted with a bit of honey to balance its tartness, the rhubarb is slightly softened but still maintains much of its sour edge, which pairs beautifully with creamy feta cheese and toasted pistachios.

Rhubarb season also feels special to me because it doesn't linger. Since it thrives in cool weather, fresh rhubarb is typically available only until early summer, depending on your location. It's often available frozen year-round, but I rather like the fleeting window when I can get it fresh at the farmers' market or my local grocery co-op. It only comes around once a year — so I know I have to make the most of it while I can.



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F and line a sheet pan with parchment paper. Place the chopped rhubarb on the prepared sheet pan and drizzle with 1 teaspoon of the honey and ½ teaspoon of the olive oil. Sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon of the salt, toss to coat, and roast until just softened, about 10 minutes.

1/2 tbs. white-wine

vinegar

1tbs. Dijon mustard

While the rhubarb roasts, toast the pistachios in a small skillet over medium heat until fragrant and lightly browned, about five minutes. Transfer the pistachios to a cutting board and roughly chop.

Freshly ground black

pepper, to taste

In a small jar, mix the remaining 1/2 tablespoon of honey and 1 tablespoon of olive



3 cups field greens

21/2 oz. feta cheese, crumbled

oil with the Dijon mustard and white-wine vinegar. Shake or whisk to combine, then add salt and pepper to taste.

In a medium bowl, lightly dress the field greens and toss to coat. Divide between two plates, top with the roasted rhubarb, chopped pistachios, and crumbled feta, and serve.

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## Cook With Your Senses

It's a good idea to taste food as you cook it, but don't stop there. Your other senses are assets in the kitchen, too.

BY **CAMILLE BERRY** 

#### **FOOD IS A DELIGHT** to the

senses -all the senses. They pick up flavor, of course, but they also notice enticing aromas, textures on your tongue, the hiss of ingredients hitting hot oil, the beautiful color of perfectly cooked vegetables.

Although eating is always a sensory experience, it's easy to forget that engaging our senses while we're cooking unlocks a wealth of information much more so than simply following a recipe and hoping for the best.

A sensory approach can transform your abilities as a home chef, whether you're an occasional cook or you break out the pots and pans every night. It can open the door to creating delicious dishes tailored to your own palate and give you the confidence to experiment more freely. Here are some easy ways to engage your senses in creating more memorable meals.



#### **SIGHT**

If you're just beginning to learn to cook by sense, recognizing visual cues is a brilliant place to start.

- A glance at a pan can tell you if you need more or less oil, butter, or ghee. "Let your eyes, ears, and taste buds guide you in how much fat to use," writes chef Samin Nosrat in her book Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat. "Say a recipe asks you to cook two diced onions in 2 tablespoons of olive oil. In a small pan, that might be enough to coat the bottom, but in a larger pan with greater surface area, it probably isn't. Instead of just following a recipe, use your common sense, too."
- When sautéing onions, watch them turn from opaque to translucent as they sizzle. It's a far more reliable method than the "five to seven minutes" instruction you often encounter in recipes.
- Our eyes are excellent tools for determining how large or small to chop ingredients, which in turn informs how long they'll need to cook.
- Watch the color of ingredients change while they're cooking. Look for rich golden browns, a chicken. This can tell you when food is done or when things have progressed enough for you to move on to the next step in your recipe.

#### **TASTE**

There is nothing more important in cooking than honing your taste buds, says chef Christine Ha, the first blind contestant to win MasterChef. "Food is most enjoyable when everything is balanced and harmonious."

And the only way to know for sure is by tasting your food as you cook.

- Dip a spoon into a pot of soup or stew as it simmers. Do you need to add salt? Is there enough spice? Your efforts should yield a meal in which the elements enhance each other to deliver gorgeous texture and balanced flavor.
- A little contrast can go a long way. Add plenty of crunchy vegetables to a noodle stir-fry or a splash of vinegar to a honey glaze. Juxtaposition may be the missing note that turns your dish into a symphony.
- Tasting also lets you test for doneness. Nibble the end of a spaghetti strand to know when it's perfectly al dente, or sample a soup to determine whether it's adequately reduced.

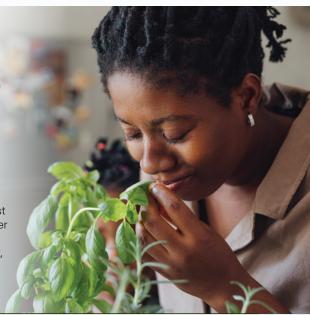
#### **SMELL**

The aromas of cooking can stimulate the appetite and make our mouths water. They also offer essential clues during the cooking process: You'll smell rather than see when nuts are perfectly toasted.

• Many ingredients — garlic, ginger, and fresh turmeric, for instance — become more aromatic as they cook, and when you smell them, it's usually time to move on to the next step. The heady fragrance rising from the skillet when you're dry-roasting whole spices tells you they've released their aromatic compounds and are ready to be ground. Butter takes on a rich nutty aroma when it's browned. When cooking with wine, you'll know the

alcohol has sufficiently burned off when you don't smell it anymore.

- When whisking together a seasoned coating for fried chicken or fish, you should be able to smell the ingredients mixed in with the flour. If you don't, add more. This also works when you're seasoning meatballs or making falafel—check for the scent of fresh herbs and fragrant spices.
- Barring obvious signs like mold, our olfactory sense is the first line of defense in detecting whether ingredients are off. If a quick whiff says something doesn't smell right, compost it. On the flip side, smelling fresh fruit is one of the best ways to gauge ripeness.



#### **SOUND**

Listen to the pan sizzling. A dry sound means you need to add another splash of oil; too much noise may mean you need to lower the heat. Sound also lets you know whether your pot is about to boil over or when all the liquid has cooked off.

- You can hear when the moisture has cooked off your tofu or meat, which is a sign that it's become crisp. When it's ready to flip, the sound shifts from a wet bubbling to a dry hissing.
- The crunch of lettuce or sharpness of celery or apples indicates they're fresh.
- Tapping the bottom of a freshly baked loaf of bread and listening for a hollow sound lets you know when it's cooked through. Cutting into the loaf before it sounds hollow will leave you with gummy, dense bread.

#### TOUCH

Touch is a reliable way to figure out the doneness of meat or the freshness of produce. Get your hands dirty and feel what your food has to say.

- Pick up a tomato, bell pepper, or plum: These fruits should be firm but not hard to the touch.
- You won't want to stick a finger into a simmering pot, but stirring and sensing the thickness of a sauce via the resistance against a spoon can indicate whether it has sufficiently reduced.
- Hover your hand over a wok to determine when the pan is hot enough to start frying.
  - You can also use the touch test to check whether meat is cooked



through. First, relax your hand and press the fleshy area of your palm below your thumb. This is how raw meat feels. Next, touch your thumb and pinky finger together — the same part of your palm below your thumb will have the firmness of well-done meat. Thumb to ring finger and thumb to middle finger are medium and medium rare, respectively.

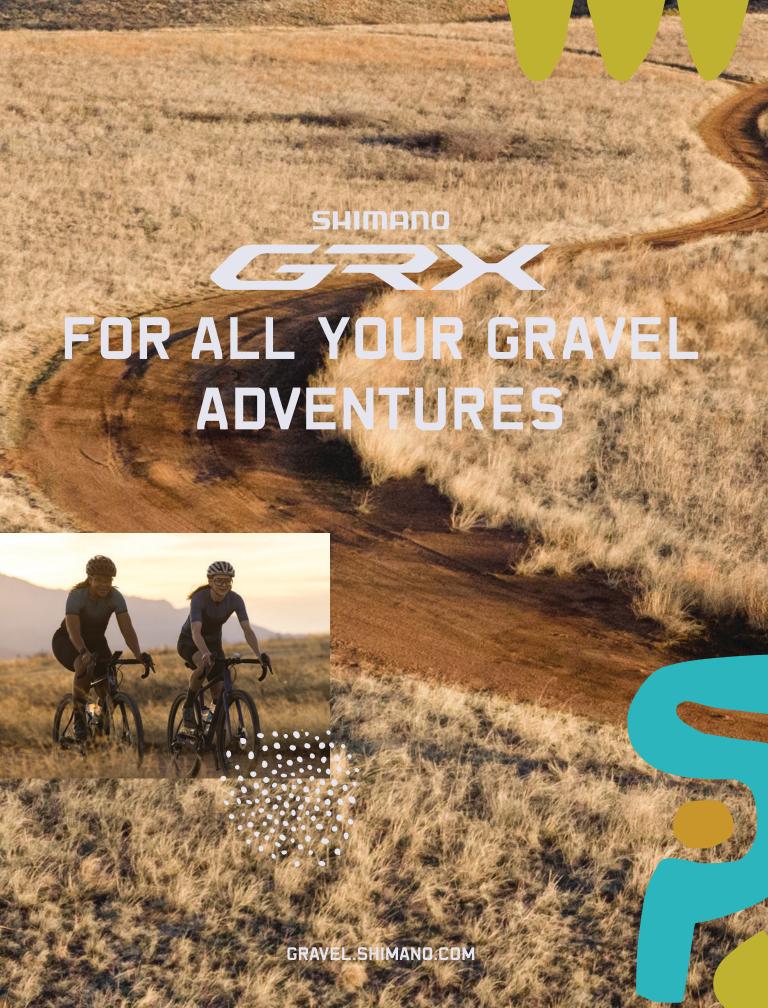


#### **INTUITION**

Once you've learned to rely on your five senses in the kitchen, you open the door to a sixth sense: intuition. This sense gives you the confidence to deviate from recipes and make your own mouthwatering creations. Think of it like an improv comedy show rather than a scripted sitcom.

- By using your five senses, you'll develop a knack for knowing which ingredients play well together. Conjure up flavors in your mind to make creative pairings, such as a sprinkle of smoked salt over fresh tropical fruit.
- Listen to your gut when shopping for ingredients. Maybe a recipe calls for lettuce and the options at the market look wilted. Rely on your intuition to decide what to use as a substitute. That red cabbage could be a beautiful swap.
- Delve into your imagination to concoct fabulous recipes with nothing more than what you have on hand.

"Food is a multisensory experience," Ha says, "so utilizing all your senses to assess your food will help make a better dish." Immerse yourself in the cooking process, and with a little trial and error, you can create meals that shine.









- ¼ cup orange juice
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¾ tsp. salt
- · 2 cloves garlic, minced
- · 1tsp. paprika
- ½ tsp. salt
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ tsp. salt

or sliced vegetables. Keep leftovers in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to four days.



#### BASE

- 1 cup raw cashews
- 1 cup raw pumpkin seeds

#### COATING

- · 1tbs. coconut oil
- 1tsp. turmeric powder
- 1tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1tsp. ground cumin
- 1tsp. freshly ground black pepper

#### MIX-IN

• ½ cup dried apricot halves, coarsely chopped

### AND CHOCOLATE

#### BASE

- · 1 cup roasted, unsalted peanuts
- 1 cup coconut flakes
- ¼ cup cacao nibs

#### COATING

- 1tbs. avocado oil
- · 1tbs. creamy nut butter
- 1tbs. honey
- · 1tsp. ground cinnamon

#### MIX-IN

• 1/2 cup raisins

#### BASE

- 1 cup whole almonds
- ½ cup walnut halves

#### COATING

- 2 tsp. toasted sesame oil
- 1tsp. tamari or soy sauce
- 2 tsp. honey
- 1/8 tsp. cayenne

#### MIX-INS

- ½ cup wasabi peas
- ½ cup goji berries
- ½ cup dried cherries

Choose your flavor, then mix the base ingredients in a medium bowl.

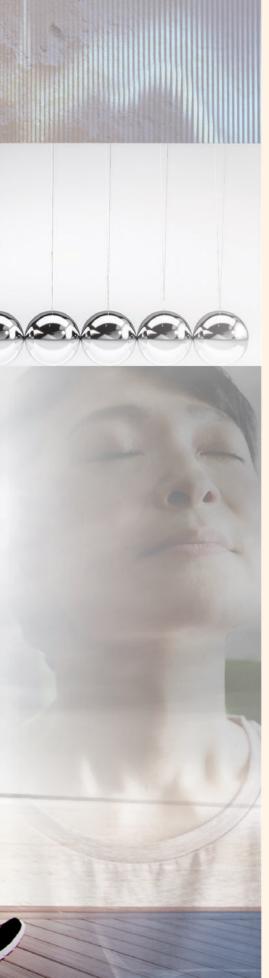
In a medium sauté pan, warm the oil for the coating over medium heat, then add the remaining coating ingredients and stir until the mixture just starts to bubble. Add the base ingredients and stir well to coat. Lower heat to medium-low and cook for about two minutes. then add the mix-ins and stir to combine. Transfer the mixture to a baking sheet to cool.

Store in an airtight container at room temperature for up to a week or in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. •

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







#### **ON THE NIGHT**

of April 7, 1997, Scott Strode had an epiphany. For years, the Boston native had been living three parallel lives: By day, he was Scott the blue-collar shipyard worker. By night, he was Scott the happy drunk. And by midnight, he recalls, he was Scott the hardcore addict, scrounging for cocaine in East Boston.

"I had a series of really dark nights that sort of kept progressing," says Strode, author of *Rise. Recover. Thrive. How I Got Strong, Got Sober, and Built a Movement of Hope.* "I was having blackouts, not remembering what had happened the night before. My relationships were severely damaged. The way I was drinking and doing drugs was stripping away the dreams of who I thought I could be."

And so, in those liminal late-night hours of April 7, Strode realized he was done, though he wasn't entirely certain what form "done" would take.

"That last night, I was thinking of my mom and her hearing I had died of an overdose, which seemed like the natural conclusion," he says. "The disease [of addiction] grinds you down. It wants you dead."

But Strode didn't die that night. April 8 — his sobriety date — marked the beginning of a life dedicated to healing himself and supporting others on the same journey. "Deep inside I knew I had more potential, and I started seeking a pathway to get back to who I thought I could be," he says.

One of the first steps on that path was joining a boxing gym.

"I learned to hit the heavy bag and discovered 'the sweet science' of boxing, as they call it. I healed some of the self-esteem wounds from early child-hood trauma, and each time I climbed into the ring I found this new confidence and courage that I realized had always been with me."

Boxing was a gateway to other activities, like ice climbing, cycling, hik-

ing, and running, all of which became important coping mechanisms.

"When I moved my body, I felt better. When I worked out, I forgot what was bothering me," he recalls. "Exercise is a chemical reset for the brain. Slowly, over time, it shifted how I viewed myself. I went from thinking of myself as an addict to seeing myself as an athlete. From there, it became easier to view myself as a brother, as a son, as a husband and father. There is something about sports and physical activity that makes it easier to expand your identity and your sense of self."

Strode went on to complete an Ironman; summit Kala Patthar, a Himalayan peak towering more than 18,000 feet; and survive a blizzard while climbing Alaska's Denali.

He became an EMT and, in 2006, launched The Phoenix, a sober active community that taps into the mental health benefits of not just moving your body but moving your body in community.

Strode's story comes as no surprise to anyone who has experienced the transformative effects of movement. Exercise can help people reduce stress and manage depression and anxiety. It can boost self-confidence and creativity. It can be a salve for loneliness, help heal trauma, and support sobriety efforts.

Many of these mental health benefits can be realized with as little as 20 minutes of daily physical activity. Even if you set out only to achieve an improvement in your physical fitness, exercise has the power to change your mind for the better.

"We're all in recovery from something," says Strode. "For some people it's drugs or alcohol. For others it's early childhood trauma. It could be the grief of losing someone, or the stress of life. Exercise and nurturing community can help us through whatever we're recovering from."

### WAYS EXERCISE CAN BOOST YOUR EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Movement is indeed medicine for the mind. It's not a panacea for mental health issues, and moving the body is not always easy when you're struggling, but a deep well of research shows that physical activity can support mental health in the following ways.



Occasional stress is both normal and healthy, but when it lingers, it can wreak havoc on your mind and body. Chronic stress increases your risk of developing anxiety, depression, insomnia, high blood pressure, and more.

Movement tackles stress from multiple angles, explains Brie Vortherms, LMFT, a therapist and senior director of Life Time Mind. It works at a chemical level, pumping out endorphins that help you relax. It also dampens cortisol, epinephrine, and other hormones that contribute directly to stress.

Blood flow is another perk. "The more you work out, the more blood flow you'll have and the stronger that blood flow will be to the brain," says Vortherms. Overall, more oxygenated blood improves brain function, which can help you cope with stress.

Exercise also eases stress by counteracting the learned helplessness response, says John Ratey, MD, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain.* 

Learned helplessness is a state of mind that develops in response to stressful situations that feel uncontrollable. In the face of future stress, these feelings cause you not to act, even if you can change

your circumstances. Stress mounts, creating anxiety and increasing your risk of depression.

"Movement is a good antidote to learned helplessness," Ratey says. Exercise teaches you to focus on the task at hand and to stick around instead of giving up right away when things get tough or frustrating.

Over time, this can improve your response to stressful situations. "A lot of people with mental health issues overrespond to stress and make their own demons too quickly."

Want to boost the stress-relieving benefits of exercise even more? Take your fitness routine outside. A 2019 study found that spending 20 to 30 minutes in nature leads to a significant drop in cortisol.



#### **LEARN MORE**

For more on how stress operates in your body — and how to reduce stress and build resilience — see ELmag.com/scienceofstress.

For more about the mental health benefits of time in nature, go to ELmag.com/naturecure.





#### **COMBATS DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY**

Reported depression rates have reached an all-time high. According to a 2023 Gallup poll, 29 percent of American adults have been diagnosed at some point in life — a 10 percentage point jump since 2015.

Meanwhile, according to the National Institutes of Health, generalized anxiety disorder (the most common type of anxiety) affects 3.1 percent of the U.S. population.

While they're separate mental health conditions, depression and anxiety commonly occur together — and addressing one often helps the other.

"Exercise is a potent treatment for depression and anxiety," says integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD, author of *The Chemistry of Joy.* 

Movement increases production of the natural painkillers known as endorphins; it also enhances dopamine and serotonin, brain chemicals that uplift mood and tend to run low in people with depression. "Anything that increases your heart

rate, even for a short period, is going to release those endorphins and chemicals that improve your mood," Vortherms says.

Exercise can also calm anxietyproducing stress hormones like epinephrine (adrenaline) and norepinephrine, Emmons adds.

Indirectly, regular movement can combat depression and anxiety by benefiting your sleep. Research has shown that improvements in sleep quality boost the mental health of people with these conditions.

"Improving sleep goes a long way toward improving mood," Emmons says. It's common to feel irritable and short-tempered after a sleepless night. But once you get some good rest, your mood stabilizes, and you're better prepared to tackle the day.

The best exercise for depression and anxiety depends on your personality and preferences. Some people benefit from the meditative quality of aerobic activities like running, walking, and cycling. Others prefer more-intense workouts.

"Giving 100 percent to a highintensity workout may make someone feel the absolute best," says Life Time trainer Austin Head, who teaches the mind-body focused MB360 classes. "For someone else, a gentle yoga or tai chi session may do the trick."

Consistency is key, Head adds. "There was a period when I wasn't working out, and it was probably the worst I've ever felt mentally."

Today, he says movement is a nonnegotiable for him. "My mental health is the strongest when I have a consistent fitness routine."



#### **LEARN MORE**

For a whole-person approach to addressing depression, check out ELmag.com/treatingdepression.

For four ways to treat anxiety, visit **ELmag.com/treatinganxiety**.



#### **BOOSTS CONFIDENCE**

Self-confidence can help you handle setbacks and failure without falling prey to depression or anxiety. It can also make you happy and improve your quality of life.

Movement matters if your self-confidence is lacking. Finishing a workout, especially one you were dreading, affirms that you can set and achieve goals. This can build confidence over time. "You feel good because you've released a lot of neurotransmitters but also because you've done something you feel you need to do," Vortherms says.



"Strength training makes you feel more powerful and competent, but when you're done running two miles, you feel pretty good about yourself too," Ratey notes.

Plus, the more you exercise, the more you'll master your chosen activity — you'll walk faster, run farther, lift heavier, progress to more difficult yoga poses, etc. Getting stronger, fitter, and faster can further improve your self-image, which is tied to self-confidence.

Any form of exercise can be beneficial. In

one study on adolescents, resistance training had greater effects on self-esteem than did cardio; other research suggests dancing is great for improving self-confidence.



#### **LEARN MORE**

For insights into building and maintaining trust in yourself, go to **ELmag.com/confidence**.

If you struggle with body confidence, look here for strategies to halt negative self-talk: ELmag.com/bodyconfidence.



#### **FOSTERS CREATIVITY**

Feeling stumped? Taking a break and going for a walk or heading to the health club may be just what you need to get your creative juices flowing.

In a 2014 study, Stanford University researchers tested college students' creative thinking abilities when walking and sitting. They found their creative output was 60 percent greater while on the move, whether they walked outdoors or indoors.

"We've always known that people who exercise are more creative, but we didn't know how or why," says Ratey.

Now, scientists understand that movement and brain evolution are closely linked, he explains. "As we evolved, we had to make our movements more precise and planful, and that changed our brain architecture."

Our brains have roughly 86 billion neurons — nerve cells that send and receive messages between the brain and body — and nothing activates these cells and improves their connections more than exercise, says Ratey.

In turn, improved connections enhance the

essential components of creativity: learning, memory, and thinking. "When you move, you're using the same cells that you think with, and if you're activating them, they're more likely to get better," Ratey says.

Movement also creates more brain-derived neuro-trophic factor, a substance Ratey describes as brain fertilizer. "[BDNF] helps our brain cells grow and get better at making connections, which leads to an environment that's more receptive to new ideas."

Any exercise activates your brain, but those that challenge your balance and coordination — like walking on uneven terrain, dancing, and playing sports — are best, Ratey says. "Your brain responds by firing a lot of nerve cells. The more your brain cells are being used, the better they get."



#### **LEARN MORE**

For ideas on how to jumpstart your creativity, go to ELmag.com/ boostcreativity.



#### **HEALS TRAUMA**

Trauma can be physical, mental, emotional, generational, or institutional. A traumatic experience can be acute or chronic. Examples of trauma include illness, accident, assault, neglect, natural disaster, torture, and war. But even life events that most people welcome, like childbirth, can be traumatic.

Without resolution and healing, trauma can persist in



our minds as well as our bodies, which remain primed to react long after the original threat has passed.

"Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort," writes psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, MD, in The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. "Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignor-

ing their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves."

A wide variety of resources are available to help people coping with trauma. Among them are modalities that integrate movement into healing practices. Intentional, trauma-informed exercise has emerged as a complementary therapy that can reestablish trust in the body.

"With any kind of trauma, trust is the biggest issue we're working toward," explains trauma-informed strength coach Mark Schneider, CSCS, owner of The Retreat Strength Gym in Minneapolis. "Strength is a manifestation



#### **LEARN MORE**

For more on how movement therapy can help heal traumatic stress, see ELmag.com/ movementtherapy.

For a somaticmovement series to support your well-being, go to ELmag.com/ somaticworkout. of trust in yourself. The more you believe in what you can do, the more you can access what you can do — and the more likely you can meet and exceed limits. Trust in your own ability is paramount."

Trauma-informed movement practices — which may include yoga, strength training, primal movement, and somatic exercises — are not intended to cure trauma. Nor is there a one-size-fits-all prescription for healing. Rather, they can help repair the effects of trauma and gradually rebuild resilience.



#### **SUPPORTS SOBRIETY**

Physical activity is the No. 1 pillar of a sober lifestyle, explains sobriety coach Veronica Valli, author of *Soberful: Uncover a Sustainable, Fulfilling Life Free of Alcohol.* 

"When we pursue sobriety, movement helps enormously. In fact, I require all my clients to adopt some form of regular exercise," she writes in a 2022 *Experience Life* article. "Movement fills time in a positive way, improves our energy levels, and connects us to others in a healthy fashion."

Moreover, exercise can stimulate the production of feel-good chemicals like dopamine and serotonin, restoring the balance that alcohol disturbs.

The type of exercise you do matters less than the act of doing it — which Valli describes as an expression of self-worth.

"You might choose long walks, kettlebell training, long-distance bike rides, short HIIT workouts — how you move doesn't really matter," she notes. "What's important is finding activities that bring you joy, which is the best motivator."

Strode agrees. "If you're trying to change your life, it doesn't take much to make a difference," he says. "When I started my sobriety journey, I would do pushups and sit-ups and squats during commercials on TV — even that had a profound effect.

"When you're ready, start moving your body, set a routine, and surround yourself with other people. Most importantly, show yourself some grace. Climbing a mountain isn't all ascending into the sunlight; there are dark sections too. As long as you keep moving, you'll climb back into the light again." •

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#### **LEARN MORE**

Find five tips for staying sober at **ELmag.com/sobertips.** 

For details on the sober-curious movement, go to ELmag.com/sobercurious.



Initiating an exercise routine when you're struggling with your mental health can be difficult. Experts offer advice for overcoming inertia.

#### Set an intention.

Acknowledge how you're feeling before you commit to movement, says Life Time trainer Austin Head. "The first step to change is awareness."

Once you acknowledge the issues you're facing, set an intention to act. That act could be taking a group fitness class, going for a quick walk, or pausing to do a few yoga poses in your living room.

#### Lead with self-compassion.

"Intuitively, people know that movement would be good for their mood," says integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD. However, he adds, it can be extremely difficult to mobilize yourself when you're in the middle of a depressive episode. So, treat yourself with compassion.

There may be plenty of days when you need to take it easy; other days, you may be unable to exercise at all. Try not to judge yourself for it.

"It's important that guilt or shame doesn't get added on top of the difficulty the person has with getting themselves moving," he says.

#### Ditch the all-or-nothing mindset.

Going in with a high-stakes mindset is a prescription for failure when you're not feeling your best. "A lot of people have that all-or-nothing mindset when they're in low states of mental health," says therapist and performance coach Brie Vortherms, LMFT.

If you think your workouts must look a certain way to be worth doing, you probably won't start — or you'll quit the moment you can't meet your strict, self-imposed standards.

#### Start small.

You may not have the energy or motivation for a long or intense workout when you're depressed or overwhelmed with stress — and that's OK. It doesn't take much time or effort to feel the mental health benefits of exercise. "It has an effect on mood within minutes," Emmons says.

Vortherms often tells clients to start with a 10-minute walk twice a week. If that seems too easy or difficult, pick something else that feels manageable.

#### Work out with a friend.

You don't have to navigate movement and mental health alone. "It can be super helpful to have an exercise partner who can get you out for a walk; or if you like going to the gym, they can be there with you and make it a social event," Emmons says.

Group fitness classes can also provide support and help you break out of a funk.

#### TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

Movement is a powerful tool for improving mental health. But becoming overly reliant on exercise for mental health support can backfire.

"Exercise is great and does many things for your body, but you don't want that to be the only arrow in your quiver," says Emmons.

If exercise is your only tool for managing mental health, your relationship with movement can become rigid and unhealthy. Instead of exercise giving us more freedom and flexibility, we can get compulsive about it, Emmons says.

You may be convinced that you have to exercise to feel good — such that missing a workout causes your mood to plummet, bringing feelings of shame and disappointment. Then you're vulnerable to relapse if you become sick, injured, or otherwise unable to work out for a prolonged period.

Finding other means of coping with stress and negative thoughts or behaviors is important for sustaining your mental health. "It's a good idea to have a wide array of tools and not rely on just one," Emmons says.

Luckily, there are many options. You can combine movement with various mental health treatments, including talk therapy, medication, and support groups.

# Lighten Your Mood

# These small, intentional actions can make a big impact on your mental well-being.

BY CHRISTINE SCHRUM

#### THE DISHES ARE PILED UP,

the bills are overdue, and you're stewing over a spat with your partner. Your phone's pinging nonstop: texts, headlines, spam. You haven't exercised in days, and you don't know when you'll next have time.

Many of us feel the weight of everyday overwhelm. But if we try to overhaul our lives all at once — relationships, finances, and spiritual outlook — we're likely to end up feeling even more defeated and distant from the relief we're seeking. Then we blame ourselves.

"When our results fall short of our expectations, the inner critic finds an

opening and steps on stage," writes behavior scientist BJ Fogg, PhD, in *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything.* 

The problem isn't our desire for change; it's the scale of change we're pursuing. Fogg's book shows readers, step by step, how to get around that impasse and improve their lives by focusing on tiny changes.

"You could scold yourself down the path of change," writes Fogg, who founded Stanford University's Behavior Design Lab. "Or you could make your life easier. You could start tiny."

Taking small, intentional actions reminds us that we still have some

agency and control, an important antidote to overwhelm.

"It boosts your mental health. It boosts how you're able to show up and provide for other people," explains home-organizing expert Shira Gill, author of *LifeStyled: Your Guide to a More Organized and Intentional Life*.

The next time you feel bogged down, try one of these strategies. Each can remind you there is something positive you can do in the moment, no matter how helpless you might feel.

As Fogg notes, "Feeling successful offers an antidote to the go-big-or-go-home culture, and a new lens through which to see yourself."

# Declutter one small space.

Clutter can make us anxious — and so can berating ourselves for not having the energy to clean our entire home. Small acts of tidying, meanwhile, can feel satisfying.

"Pick one room, put blinders on, and black out the rest of your home," suggests Gill. "Within that room, tackle one microspace at a time so you can actually see the progress."

If your entire living space feels like a disaster, she suggests focusing on one individual mess, like a stack of papers. "Tell yourself, I'm going to go through the papers. Then I'm going to set up a mail basket by our entry so we no longer have to see the piles overtaking our kitchen counter. That's a little win that's final," she says.



#### Choose a "15-minute win."

Pick a task you're resisting: paying a bill, returning an email, cleaning the refrigerator. "These are things that feel overwhelming but take much less time than you think," says Gill.

After choosing your target, apply the "15-minute win" formula: Silence your devices. Set a timer for 15 minutes. Then roll up your sleeves and get cracking.

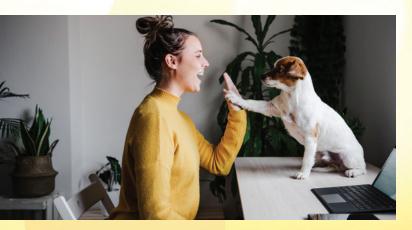
Once you've recovered from the shock that your dreaded task required 15 minutes or less of your time, give yourself a little reward. This acts as a bargaining chip for your brain, as Gill puts it.

#### Unclog your inbox.

Digital clutter can be as stressful as physical clutter, but parting with old emails can be uniquely difficult.

University of California, Los Angeles, clinical professor of psychiatry Emanuel Maidenberg, PhD, offers this behavior-change blueprint for support: Schedule a specific time for your digital declutter — and allocate about 15 minutes a day to the task. Start by deleting the oldest items in your inbox. Work toward the present. Notice your shoulders getting lighter as each old email disappears. That last part is important.

"Once you start experiencing relief, things become much easier," says Maidenberg. This feeling will motivate you to keep going.



#### Give yourself a high-five.

Good feelings spur the release of dopamine, which reinforces positive behaviors. "What happens in your brain when you experience positive reinforcement isn't magic — it's neurochemical," Fogg writes. "Feeling successful helps us wire in new habits, and it motivates us to do more."

So, the next time you have a triumph, no matter how tiny, congratulate yourself. If happy dances are your thing, do one. Or say, loudly and with feeling: "Yes!" Or give yourself a high-five. Whatever form of self-celebration works for you is the right one.

#### Cultivate "pearl habits."

Oysters create pearls in response to irritants; Fogg suggests humans try doing the same.

Consider this adaptation of one of his pearl habits exercises: Make a list of your top pet peeves — on-hold music, long lines, your neighbor's leaf blower. Pick one. (Definitely the leaf blower.) Choose a positive action that can counterbalance your irritation.

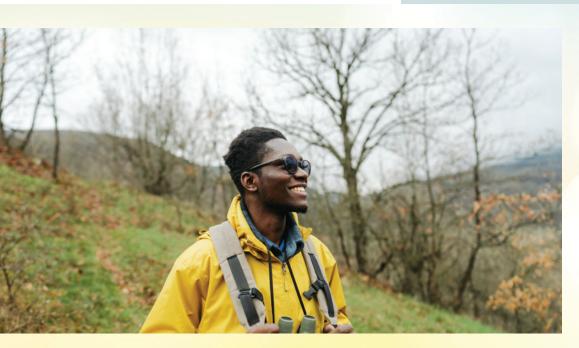
For instance: Whenever I hear the leaf blower, I will put on my noise-canceling headphones and tidy up my desktop. When you complete the positive action, give yourself a mental high-five to reinforce the behavior. See if your irritation subsides. Either way, your desk will be cleaner.

#### Pause your purchasing.

For one month, avoid all unnecessary purchases. Verging on a splurge? Jot down how you feel. "This reflection can help identify the shopping triggers," says Gill. These are often anxiety, loneliness, or boredom.

Sitting with the urge to buy an unnecessary thing can also help you pinpoint the deeper needs you're trying to satisfy, she continues. "Then you can work on meeting them."

To relieve boredom, you could get some exercise, connect with a friend, or switch up your focus.



# Lace up your sneakers and head outside.

There's a reason the "take a walk" cure never goes out of style. "If you have 20 minutes and you go for a walk, you're likely to have a much better outcome than anything else that you can do during these 20 minutes," says Maidenberg.

#### Slow your scroll.

Many of us turn to social media when stressful thoughts take hold, aiming for a little light entertainment. It may feel like a quick fix, but "it also has a tendency to be habit-forming," says Maidenberg.

One way to avoid losing hours to distraction: Set a timer for 15 minutes every time you log on. There are no built-in off-ramps for most forms of social media; a reminder ding will add one.



### Moderate your news intake.

You can stay informed about politics and culture without being inundated. Maidenberg suggests seeking out "one or two neutral and reliable sources of information" and checking in once or twice a day for 10 minutes or so. "Limiting the amount of time is key," he says.

Like social media, news sites are designed to be addictive, so we often find ourselves reading for far longer than we intended, he adds. "It's just impossible to get to the point of thinking that I know everything." If this is the case for you, it may be helpful to set a timer here, too.

### Remember you're not alone.

It's easy to feel isolated in our stress, but we're rarely the only ones who feel as we do. "We live in a world whose demands, crises, and economic pressures breed anxiety, stress, and a kind of low-grade panic," says Buddhist meditation teacher Oren Jay Sofer, author of *Your Heart Was Made for This: Contemplative Practices for Meeting a World in Crisis With Courage, Integrity, and Love*.

"These feelings are often healthy, normal reactions to the kind of overstimulation and pressure so many of us face," he adds. "Remembering that a lot of us are struggling right now, we feel less alone."

#### Redirect your attention.

Next time you find yourself entangled in worries about the future, try taking stock of your physical surroundings. "This isn't about avoiding our problems or pretending everything's OK, but rather choosing where we place our attention," Sofer explains.

He suggests this sensory exercise: "Focus your attention on three things you can see, then three things you can hear, then three things you can touch. With each one, notice the actual sensations themselves. Listen to the melody rather than thinking *bird*. Feel the texture of the fabric rather than thinking *pants*. Keep cycling through the three senses in a slow, steady way until you begin to feel more oriented to the present."

He suggests that once you've regained a calm perspective, ask yourself what, if anything, you can do to address the root cause of your overwhelm.

"We're wired to enjoy giving. Being generous, being kind, serving — these acts have the power to transform our hearts and brighten our world."



#### Do something kind.

Buy coffee for the person behind you in line. Compliment a stranger's coat. Donate to a good cause. Listen wholeheartedly to a friend who needs to talk. Any small act of kindness will do.

A 2023 analysis of data from an ongoing project at the Greater Good Science Center found that people who performed "microacts of joy" for seven consecutive days experienced a 26 percent increase in their emotional well-being. (For more on microacts of joy, visit ELmag.com/happinesshabit.)

"We're wired to enjoy giving," explains Sofer. "Being generous, being kind, serving — these acts have the power to transform our hearts and brighten our world." Shifting our focus to others can pull us out of the tendency to focus solely on our own problems, he adds.

# Snuggle your cat. (Or dog. Or guinea pig.)

Our furry friends are major mood boosters. Research has shown that interacting with animals decreases levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and increases the feel-good hormone oxytocin. A special shout-out goes to the critters who get us outside. Dog walks can improve mood, support metabolism, and lead to neighborly chitchat.

Even caring for a goldfish can bolster well-being, according to a study published in the *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*. No wonder the National Institutes of Health has funded long-term, large-scale studies on the positive impact of pets on people's health.

#### Place your hand on your heart.

Most babies like to be held when they're upset. The same is true for adults, according to self-compassion expert Kristin Neff, PhD. "Our bodies respond to physical touch almost immediately," she writes in Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak Up, Claim Their Power, and Thrive. "Touch taps into the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms and centers us."

Neff recommends placing your hand over your heart when you're noticeably dysregulated. If that feels too awkward, experiment with a hand on your cheek. The point is to send your body a straightforward message of comfort without getting too caught up in your thoughts.

### Keep a self-compassion journal.

Neff suggests jotting down difficult moments from your day in a notebook before bed. Stick to the facts, such as, "Someone cut me off in traffic. I snapped at him and felt bad."

Look for the most humane interpretation of everyone's behavior, including your own: "That wasn't great, but I'm only human. Plus, I skipped lunch and was hangry."

Finally, write yourself a few words of encouragement and some proactive steps you might take in the future. Perhaps: "I messed up, but I'll try to do better next time. And I will remember to eat lunch."



"Practice patience and letting go because it feels better in the long run than revving the engine of your nervous system."

#### Imagine yourself behind someone else's steering wheel.

If you're inclined to road rage, first try to have some compassion for yourself, advises Sofer. "Breathe. Recognize that getting angry is only agitating your own heart. Practice patience and letting go because it feels better in the long run than revving the engine of your nervous system."

Then, he adds, try humanizing other drivers in your mind. "Maybe their parent or kid is in the hospital. Maybe they're late to work and terrified they'll lose their job. Try to have compassion for the state of mind that would lead someone to be inconsiderate or drive recklessly."

#### Let go of a grudge.

Resentments drain our life energy. Letting them go helps us reclaim it. "We may have very good reasons for being angry and for the grudges we hold, but the inability to forgive hurts us," writes happiness expert Christine Carter, PhD, in *The Sweet Spot: How to Accomplish More by Doing Less.* "Forgiveness is not about denying wrongdoings; it's about choosing positive emotions over negative ones."

Forgiveness also gets easier with practice, explains Carter. She suggests starting with small stuff. Write a letter of forgiveness to someone who has wronged you. (No need to send it unless you really want to.) Name the hurt and express how you wish things had gone differently. Then see if you can muster a little forgiveness, understanding, or empathy for the other person. Even a modest perspective shift can bring you more ease.

#### Say thank you.

People who feel grateful tend to be happier, more enthusiastic, and more resilient to stress, studies have shown. "Relative to many other positive emotions, we have reams of research indicating that gratitude is part of the happiness Holy Grail," writes Carter.

A daily gratitude practice can be as simple as making a list of life's little riches in your head before you fall asleep — the warmth of your blankets, the safety of your home. Or you might try a gratitude exchange with a friend: Each day, trade an email or text listing three things for which you feel thankful. The more specific, the better. A daily practice of recounting the good in your world may help you notice more of it.

# Throw yourself a one-minute dance party.

A study published in 2024 in *The BMJ* found that dancing tops yoga, strength training, and other forms of exercise when it comes to easing symptoms of depression. (For more on the benefits of movement for mental health, see "Move for Mental Health" on page 52.) So shut your laptop, put on your favorite song, and dance like no one is watching. (Your cat is, but she's cool with it.)

# Take a good old-fashioned recess.

Carter recommends deploying a time-tested elementary school practice: recess. After you've worked on a difficult task for 90 minutes, do something relaxing and rejuvenating or fun.

That may mean taking a quick nap, looking up recipes on Pinterest, or reading an article you've bookmarked. Carter's only rule here is that it can't be anything on a to-do list.

# Treat yourself to unexpected beauty.

Beauty is a signal that life is not all toil and struggle, so try placing some loveliness where you least expect it — like flowers next to the kitchen sink, suggests Gill. "When you're doing dishes, staring at something beautiful makes that kind of daunting task feel more approachable."



#### Slow down.

When life speeds up, try slowing down. Even a little. This alone can be a powerful act.

"We can learn to punctuate our day with small moments of presence, gratitude, and connection with life," says Sofer. "When you rise, before a meal, when you leave your home, take a moment to attend to the mystery and uncertainty of being alive. Breathe. Feel your feet on the ground. Instead of trying to do anything, just receive the unlikely gift of being here on this planet."

CHRISTINE SCHRUM is a writer and editor living on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.



#### BY **HEIDI WACHTER**

#### IN SEARCH OF PLACES other

than bars to connect with people, Susie Whitlock visited a Minneapolis sauna with an old high school friend.

"She said she'd been doing a 'fire and ice' activity; I was like, 'I'll try that,'" Whitlock recalls. "But what I ended up loving more than the heat was the cold water. It is calming in a way few self-care activities are."

Some researchers theorize that the physiological stress induced by temperature changes can enhance our capacity to manage mental and emotional challenges. Hence that calming response — which can be better than a gin and tonic.

What Whitlock once sought as a social activity quickly turned into a routine personal practice. Now she seeks out hotels with saunas whenever she travels. When she's home, she visits a local sauna and cold plunge as often as she can.

Public baths were a centerpiece of many ancient societies, so Whitlock is far from the first to seek out community at the local sauna. The social connection these sites provide is just one of many ways modern-day contrast bathing can support mental health.

"You're sitting in a room with strangers and chatting, which is a muscle many people don't get to flex very often anymore," Whitlock says. The close quarters of public saunas encourage face-to-face dialogue, an increasing rarity in our digitally mediated world.

In fact, the challenges of heat and cold therapies — physical, mental, even social — are the whole point. That good stress is how these therapies make us stronger.

#### **GOOD VS. BAD STRESS**

The benefits of thermal bathing are familiar to multiple cultures.

For centuries, people in Japan have bathed in hot springs called *onsen* to loosen muscles, improve healing, and promote overall relaxation. The traditional Shinto practice of *misogi* is a cold-water ritual meant to cleanse the mind and spirit. Many North American Indigenous cultures use sweat lodges for physical and spiritual purification.

Saunas have been a central part of Finnish culture for more than 2,000 years, typically pairing time in a hot sauna (between 150 and 195 degrees F) with a plunge into an icy shower or a hole cut into a frozen lake. The Turkish hammam ritual also involves time in heated rooms and steam baths followed by a coldwater rinse.

Thermal therapies like these are forms of eustress. This term was coined in the 1970s by endocrinologist Hans Selye, MD, PhD, to describe how some types of stress can be positive, enhancing motivation, focus, and performance. Exercise and intermittent fasting are other examples.

Unlike distress, which is typically chronic and overwhelming, eustress is short-term and challenging but manageable. It often occurs in those moments when you exercise with vigor or engage in other exciting challenges — like jumping into an ice-cold lake.

The nervous system initially responds the same way to all forms of stress. It's the duration and frequency of stressful events that determine their overall health effects.

"During a period of shortterm stress, cortisol will rise and then go back to baseline," says integrative epidemiologist Chris D'Adamo, PhD. "[Then] you may have some greater adaptive capacity."

Intermittent stressors trigger hormesis — a process during which moderate, short-term doses of stress activate the protective mechanisms in the body. These help turn on the genes involved in cellular repair and stress tolerance. This process can improve adaptability and resilience by helping the brain and body manage stress more effectively over time. If the stress becomes chronic, however, the salutary effects are lost.

"If you have prolonged stress, cortisol could rise and rise and rise, and ultimately the body's stress-response system may become dysregulated," explains D'Adamo. "You'll get to a point where you can no longer produce adequate cortisol, potentially leading to a constant inflammatory state and other issues."

Yet when we build resilience with deliberate, short-term exposures to stressors, we can better cope with long-term difficult conditions. Therein lies the beauty of thermal-stress techniques.

# BENEFITS OF HEAT THERAPY

Hot springs, saunas, hammams, and other heat therapies boast a range of boons for body and mind.

#### PHYSICAL HEALTH

Exposing your body to intense heat can initiate a host of adaptive responses. An increased heart rate triggers greater blood flow to the skin and helps you cool off, and sweat can help the body excrete small amounts of heavy metals, pollutants, and other toxins.

The body responds to a higher core temperature by producing heat-shock proteins, which enhance your ability to manage stress and build resilience.

"Heat-shock proteins play a crucial role in cellular repair by addressing misfolded proteins caused by mutations in gene sequencing, translation errors, or environmental changes," D'Adamo explains. Scientists are examining how misfolded proteins contribute to Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and other neurodegenerative diseases.

A Finnish cohort study linked frequent, consistent sauna use with a 50 percent reduction in the risk of cardiovascular disease mortality and a 40 percent reduction in all-cause mortality compared with less frequent use. Some researchers argue the benefits may stem from improved vascular function, reduced blood pressure, and better heart-rate variability, all of which reduce strain on the cardiovascular system.

Another Finnish study found that, compared with those who used a sauna once a week, individuals who used saunas two or three times weekly lowered their stroke risk by 14 percent. Those who visited four to seven times per week saw a 61 percent reduction.

Heat exposure can improve cellular function in the lining of the blood vessels and decrease blood pressure, two major risk factors for stroke.

Heat therapy can even produce some of the same effects as exercise, a potential game-changer for people with mobility issues.

Environmental physiologist Christopher Minson, PhD, codirector of the Exercise and Environmental Physiology Labs at the University of Oregon, studies the effects of heat therapy on vascular health in sedentary individuals.

"The increase in body temperature, heart rate, and increased blood flow caused by heat therapy mimics the physiological effects of moderate exercise, such as improved blood flow and stress tolerance," he explains.

#### **MENTAL HEALTH**

Heat therapy can also have a powerful effect on depressive disorders. "Heat therapies boost neurotransmitter levels and have shown significant benefits for people with depression," Minson says.

These are vividly illustrated by a 2024 study published in the *International Journal of Hyperthermia*. Researchers used heat beds to induce "whole-body hyperthermia" (high body temperature) in study subjects with major depressive disorder. The treatments were paired with cognitive

Heat therapy can even produce some of the same effects as exercise, a potential game-changer for people with mobility issues.

behavioral therapy (CBT), a therapeutic approach that cultivates awareness of negative thinking.

Twelve participants completed the eight-week study; they had an average symptom reduction of 15.8 points in the Beck Depression Inventory. (A three-point reduction is clinically significant.) Eleven of them no longer met the criteria for major depressive disorder.

"We observed reductions in depressive symptoms that were much higher than we would have expected from receiving CBT without heat treatment," notes lead study author Ashley Mason, PhD, in a news release.

Researchers are unsure of the exact mechanism at work, but some speculate that heat's effect on the production of the mood-enhancing neurotransmitters serotonin and norepinephrine may be a factor. Additionally, once the body cools down from heat exposure, it remains cooler longer. This may benefit people with depression, whose baseline body temperatures tend to be higher.

#### **OPTIMIZE YOUR HEAT EXPOSURE**

If you're new to heat therapy, start with shorter sessions — a few minutes in the sauna at most — and lower

temperatures. Infrared saunas tend to be cooler, so they're a good place to begin. Increase time and temperature as your body adapts.

Use regularly. There are competing viewpoints about what frequency, duration, and temperature provide maximum benefits. Both Minson and D'Adamo say the sweet spot seems to be about three to five sessions per week, 15 to 20 minutes at a time, in temperatures around 170 degrees F. Infrared saunas typically heat to about 120–150 degrees F, so you can stay in one for up to 40 minutes.

**Hydrate.** During heat therapy sessions, drink water like it's your job. Hydrating before, during, and after helps maintain electrolyte balance and prevent dehydration.

**Recover.** After a heat session, allow ample time for your body to cool down. Wait until you've stopped sweating to get dressed. Follow with rest and proper nutrition to help maximize your body's adaptation and repair.

Use caution. If you're pregnant, have cardiovascular issues, or tend toward low blood pressure, consult a healthcare provider before beginning heat therapy. If you experience dizziness or intense fatigue during a session, seek cooler temperatures immediately.

If you know you're sensitive to heat or prone to fainting, consider using an infrared sauna because they run slightly cooler. D'Adamo recommends sitting in the middle of an infrared sauna, away from heating elements, to avoid any potential exposure to electromagnetic fields.



# COLD THERAPY

If the idea of regular icy morning showers leaves you cold, you're not alone. Fortunately, the upsides of cold-water immersion begin with a single exposure.

#### PHYSICAL HEALTH

Cold has a dramatic effect on the body: Step into a cold shower or jump into an icy lake, and you'll likely feel your heart race and your lungs gasp for air. Your blood vessels constrict (a process called vasoconstriction), and you may start shivering.

Your newly alert brain activates cold-shock proteins, which bind to nucleic acids and other proteins to help your body adapt to the cold. The molecules regulate various cellular processes, including metabolism and the stress response.

Specifically, cold shock stimulates the release of norepinephrine, a neurotransmitter that plays a key role in your body's fight-or-flight stress response. Norepinephrine also functions as a hormone, and it signals brown adipose tissue (BAT), or brown fat, to burn calories and produce heat to regulate body temperature in cold environments.

BAT is rich in mitochondria, which are responsible for its brown color. Brown fat generates heat by burning calories through a process called nonshivering thermogenesis, which involves breaking down glucose and fat molecules.

Unlike white fat, which stores energy, brown fat's primary function is to maintain body temperature by burning energy. Researchers have been studying BAT's potential to improve glucose metabolism and insulin sensitivity.

A growing body of research suggests cold exposure may be one way to increase the amount of brown fat your body produces.

#### **MENTAL HEALTH**

Cold-water therapy may ease depression. To understand how this works, it helps to know what happens in the body during depressive cycles, says Claudia Skowron, MS, LCPC, CADC, a mental healthcare provider who recommends cold-water immersion to her patients.

"When someone is actively depressed, they may have low energy levels, low levels of serotonin or dopamine in the brain, high cortisol levels, and low metabolic functioning," she explains.

Immersion in cold water increases endorphins, which can elevate energy and improve mood. "Endorphins help lower cortisol, which plays a significant role in managing depressive symptoms," Skowron says.

Cold-water immersion can also spike dopamine, the so-called feel-good neurotransmitter. "Cold-water exposure has been remarkably helpful for clients battling substance use disorder," she notes. "Its ability to boost dopamine helps manage cravings and impulsivity, making it a valuable tool in addiction recovery programs."

There's not enough research to prove indisputably that cold-water

"Submerging yourself in cold water is always unpleasant, but doing so regularly builds mental resilience."

immersion improves mental health, Minson says. But one small study he conducted showed a decline in participants' cortisol levels three hours after spending 15 minutes in cold water. Their moods got better, too.

He believes at least some of the mental health benefits of cold therapy come from the sense of accomplishment it offers, which can create a positive upward spiral.

Skowron adds that "submerging yourself in cold water is always unpleasant, but doing so regularly builds mental resilience. It teaches us that we can push through discomfort, which translates into being better equipped to handle stressful situations in life." (For more on the benefits of cold conditioning, visit ELmag.com/coldconditioning.)

#### **OPTIMIZE YOUR COLD EXPOSURE**

Research has shown that the therapeutic benefits of cold-water immersion start with a single exposure. This is how to build a healthy tolerance for cold.

**Take care.** If you have cardiovascular issues or Raynaud's phenomenon, check with your healthcare provider before you begin. Cold exposure is likely to exacerbate



Raynaud's symptoms. When cold plunging outdoors, go with a friend or a group for safety.

**Keep it brief.** Begin with a 10-second cold shower or plunge and work up to one to two minutes in water temperatures around 50 degrees F. Extend the time as your body adapts.

**Breathe deep.** When you first submerge yourself in cold water, your

body's shock response is activated. Practicing controlled-breathing techniques can help.

"Breathwork plays a critical part in cold-water therapy," Skowron says. "Learning how to control breathing, such as with the Wim Hof Method, reduces the panic in the body and subsequently increases alpha brain waves, which aid in calmness and relaxation."

**Recover.** Allow ample time for your body to warm up and repair. If you're doing plunges outside in cold weather, be sure to dry off and get dressed immediately afterward. And take a moment to relish your sense of accomplishment. •

**HEIDI WACHTER** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

# WHAT DOES 'HEALTH SYSTEM' **EVEN MEAN?** IT MEANS A BIG DIFFERENCE FOR YOUR HEALTH.

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Better health starts with a better health system.













Help your children develop some basic financial skills.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC



"Financial literacy" refers to the skills and knowledge that enable us to manage our money effectively. Teaching kids sound monetary habits from an early age sets them up to make smart, confident financial decisions as they grow — and can improve their overall well-being.

The No. 1 source of stress in many people's lives is money, says Tim Ranzetta, cofounder of Next Gen Personal Finance, which provides personal finance curriculum and professional development for teachers. He notes that giving kids a sense of control over money can enhance their long-term emotional health.

Those effects extend beyond their bank accounts. A study published in 2021 found that children who learn money skills, like budgeting and saving, are more likely to maintain those habits in adulthood — and have stronger romantic relationships, too.

Fortunately, you don't need to be a finance expert or solve your own money issues to teach your kids healthy habits. "Start before you feel comfortable," advises Linda Matthew, owner of MoneyMindful Personal Finance Coaching. "Don't wait until you have it all together."



It's almost never too early to teach kids about money nor is it ever too late. The main objective is to give them opportunities to gain knowledge and skills in a lowstakes environment.

# Young Kids

(AGES 3-8)

Money-related conversations with young children can be simple and fun. "You're just getting them used to using money as a tool," says John Lanza, author of *The Art* of Allowance.

### Focus on emotional skills.

"Young children don't understand money very well, but they understand emotions," says Anthony Delauney, author of the Owning the Dash series of children's books, which introduce financial lessons.

In one book, a brother and sister are each given 10 jelly beans and told they'll earn more if they don't eat them right away. The book explores patience and kindness as the brother, who resists temptation, helps his sister get a second chance to grow her stash after she eats her jelly beans.

Start an allowance. Giving kids as young as kindergarten age an allowance can help them practice using money. Rather than tying it to chores, think of an allowance as part of their education, Matthew suggests.

Delauney agrees, noting that associating money with chores may have the adverse effect of teaching kids to see their contribution to the household as negotiable as they get older.

### Make money tangible.

Let children see and handle money. Explain how you earn it and talk about things in their lives that money buys. Encourage them to run a make-believe store or restaurant, and when you buy something at a real store, let them hand over the bills and take the change.

### Introduce saving, spending, and giving.

Rather than a piggy bank, some experts suggest giving children three clear jars labeled Save, Spend, and Give. Offer parameters for how to divide money they receive.

For example, if they receive five dollars, have them put one dollar in the Save jar and one in the Give jar, and let them choose where to put the other three. "The more a child feels like they're in charge of the decision, the more they'll take ownership of that decision," says Delauney.







### Tweens

### (AGES 9-13)

Preteens often begin to compare themselves with peers, which makes this a great time to introduce foundations of earning, saving, and not trying to keep up with the Joneses' kids.

### Give them a debit card.

Kids this age can grasp more abstract concepts of money, and debit cards help them use money in a digital world. Many debit cards on the market for kids (which are typically tied to checking accounts) have digital versions of the Save and Spend jars. As the parent owner on these accounts, you have visibility into your child's activity and can guide their decision-making.

Encourage entrepreneurship. Some kids are satisfied with allowance money, but others are ready to earn more. Hosting lemonade stands or craft sales, or doing odd jobs around the house — ones you might otherwise do or pay others to do — are great ways for kids who want more money to earn it, says Lanza.

Emphasize saving and mindful spending. Saving makes more sense to kids when they can imagine what they're saving for, so let them set goals that matter to them. Have them paste a picture of their goal on their Save jar as a reminder.

If they want to dip into their savings for something they haven't been saving for, Lanza suggests instituting a weeklong waiting period to temper impulse buys.

But don't be afraid to let children make mistakes, Ranzetta adds. "At some point they're going to be out of your house, and it's better for them to learn these lessons early when they provide teachable moments."

Support giving. Facilitate regular conversations about what kids might do with their Give money. Help them identify charities or causes that they want to support and gifts they'd like to buy for others. You might offer to match their gifts (at any percentage — it doesn't have to be 1:1) to increase their impact.

# Adolescents

#### (AGES 14+)

Each step toward adulthood is an opportunity for real-world financial lessons, says Ranzetta. "The lens I think about is money milestones."

#### Put them to work.

Encourage teens to take on neighborhood gigs like babysitting, lawn mowing, or dog walking. Once they're old enough, part-time jobs offer opportunities for more sophisticated money lessons.

"They're going to read the pay stub, and now you can have a conversation about FICA and other deductions," Ranzetta notes. "They're going to file a tax return. They may want to set up direct deposit or automatic savings."

Tie an allowance to budgeting. Increase a child's allowance as they mature, but make them responsible for purchasing some of their own necessities, such as clothes or gas. Ranzetta suggests spreading an allowance out over time.

"Instead of weekly, pay kids monthly," he advises. "And when the money runs out, it runs out." This teaches them to plan and make more careful decisions.

### Introduce investing.

Consider opening a custodial Roth IRA for children under 18. You'd manage the account, but they'd contribute to it with their own earned money.

"I don't think teens are too young to talk about the stock market," notes Ranzetta, who suggests letting kids invest a small amount in a company they know something about. "Go back every few weeks and talk about how their investment did and why."

Don't worry if you're not up for more sophisticated investing, says Delauney. "If a child knows how to balance a budget, that's going to be worth 10 times more than knowing how to place a proper stock trade."

Talk about debt and credit. Staying out of debt — particularly high-interest credit-card debt — is a crucial lesson for kids moving toward adulthood. And they may need a good credit score in a few years to rent an apartment or buy a car.



If you have good credit, you might sign your child as an authorized user on your card, which builds their credit history. Once they're old enough to get their own credit card, suggest that they put a \$500 limit on it and pay it off every month. "Teach them to play the credit-score game without getting in over their heads," Matthew says.

Adds Lanza: "Ultimately, you're taking children on a journey toward money empowerment, which is more about *becoming* than it is about *being*. It's fun when you realize how much you're learning on the journey with your kids." •

**JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC,** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor and an integrative health and wellness coach.

# LIFETIME Events

# Experience Life Outside with Life Time Events



hibernate. We sleep more, eat more comfort foods, and spend more time indoors. Come spring, when nature awakens, so do we. We might need less sleep and feel energized to give the house a good cleaning.

Yet for some of us, the pendulum swings too far: Spring energy turns into agitation, moodiness, irritability, and insomnia.

We might think of having seasonal affective disorder (SAD) solely as being tired, sluggish, and depressed during the winter. But feeling wired and restless in spring is the other side of the coin, and it can happen anytime after about mid-February.

Spring SAD is a state of physiological overactivation. The return of more daylight signals the body and brain to become more active, and some of us are extra sensitive to these signals.

The symptoms of springtime SAD are usually mild, but they can become severe. Suicide rates are higher in spring. A low mood coupled with agitated energy can be a difficult combination.

In the framework of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), spring anxiety indicates stagnation in the liver, a blockage of vital energy that can occur with the seasonal transition.

TCM emphasizes the importance of the liver's role in detoxification. If that function is sluggish after a winter of overindulging and underactivity, the liver may be unable to handle the extra metabolic energy that spring demands. It's like a stream that becomes clogged with debris during the winter: When spring rains come, the stream is obstructed. If this blockage continues, it causes problems upstream. In the body, that could mean moodiness or agitation. Energy, like water, is meant to flow.

There is good news for those of us who deal with spring SAD, though: When we make small adjustments to align ourselves with these natural cycles, it allows us to work with our sensitivities rather than against them. Reclaim your flow with these strategies.

As warmer weather returns, our bodies require different foods to stav in balance.

- Receive what nature offers in springtime: delicate sprouts, herbs, and leafy greens. Bitter greens, like dandelion and arugula, are especially good for stimulating the liver.
- Drink plenty of roomtemperature water throughout the day. Water is cleansing — even more so when citrus is added.
- Eat plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits, and limit animal protein, especially red meat. According to TCM, meat is heating for the body. If you're already overactivated, highly concentrated proteins add fuel to the fire.
- Minimize spicy foods, like hot peppers, which are too stimulating, as well as greasy, deep-fried foods, which add to stagnation.
  - Keep regular mealtimes.
- Eat moderately, neither fasting nor indulging. This takes pressure off your liver and digestive tract so you can adjust to the change in your metabolism.
  - · Relax after eating.

### 2. COMMIT TO MOVEMENT.

Regular exercise can help absorb some of spring's manic energy. Make it something you can enjoy without becoming compulsive or overly competitive.

• Aim for 30 to 45 minutes three to five times per week.

in the company of others when you can.

### 3. EMPHASIZE ROUTINE.

A regular routine stabilizes your autonomic nervous system and the hormones that support it.

- Aim to wake up and go to bed at the same times each day.
- Set aside 30 to 45 minutes for a relaxed bedtime routine. Set the lights low, turn off the computer or TV, read something calming, and take a cool shower
- Even if you work a lot, you can maintain a healthy work schedule. Take regular breaks, ideally every one and a half to two hours. Your stress-response system has a daily rhythm of its own — a time to be "on" and a time to be "off."

### 4. TAKE EXTRA CARE.

If your regular routine isn't cutting it, try adding these measures.

- A 20-minute nap
- A massage
- A tai chi or yoga class
- Five to 10 minutes of a calming breath practice
- Magnesium I-threonate or I-theanine before bed
- Calming herbs, like passionflower, chamomile, or rhodiola

Finally, remember that you can wait this out. As with all natural cycles, the overactivation of spring will pass, and you'll find your rhythm again.

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



SECRETS ARE POWERFUL. You might feel energized while keeping news of an upcoming proposal or promotion under wraps. But if you're holding on to a heavy secret about yourself — a distressing diagnosis, a violation of someone's trust, a legal issue — it can lead to rumination, loneliness, and worry. Revealing your secret to someone else can provide relief as well as build intimacy and trust between you and the person you share it with.

But what if you find yourself in possession of a secret that isn't yours to reveal? A friend confides in you about a terminal diagnosis and asks you to keep it to yourself. Or you accidentally discover that a friend is having an affair or your sister is keeping financial indiscretions from her partner. In such instances, carrying the secret can become a strain on your well-being, leading you to weigh your discomfort against the damage it might do if you were to share it.

Marcia Reynolds, PsyD, a master certified life coach and president of Phoenix-based Covisioning, has some simple but powerful suggestions for handling such a dilemma.

### **STRESS SOURCES**

You feel you've been put in a difficult position. You may appreciate the fact that your friend trusts you with their secret, but you may also feel they've burdened you with a no-win proposition. Holding the secret makes you anxious; sharing it may damage a relationship you value. It's possible that divulging the information may have negative ramifications for others' lives; alternatively, if the secret comes out later, those affected might be upset with you for not telling them the information sooner. All this can generate major stress, Reynolds notes.

You can't stop ruminating on the secret. It can be hard to stop thinking about the information you've learned — along with its potential consequences.

You also may not understand the reasons behind the request to keep silent, and you might find yourself ruminating on that. "The 'shoulds' can be a big burden here and hold us back," says Reynolds. "I'm basically being told that I shouldn't tell anybody the secret — but why shouldn't I? What's the real purpose of my silence?"

If you decide to share the secret, whom should you choose? Should it be someone acquainted with the person who told you the secret - someone who will understand the significance of the situation — or an unbiased third party?

You may wonder whether sharing the secret **is gossiping.** Reynolds points out that there's a fine line between divulging a secret to relieve stress and doing so to create a closer relationship with the person who'll receive the information. If you feel the other person doesn't value you enough, you might think that sharing the secret will increase their view of your worth; it could have the opposite effect if they feel you are betraying someone else's confidence.

You don't know how you'll feel after sharing the secret. "You might ask yourself, Am I telling the secret because I just have to tell somebody to feel better?" says Reynolds. But you should also consider whether sharing the information will actually lead to relief and, if so, how true and lasting that relief will be.

On the other hand, sharing the secret could lead you to feel guilt over betraying someone's trust.

You're not sure how to process your feelings **about keeping the secret.** If you decide not to tell anyone, how will you work through the rumination or anxiety that may arise?

### **SUCCESS STRATEGIES**

### If someone asks you to keep a secret, pause before you agree.

Most of Reynolds's recommendations for navigating someone's request for secrecy involve taking preparatory measures — ideally, before you hear what the secret is. Although you may wish to prove your friendship by agreeing right away, it's wise to first clarify a few issues, including the following:

- · Let them know that keeping the secret might be hard for you. "The secret holder obviously feels a strong need to tell someone," Reynolds notes. "So it's OK to remind them that you, too, might feel that need."
- Ask the secret sharer to specify who should not learn the information. If the person asks you not to divulge the secret, "you can ask them to clarify — do they mean everybody on the planet?" Revnolds says, "Could I tell people in my family [or] somebody not associated with the sharer?" If the sharer leaves you with no options at all, that knowledge can inform whether you decide to receive the information.
- Ask the secret sharer to be specific about timing. Another question to ask is how long they want vou to keep their secret. The timeline — a week. six months, indefinitely — may reduce or increase the burden.

 Ask the secret sharer to be specific about consequences. It can be helpful to understand the effects of divulging the secret — both for whom it concerns and for your relationship with the secret keeper. If someone's marriage or reputation could be on the line, you might decide that the burden is too heavy to bear. But if the secret is less stirring (related to discontent at work, for example), you may feel equipped to take it on board.

In addition, you'll want to know how your relationship with your friend



might change if you disclose the secret, Reynolds advises. "It's perfectly OK to ask the sharer outright, 'What would happen? How would you feel? What would be the consequences for our relationship if I did share your secret, [either] accidentally

Consider

whether sharing

or because it was too stressful for me to keep it?""

Be honest. If, after the information will learning more, you actually lead to relief feel that accepting and, if so, how true the request is too much of a strain. and lasting that say so, and don't relief will be. be hard on vourself if the other person expresses disappointment or frustration at your hesitancy, Reynolds notes.

> Decide what you need in order to feel better about keeping the secret.

If you've agreed to keep the secret, or if you've learned information on your own and are finding it difficult not to share, ask yourself what would help reduce the stress, Reynolds suggests. Maybe it's sharing the secret — ideally with an uninvolved party — but maybe it's about dealing with your feelings in other ways. "Journaling, for example, can really help

you put all your thoughts out on the table instead of leaving them swirling in your head."

Interrogate your own desire to tell. When you find it hard to keep a secret, it can be helpful to ask vourself why. Revnolds advises.

"We often will tell people a secret simply because we want to show them, 'Hey, I know something you don't.' That's gossiping. Are you tempted to reveal the secret because you want attention? The idea is to be really honest about why you feel the need to tell."

### Get help from a professional.

A coach or therapist can be an excellent person to consult, she savs. That's especially true if you've discovered someone's problematic secret on your own and don't know how to deal with it — or if a secret involves real danger or harm.

Many professionals are mandatory reporters and can help you report suspected or known instances of abuse, neglect, or violations of the law. For other secrets, a professional could help you clarify your motives and your options and help you process the feelings that holding a secret can create. •







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More than a social media trend, this skin-scraping technique has a long history as a full-body healing modality.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE

**IF YOU LIVE** in the United States and you've heard of gua sha, you might associate it with facials that involve pretty little stone tools. Those treatments are popular, with abundant DIY tutorials available online. Yet this skin-scraping technique existed long before Instagram, and it does much more than reduce puffiness around the jawline.

### **GO WITH THE FLOW**

Gua sha is the Chinese name for a traditional healing modality that's been practiced for more than 2,000 years across Asia. Called cao gio in Vietnam and kerokan in Indonesia, gua sha also goes by "coining" or "spooning" because coins or soup spoons are sometimes used to perform it.

"Gua," loosely translated, means to press or to scrape; "sha" refers to blood stagnation. Gua sha's effects include mimicking sweating and moving fluids. Traditional East Asian medicine views stagnant energy and fluids as the root causes of many ailments, so increasing the circulation of blood, lymphatic fluid, and gi can help restore health.

In the United States, gua sha is typically performed by acupuncturists to treat respiratory ailments, like colds, bronchitis, and asthma, as well as conditions involving pain and stiffness. It's also used to treat inflammatory ailments more broadly, including headaches and migraine.

Minneapolis-based acupuncturist Melinda Van Eeckhout, Dipl. OM (NCCAOM), LAc, decides whether to add gua sha to a treatment based on what she sees when she presses the skin on a client's neck or back. "You can tell gua sha will help because your finger will displace the skin color," she says. "Extravasated fluids are built up in there."

A gua sha treatment itself typically results in skin discoloration. The procedure involves firm, repetitive strokes with a tool, which produces minor damage to the blood vessels near the skin's surface, leaving marks. These are called petechiae or sha, and they usually fade in two to four days. Your practitioner will be interested in how long that process takes because it can reveal how well circulation has (or hasn't) been restored.

Gua sha facials, on the other hand, do not involve the same level of pressure or marks on the skin. Their goal is to gently stimulate circulation of blood and lymphatic fluid and reduce tension in your facial muscles.

### **HOW DOES GUA SHA WORK?**

Despite the surprisingly dark marks it leaves on the skin, a gua sha treatment can feel good — especially if your muscles are stiff and sore. The pressure and rhythmic strokes help loosen muscles and restore range of motion. (The Graston Technique, a physical therapy approach, resembles gua sha but without the accompanying goal of reducing stagnation.)

During a session, a practitioner spreads oil to the back and neck, or wherever they're planning to apply pressure. Then, using a small tool with a rounded edge — this could be a formal tool, or a soup spoon or jar lid — they apply long, firm, scraping strokes to places of tension and along the energetic meridians, specifically targeting stiffness and pain. (Meridians are the body's energy channels.)

You'll feel some mild pressure, but it shouldn't be uncomfortable. After your session, you'll notice the sha marks. Their presence can be a little troubling until you get used to them.

Because gua sha involves deep pressure, it might not feel great for those with especially sensitive skin. And it's not recommended for people who are pregnant, taking blood thinners, or have circulatory issues.

But if you're in generally good health, with nothing more than everyday aches and pains, adding gua sha to your list of complementary therapies can be worthwhile. Van Eeckhout believes applying gua sha on the back of the neck can help "stop a cold in its tracks." It's also an effective way to address muscle soreness without NSAIDs. Better circulation beats stagnation every time.

To make sure you're receiving genuine gua sha, seek it out from a certified professional.

**COURTNEY HELGOE** is *Experience Life's* executive editor.



# Creating Community

At its heart, community is connection — something many of us may be lacking these days. These ideas can help you build more of it in your life.

BY KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS

**ONE FRIDAY** this past fall, my partner, Brian, and I sat together on the bleachers at our local high school soccer team's senior night. As the sun set, we watched as the departing seniors were honored for their contributions. They shared thanks for their parents' support as well as their hopes for the future. Then they took the field for a gripping, hotly contested match.

We didn't have any children in the game — or even at the school. But because we live nearby, we chatted with neighbors, renewed old friendships, and enjoyed seeing the players, whom we remembered as kids, preparing to launch into the next chapter of their lives. We felt connected anew to our community and relished cheering at a fast-paced sporting event.

At a time when things feel more polarized than ever and loneliness has been declared a health epidemic, small gestures of connection matter. Building community not only helps us feel better but also improves our health and sense of belonging — all while fostering social ties that could provide a vital support system in times of need.

"Family and community can and should be where we find belonging, care, and love," writes Mia Birdsong in How We Show Up: Reclaiming Family, Friendship, and Community. "We can create more of what we all need when we are in community."

To start building community in a way that matters to you, consider taking on one or more of these ideas.



### TALK TO STRANGERS.

Leverage the power of casual encounters by chatting up the person in line with you at the local farmers' market or coffee shop. You never know when you'll discover a common interest that could lead to a new connection.

Linger after events to engage with other attendees or staff. Talk to other parents and caregivers at the local park or playground with your kids. We come into contact with so many people in our daily lives — interacting with any one of them could spark a sense of community if we stay open to synchronicity.

### BECOME A REGULAR.

Look for a coffee shop or locally owned café in your neighborhood where you can get to know the staff and regular customers. Be friendly and make small talk. Lend a charger if someone's device is low on battery power. If you're always there on Tuesdays, say, you might start to recognize faces and can strike up a friendship. Just as everybody knew your name at the *Cheers* bar and the *Friends* crew hung out at Central Perk, you can cultivate community in a regular spot.

## OFFER TO HELP NEIGHBORS WITH ERRANDS.

Keep an eye out for people in your community who might benefit from your time — especially if it's tacked onto your other weekly errands. Pick up extra groceries or make a pharmacy run for an elderly community member. Deliver Meals on Wheels or volunteer at a local food bank.

### START A BOOK, EXERCISE, OR GAME CLUB.

If you love to read, work out, or play canasta, you could invite neighbors or members of a local Facebook group to get together. Even better, enlist a couple of other people to rotate hosting duties so you broaden the base of organizers. With a big enough invitation list, you're bound to get at least a half-dozen people to attend.

If your home isn't a suitable gathering spot, you can always meet at a public library or community center. By picking the same weekly or monthly time, people can schedule it and show up without needing to RSVP.





Get your hands dirty in a local community garden — or start one yourself. Time outdoors can improve your heart rate, lower blood pressure, boost vitamin-D levels, and ease stress.

Moreover, seeing flowers, fruits, and vegetables grow gives us all a sense of progress and hope. In a community garden, you'll regularly work a plot next to the same people — a perfect opportunity to build social ties.

### MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR FRONT PORCH.

Sitting on your porch lets you chat with passing neighbors. Host a porch party where you share munchies and beverages with friends. Or kick it up a notch with a musical "porchfest" featuring talented neighbors and their offspring. For years, our neighborhood enjoyed a periodic outdoor music "festival" featuring community artists. Throw in a pitcher of lemonade and some cookie travs. and it's a party! The front stoop of your apartment building can also work - or make the most of the

# SHARE RESOURCES.

your building.

We can help our pocketbooks and the environment by sharing with others while also deepening

community spaces in

community ties. Pool resources by creating a tool-sharing or medical-equipment-sharing program in your neighborhood: Not everyone on your

block needs a power saw or snowblower of their own.

Shortly after our first child was born, Brian and I started a babysitting co-op with other families from a postpartum support group: Members agreed to exchange babysitting time. The workload was light, since babies usually go to sleep by 7:30 p.m., and it gave all of us a chance to engage in some adult social time.

Apartment dwellers might start a "free" box in the laundry room or a WhatsApp group chat where people can offer to pick up grocery items.

### WELCOME NEW FAMILIES.

When we moved into our current house, the neighbors down the street brought us a tray of cookies, and suddenly we felt part of a community. Our family continues that tradition with brownies or other sweet treats for new members of the neighborhood, sending the message, "We're glad you're here."

#### SHARE SKILLS.

During the pandemic, my son taught some neighborhood kids how to plant and grow strawberries. He could easily spare dirt, a few small pots, and clippings from his own patch.

Whether you're handy with repairs or computing know-how, your neighbors would appreciate such instructions

or assistance. You can formally teach them or help on a one-time basis.

# PLAN AN OUTDOOR VIEWING PARTY.

Host an outdoor movie night

for friends or neighbors, projecting a film or sporting event on the side of a garage or a large white sheet. Everyone can bring a folding chair

or two. Pop some popcorn and boost the sound system. You'll encourage the campfire effect of sitting down to an experience together — and leave feeling more connected.



It's great when one family declutters and posts items in a Buy Nothing group — but imagine the bounty from multiple homes! You can coordinate a yard sale with neighbors and friends or organize a giveaway. When you're pooling the items, it aids the environment as well, because there's less driving around the area to pick up free stuff.

### **VOLUNTEER YOUR TALENTS.**

Brian volunteers as an usher for our local music center. He gets to enjoy spectacular shows for free — and build friendships with the fellow ushers and regular patrons. If music's not your thing, you could become a citizen scientist, join a park-maintenance group, or mentor a student at your local school — choosing whatever matches your interests.

# VISIT THE LEMONADE STAND.

When kids are selling their homemade elixir or artwork, or holding their own toy sale, stop by and at least say hi. I was walking my dog past a group of children selling bracelets on the sidewalk. Despite needing to get home, I paused to admire the beads and then commissioned a custom bracelet as a gift. Days later, the kids delivered it — along with their adorable

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smiles. And we felt more connected to

our neighbors. •









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# A Win-Win Approach

BY BAHRAM AKRADI

**THE LAST FEW YEARS** have led us to a crossroads with artificial intelligence. The path we choose — to embrace AI as a tool for collective advancement or to wield it as a weapon that benefits only a few — will profoundly shape our future. It's a choice between win-win and win-lose.

As the leader of a company long committed to healthy people, a healthy planet, and a healthy way of life, I believe the question we have to ask is, "How can AI improve people's lives?"

Consider how AI is being used as a win-win in health and wellness. AI-powered health monitoring can pinpoint subtle changes in someone's movement patterns, helping prevent injuries. Smart devices can analyze sleep patterns and recovery metrics, enabling personalized workout recommendations.

These applications don't replace human expertise, they complement it, allowing our trainers and health professionals to deliver more precise, effective guidance to their clients.

There are opportunities like these in every industry. In healthcare, for instance, AI is helping doctors detect diseases earlier, analyze medical images more accurately, and develop personalized treatment plans. This is what a win-win can look like — technology amplifying human capability rather than diminishing it.

On the other hand, we've seen AI deepfakes that deceive, algorithms that divide, and automations that displace workers without consideration for their future. This win-lose approach might be good for a few, but it ultimately undermines the collective trust and cooperation we need to address humanity's greatest challenges.

It creates misalignment when what we need is clear alignment that

allows us to move forward together, as a team.

The anxiety many people feel about AI is understandable. Change, especially at this unprecedented pace, creates uncertainty. It challenges us to think and do things differently, which can leave us feeling like we're not safe. But that doesn't mean change isn't good.

Through decades of building healthy communities at Life Time, we've witnessed how the willingness to challenge ourselves leads to transformation, which leads to growth. The key with AI is ensuring that growth, even when challenging, benefits everyone.

Imagine how greater alignment and more holistic planning around AI could serve our communities and the world at large for the better. This could help us create technology that elevates, rather than eliminates, our potential. It can enhance our abilities while preserving our agency.

On a broad scale, AI has tremendous potential to create efficiencies and solve complex challenges in public health, environmental sustainability, and social equity. It can optimize energy use in our cities, reduce waste in our food systems, and accelerate the development of clean technologies. (At the same time, we need to get aligned about how to address the environmental impacts of AI, which does come at a cost.)

Artificial intelligence can expand our horizons and do things humans have yet to do — think deep-space exploration and the discoveries it could reveal.

Here at Life Time, we're exploring ways to use AI across our business. We're challenging everyone to understand how it can streamline processes (it helped turn my notes on this topic into an early draft of this



column, for instance) and create better experiences for anyone interested in healthy living.

One application we're especially excited about is Life Time's Al companion, L.Al.C (pronounced Lay-see). A core feature of our app, L.Al.C can not only help members navigate their memberships more easily but also help people everywhere find workouts, programs, and nutrition guidance, as well as get answers to their health and wellness questions.

As L.AI.C gets smarter, it will be able to make personalized health and fitness recommendations based on someone's latest activities and unique health data. It will be able to track their progress in a meaningful way. It's a win-win.

When it comes down to it, the choice between win-win and win-lose isn't just about technology: It's about our values and vision for the future. We have a responsibility to demonstrate how AI can be developed and deployed in ways that unite rather than divide, that empower rather than replace, and that serve the greater good while driving innovation.

The future of AI is being shaped by the choices we make today. By consciously choosing the path of win-win, we can ensure that AI becomes a force for collective advancement and good, helping us create a healthier, happier, and more sustainable world for all.



### BAHRAM AKRADI is

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



# fr & movement

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