Experience Life

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL.

MAY/JUNE 2026

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Experience Life DIGITAL

Nutrition for Healthy Aging

What we eat affects the quality and resilience of virtually every cell, organ, and system in the body. That's why one of the keys to aging well is to give your body the best tools for the job: whole, healthy foods.

We've put together a complimentary guide that offers ways to feed your body on a cellular level to tamp down inflammation, balance your hormones, and boost your mitochondria. Scan the QR code or go to **ELmag.com/nutritionhealthyaging** to get the guide.

CONNECT WITH US!

THE POWER OF BREATHWORK
A functional-medicine practitioner explains how breathwork can influence physical and emotional health.
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8 EGG SWAPS FOR BAKING
No eggs? No problem. These baking substitutes deliver the moisture, structure, and lift your recipes need.
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REFRAMING PERFECTIONISM
Feelings of inadequacy can lead to a drive for perfection that can, in turn, contribute to anxiety and depression. Find strategies for relief at **ELmag.com/perfectionism**.

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LIFE TIME HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

RENEWED STRENGTH

IN MY LAST Editor's Note of 2025, I shared that I was feeling burned-out and overwhelmed by the fast pace of life. Some of you might recall my story about packing my daughter's tennis shoes instead of my own for a trip and, upon realizing it, being reduced to tears. It wasn't that big of a deal, really, but it was the wake-up call I needed to start making some much-needed changes for my physical and mental well-being.

I had just interviewed Dr. Judith Joseph, author of *High Functioning: Overcome Your Hidden Depression and Reclaim Your Joy*, and I found myself relating to many of the tendencies and behaviors that her research associated with high-functioning depression. I didn't want to keep operating that way. "I'm on the path of reconnecting and being more in tune with that inner knowing that's trying to tell me what's right and good for me," I wrote. "I'm setting some personal and professional boundaries, I'm delegating where I can, and I'm listening more closely to my body."

This last item was the hardest for me at the time, especially as it pertained to my workouts. I was in the final month of training for a 10-mile race, and despite near-constant aching joints and soreness, I wasn't ready to give up on that goal. Even though I struggled through every training mile — they all felt so hard physically and I wasn't enjoying them mentally — I kept running.

When routine bloodwork showed I had some inflammation (the likely cause of the physical discomfort I'd been experiencing), I briefly considered skipping the race. Instead, I subbed some cross-training for running and pushed through.

I crossed the finish line in early October, but it wasn't pretty — those 10 miles were harder than the 26.2 I had done the previous year. With the goal completed, I decided to hang up my long-distance running shoes.

My postrace plan was always to shift my focus back to strength training, my favorite form of exercise. I didn't realize how significant that choice would be until I was a few weeks into The Body Blueprint, an eight-week strength-building and hypertrophy program (available in the Life Time app). I soon found myself feeling more alert, more energized, and more motivated than I had in months.

Sure, I had some acute postworkout muscle soreness, but the persistent aches and pains of endurance training were gone. I was no longer dragging myself out of bed for workouts I dreaded. Instead of negotiating with myself about when and how I would squeeze in long runs, I looked forward to, planned, and followed through with my strength sessions. Most importantly, I was having fun again; challenging myself to progress with lifts or to try something new was exciting.

Nearly six months into my renewed strength regimen, it's *still* exciting, and I'm still going strong. And while I am stronger physically, my mental health has improved, too.

I'm now giving myself the space and permission to slow down and be flexible — in my fitness efforts and in other aspects of life. This, in turn, creates opportunities for more of the things that light me up. And that's the spirit of this issue.

"Follow the Energy" is all about noticing and heeding the call of what brings us joy, ignites a passion, and opens the door to fresh possibilities (find some ideas on page 16). It's about reconnecting with long-lost interests and discovering new ones. It's about embracing and pursuing the things that make us feel the most alive.

The postrace plan was always to shift my focus back to strength training, my favorite form of exercise. I didn't realize how significant that choice would be.

YOUR THOUGHTS?

Email us at **Experiencelife@experiencelife.com.**

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TALK TO US

A TOUGH TREK

I had the pleasure of meeting Maggie Fazeli Fard as part of the group that took this trek ("Hiking Rim to Rim Across the Grand Canyon," January/February 2026). This is such a beautiful account of the hike and her experience. It is hard to describe the scale of the canyon, the mental toughness needed, and the quiet determination it takes to keep moving. Thank you, Maggie, for sharing the account of your journey.
Pam V.

CONNECTIONS MATTER

Upon receiving each issue of *Experience Life*, I turn to the back of the publication to read Bahram Akradi's Perspective column. I'm never disappointed. His January/February 2026 column, "With Gratitude," prompted me to finally write.

As CEO of the American Organization for Nursing Leadership and chief nurse executive for the American Hospital Association, I felt the column spoke to both my heart and my head — especially this: "We are creating connection in a disconnected world, and that is everything."

Healthcare leaders, and particularly the nurses leading teams delivering care in a variety of settings, are living in a disconnected world and are striving to keep the connections. Those connections keep them leading every day.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who was touched by this column, but I wanted to reach out and thank him.
Claire Z.

A TIMELY RECIPE

I was cozy and comfy up at our family cabin reading the January/February 2026 issue and came across this recipe ("Sick-Day Chicken and Rice Soup"). It was perfect and so delicious for a cold, windy day in the mountains. And it was a great meal for a crowd that I could make in no time. This is a go-to recipe to fix up with any veggies and seasonings you have on hand.
Carmela

MIND YOUR FEET

This is excellent advice to strengthen toes to keep them from getting "rusty" ("3 Essential Exercises to Increase Foot Strength and Mobility," January/February 2026). [To me,] strong feet and toes and strong hands and fingers are as important as a strong heart and strong lungs.
Wendy M.

POSTPARTUM REALITIES

I remember struggling mentally and physically to regain my health after my second baby was born ("Learning How to Manage Gestational Hypertension — Naturally," July/August 2025). I felt exhausted all the time, and it took years for me to resume running and managing my weight. I thought it was just me being lazy, but the mental and physical fatigue is a real thing.

Sharing your story will help other moms understand they are in a normal cycle after childbirth and can recover their health.
Theresa C.

HOW TO EASE YOUR STRESS

I recommend regular massage, which puts you into your relaxation state ("How Stress Affects Your Body," May 2019). Human contact, such as hugging your friends, and even activities like square dancing, can lower the stress response.
Mary K.

GOOD MESSAGING

I'm always trying to eliminate emails and unsubscribe from things to improve my life, but your messages seem to be the exception. Your article on capturing the joy of the holidays ("12 Ways to Experience Holiday Joy," December 2012) offers good advice. I'd like to see more of your thoughts, not less. Bravo and blessings to you!
Carol B.

I have been a subscriber for probably 10 to 15 years. I love the hard copy. I sit at my computer all day; the last thing I want to do is sit there longer to read *Experience Life* articles. I relish every issue, and I'm constantly tearing out articles or forwarding them on to people who would appreciate the information. I have filled many manila folders with articles over the years. Each issue provides me with many nuggets of invaluable information. I was disappointed when a year or two ago you decided to publish the magazine only every other month. Please don't cut back any more.
Risa T.

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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A NEW AGE OF AT-HOME MITOCHONDRIAL TESTING

THE CANDLES on your birthday cake reflect your chronological age but not your biological age — a better indicator of your overall health. Now, your biological age can be measured by the health of your mitochondria, the microscopic power plants in your cells that convert the oxygen you breathe and the food you eat into energy.

Testing mitochondrial performance used to be for researchers and elite athletes, requiring lab muscle biopsies. New at-home tests offer a novel way to assess your biological age and health.

Such tests can take you beyond counting steps to tracking your cellular efficiency — and may lead to personalized longevity strategies.

"We're entering a new era in which mitochondrial health becomes the central biomarker of metabolic health — and the brain's destiny," says neurologist David Perlmutter, MD, FACN.

"These tools allow us to assess our own biology in real time and make targeted, data-driven decisions to support long-term cognitive resilience. And that's empowering," he adds. "It's exactly the kind of shift we need as we move away from late-stage disease treatment and toward true prevention."

Mitochondrial function is essential to your metabolism, energy, vitality, and cognitive powers.

Each of your body's 37.2 trillion cells has hundreds or even thousands of mitochondria — thousands of trillions in total. And each mitochondrion contains thousands of biochemical assembly lines that produce adenosine triphosphate, or ATP — your body's most basic fuel.

"When we test mitochondrial function, we're assessing the engine that powers virtually every cell in the body," Perlmutter explains. "We gain real, actionable insight into our metabolic flexibility, our energetic capacity, and our overall cellular health."

Two new at-home tests — MitoSwab and Mescreen — may herald "a democratization of mitochondrial testing," he says. "We're moving from lab-based, highly specialized tools into consumer-facing, noninvasive platforms that give us a window into mitochondrial health at scale."

That window, however, does not offer a complete view of mitochondrial activity, notes Theodoros Kelesidis, MD, PhD, MSc, a professor of medicine at UT Southwestern Medical Center and coauthor of a 2025 review of mitochondrial function.

MitoSwab focuses on mitochondrial enzymes collected with a swab from the inside of your cheeks — "but it does not measure actual activity and function," Kelesidis explains.

Mescreen offers a broader, more systems-oriented snapshot of mitochondrial health using a blood sample from a simple finger prick. But it also falls short of the gold standard provided by muscle biopsies, he says: "Mescreen measures mitochondrial function in blood cells but not at the tissue level."

Kelesidis notes that neither product has received FDA approval. "These tests are promising tools but need validation in clinical studies."

Perlmutter adds one further note of caution: "The main concern is that people may overinterpret the data. These tests provide relative information, meaning patterns and trends, and not an absolute diagnosis."

— MICHAEL DREGNI

"We're entering a new era in which mitochondrial health becomes the central biomarker of metabolic health."

CONNECTING DIET SODA AND DIABETES RISK

Opting for diet soda has long been a popular practice among those concerned with the ill effects of sugar. But a landmark study published last November challenges the perception that artificial sweeteners are the healthier choice.

"The study found that people who regularly consumed artificially sweetened drinks had a significantly higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes — even more so than those who drank sugar-sweetened beverages," says coauthor and epidemiologist Barbora de Courten, MD, PhD, a professor at Australia's Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Monash University. "Importantly, this increased risk was independent of weight gain, which means it's not just about calories."

In the first longitudinal study of its kind, researchers tracked 36,608 older adult participants over an average of 13.9 years. Results were adjusted for lifestyle, weight, and socioeconomic factors.

Researchers found that drinking just one can of artificially sweetened soda daily increased the risk of developing type 2 diabetes by 38 percent compared with those who avoided diet drinks. And that was even higher than the risk for the participants consuming the same number of sugary drinks; their increased risk was 23 percent.

The results, de Courten says, indicate that artificially sweetened diet drinks come with their own health risk.

"As a physician and diabetes researcher, I've often seen artificial sweeteners recommended as a 'healthier' alternative to sugar," she says. "So to see that sugar-free drinks could carry equal or even greater risk than sugary ones challenges a lot of our current thinking and clinical practice.

"The message is: Don't assume that 'sugar-free' means 'safe' or 'healthy.' Just because it doesn't contain calories or sugar doesn't mean it has no impact on your metabolism."

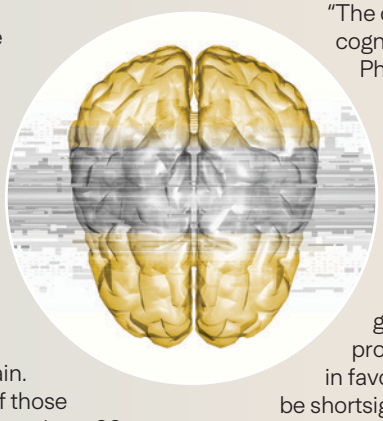
— MD

"Don't assume that 'sugar-free' means 'safe' or 'healthy.' Just because it doesn't contain calories or sugar doesn't mean it has no impact on your metabolism."

THE COGNITIVE DANGERS OF DIRTY AIR

We tend to think of air pollution as harmful to our lungs, but recent research suggests it also could be damaging our brains.

That's what University of Pennsylvania researchers concluded after inspecting more than 600 autopsied brains of older people for signs of neurological damage and comparing their findings to air-quality measurements — especially the presence of fine particulate matter called $PM_{2.5}$ — in the neighborhoods where they lived. Their findings were published last fall in *JAMA Neurology*.



$PM_{2.5}$ is among the smallest particulates emitted by power plants, factories, motor vehicles, and wildfires. When inhaled, these molecules can travel from the nose to the brain.

Researchers determined that the brains of those who lived in areas with high levels of $PM_{2.5}$ were about 20 percent more likely than the brains of those residing in less-polluted neighborhoods to exhibit the tau tangles and amyloid plaques that are characteristic of severe Alzheimer's disease.

"The quality of the air you live in affects your cognition," lead study author Edward Lee, MD, PhD, tells *The New York Times*.

Lee, a neuropathologist who leads the Penn Medicine Brain Bank, notes that the study confirms earlier research relying primarily on epidemiological evidence.

"We're linking what we actually see in the brain with exposure to pollutants," he explains. "We're able to do a deeper dive."

These findings suggest that recent governmental efforts to curtail clean-energy projects and loosen air-quality regulations in favor of boosting fossil-fuel production may be shortsighted. "People argue that air quality is expensive," Lee notes. "So is dementia care."

— CRAIG COX

AI'S ENVIRONMENTAL TOLL

Artificial intelligence may appear to be computerized magic, boundless in its ability to improve productivity, advance scientific research, create art, and more. But AI comes with a substantial environmental cost. Recognizing its toll may inspire more-responsible use.

Generative-AI data centers require "a staggering amount of electricity," according to *MIT News*. To meet demand, U.S. utility companies reportedly plan to add 133 new natural gas–fired power plants to the nation's grid, as well as additional oil- and coal-fired plants. These new power plants will come online during a critical time for slowing climate change and may threaten "decades of progress cutting greenhouse gas emissions," according to a *Washington Post* article.

Additionally, data centers that power AI systems require massive amounts of water for cooling: A University of California, Riverside, study found that writing a 100-word email using ChatGPT consumes the equivalent of just over one standard bottle of water (16.9 fl. oz.). The study's authors note that freshwater scarcity has become a modern-day challenge, and the global AI demand for cooling water in 2027 alone is projected to reach the equivalent of about half of all the water used in the United Kingdom annually.

— MD

EXERCISE REWIRES YOUR BODY — AT THE MOLECULAR LEVEL

Studies have long shown that regular exercise improves cardiovascular health, builds strength, and enhances mood. Research in the past 16 years has revealed an even broader view of its benefits: Exercise may produce molecular changes that affect biological systems throughout the body.

"Exercise is not just about physical performance, but a powerful biological intervention that affects our health at the deepest molecular level," explains John Hawley, PhD, director of the Mary MacKillop Institute for Health Research at Australian Catholic University, and co-author, with Nolan Hoffman, PhD, of a recent review highlighting the physiological role of physical activity.

Writing in the journal *Nature Reviews Endocrinology*, Hawley and Hoffman cite three key studies:

- A 2010 paper describing how exercise influences mitochondrial protein content
- A 2018 study identifying how exercise may increase beneficial plasma-borne proteins
- A 2020 report showing how physical activity boosts a variety of circulatory responses

Together, these discoveries are advancing a new understanding of exercise physiology.

"They show that exercise triggers a specific timeline of genes and proteins in muscle, orchestrates metabolic and immune systems in the bloodstream, and releases molecular 'packages' into the circulation that communicate with various cells and organs around the body, showing that exercise's effects extend far beyond just muscle contraction," Hoffman notes.

> "These findings suggest a future where exercise is integrated into healthcare **as a form of preventive medicine."**

These insights could eventually help clinicians address myriad diseases in a more holistic manner, Hawley says. "For chronic conditions like heart disease, obesity, and type 2 diabetes, these findings suggest a future where exercise is integrated into healthcare as a form of preventive medicine."

— CC

18 SIMPLE THINGS YOU CAN DO DAILY TO SUPPORT YOUR HEALTH

WHEN IT COMES to supporting your health, the simplest things often make the greatest difference.

"Adopting a healthy lifestyle requires completing simple habits consistently," says Life Time's Samantha McKinney, RD, CPT. "Many of the health and wellness tools or tips that make headlines aren't going to move the needle if you don't first have a solid foundation of essential habits. It may not seem fun or flashy, but it's effective."

Choose a few of these daily nutrition, movement, sleep, and mental health habits that resonate with you. Stay consistent, and watch yourself start to make progress.

1. Start your day with a protein shake. A key macronutrient, protein helps stabilize blood sugar, curb cravings, and enhance workout recovery.

2. Think 80/20. Strict food protocols are sometimes necessary for healing, but an overly rigid diet is not usually sustainable in the long term. An 80/20 approach is often more than good enough. Focus on making nutritious food choices at least 80 percent of the time, and allow for less-healthy options when celebrations or other circumstances call for a more flexible strategy.

3. Keep consistent mealtimes. Predictable meal timing allows your digestive system to anticipate food intake. This improves enzyme production and nutrient absorption, and it supports your circadian rhythms.

4. When you eat, just eat. If you're eating and your attention is elsewhere, maybe on your phone or your favorite show, you're likely to miss the signals your body is sending. Pay attention to hunger cues, eat slowly, chew well, and savor your food. Doing so can improve digestion and make it easier to recognize when you've eaten enough.

5. Practice sun salutation in the morning. This yoga sequence warms your body, builds strength and flexibility, and focuses your mind — an excellent way to prime yourself for the day.

6. Walk for five to 10 minutes every hour. This boosts circulation and energy, especially if you tend to sit for prolonged periods.

7. Stretch for five to 10 minutes. "Stretching your muscles regularly is important," says master trainer Danny King, director of performance and recovery at Life Time. "Especially if you find yourself saying, 'I don't move as well as I used to,' or if you experience aches, pains, soreness, or stiffness."

8. Take the stairs whenever possible. Climbing stairs is an efficient way to support cardiovascular health and leg strength.

9. Get outside for morning sunlight. Exposing yourself to bright natural light shortly after waking helps regulate melatonin production and promotes a healthy sleep–wake cycle.

10. Dim the lights in the evening. Lower light encourages melatonin production and prepares your body for sleep. Blue-light exposure can suppress melatonin and make it harder to fall asleep, so avoid screens for an hour or more before bed.

11. Maintain a consistent bedtime. Waking and falling asleep at the same times each day reinforces a consistent sleep rhythm and reminds the brain when to release — or suppress — certain hormones.

12. Avoid oversleeping or prolonged napping. If you need to nap, keep it short so you can enjoy a full night's sleep later on.

13. Create a relaxing bedtime routine. Engaging in calming activities before bed, such as reading, gentle stretching, journaling, or meditating, may help you get more restorative rest.

14. Meditate. Even just a five-minute meditation practice can help increase resilience, reduce stress, offset anxiety and depression, and improve overall health.

15. Engage socially. Try to connect with at least one person a day — ideally through a face-to-face conversation — to reduce feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging.

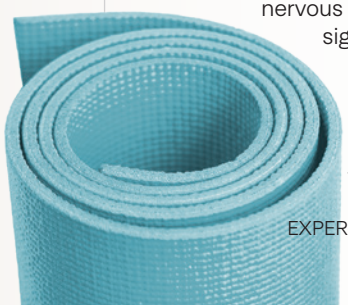
"Adopting a healthy lifestyle requires completing simple habits consistently."

16. Express gratitude. Reflecting on positive aspects of your life can boost mood and overall well-being while training your brain to notice the good. A daily gratitude journal can help.

17. Pinpoint moments of joy. Do one small thing daily just because it feels good. This can help your brain pivot toward pleasure.

18. Take time to breathe deeply. Mindfully lengthening and slowing the breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system. This signals safety to the body, which can help you relax.

— TINA NGUYEN



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GOOD ENERGY

Experts share their strategies for tapping into energy's flow.

BY **JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC**

"WHAT ENERGIZES YOU?" That's the question we posed to 10 *Experience Life* expert sources and past cover-story subjects, searching for insights on the values, passions, and interests that bring meaning and joy to their lives.

Each of them interpreted the question a bit differently: Some spoke of motivation, others of inspiration. Some talked about physical energy, while others tapped into a more spiritual or emotional quality. Some pursued sources of energy to attain goals or face challenges; others sought quiet sustenance.

We gathered their ideas in hopes that they might spark your own reflections about what lights you up.

KARA GOUCHER
MAINTAINING FITNESS ROUTINES

Two-time Olympian and World Championship medalist in long-distance running, Kara Goucher still relies on the kinds of disciplined fitness routines that kept her energized as a professional athlete.

"I don't consider myself a super high-energy person naturally," says Goucher, who now serves as a track-and-field analyst for NBC Sports. So, making time to move every morning — outdoors, if possible — is key to feeling good.

"It brings me joy. It makes me feel like anything is possible," she adds. "I know not everybody can do this, but I try not to schedule anything before 11 a.m. so I can work out. It's about setting myself up to succeed for the day."

"We all have the capacity for love and kindness, and connecting to that possibility is so energizing."

— Sharon Salzberg

> “It’s not about energy for energy’s sake, but about how I am using that energy to contribute to the lives of others.”
>
> — Amber Lyon

YIA VANG
HONORING FAMILY

Chef Yia Vang calls his celebrated Minneapolis restaurant, Vinai, “a love letter” to his parents, Hmong immigrants who brought their family to the United States after fleeing Laos at the end of the Vietnam War.

At least three mornings a week, Vang personally lights the wood-fire grill that functions as Vinai’s primary cooking station. Igniting it serves as a ritual to honor family.

“Everything starts from that fire,” he explains, recalling how he learned to cook on a simple grill his father constructed with two cinder blocks. “It rejuvenates me and ignites a remembering of what this is all about.”

SHARON SALZBERG
SEEING GOODNESS IN OTHERS

“When I think of being energized, I think of being inspired. And the quality that comes to mind for me is awe,” says renowned meditation and lovingkindness teacher Sharon Salzberg.

“One of the largest sources of awe for people is seeing goodness in others. It’s moral beauty.”

Salzberg acknowledges the challenging divisions we currently face and says that we have to face them honestly. But more than anything, she emphasizes, seeing the good in others energizes her to sustain her work.

“I just feel so uplifted, even in the midst of difficulty,” she explains. “We all have the capacity for love and kindness, and connecting to that possibility is so energizing.”

HENRY EMMONS
PRIORITIZING SELF-CARE

After his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in 2020, integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD, labored through the grief and challenges of caregiving. He leaned on the self-care practices he teaches and writes about, but he also began experiencing symptoms of fibromyalgia, including muscle aches and fatigue.

“I had no idea how depleted my energy was,” he recalls.

In 2025, Emmons moved his wife into a memory-care facility. Since then, he’s been on an intentional journey to reclaim his energy and vitality, relying on the support of good friends and prioritizing rest.

“I’ve been attending to my inner self, entering more deeply into what I really need.”

AMBER LYON
FEELING PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER

Part of personal-development coach Amber Lyon’s work is helping others embrace the positive energy they seek. In February 2026, a month before the birth of her first child, the author of *You Are a Magnet* reflected on how her notion of energy has shifted.

“In the past, it would have been about what fills my cup versus what depletes it,” she says. Now Lyon is looking outward.

“I think what’s missing from a lot of people’s lives is feeling part of something meaningful and bigger than themselves. For myself now, it’s not about energy for energy’s sake, but about how I am using that energy to contribute to the lives of others.”

ALAN CHRISTIANSON
GETTING OUTDOORS

The trails, lakes, and forests near his home in north-central Minnesota are what energize naturopathic physician Alan Christianson, ND. "I love Nordic skiing, hiking, running, fat-biking, snowshoeing — whenever there's a reason to exercise out in the elements," he says.

A longtime endurance athlete, Christianson admits that he can push himself too hard. "Sometimes what I think I can do gets a little unrealistic," he says. Rather than relying on natural stimulants like caffeine or supplements to hack his energy levels, Christianson has become more interested in tuning in.

"We get out of sync with the natural world when we don't have a pronounced recess," he notes. "If I feel low-energy, I'm probably behind on rest."

SARAH STURM
EMBRACING PHYSICAL CHALLENGES

"I'm motivated and energized by the life I want to live," says professional off-road cyclist and Life Time Grand Prix competitor Sarah Sturm. "I love the freedom and the privilege of getting out on my bike every single day, and my energy comes from wanting to keep doing that."

Sturm is exhilarated by experiencing new places and taking on physical challenges with other people. For example, each January she participates in a four-day group ride that traverses more than 460 miles along the California coast.

"It's really hard at times," she says. "But there's something special about knowing that a whole group of people are having the same experience as you."

JUDITH JOSEPH
CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

When psychiatrist Judith Joseph, MD, MBA, recognized her exhausted-yet-restless state as depression, she took stock and noticed how the people around her were affecting her energy.

"I am now intentional to surround myself with people whose energy I want to exude," Joseph says. She credits her circle of family, friends, and colleagues for helping her tap into more joy and courage in her life.

Joseph's daughter reminds her to create and play, and her partner models unconditional love. Her siblings provide support and honest feedback, while her best friend represents the gold standard of how to be a loyal friend.

Meanwhile, colleagues and mentors inspire her with their discipline and persistence in the face of setbacks.

GREGORY PLOTNIKOFF
LAUGHING

"The No. 1 thing that gives me energy is laughter," says functional-medicine physician Gregory Plotnikoff, MD, MTS, FACP. "My life is full of bad dad jokes."

Laughter tends to be a group activity, Plotnikoff says. "Have you ever done laughter yoga? Suddenly you're laughing because everyone else is laughing. The happiest stomachache I've ever had in my life was from laughing in a laughter yoga group!"

When he's not cracking jokes or working to solve complex medical mysteries (No. 2 on his list of energizing activities), Plotnikoff finds energy in music. "I love Baroque trumpet. I love Dvořák, Beethoven, and Handel."

And he enjoys watching *America's Got Talent*. "Music with a good story — I find that very moving."

JESSE HAAS
SPENDING TIME ALONE IN NATURE

Caring for the health and well-being of others is both fulfilling and depleting, so integrative nutritionist Jesse Haas, CNS, LN, takes time to recharge. "I get a lot of juice from solo time, particularly solitude in nature," she says.

Haas's favorite activities, canoeing and hiking, allow her to feel present in her body. "To be able to use all of my senses — to feel the sun, hear the forest and water sounds, be fully immersed in wild spaces — that does it for me," she says.

Since she can't always get away for a 10-mile hike or a weeklong canoe trip, Haas enjoys nature "snacks" — whether walking with her dog and partner or paddling her city's lakes.

> "The No. 1 thing that gives me energy is laughter."
>
> — Gregory Plotnikoff

WHAT ENERGIZES YOU?

Share your ideas and insights with us at **ELmag.com/goodenergy.**

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


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What Are You LISTENING TO?

EL staffers share their current audio obsessions.

Being musically stuck in the past, I shuffle from **JOHNNY BURNETTE AND THE ROCK AND ROLL TRIO** to Django Reinhardt, from The Monks to James Carr . . . and sometimes into the present with Waxahatchee.

— Michael Dregni,
deputy editor

Since moving to the Southwest, I've seen many new **FEATHERED FRIENDS.** It's been fun hearing unfamiliar birdsong and using my Merlin app to identify different species by sound.

— Jane Meronuck,
production director

Last year was a great one for **ELECTRONIC/DANCE MUSIC.** I've been jamming to the newest releases from Daniel Allan, Chris Lake, and SG Lewis. I dare you not to sprint while listening to "Memories" by Chris Lake and Nathan Nicholson.

— Cole Luskey,
business and circulation specialist

I've been listening to a lot of music by **JESSE WELLES**. People are comparing him to Bob Dylan, and I just love them both!

— Jennifer Jacobson,
art director

Generally: **GOTHIC, HORROR, FANTASY, HISTORICAL, AND OTHERWISE SPOOKY FICTION.** Currently: *Empire of AI: Dreams and Nightmares in Sam Altman's OpenAI* by Karen Hao, which reads like the nonfiction version of my preferred genres.

— Maggie Fazeli Ford,
editorial director of fitness

I love a good **SCAM PODCAST!** Recent favorites include *PRETEND*, *Scamanda*, and *Betrayal Weekly*. I find the psychology of deception so fascinating, and it's shocking just how persuasive and believable these con artists can be.

— Christy Rice,
digital content specialist/special projects coordinator

"BANG" by Melenas has been giving me major "I got this" vibes.

— Laura Lineburg,
director of digital marketing and media strategy


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Confidence on the Court

How a kind tennis instructor helped me face my fear of playing ball sports.

Piyali Nath Dalal plays tennis a couple times a week at Life Time Fridley in the Twin Cities.

BY **PIYALI NATH DALAL**

I REMEMBER the experience clearly: I was in junior high school in Wayne, Neb. It was sunny, hot, and dusty. My face was flushed, but not just from the heat. I was mortified. My gym class was dividing into teams for softball, and everyone had been chosen but me.

When my name was finally called, members of my team groaned. I was embarrassed by my lack of athletic ability — but, even more, I was scared because soon there would be softballs flying in my direction. And I would be expected to catch them or hit them, neither of which I could do.

I spent most of my life afraid of getting hit in the head. I didn't play any ball sports, so I had no practice with them or understanding of the physics of how they worked. And if a ball was ever hurtling in my direction, I covered my head in terror and prayed that the person closest to me would catch it.

For decades I avoided my fear. But in early 2022 I decided to try a complimentary tennis class that came with my membership at Life Time, and my life changed.

WATCHING FROM THE SIDELINES

Fitness played a complicated role in my family of origin. My dad died when I was 13, and one of the memories I have is of him watching professional tennis matches. A frequent yeller, he'd get vocal, and he'd relish a powerful serve or particularly eloquent rally. I remember being intrigued and perplexed by the game.

Meanwhile, I ran track in junior high and high school. Other than the shot put, which I never tried, the sport was devoid of spherical objects. I was a sprinter, running the 100-, 200-, and 400-meter sprints and relays.

In the summer of 2000, my brother came to live near me in Minnesota for the summer. He was enthusiastic about tennis and played often. I couldn't play with him because of my fear and because I didn't know how. But I was intrigued. Some of my very dearest friends also played tennis, and I passively hoped that one day I'd be able to join them.

Sports and fitness remained a fixture in my life after I started a family. My husband played baseball and basketball and was devoted to his tae kwon do practice. My daughter participated in gymnastics, soccer, and competitive cheerleading. My son played soccer and baseball while I secretly cheered that I didn't have to catch or throw the balls myself.

I went to yoga, strength training, HIIT, and stretch and balance classes at a locally owned gym where I was a member for 17 years. That gym closed in 2021 due to the pandemic, and we decided to become members at the Life Time in Fridley, Minn. We knew we'd frequent the Kids Academy with our youngest daughter.

HITTING THE BALL

The Fridley club was enormous compared with our previous gym. We marveled at its multiple spaces for strength training, its group fitness studios, its swimming pools, and its tennis areas. The club even offered an introductory tennis lesson.

Despite my lifelong fear of balls, the lesson sounded fun, and it was a way for me to connect with my brother. It was also free. When things are free, I feel like there's less pressure to perform at a certain level.

My tennis lesson was led by Malik Benyebka, a tall man with a kind face and a mean serve. We quickly determined that he was teaching my brother, too. I was thrilled by this information.

During that initial lesson with Malik, my fear was suspended for 30 minutes. We bounced the ball with our rackets. We gently passed it back and forth. The simplicity and casualness of the experience helped assuage my anxieties.

After our session, I knew that I'd like to learn more from Malik. I joined his drill class on Saturday mornings at 8 (talk about dedication!), where I learned how to hit and receive the ball.

In class, balls would fly in my direction but at a speed I could handle. The slower speed made them less formidable. I might not have been able to hit them, but I wasn't afraid of them — which was a huge step for me. I also learned to watch the ball and anticipate where it would land.

A compassionate and caring teacher really helps when you're trying to move past mental and physical obstacles. Malik is kind, fun, loving, funny, and thoughtful. He's a responsive teacher and is always looking for the best way to teach a student a particular skill.

In class, Malik creates a playful atmosphere with music and camaraderie. He customizes feedback for each student, even in fast-paced drill classes. And I appreciate that he takes tennis seriously — but not too seriously.

ADDRESSING MY INNER CRITIC

It hasn't all been rosy. Over time, I've discovered that behind my lifelong fear was an even greater fear. The more I played tennis, the more I noticed the times that I dreaded my drills. Sometimes I was afraid to play at all. I feared feeling inadequate and being unable to hit the ball or serve.

I discovered that both my bipolar disorder (diagnosed in 2003) and my perfectionism had infected my joyful tennis game. The critical voice in my head would tell me that I'd never improve, a destructive habit I picked up early in life.

Piyali with her youngest daughter, Paloma, who has also taken an interest in tennis.

I grew up in a family where it was common to compare. I was compared with my cousins, my brother, my friends. And it never helped me — not in junior high or in college or when starting out as a young stay-at-home mom. There was always someone smarter, prettier, or blessed with a better backhand, and seeing myself as less-than only made me more reluctant to participate.

My perfectionistic tendencies lead to unrealistic expectations and fuel the hyperactive critical voice in my head, and they become much worse when I am in a depressive space. These are the times I can easily talk myself out of going to my Saturday morning class.

I have benefited from meeting with numerous talk therapists in my life. They have helped me unpack that critical voice and develop strategies for reducing its power over my actions and inactions.

And my experience with tennis has helped quiet these cognitive distortions. The more tennis I play, the stronger I feel mentally and physically. Having Malik as a coach has taught me how to bring positive thoughts into my mind when it is flooded with negativity.

When I'm able to let go of some of the comparing, I can focus on my own game — my serves and my returns. Now I recognize that when my mindset is positive and centered on how I'm showing up, I'm a much more fun-loving and responsive tennis player.

And I'm not afraid of the ball.

KEEPING UP THE PRACTICE

I've been attending the Saturday morning class for four years, and I take an additional drill class on Wednesdays. My tennis classes have helped me build community by introducing me to incredible people from all over the world.

I've also played tennis with my brother, and I hope to play soon with more of my friends. My 4-year-old daughter, Paloma, is taking tennis lessons in the Fridley program too, and I couldn't be more delighted. Thanks to my experience with the Life Time tennis program, all I want to do now is play.

Piyali's Top Takeaways

1.

Be willing to try new things. "When I finally gave tennis a shot, I found that it made me feel alive in a way that no physical activity had since before the pandemic," Piyali says.

2.

Create a sense of play. "Play is a great way to help you work through initial feelings of intimidation or fear," she notes. "Furthermore, it creates a sense of safety, making mistakes less threatening."

3.

Have fun. "By choosing an activity you love, you can create more long-term health benefits."

TELL US YOUR STORY

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


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REAL FITNESS

STUDY AFTER STUDY shows that strength is essential for long-term health. But what counts as strength training? And what are the most efficient ways to get stronger? Find out on **page 32.**

An Energizing Yoga Flow

Stoke your inner fire with this seven-pose practice.

BY **LAUREN BEDOSKY**

WHEN ENERGY flags, many of us turn to two solutions: food and rest. The processes that create and release energy in our bodies are incredibly complex, and sufficient nutrition and sleep are paramount for keeping these systems working optimally.

But there is a third factor in the energy equation — one that, when used in tandem with a balanced regimen of eating and resting well, can help you harness a renewed sense of vitality. That energetic spark is oxygen.

And yoga, which links breath and movement, is one of the best ways to ignite it.

"As you move through a flow, you have the opportunity to play around with your balance, strength, and breath, which ultimately leads to feeling more energized and connected to your body," says Life Time studio lead and yoga instructor Madden Zappa, CPT, RYT-200.

Zappa designed the following flow to tap into the power of breath for energy, which also helps increase circulation. Use it instead of caffeine or sugar to get going in the morning or to bust out of an afternoon slump.

Daily practice can help improve your blood's oxygen-carrying capacity, resulting in greater sustained energy and improved vitality.

As a bonus, consistent practice can help regulate your nervous system and improve your overall mobility, notes Zappa. "This is a great complement to strength training, running, or other high-intensity workouts."

The Workout

This routine alternates between "poses that contract and [poses that] expand the body, creating waves of energy that build and release," explains Zappa.

As you flow through the sequence, use your breath to transition from one pose to the next. Perform the first pose on an inhale, the second on an exhale, and so on.

The resulting flow will feel like a dance, she says. So rather than holding and perfecting each pose, move with a sense of playfulness, spontaneity, and exploration.

Complete three to five rounds per side. Practice this flow two or three times per week, or anytime you want a boost of energy.

"As you move through a flow, **you have the opportunity to play around with your balance, strength, and breath."**

WARRIOR I, OR VIRABHADRASANA I (INHALE)

- Start by standing at the front of your mat with your hands on your hips. On an inhale, step your right foot back to assume a wide, comfortable stance. Orient your feet so your front toes face straight ahead and your back toes point to the right at a 45-degree angle.
- Keeping both heels on the mat, bend your left knee into a lunge position. Make sure your knee is aligned over your left heel or slightly behind it.
- Raise your arms straight overhead with your palms facing one another.

CURTSY LUNGE (EXHALE)

- From Warrior I, exhale as you step your right foot up to land slightly behind and to the left of your front leg.
- Bend both knees and lower your body straight down, keeping your hips and shoulders squared and stacked.

PHOTOS: KELLY LOVERUD; STYLING: PAM BRAND; MODEL: LIZ SOUSEK

STAR POSE, OR UTTHITA TADASANA (INHALE)

- From the curtsy lunge, straighten your knees and, on an inhale, step your right foot back and open your body to the right side of the mat.
- Assume a wide, straight-legged stance, with feet parallel, toes facing forward. Simultaneously extend your arms out to the sides; try to take up as much space as possible.
- If it feels good, take a slight back bend by squeezing your shoulder blades together and lifting your chest and chin toward the ceiling.

WIDE-LEGGED FORWARD FOLD, OR PRASARITA PADOTTANASANA (EXHALE)

- From the star pose, hinge at your hips to fold forward as you exhale deeply.
- Walk your hands down and allow your torso to hang between them. Bend your knees as needed.
- If you'd like to add movement, gently sway from side to side or bend and straighten one knee at a time.

DRAGONFLY TWIST, OR PARIVRTTA UTTHITA ASHWA SANCHALANASANA (INHALE)

- In the wide-legged forward fold, walk your hands toward your right foot. On an inhale, turn both feet to the right and assume a low lunge position.
- Align your right knee over or slightly behind the same-side heel and extend your left leg long behind you.
- Rotate your torso to the right so your chest is twisting toward your bent knee.
- Keep your left hand on the floor (or on a block) and reach your right hand toward the ceiling.

PYRAMID, OR PARSVOTTANASANA (EXHALE)

- From the dragonfly twist, exhale and step your left foot forward until it's about three to four feet from your right heel.
- Keeping both feet rooted in the mat, straighten your legs.
- Fold over your right leg and place your hands on the floor (or on blocks) on either side of your front foot.

BALANCING HALF-MOON, OR ARDHA CHANDRASANA (INHALE)

- From pyramid pose, inhale to shift your weight onto your right foot and lift your left leg.
- Rotate your torso to open your hips and chest to your left.
- Extend your top arm skyward or place that hand on your hip. Allow your right hand to hover or rest it on a yoga block.

RETURN TO THE START OF THE FLOW

- On an exhale, move into a high-plank position with arms extended under your chest.
- Inhale.
- On an exhale, move into downward-facing dog (adho mukha svanasana). Rest here for a few breaths, if needed.
- When you're ready, lift your right leg off the floor and swing it between your arms. Plant your right foot on the ground to set up for warrior I, or virabhadrasana I.
- Repeat the flow on the opposite side. Complete three to five rounds per side.

GO WITH THE FLOW

See the full sequence in motion at **ELmag.com/yogaflow.**

LAUREN BEDOSKY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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THE PULL-UP

Three cues to fine-tune your form.

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

SNEAKILY disguised as an upper-body exercise, pull-ups are among the best full-body strength moves — and one of the most intimidating. Follow these three simple tips to get the most out of your pull-up practice, no matter your fitness level.

1. Use your full body. A pull-up requires more than just bending and straightening your elbows while hanging from a bar. Engage your scapulae, your core, your glutes, and your quads before you even begin pulling. Maintain this top-to-bottom engagement as you use your lats to draw your elbows toward the sides of your body.

2. Pull from your shoulders. To help visualize this, think about closing off your armpits from view as you pull yourself up and then showing them off as you lower yourself down. Alternatively, you can imagine someone trying to tickle your armpits while your hands are glued to the bar: Pull yourself up to protect your pits and lower yourself down once the imaginary threat has passed.

3. Focus on form. Remember: "Pull up" describes a movement pattern, not a particular load. Whether you use assistance, add extra weight, or perform pull-ups with body weight only, the basic act of pulling yourself up and then lowering yourself with control doesn't change. To that end, use as much support as you need to ensure proper form. One of our favorite assisted pull-up variations is the foot-supported pull-up (pictured at left).

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

PHOTOS: KELLY LOVERUD; STYLING: PAM BRAND; MODEL: JEREMIAH LEWIS-WALKER

WHAT COUNTS AS Strength Training?

Expert insights for determining whether your favorite activity is making you stronger.

BY **ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS**

THE VERDICT IS IN: Strength training is essential for long-term health. Mobility, balance, muscle mass, metabolic health, body composition, bone density, even straight-up longevity — these health markers (and more) get a special boost from resistance training.

But what, exactly, counts as strength training? The answer might seem simple — obvious, even. Conventional fitness wisdom tells us that lifting heavy weights counts, while everything else is just cardio or stretching.

But this belief only scratches the surface of how muscles are challenged and strengthened.

"The first thing to consider is *What is strength?*" says Life Time trainer and strength coach Daniel Espinosa, BS, ALPHA. "That's the muscle's ability to produce and resist forces."

Consider the example of putting a 30-pound child into a stroller. First your muscles produce force to hoist the child off the ground; then they resist it as you set the child into the seat.

Without some measure of strength, you wouldn't be able to move at all. But only certain movements push the limits of your muscles in a way that allows you to maintain — or even increase — that strength.

Strength training, then, "is a form of exercise that systematically challenges your body's ability to produce and resist force," Espinosa says.

Lifting weights is an effective way to train this ability. But multiple forms of body-weight training, like calisthenics, yoga, and martial arts, also work. Variable-resistance modalities, like reformer Pilates, cable machines, and resistance bands, are other good options.

More important than the tool, say experts, is the challenge.

"Barbells, kettlebells, calisthenics — these are just methods," says Mark Schneider, NASM-CPT, a Twin Cities–based personal trainer and owner of the Retreat Strength Gym. "If you're doing more than before, with a method that builds your ability to generate force, you are doing strength training."

The question to ask yourself, then, is not *What counts as strength training?* but, rather, *Am I challenging my ability to produce and resist force?*

HARD AND HEAVY, SLOW AND STEADY

When you're building strength, it helps to understand a training concept known as progressive overload. Its guiding tenet is that slowly increasing the stress of training triggers the body to adapt and grow stronger. "Stress" and "slow" are key here.

Stress: This is the "overload" piece of progressive overload, which teaches that training stress is a requirement for change. This holds true for any activity: Whether you're training to run a marathon or compete in powerlifting, improvement requires finding and nudging the edge of your ability.

Slow: Measured and intentional increases in training stress, combined with sufficient recovery, can yield the safest and most sustainable results. Again, explore the edge of your ability each time you train. This, rather than blowing past your edge and risking injury, is what makes progressive overload, well, progressive.

"Effort is the catalyst in strength adaptations," says Ashley Thomas, a group fitness instructor for Life Time who teaches the reformer-based class CTR (Core. Tone. Reform.). Still, an effort that qualifies as overload is highly individual. It depends on your current level of strength and fitness.

If you haven't exercised in many years, or you're recovering from an illness, just standing up out of a chair a few times might work your muscles enough to make them stronger. If you're already fit, however, performing three sets of 10 body-weight squats might not be enough overload to stimulate growth and improvement.

What's easy for one person might overload another, and what overloads you today might not do so after two months of consistent practice.

"Over time, you will be able to gradually increase the demands you're placing on your muscles," says Life Time personal trainer and barre instructor Danica Osborn. This, in turn, should render you stronger than before.

LIFTING WEIGHTS AND BEYOND

Lifting is commonly associated with strength training, and for good reason.

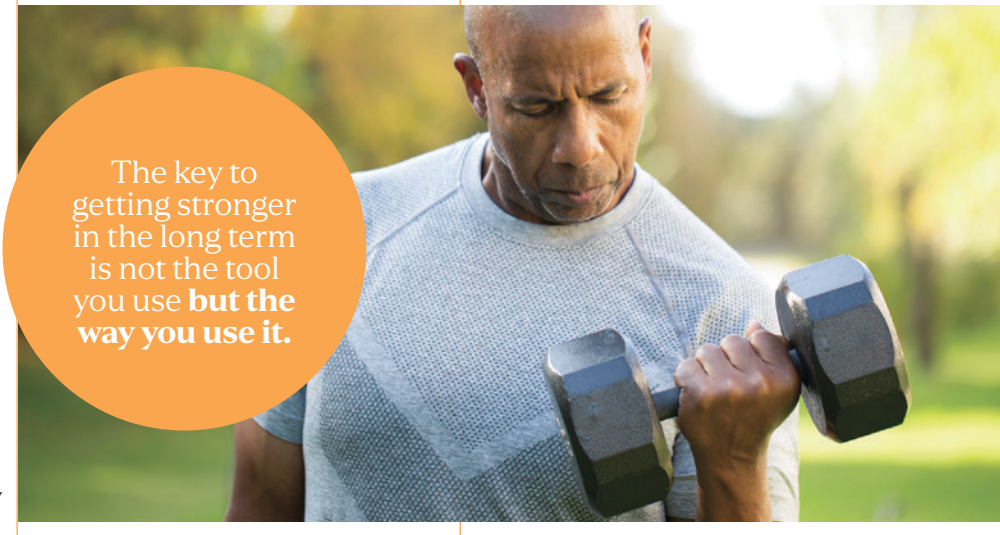
Using an external load in the form of free weights or machines allows you to overload your system incrementally and for a long period of time. You can safely challenge your strength and nudge your edge using a variety of techniques.

"You can lift the weight faster; you can increase the sets you perform, take less rest time between sets, or adjust many other variables," says Osborn. Other tweaks to consider include adding weight (even as little as 0.25 pounds), doing more reps per set, adding a tempo, or playing with movement variations.

"As long as you keep challenging your muscles in some way, you'll continue to make progress," she says.

Lifting weights makes it easy to objectively track improvements in your strength and ability. "You can enjoy a lifetime of progress," says Espinosa. That progress will almost certainly slow down over time — the more advanced the lifter, the slower the gains — and you may reach a point in your training where maintaining, rather than gaining, strength is the goal.

Weight training may be the most efficient route to strength, but it's not the only way. Most yoga classes consist of postures, or asanas, that activate muscles. Hiking, running, and biking — especially over challenging terrain or up and down hills — can stimulate some lower-body strength gains. Pilates, especially when performed on spring-loaded resistance equipment, such as a reformer, can potentially trigger progressive overload.



The key to getting stronger in the long term is not the tool you use **but the way you use it.**

For beginners, almost any exercise or movement builds some strength, because everything requires a novel level of effort.

Keep in mind that you may eventually become too strong for these activities to keep making a difference.

The best tool, ultimately, is the one you use. Over a long career of working out, you may want to experiment with more than one — or possibly all — of them. Just remember: The key to getting stronger in the long term is not the tool you use but the way you use it.

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

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Shame and Motivation

True or false: Shame is an effective motivator for health changes.

BY **ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC**

FALSE. The messaging that shame drives change runs deep in our culture. It's especially pervasive in health and fitness spaces, says Jessi Kneeland, a personal trainer turned body image coach and author of *Body Neutral: A Revolutionary Guide to Overcoming Body Image Issues*. "Society tells us that poor health is a character failing, and that the way to feel good about ourselves is by getting in shape."

But just because the idea is common doesn't make it true.

"Shame may get you started, but it's not enough to carry you through," says Kneeland. "Health and fitness changes are slow. If you feel fundamentally unworthy, it's easy to feel like you're failing and get off track."

THE SHAME GAME

Many of us have been taught to believe that shame, while a negative feeling, is a useful tool. If someone is convinced that their body, their eating or movement habits, their physical abilities, or their other attributes are shameful, the thinking goes, they may try to course correct. They might eat less and move more until they get healthy.

Meanwhile, they can wear their shame as a cloak, signaling to others that they are working on the "problem."

Yet research shows that shame is not the most effective motivator.

One study comparing fitness classes led by an instructor using appearance-focused language ("Blast that cellulite!") with classes led by a function-focused instructor ("You're getting stronger with every step!") found that the latter experience led to greater improvements in positive affect and body satisfaction. Meanwhile, those in the appearance-focused class experienced more self-objectification and were more likely to report feeling ashamed than the participants who attended the other class.

The "tough love" mentality is not only counterproductive — it can be downright harmful.

At the 2019 Canadian Obesity Summit, presenters argued that exposure to weight bias and discrimination actually increases the likelihood of weight gain. Fat shaming also correlates with depression, anxiety, and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and stroke.

Perhaps there's no better illustration of the self-defeating nature of shame than *The Biggest Loser*.

The reality show, which featured contestants competing to lose the greatest percentage of their body weight, was framed as inspirational. Yet contestants were frequently berated by their trainers and subjected to humiliating challenges.

Most did lose weight. But a longitudinal study found that six years after the show ended, the majority of contestants had regained most of the weight they'd lost, and several were heavier than when they started.

What's more, the pressure left some contestants feeling worse about themselves, no matter the number on the scale.

"I left with a very poor mental body image," contestant Kai Hibbard said on *The Early Show*. "I found myself loathing what I looked like the more weight I dropped because of the pressure on me."

BREAKING FREE

Releasing yourself from shame can feel like an uphill battle when you live in a culture so deeply steeped in it. Flip the script with these strategies.

(Re)educate yourself. Dismantling shame starts by recognizing and challenging the unhealthy beliefs you may not realize you've been holding. "Shame-based messages are so deeply ingrained, you need to actively unlearn them," says Kneeland.

Practice self-compassion. Research shows that adopting a more loving attitude toward yourself counteracts shame and boosts resilience. When you speak to yourself with kindness and compassion, you're more likely to overcome inevitable hurdles.

Watch your language. Words matter. "It's easy to throw around morally charged language without really reflecting on what it means," Kneeland explains.

Get curious about the words you use and what they imply. "If you use the term 'cheat day,' for example, ask yourself, *What am I cheating on?*" Be especially mindful around kids, whose blueprints for self-worth are just being formed.

Connect with your intuition. Many of us believe that if we aren't hard on ourselves, we'll fall apart. But Kneeland suggests that we trust in the body's innate orientation toward health.

"Our bodies are designed to move, and to feel good when we choose foods that nourish and energize us. We thrive when we trust in those intuitive, natural inclinations toward what feels right."

ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC, is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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Your Metabolism Over Time

What really happens to your metabolism as you get older.

BY **NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI**

A SLUGGISH METABOLISM is a common scapegoat for the unwanted changes in body composition and fat distribution that can come with age. But just how much does aging affect the efficiency of your body's engine? And is there anything you can do about it?

We tapped three experts in fitness, nutrition, metabolism, and aging to break down what you need to know to support your metabolism at any age.

WHAT IS METABOLISM?

Metabolism is the body's ability to take in fuel and process it to support life.

"It consists of all the complex biochemical reactions that go on in the body to create energy in order to survive," says fitness and nutrition educator and researcher Mike T. Nelson, PhD.

Energy expenditure is measured in calories. Your total daily energy expenditure (TDEE) has four components.

1. Resting metabolic rate (RMR) measures the calories you burn at rest. This figure accounts for approximately 60 to 70 percent of calorie-burning processes and is most influenced by your body mass and composition.

2. Thermic effect of food (TEF) represents the calories you burn to digest, absorb, and process food. TEF makes up about 10 percent of daily calorie burn for adults eating a diverse and balanced diet.

3. Nonexercise activity thermogenesis (NEAT) refers to the calories you burn moving around as part of everyday life. "The biggest factor you can change when it comes to metabolism is increasing your NEAT," says Nelson.

Making everyday things a little bit harder for yourself adds up: taking the stairs instead of the elevator; walking or biking for part of your commute; using a standing or treadmill desk; or storing items you commonly use on a harder-to-reach shelf or cabinet.

4. Formal exercise triggers the calories you burn doing a workout, sport, or other physical activity. This is typically a smaller piece of the TDEE pie, but it's highly important for metabolic health, says certified fitness coach Paul Kriegler, RD, CPT, CISSN, Life Time's director of nutritional product development.

"It's important to understand that your metabolic rate is a measure of how busy your cells are," adds Herman Pontzer, PhD, a metabolism researcher and professor at Duke University. "We're really aware of the calories that our muscle cells use during exercise, but all of your organs — not just your muscles — are burning energy all day."

IS A SLOWDOWN INEVITABLE?

Despite popular belief, metabolism doesn't suddenly tank when we turn 30, 40, or even 50.

Pontzer led a study in 2021, published in the journal *Science*, that created a road map of how metabolism changes over a person's lifespan. "What we see is that it's quite stable from your mid 20s through your late 50s," he says. "But then starting at about 60 years old, it starts to decline pretty steadily." (Learn more at ELmag.com/metabolism.)

Still, chronological age does not singularly determine metabolic function, experts say. Changes in lifestyle have a profound effect.

"My biased opinion, and the answer that nobody wants to hear," Nelson says, "is that people generally don't move as much as they get older — specifically movement that's not formal exercise."

DO CHANGES VARY BY GENDER?

Not really. While conventional wisdom has it that women experience a sharper decline in metabolic rate because of the menopause transition, research suggests this is not the case.

"We looked at data from thousands of men and women and expected to see a change in metabolism around the time of menopause in women," Pontzer says. "But in fact, both men and women are really steady in their metabolic rate through their 40s and 50s."

That's not to say the menopausal shift isn't significant for metabolic health. Age-related declines in sex hormones can alter how fat is stored in the body. More visceral fat deep in the abdomen can also create a cascade of health issues, including metabolic dysfunction. (Learn more at ELmag.com/visceralfat.)

Additionally, hormonal changes "can definitely affect how you feel and make you less inclined to exercise or move," says Pontzer. "And if it's harder for you to keep active and keep your lean mass up, then these things can have an effect on your metabolism."

WHAT'S THE BEST EXERCISE TO SUPPORT METABOLISM?

"Exercises that help you build or maintain your muscle mass are a particularly good idea," says Pontzer.

Nelson recommends doing two or three full-body weight-training sessions each week, plus two or three days of an enjoyable aerobic activity. If you're new to exercise, build up to this schedule gradually, and consider enlisting the support of a trainer to help you get started without risking injury or overtraining. (For a longevity-focused training plan, visit ELmag.com/fitnesstemplates.)

NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI is an *Experience Life* contributing editor and personal trainer in River Forest, Ill.

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REAL FOOD

AFTER A LONG WORKDAY, the sheet-pan meal is ideal: In an hour or less, you can cook up a sumptuous dinner on a single pan. Find three savory Mexican meals starting on **page 48**, and get the recipe for this Citrus-Cilantro Pork Tenderloin at ELmag.com/sheetpanmexican.

Nutrition for Nervous-System Balance

A well-regulated autonomic nervous system is fundamental for resilience. Feed it well.

BY **JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC**

IMAGINE, IF YOU CAN, an unhurried weekday morning. Your alarm rouses you from a restful sleep. Your energy is steady as you move through your morning routine.

On the road, traffic crawls, but you take a deep breath and relax into your commute. At the office, an unexpected deadline sparks a surge of adrenaline, and you become alert and focused on the task at hand.

By the time you get home, the tensions of the day have receded. You wind down and, later, drift easily to sleep.

Behind the scenes in this ideal scenario, your autonomic nervous system, or ANS, is keeping things humming. This built-in regulator adjusts your heart rate, breathing, digestion, and many other functions throughout the day and night, allowing you to rise to life's challenges and then return to equilibrium once the tasks are complete — without your having to think about it.

Of course, not everyone's system finds this rhythm so readily, at least not all the time. Daily stressors, poor sleep, and an imbalanced diet can throw your stability out of whack.

And when you're dealing with an illness, trauma, or long-term emotional strain, your body's automatic adjustments may start to misfire. You might experience fatigue, insomnia, brain fog, anxiety, digestive trouble, or a sense of being tired but wired.

In severe cases, dysregulation can evolve into dysautonomia, a condition in which the ANS struggles to regulate even basic functions like breathing.

Fortunately, you can usually bring an out-of-tune system back into harmony on your own. Sleep, movement, and stress management all play important roles in preserving and restoring ANS balance — and nutrition is pivotal.

A DELICATE BALANCE

The ANS is composed of two primary branches: the sympathetic, which prepares your body for alertness and action, and the parasympathetic, which promotes rest, digestion, and recovery.

"Think of the sympathetic nervous system as the accelerator in your car, and the parasympathetic as the brakes," says functional-medicine practitioner Navaz Habib, DC. "You need to be able to use both and to easily shift between the two for the car to run effectively."

Certain foods provide the materials your body needs to make neurotransmitters, the chemical messengers that enable you to step on the gas in response to stress — and press the brakes to rest and recover.

"When we have impaired nutrition, we may not be able to make these neurotransmitters," says functional-medicine physician Gregory Plotnikoff, MD, MTS, FACP. But targeted nutrition can support the biochemical circuitry that helps your body shift smoothly between action and restoration.

SYMPATHETIC SUPPORT

Norepinephrine and epinephrine (also called noradrenaline and adrenaline) are the primary neurotransmitters of your sympathetic system. They're made from the amino acids tyrosine and phenylalanine, which come from dietary protein. Iron, copper, and vitamins C and B6 are considered cofactors, the biochemical supports that enable the sympathetic nervous system to produce these messengers.

Elevated levels of epinephrine and norepinephrine can lead to sympathetic imbalance. "It's like putting a brick on the accelerator," says Habib.

You can support a balanced "get-up-and-go" system by getting plenty of protein from legumes, meat, fish, eggs, soy, and dairy. Fresh fruits and veggies add the vitamin C you need, while shellfish, nuts, and seeds provide copper. Good B6 sources include starchy vegetables such as potatoes, yams, and winter squash. Find iron in red meat, fish, and poultry, as well as in plant-based sources like legumes.

"Heme iron, found in meat, is much more readily absorbed than vegetarian nonheme iron," notes Plotnikoff. You can absorb up to 30 percent of the animal-sourced iron you consume, compared with 2 to 10 percent of iron sourced from a vegetarian diet.

"Think of the sympathetic nervous system as the accelerator in your car, and the parasympathetic as the brakes."

PARASYMPATHETIC SUPPORT

Your parasympathetic system is dependent on the neurotransmitter acetylcholine. "If you don't have acetylcholine, both skeletal- and smooth-muscle function — including gastrointestinal functioning — are going to be compromised," says Plotnikoff.

To make this calming chemical messenger, you need choline, an essential nutrient your body must get from food. Only about 10 percent of adults consume enough choline, and insufficient quantities can impair parasympathetic function. According to the National Institutes of Health, men should aim for 550 milligrams of choline per day, but the average intake is around 400 mg; women need 425 mg per day, but most get closer to 280 mg.

Organ meat and egg yolks top the list of high-choline foods, followed by other red meat and poultry, fish, and soy. Grains, veggies, and dairy provide choline in lower amounts.

"The highest sources tend to be animal products," says Plotnikoff. "Restricted diets, including gluten-free, dairy-free, and vegetarian diets, can be counterproductive if you're not intentional around some key nutrients."

For patients on restricted diets or who need parasympathetic support, Plotnikoff often recommends supplementing with CDP-choline; Habib suggests alpha-GPC or phosphatidylcholine or both.

Thiamine, or vitamin B1, helps your body turn food into the energy needed to make acetylcholine. "Plus, it slows down the enzyme that's involved in breaking down acetylcholine," allowing it to stay active longer, says Plotnikoff.

Thiamine can be found in lean pork and whole grains. Many refined-grain products, like pasta and rice, are enriched with thiamine.

METHYLATION MATTERS

The production of parasympathetic neurotransmitters — and the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response — rely in part on effective methylation, a biochemical process that helps your body build, activate, and recycle key compounds for healthy nervous-system function.

To support methylation, eat plenty of leafy greens, legumes, and citrus for folate; fish, poultry, and dairy for vitamin B; and whole grains, nuts, and seeds, which provide B vitamins, magnesium, and zinc.

"Methylation is a critical metabolic pathway in the body [that's] responsible for mood, energy, memory, sleep, and general oomph-power," says Plotnikoff. "And good methylation requires good nutrition." ⇢

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

ILLUSTRATIONS: STUART BRIERS

Beyond Neurotransmitters:

OTHER WAYS FOOD BRINGS BALANCE

In addition to directly affecting your ability to make neurotransmitters, the foods you eat can have an indirect — yet significant — effect on your sense of regulation and resilience. We spoke with several integrative-health experts for emerging insights.

THE GUT-BRAIN CONNECTION

Your brain regulates your autonomic nervous system from the top down, using the vagus nerve — the ANS's main parasympathetic pathway — to send signals throughout your body, including to your gut.

Symptoms that you might experience when feeling stressed or anxious, such as nausea, cramping, or diarrhea, may be the effects of your sympathetic "brakes" not working properly, says functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoe, DC, DACNB. "Now you're in more of a fight-or-flight state: The brakes aren't on, and you're getting hormonal and blood-flow changes to the gut."

For the past few decades, researchers have also been exploring a bottom-up relationship between the gut and the brain, hypothesizing that gut health may influence the function of the ANS via the immune system.

For example, imbalances in your gut microbiome can make your intestinal barrier leaky, allowing bacterial fragments to enter the bloodstream and trigger systemic inflammation, explains Schmoe. This inflammation can in turn reach the brain, disrupt neurotransmitter balance, and throw off the autonomic nervous system's regulation of functions like digestion, mood, and stress response. (Learn more about leaky gut and how to heal it at ELmag.com/leakygutfaq.)

Scientists are also researching how the vagus nerve may influence inflammation through the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway — a reflex circuit in which vagal signals may help regulate immune activity. The precise workings of this pathway in humans, as well as the vagus nerve's broader role in mediating gut function, remain areas of active research and debate.

Still, for many practitioners, balancing a dysregulated ANS starts by balancing your gut.

"The gut is intricately tied to what's happening with our stress response and the sensory information we're taking in," says Brooke Seiz, LCPC, a licensed mental health counselor, holistic nutritionist, and certified functional-medicine practitioner. "Part of the communication between the gut and the brain happens via the microbial community in there."

You can improve gut health by avoiding ultraprocessed foods, refined sugars, and artificial sweeteners, as well as excess saturated and trans fats. Focus instead on whole foods that support a healthy microbial ecosystem, including high-fiber veggies; oily fish, walnuts, and flaxseed, which are high in omega-3 fatty acids; anti-inflammatory berries and green tea; and fermented foods, like yogurt and sauerkraut.

"Your gut population can shift pretty easily, and going on a whole-foods diet for a couple of weeks can have a massive positive effect on the bacterial population," says functional-medicine practitioner Navaz Habib, DC. "That in turn will have a positive effect on leaky gut."

CALMING NUTRIENTS

Because your autonomic nervous system is closely linked with your brain, its state influences how you think and feel.

"Most people are overactivated in the sympathetic nervous system," says integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD. While an immediate fight-or-flight response to a perceived threat is normal and healthy, he says, getting stuck in high gear is not.

Many of the same nutrients that help your body regulate stress responses also support the production of neurotransmitters involved in mood, focus, and emotional resilience.

"In terms of nutrition, there are lots of things that help settle people down," adds nutritional psychiatrist Drew Ramsey, MD. He notes that many of his patients with anxiety are low on vitamin B12. In addition to creating ANS neurotransmitters, B12 — found in liver, mussels, and clams — produces the mood-regulating neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine.

In fact, many of the nutrients necessary for ANS function are also key players in optimal brain health and emotional regulation. For example, thiamine (vitamin B1) is required for nearly every cellular energy reaction in your body. "It's really important for brain health, because your brain is your most energy-intensive organ," Ramsey says.

He also recommends folate-rich foods for serotonin production, iron to make dopamine, magnesium to regulate mood-supporting neurotransmitters, and vitamin C as an antioxidant to counteract damage caused by free radicals.

Ramsey's dietary recommendations can be summed up in a simple mantra he teaches patients: "Seafood, greens, nuts, and beans . . . and a little dark chocolate." (Dark chocolate contains calming magnesium.)

Beyond these recommendations, Emmons often advises overactivated patients to eat less protein, because protein supports the production of epinephrine and norepinephrine in the sympathetic system. "Protein stimulates nervous-system activity, and you don't want something that's more activating at that point," he says.

By nourishing your nervous system with the right foods, you're not just feeding your body. You're supporting the calm, clarity, and resilience that help you meet life's challenges with greater ease.

— JP

Key Foods and Nutrients FOR BALANCED NERVES

	FOOD	NUTRIENTS	HOW THEY SUPPORT THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM
	**Eggs,** especially the yolks	Choline, protein, riboflavin (B2), B12, folate (B9)	Choline helps form acetylcholine; amino acids and B vitamins support neurotransmitter synthesis and methylation.
	**Red meat,** such as beef	Protein, heme iron, zinc, B12, methionine	Iron and B12 support norepinephrine and epinephrine production, as well as mood-regulating serotonin and dopamine; methionine supports methylation and neurotransmitter balance.
	**Fish,** especially salmon, tuna, cod, and sardines	Protein, B12, niacin (B3), choline, magnesium, omega-3 fatty acids	Amino acids and cofactors support neurotransmitter synthesis; omega-3s help maintain the integrity of your gut barrier and reduce inflammation.
	**Shellfish,** think oysters, crab, and clams	Copper, zinc, heme iron, B12	These nutrients assist norepinephrine and dopamine synthesis, as well as antioxidant defense and methylation.
	**Poultry,** such as chicken and turkey	Protein, B6, niacin (B3)	Protein and B6 are essential for synthesis of epinephrine; B3 supports energy and stress resilience.
	**Legumes,** such as lentils, chickpeas, and beans	Protein, folate (B9), nonheme iron, magnesium, zinc, dietary fiber	Amino acids support the synthesis of neurotransmitters; folate and magnesium support methylation; fiber may aid gut–brain communication.
	**Leafy greens,** such as spinach, kale, and Swiss chard	Folate (B9), riboflavin (B2), magnesium	Folate and B2 support methylation; magnesium promotes relaxation and parasympathetic balance.
	**Nuts,** such as almonds and cashews, and **seeds,** such as pumpkin, sunflower, and sesame	Zinc, copper, magnesium	Zinc and copper are cofactors for neurotransmitter production; magnesium supports a sense of calm.
	**Whole grains,** such as brown rice, oats, and fortified cereals	Thiamine (B1), niacin (B3), B6, magnesium	Thiamine enables acetylcholine production; B vitamins and magnesium support methylation.
	**Organ meats,** such as liver and heart	Choline, copper, heme iron, B12, folate (B9)	These cofactors support sympathetic (iron, copper, B12) and parasympathetic (choline) neurotransmitter synthesis; folate and B12 assist methylation.
	**Soy foods,** such as tofu, edamame, and soy milk	Protein, choline, magnesium, copper	Plant-based protein and copper support neurotransmitter synthesis; magnesium helps regulate nerve signaling and autonomic balance.
	**Dairy,** such as milk, yogurt, and cheese	Protein, riboflavin (B2), B12	Protein and B vitamins provide building blocks and cofactors for neurotransmitter synthesis.
	**Starchy vegetables,** such as potatoes, yams, and winter squash	B6, complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber	B6 aids neurotransmitter synthesis; complex carbs promote serotonin balance; fiber protects the lining of the gut and may reduce inflammation.
	**Cruciferous vegetables,** such as broccoli and Brussels sprouts	Choline, folate (B9), magnesium	Choline supports acetylcholine synthesis; folate supports methylation; magnesium supports a sense of calm.
	**Cocoa/dark chocolate**	Magnesium, copper	These minerals facilitate neurotransmitter synthesis and promote relaxation.

Raspberry Crisp for Two

Use fresh or frozen berries to make this fiber-filled treat any time of year.

BY **KAELYN RILEY**

ONE THING about me is that I pretty much always want a sweet treat. I love those little sour gummy candies. I keep a stash of homemade cookie dough in my freezer, in case I have an emergency that only chocolate chips can solve. I will spend hours carefully constructing a multilayered cake to celebrate your birthday — as long as I can have a little slice.

As a combination aspiring healthy person slash certified sugar fanatic, I've had to hone my approach over the years to ensure that I can enjoy a little something sweet while still getting plenty of the nutrients that really matter. That's why I love what I call double-duty desserts, which satisfy my sweet tooth with wholesome ingredients that also help meet my macronutrient goals.

Practically speaking, this means that if I want a sweet treat, I think about how to include some extra protein and fiber. That cookie dough in my freezer is full of hemp seeds. If I'm baking a birthday cake, I'm probably using half almond flour. And if I'm lucky enough to encounter some of my favorite sour candies in the course of my day, I'm enjoying them with a side of walnuts.

I'm not trying to conquer my sugar cravings; I'm just trying to make them work for me.

Because raspberries are packed with fiber — and naturally sweet but relatively low in sugar — they make a perfect building block for this double-duty dessert. I like a bit of maple syrup for added sweetness and a slightly nutty caramel flavor, but you can use less if you want. A crispy topping of mostly oats and pecans bumps up the fiber and protein content, which helps slow digestion and prevent the dreaded blood-sugar spike and crash.

In addition to its balanced macronutrient breakdown, this dish is packed with antioxidants and vitamin C. I like adding chia seeds, in part for the extra boost of fiber and omega-3 fatty acids — but also because, when mixed with the lemon juice and maple syrup, the seeds soften and help stabilize the fruit filling as it bakes. If you prefer to use cornstarch, you can sub in an equal amount for the chia seeds to make a slightly thicker filling.

When raspberries are plentiful in the late spring and summer, I'll pick fresh ones from the tangled bushes in my backyard and bake them into these crisps. But this recipe is equally as delicious (and nutritious) with frozen berries, which are flash-frozen at peak ripeness and so retain their vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants.

If you're using frozen berries, it's best to let them thaw in the refrigerator before assembling the crisps. Otherwise, you'll have to increase the bake time until the filling is bubbling — that's your visual indicator that the fruit is fully cooked and the flavors have had enough time to develop.

And because a fruit crisp is a pretty forgiving recipe, you can tweak this one to accommodate your preferences and what you have on hand. Maybe you'd rather use a mix of different fresh or frozen berries. If you want more lemon flavor, you could mix a bit of lemon zest into the topping. Or for more warming spice, add a pinch of ground cloves along with the cinnamon. Need more protein? Serve your crisp with a spoonful of Greek yogurt, à la mode style.

However you want to mix it up, healthy eating doesn't have to mean depriving yourself of the foods you love — especially if you can find a way to make them work for you.

Makes two servings
Prep time: 20 minutes
Cook time: 25–30 minutes

2¼ cups raspberries (fresh or thawed from frozen)

1 tsp. lemon juice

½ tsp. vanilla extract

1½ tbs. maple syrup, divided

2 tsp. chia seeds

¾ cup rolled oats, divided

⅓ cup chopped pecans

½ tsp. ground cinnamon

¼ tsp. sea salt

1½ tbs. melted coconut oil, plus more for the ramekins

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F and place two 6-ounce ramekins on a sheet pan lined with aluminum foil. (Alternatively, you could use one small 1-quart baking dish.)

Place the raspberries in a bowl with the lemon juice, vanilla extract, and 1 tablespoon of the maple syrup. Stir to combine, then sprinkle the chia seeds over the top and stir until the seeds are evenly distributed. Allow this mixture to rest at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes while you make the topping.

Measure ¼ cup of the oats into a blender, and blend to create a fine powder. Transfer the oat flour to a bowl; add the remaining rolled oats and the pecans, cinnamon, and sea salt. Stir to combine, then add the remaining ½ tablespoon of maple syrup and the 1½ tablespoons of melted coconut oil. Stir until the liquids are absorbed.

Lightly grease the ramekins with a small amount of melted coconut oil, then divide the berry mixture evenly between the two dishes. Top each with half of the oat mixture, and bake until the filling is bubbling and the topping is slightly browned, 25 to 30 minutes. Let cool slightly before serving.

KAELYN RILEY is *Experience Life*'s editorial director of food and nutrition.

Get Creative With Kitchen Scraps

Reduce waste and increase your kitchen creativity with these tips for giving new life to veggie peels, citrus rinds, and more.

BY **ADAM MEYER**

YOU'RE CHOPPING carrots for dinner when you reach for the compost bin, sweeping the tops and ends into it without a second thought. A moment later you're juicing a lemon and tossing away the rind. That crusty loaf of sourdough on the counter? It's been there over a week, and it's off to the trash.

We've all done it. In the rush of cooking, food scraps tend to fall into two categories: compostable or disposable.

But many of these so-called scraps are culinary building blocks in disguise.

In today's food landscape, where prices are high, waste is widespread, and sustainability is more urgent than ever, it pays to rethink what we throw away. An estimated 30 to 40 percent of the U.S. food supply is wasted each year, contributing to both landfill waste and greenhouse-gas emissions. Yet plenty of food scraps that we treat as trash could be tomorrow's secret ingredients.

Saving scraps can also help you become more resourceful in the kitchen, explains environmental activist Bea Johnson, author of *Zero Waste Home*. "For me, it's about creativity, but the cost savings are a reward for anyone."

Whether you're trying to stretch your budget, reduce waste, or flex your creative muscles, these tips can help you look at your kitchen scraps in a whole new light.

CITRUS PEELS

"My favorite wasted scraps are citrus peels for zest," says Auset Shridevi, the executive chef for the website Eating Love. Shridevi likes to use a Microplane, an ultrasharp hand grater that yields fine, flavorful zest — "perfect for just about any baked good or cream frosting."

Shridevi uses citrus zest in savory cooking, too. "For something savory, lemon or lime zest with garlic, fresh herbs, and avocado oil makes a great rub for marinating chicken or fish," she explains. Or mix orange zest with sugar to adorn the rim of a favorite beverage.

You can dry your citrus zest or use it fresh, or try this simple method to make citrus salt:

- Zest your citrus.
- Spread the zest on a baking sheet. Dry it at the lowest oven setting, or leave it at room temperature until it's dry and brittle.
- Mix about 1 tablespoon dried zest with ¼ cup sea salt.

Use citrus salt on roasted veggies or grilled fish, or as a rim for a summer mocktail. (Try it with our Pink Grapefruit Margarita at ELmag.com/summermocktails.)

VEGGIE PEELS AND ROOTS

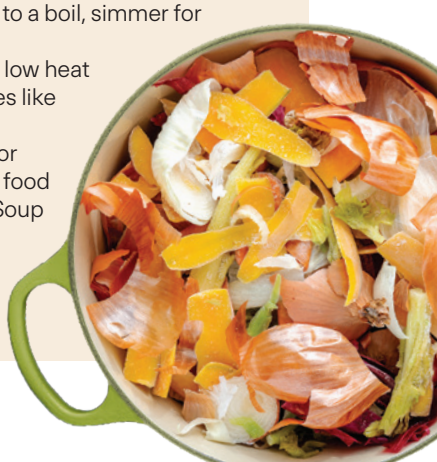
Many peels and root ends left over after chopping vegetables can become a flavorful stock.

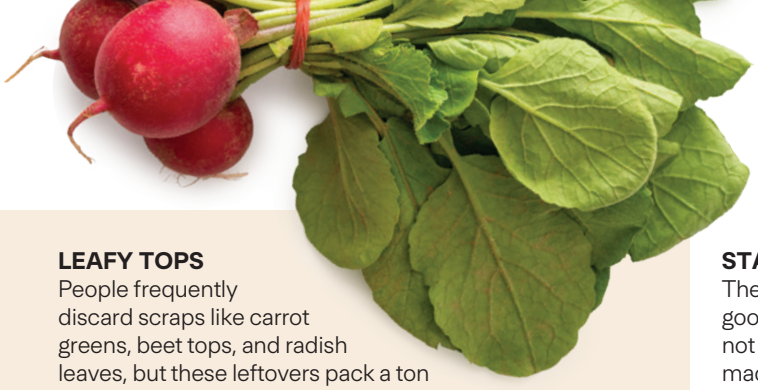
Johnson likes to collect veggie peels and roots in a jar and store them in the freezer for an easy, scalable stock method. "When the jar is full, throw the scraps into a pot, cover them with water, bring to a boil, simmer for 15 minutes, then strain."

Shridevi recommends cooking your stock over low heat to preserve delicate flavors. "Avoid bittering veggies like broccoli, cabbage, or collard greens," she advises.

Your homemade stock can become the base for soups or sauces, adding depth while sidestepping food waste. (Try it in our Kale, White Bean, and Fennel Soup at ELmag.com/kalebeansoup.)

You can also use the stock for cooking grains or legumes. Refrigerate your stock for up to five days, or freeze it in portions for several months.





LEAFY TOPS

People frequently discard scraps like carrot greens, beet tops, and radish leaves, but these leftovers pack a ton of flavor and nutrition.

If you're short on time, a quick sauté of any leafy tops with garlic and oil makes a simple, easy side dish. Additionally, a vibrant pesto of carrot greens with garlic, nuts or seeds, olive oil, and lemon juice or zest can transform a sandwich or pasta. (Try our Anything Pesto at ELmag.com/pesto.)

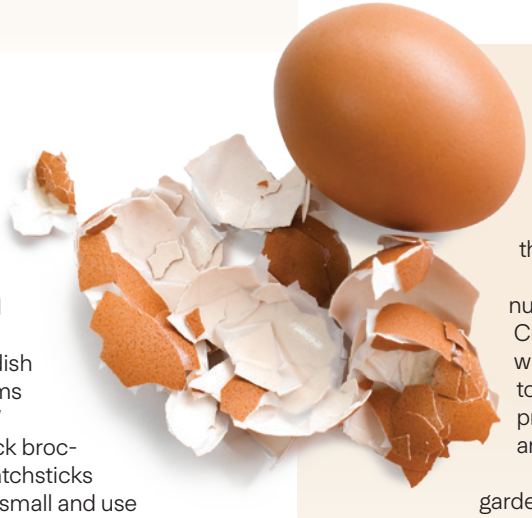
Leafy tops are lightweight and easy to store. Just wash the leaves, pat them dry, and wrap them in a paper towel. Store wrapped greens in a loosely sealed bag in your crisper drawer for up to five days.

STALE BREAD

There's no need to throw out that good loaf gone stale. As long as it's not moldy, dried-out bread can be made into croutons, breadcrumbs, panzanella, or bread pudding.

"The easiest is repurposing stale bread for croutons or breadcrumbs," Shridevi says. "If the bread is only slightly stale, you might need to dry it further in the oven for 15 minutes at 250 degrees F. Then chop it to your desired size or pulse it lightly in a food processor."

You can season and toast chopped bread to make croutons, or use ground breadcrumbs as filling for stuffed mushrooms, peppers, and more.



STEMS AND CORES

Stems from broccoli, kale, and collards tend to end up in the compost pile, but these commonly neglected bits are nutritious and edible.

"Vegetable stems do not need to be discarded," Johnson says. "I chop them and add them to the dish instead. Chopping or peeling stems can make them easier to handle."

For example, you can peel thick broccoli stems and slice them into matchsticks for stir-fry, or chop collard stems small and use them in soups or sautés with herbs and garlic.

Because they're tougher, these stems may take a few extra minutes to fully cook, but they'll reward you with texture and flavor that you'd otherwise miss out on.

EGGSHELLS AND COFFEE GROUNDS

Before discarding your coffee grounds or eggshells after breakfast, consider giving them a second life in your garden.

Eggshells and coffee grounds are rich in nutrients that support strong plant growth. Crushed eggshells add calcium to the soil, which helps prevent blossom-end rot in tomatoes and peppers; coffee grounds provide nitrogen to boost leafy greens and herbs.

To prepare these food scraps for the garden, follow these steps:

- Rinse the eggshells and let them dry before crushing them.
- Let the coffee grounds air-dry to prevent mold.
- Sprinkle directly into the soil or mix into your compost for an easy, eco-friendly fertilizer that keeps your garden thriving.

SOMETIMES your scraps just won't work in cooking, and that's OK. If all else fails, many of these scraps make ideal compost matter.

If you're able to compost your scraps, the most convenient place to collect them is in a designated countertop compost container. Keeping a large outdoor compost bin, meanwhile, is an affordable and efficient way to transform your kitchen scraps into gardener's gold. (Try our simple six-step method to start composting at ELmag.com/composting.)

You can also try keeping your compost in the freezer, which can eliminate bugs and odors — a great solution for those without much counter or yard space, or for people who want to save scraps over time before taking them to a community drop-off site.

ADAM MEYER is a writer based in British Columbia, Canada.

SHEET-PAN MEXICAN MEALS

Delicious to eat and easy to clean up after, these one-pan recipes are weeknight lifesavers.

BY **JOSE GUZMAN, RDN**

IT CAN BE HARD TO FIND the time and energy to prepare a healthy meal during the week — especially one that requires major prep or lots of ingredients. Between long workdays and social obligations, cooking can easily fall to the bottom of the priority list.

That's where the sheet-pan meal comes in: With one hour or less, you can cook a healthy, flavorful dinner on a single pan — and with almost no dishes left to wash.

With a more complex recipe, you need the luxury of time to build layers of flavor. For these sheet-pan meals, the savory Mexican seasonings and marinades do that work for you.

To make these flavors shine, follow a few easy steps: Let your oven fully preheat for optimal roasting; allow time for your ingredients to marinate; and always taste and adjust the salt level before serving. Most importantly, use the largest sheet pan you have and avoid overcrowding to ensure every bit browns beautifully.

You can also keep a few simple ingredients on hand to round out a sheet-pan meal: precooked grains, ready-to-eat salad kits, and your favorite salsas.

Chipotle Shrimp Tacos

Makes two servings
Prep time: 35 minutes
Cook time: 25 minutes

MARINADE

- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ tbs. ground cumin
- ½ tbs. chipotle powder (or 1 tbs. adobo from canned chipotles)
- ¼ cup minced cilantro
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ tbs. soy sauce
- ¼ tsp. sea salt

SHRIMP TACOS

- 12 oz. medium raw shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 1 white onion, chopped
- 1 bell pepper, chopped
- ½ cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 jalapeño pepper, thinly sliced (remove seeds for less heat)
- 4 corn tortillas
- Avocado or salsa for topping (optional)

SLAW

- 2 cups shredded cabbage
- 2 tbs. minced cilantro
- 1 tbs. white vinegar
- Juice of 1 lime
- ¼ tsp. sea salt

Combine all marinade ingredients in a medium bowl and mix thoroughly. Add the shrimp, onion, bell pepper, tomatoes, and jalapeño. Toss to coat, and marinate for 15 to 30 minutes at room temperature.

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees F with a sheet pan placed inside. While the oven preheats, combine the slaw ingredients in a small bowl.

Carefully remove the sheet pan and line with parchment paper. Spread the marinated ingredients on the sheet pan and roast for 15 minutes.

Remove the pan from the oven, stir, and return to the oven for five minutes more, until everything is evenly browned.

Heat the corn tortillas in a dry skillet over medium heat on the stove. To serve, fill the tortillas with the roasted shrimp and vegetables, then top with slaw and any additional toppings, such as sliced avocado or your favorite salsa, as desired.

Tofu Fajita Bowl

Makes two to four servings
Prep time: 15 minutes
Cook time: 30 minutes

FAJITAS

- 1 16-oz. block extra-firm tofu
- 2 medium bell peppers, cut into ¼-inch slices
- 1 medium red onion, cut into ¼-inch slices
- 3 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- Cooked grains, for serving
- Avocado, salsa, or sour cream for topping (optional)

MARINADE

- 1 tbs. ground cumin
- 1 tbs. chili powder
- ½ tbs. smoked paprika
- ½ tbs. garlic powder
- 1 tsp. onion powder
- 1 tsp. Mexican oregano (or Italian oregano)
- ½ tsp. cayenne
- ¾ tsp. sea salt
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- Juice of 1 lime

Cut the tofu block in half both ways to make four equal slabs. Press the tofu slabs with a kitchen towel and dry thoroughly to ensure optimal browning.

In a small bowl, combine all marinade ingredients minus the lime juice to form a thick paste. Remove a third of the marinade and combine with the peppers, onion, and garlic in a medium bowl.

Add the lime juice to the unused marinade and spread evenly onto all sides of the tofu with a small spoon.

For easier cleanup, line a sheet pan with parchment paper; for crispier tofu, use an unlined pan. Arrange the tofu slabs on the sheet pan with some space between them. Place the pan in the cold oven and preheat to 425 degrees F.

When the oven comes to temperature, remove the pan. Add the peppers, onion, and garlic, then return the pan to the oven and cook for an additional 10 minutes. Remove the pan, flip the tofu, move the vegetables around, and return to the oven for 10 more minutes, until all the ingredients are evenly browned.

Thinly slice the tofu and serve with the roasted vegetables and cooked grains. Top with avocado, sour cream, or salsa as desired.

COOK WITH EASE

Download a mobile-friendly version of these recipes — plus one for Citrus-Cilantro Pork Tenderloin — at **ELmag.com/sheetpanmexican.**

Cod Veracruz en Papillote

Makes four servings
Prep time: 20 minutes
Cook time: 20 minutes

VERACRUZ VEGETABLES

- 3 medium Roma tomatoes, chopped
- 20 green olives, pitted and chopped
- ¼ cup capers, chopped
- 1 jalapeño pepper, finely chopped
- ¼ cup minced parsley, plus more for serving
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ white onion, minced
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp. Mexican oregano (or Italian oregano)
- ½ tsp. sea salt

FISH

- 4 6-oz. cod fillets (or other flaky white fish, like sea bass, flounder, or pollock)
- Sea salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 4 12-inch pieces of parchment paper
- 2 cups cooked quinoa
- Lemon wedges, to serve

Combine all Veracruz vegetable ingredients in a medium bowl. Sprinkle each fish fillet with salt and pepper on both sides.

Preheat oven to 425 degrees F while assembling the parchment-paper pouches.

To make the pouches: Place ½ cup of the cooked quinoa in the center of one sheet of parchment, and top with ¼ cup of the Veracruz vegetables, a fish fillet, and an additional ¼ cup of Veracruz vegetables. Bring the top and bottom edges of the parchment together above the center of the fish, and fold the parchment over itself several times, until the edge of the parchment reaches the top of the fish and vegetables. Fold each side several times and tuck the ends underneath the package to create an airtight seal. Repeat with each pouch.

Arrange the four pouches on a sheet pan and bake for 20 minutes.

To serve, transfer the pouches to plates and cut each open with a sharp knife or scissors, taking care to avoid the hot steam as it releases from its pouch. Top with additional parsley and serve with the lemon wedges. ◔

JOSE GUZMAN, RDN, is a New Mexico–based dietitian and chef.

FATIGUE, EXPLAINED

Identifying the root causes of exhaustion is the first step toward finding relief.

BY **MO PERRY**

A YEAR AFTER HAVING her second baby, Jen Novak, 38, was sleeping seven to eight hours a night. Yet she would wake with a "halo of exhaustion" that hovered over her all day. The Twin Cities–based ad-agency account director felt foggy, slow, and not herself.

As a college student, Novak battled Graves' disease, a form of hyperthyroidism that brings feelings of jitteriness and anxiety. It showed her how easily hormones can wreak havoc when they're out of balance. Now, postpartum, she suspected the pendulum might have swung the other way.

"When you're a parent of young children, people say, 'Of course you're tired,' but I knew something else was going on in my body," Novak says. "I'm sleeping. I'm eating well. I'm doing all the things, but I'm just constantly exhausted."

Novak isn't alone. Globally, about one in five adults experiences general fatigue, and one in 10 experiences chronic fatigue lasting more than six months, according to a 2023 systematic review and meta-analysis published in *Frontiers in Public Health*.

"Fatigue is one of the most frequent complaints we hear from patients," says functional-medicine physician Gregory Plotnikoff, MD, MTS, FACP. "It's such a significant problem in our society, and there are a million different reasons for it."

Fatigue is a lack of energy. Our cells use oxygen and nutrients to produce energy in the form of adenosine triphosphate (ATP) inside their mitochondria. Signals from hormones and the autonomic nervous system (ANS) influence that process. Anything that limits the supply of nutrients and oxygen, disrupts hormones or ANS signals, or diverts resources to respond to chronic stress or a depleted immune system can sap our energy.

In other words, persistent exhaustion is a single symptom with a wide variety of potential root causes.

"Fatigue is a generic sign from the body, saying, 'Hey, something's not OK,'" says functional nutritionist Jesse Haas, CNS, LN.

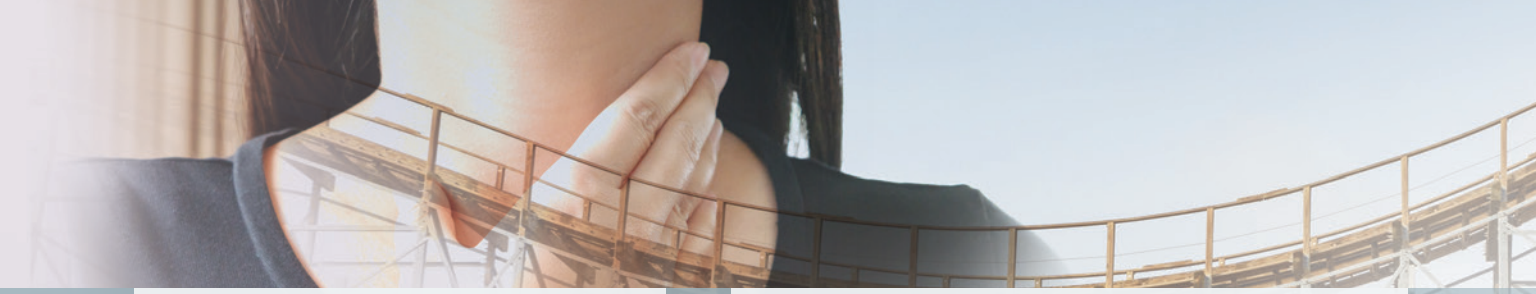
For that reason, fatigue rarely shows up in isolation. Studying the pattern of symptoms that accompany it can often help point to its underlying cause or causes.

"Fatigue is the tip of a very large iceberg," Plotnikoff notes. "Drilling down to the base can require a lot of time and attention."

Several other factors complicate the challenge: Basic lab tests often miss critical dysfunctions; multiple causes may overlap; and mental health factors such as burnout and grief pull hard on the same systems.

But most root causes of fatigue can be managed effectively once you've identified them, and restoring energy can have a big impact on overall well-being.

Learn about some of the most common drivers of fatigue — and how to address them.



THYROID DYSREGULATION

The thyroid, a butterfly-shaped gland in the neck, makes hormones that regulate the body's metabolism, controlling how efficiently it converts nutrients and oxygen into energy.

Some of these hormones, particularly T3 and T4, affect how quickly the body burns calories at rest. When the thyroid produces optimal levels of these hormones, body temperature and heart rate increase, and the nervous system activates to produce quicker reflexes and greater alertness. But when the thyroid grows sluggish, so do we.

An underactive thyroid — a condition known as hypothyroidism — can leave you "feeling like you're carrying around bags of cement," says Haas. You might also feel cold, dry, constipated, and foggy.

"Thyroid [production] has to be very low for prolonged periods of time for a lot of these symptoms to appear," notes Plotnikoff. This means that low-grade thyroid problems may be sapping stamina well before the classic signs emerge.

How to address: A basic clinical approach often includes testing for thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH), but it can be worth going deeper with a full thyroid panel, says Haas. "There's a pretty broad range in which TSH is considered to be normal, but it can still be suboptimal."

Even if TSH is normal, suboptimal levels of T3 and T4 can cause symptoms.

If testing indicates a sluggish thyroid, a combination of treatment and lifestyle adjustments can help get things back on track: targeted thyroid medication when appropriate plus steady, protein-anchored meals; stress and sleep support; and follow-up labs to make sure the complete thyroid picture (not just TSH) is improving.

"These are easy things to test and relatively easy to correct when they're out of whack," Haas says.

HORMONAL IMBALANCE

Like thyroid hormones, cortisol (the "stress hormone"), insulin, and various sex hormones affect our energy production and metabolism.

Some of these — such as estrogen, DHEA-S, insulin, and testosterone — are anabolic, or what Plotnikoff calls "build-up hormones." They contribute to tissue growth and repair and support increases in energy-creating mitochondria.

Others — such as cortisol and adrenaline — are catabolic, or "break-down hormones" that disassemble molecules and release stored energy.

"Imagine a teeter-totter, with the build-up hormones on one side and the break-down hormones on the other," Plotnikoff says. "You want to have a good balance between them. If the break-down side is heavier than the build-up, then people experience fatigue."

Other symptoms that might point to imbalanced hormones are shifts in weight, loss of muscle and bone, changes to mood and cognition, disrupted sleep, delayed injury recovery, and low libido.

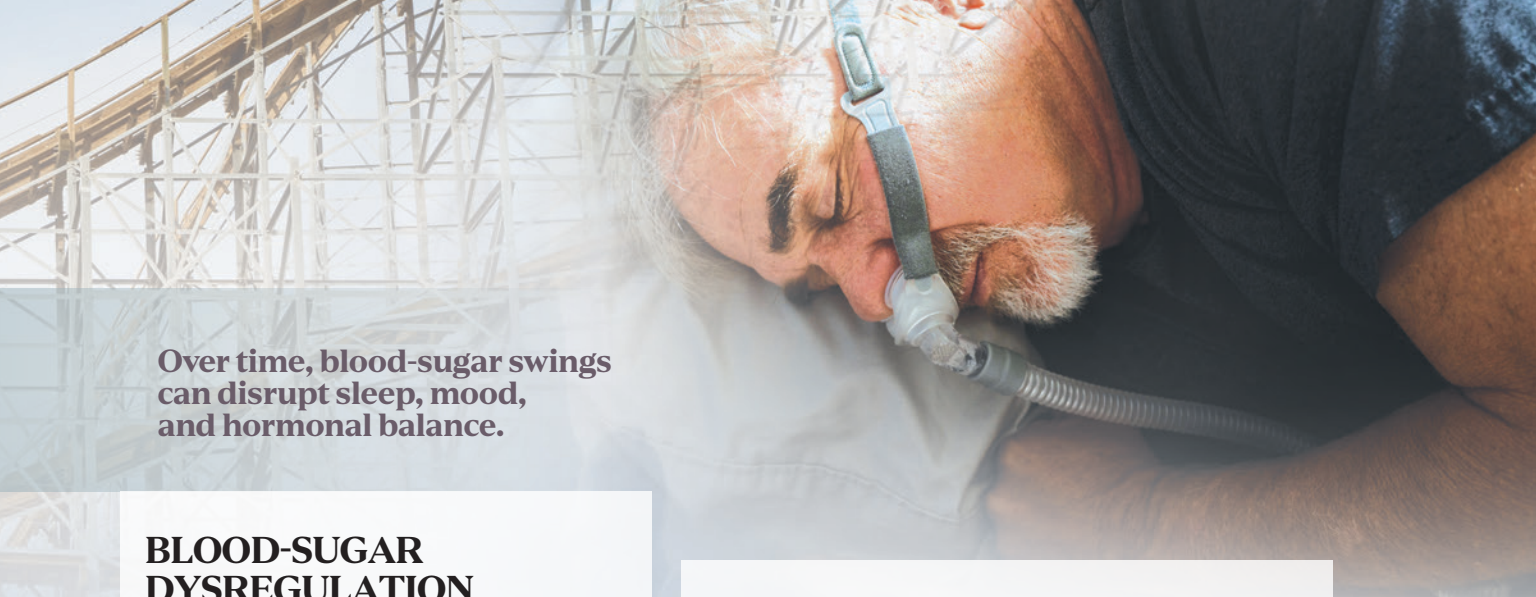
Haas notes that hormonal transitions, such as puberty, pregnancy, and perimenopause, often come with fatigue. "These are times when there's a lot of brain pruning going on — a clearing out of stuff we don't need anymore before we start rebuilding."

How to address: To some extent, fatigue is a natural byproduct of this physiological remodeling, so Haas suggests we offer ourselves and others plenty of patience and rest during these transitions.

Minimizing stress — whether environmental, physical, emotional, or dietary — is also key to hormone balancing, says Plotnikoff. So is stabilizing blood sugar with regular, nutrient-dense meals, which can reduce a reliance on cortisol spikes for energy.

Targeted supplements or hormone replacement therapy can provide additional support.

"Imagine a teeter-totter, with the build-up hormones on one side and the break-down hormones on the other. You want to have a good balance between them."



Over time, blood-sugar swings can disrupt sleep, mood, and hormonal balance.

BLOOD-SUGAR DYSREGULATION

Your cells run best on a steady glucose supply, which is supported by regular, well-balanced meals. Skipping meals or waiting too long to eat can trigger crankiness and brain fog. Snacking on high-sugar foods or refined carbs can trigger big insulin spikes, followed by crashes that leave you lethargic.

Over time, blood-sugar swings can also disrupt sleep, mood, and hormonal balance. Once you've added stress hormones (which raise glucose) and poor sleep (which reduces insulin sensitivity), you've got a recipe for persistent fatigue.

How to address: "One of the things I recommend for patients with low energy or fatigue is establishing a superconsistent eating routine that's balanced in protein, fat, and fiber," says Haas.

If you're nourishing your energy needs throughout the day, she adds, your blood-sugar levels should feel more like a mellow kiddie-park roller coaster than an extreme thrill ride.

If you suspect you have trouble regulating your blood-sugar levels, a few straightforward labs — including fasting glucose, A1c, and fasting insulin — can offer some insights. And a continuous glucose monitor can provide a window into how your body responds to specific foods or meal timing.

Other lifestyle shifts, such as taking a walk after meals, prioritizing sleep, managing stress, and engaging in strength training, can help stabilize blood-sugar levels, too. You might also try taking magnesium or berberine supplements.

SLEEP APNEA

Sleep apnea — a condition in which breathing repeatedly stalls during sleep — is another hidden driver of daytime fatigue. These pauses jar the brain awake to reopen the airway, disrupting sleep and preventing deep rest.

Sleep apnea can also cause blood-oxygen levels to drop, straining the heart and brain. This can lead to drowsiness and difficulty concentrating.

Studies have estimated that between 10 and 30 percent of U.S. adults suffer from sleep apnea. And yet it can be difficult to know if you have it, especially if you live alone and there's no one to tell you if you're snoring — one of sleep apnea's hallmark signs. Even then, while certain health conditions may predispose a risk for sleep apnea, not all of them are visible.

Signs of sleep apnea can include unrefreshing sleep, loud snoring, headaches, and brain fog.

"When I was in med school decades ago, I was taught that sleep apnea is a problem for people who are obese or elderly," Plotnikoff says, noting that it's often missed in those who don't fit that profile. "At our clinic, we recently diagnosed it in a 17-year-old slender person, whose only risk factors had to do with the anatomy of their throat and hypermobility."

Signs of sleep apnea can include unrefreshing sleep, loud snoring, headaches, and brain fog. FDA-approved portable devices measure airflow, oxygen levels, respiratory effort, and heart rate to help identify the condition. An in-person overnight sleep study is even more thorough.

How to address: Many sufferers find it helpful to limit their drinking, because alcohol can relax the throat muscles and increase airway obstruction. For heavier people, weight loss may help; weight around the neck can put pressure on the airways.

CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machines are among the most commonly prescribed treatment tools for sleep apnea. They help keep the airway open during sleep and can substantially improve sleep quality.

NUTRIENT DEFICIENCIES

Inadequate nutrition is another potential cause of fatigue. When our cells don't get the raw materials they need to function, energy output drops. Common deficiencies include iron, vitamins B12 and B9, vitamin D, and magnesium.

Iron deficiencies are a routine culprit. Hemoglobin is the iron-containing protein in our red blood cells that carries oxygen to our organs and tissues; low levels can be a sign of iron-deficiency anemia. "Anyone who menstruates or donates blood should be getting their hemoglobin levels tested," Haas says.

Testing ferritin, a protein that stores iron, is another way to measure iron levels. "Fatigue is a really common symptom of suboptimal ferritin," she adds. "There's a huge range of 'normal' ferritin levels in conventional medicine, but it's better for people who are menstruating regularly to have higher levels."

How to address: Good sources of iron include oysters, red meat, and poultry. Pumpkin seeds, lentils, and dried apricots are also iron-rich. (Learn how to get more iron from your diet at ELmag.com/ironrichfoods.)

Meanwhile, vitamins B12 and B9 are necessary for red-blood-cell formation; low levels indicate poor oxygen delivery and sluggish energy production. Low vitamin D levels can also sap vitality. And sufficient magnesium, which many of us lack, is key to making and using ATP.

Even if these nutrients aren't technically deficient, suboptimal levels can still show up as fatigue, says Haas. Notable hair loss, slow-healing wounds, bone pain, and an irregular heartbeat are other good reasons to get nutrient levels checked.

Working with a practitioner to adjust your diet and then target areas for supplementation is usually the most effective way to address deficiencies.

STEALTH INFECTIONS

Hidden, low-grade infections can quietly siphon energy. These include viral reactivations (such as EBV, the virus that causes mononucleosis), smoldering sinus or dental infections, postviral states, tick-borne illnesses, or gut or urinary infections that don't clearly announce themselves. Any of them can lead to a persistently "on" immune system that keeps you feeling foggy and underpowered.

"Chronic infections can keep your body in a chronic state of low-level alarm," writes integrative-medicine physician Aviva Romm, MD, in *The Adrenal Thyroid Revolution*. She notes that chronic stress can also reduce your body's ability to keep viruses contained.

"We carry a lot of viruses with us, whether we've had chicken pox, mono, or other things," says Plotnikoff. Normally, the body sequesters these viruses, but they may reemerge in times of stress — such as when a latent herpes virus awakens to trigger a cold sore as the body is fighting off a cold.

How to address: In general, managing stress can help the immune system do its job. A quality diet also helps. "Focus on nutrient density," Haas advises. "High-fiber foods, adequate protein, anti-inflammatory herbs and spices, and lots of colorful foods to support the microbiome."

If you suspect a potential infection may be at the root of your fatigue, see a healthcare provider. They can help you dig deeper with targeted testing and treatment.

In general, managing stress can help the immune system do its job. A quality diet also helps.

AUTONOMIC-NERVOUS-SYSTEM DYSFUNCTION

The ANS runs our background settings, including heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, body temperature, and digestion, so we don't have to think about them. When the ANS malfunctions, it may lead to symptoms of dysautonomia, in which ordinary activities like standing or taking a hot shower become strangely depleting.

"Right now, there's an epidemic of dysfunction in the ANS," Plotnikoff notes. "We have more and more people with impaired capacity to literally stand up."

The ANS has two primary branches: the sympathetic, also known as "fight or flight," and the parasympathetic, usually called "rest and digest." (It also encompasses the enteric nervous system in the gut.) Communication between the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems helps manage blood flow to the brain.

When the balance between the two is off, blood can pool in the legs, and the heart races in an effort to get enough blood to the brain. "If you don't get good brain perfusion, you're going to be fatigued; you're going to feel weak; you're going to feel like you need to lie down," Plotnikoff says.

When people with ANS dysfunction do lie down to rest, their brains get adequate blood flow, and suddenly they feel wired and unable to sleep. Adds Plotnikoff, "This is a very common thing that drives a multibillion-dollar-a-year insomnia industry."

Signs of ANS dysfunction can include lightheadedness upon standing, graying vision that clears upon sitting, a racing heart, breathlessness, brain fog, or the odd combo of feeling tired but wired. Testing can include electrocardiograms, physical or neurological exams, and tilt-table tests that measure how different body positions affect heart rate.

How to address: Fixing nervous-system imbalances that lead to poor blood flow to the brain can often effectively take care of symptoms, Plotnikoff says. Tools might include diet changes, exercise, or medication. "Suddenly, people's brain fog is gone, and their clarity, capacity, and energy are significantly improved."

BURNOUT, GRIEF, AND DEPRESSION

Fatigue often feels distinctly physical — and it is. But the mind, spirit, and emotions can still be driving causes. Long periods of overwork, significant personal loss, and mood disorders can all change how the brain allocates energy.

In burnout, physical and emotional resources become deeply depleted by chronic stress. It can feel as if our body and emotions have gone on strike, refusing to keep up the breakneck pace. "We don't thrive when we're constantly in survival mode," says Haas. "Sometimes fatigue is the body saying, 'Hey, dude, I can't do what you're asking of me. We need less.'"

Fatigue is also a common element of grief. Feelings like sadness and anger consume substantial emotional energy, and after a big loss, the mind has to remap a world that's changed — which is a lot of work. Expecting too much from ourselves too soon, before our energy stores have had time to replenish, might lead to prolonged feelings of depletion.

Depression comes with its own challenges, including imbalanced neurotransmitters, increased inflammation, and disrupted sleep patterns. All these are treatable, but motivation to do so can be hard to find.

How to address: "Exercise is really important in [treating] depression, but when you're really fatigued, it's hard to do any exercise," Plotnikoff notes. "Part of the goal is to break that spiral and reverse it upward so people are getting dopamine hits from small achievements."

In cases like these, the basics of self-care — stabilizing sleep, moving the body, eating wholesome and nourishing food — provide an important foundation. Maintaining reasonable expectations and celebrating the small wins can help; so can patience and self-compassion.

Finally, working with a trusted care provider can be extremely supportive when energy is brought low by life's challenges. You don't have to do it all alone.

MO PERRY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

WHAT IS CHRONIC FATIGUE SYNDROME?

Chronic fatigue syndrome, also called myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME/CFS), is different from ordinary exhaustion that improves with rest and time. It's marked by unrestful sleep, brain fog, and debilitating fatigue that lasts at least six months. Symptoms often worsen after any kind of exercise, which is known as post-exertional malaise, or PEM.

There's no definitive diagnostic test for ME/CFS, and its underlying cause is an area of active study (some research points to immune dysfunction). While treatment can be challenging and there's no one-size-fits-all cure, most guidelines emphasize symptom care and energy management — also known as pacing — to prevent boom-and-bust crashes.

Some clinicians advocate for nervous-system regulation techniques to help moderate stress tolerance, followed by personalized steps to address sleep, pain, and orthostatic symptoms. This approach aims to calm physiological overload and restore autonomic balance and day-to-day function.

Beyond Talk Therapy

A trauma expert explains the subtle art of energy psychology.

BY **JANE McCAMPBELL STUART, MA, LMFT, RCC**

WHEN I WAS a practicing therapist, one of my favorite things was to hand my new clients a little gadget called an emWave, an early-model biofeedback device that depicted the pattern of their heart rhythm. It was the fastest way for me to demonstrate that mental health involves more than just the mind.

When clients placed their thumbs over the sensors, the little machine would respond: a red-light "bing," indicating a herky-jerky, stressed heart rhythm; a blue-light "boop" for a more regular pace; or a soothing, green-light "bong" for an even, wavy rhythm.

This last pattern indicates what's known as heart coherence. It signals that the body's psychological and physiological systems are aligned, and it corresponds to greater overall stability, clarity, and resilience.

When a stressed-out client could slow their breathing and focus attention on something that brought them feelings of gratitude, appreciation, or love, the energy in the room would settle and the emWave's light would turn green. The pleasing, rhythmic "bong" would lull us both into a place of stillness and calm, at which point I'd ask something along the lines of "Have you heard from your ex lately?"

Instantly, the little machine would turn bright red and "bing" in protest. The client, jarred from their peaceful reverie, would look at me in shock, then confusion, before arriving at some variation of "Ah, you got me!"

Mental health involves **more than just the mind.**

From that moment, our goal was to see how quickly the two of us could work together to bring the green light back.

This routine allowed us to enjoy a few moments of shared coherence, reducing our stress levels and enhancing our connection.

Professionally, it helped me understand a client's degree of attunement to their body, as well as how much help they might need to settle themselves after working with distressing material.

Most beneficial of all was that after the exercise, I rarely needed to convince anyone of the need to invite their body to join their mind in the healing process, because they'd just experienced the connection firsthand.

And you can too.

ILLUSTRATIONS: REBECCA SANTO

Bringing the Body to Therapy

Twenty years after the first emWave hit the market, you can now choose from a plethora of biofeedback devices. They can measure your heart rhythm, stimulate your vagus nerve, and track your sleep. Consumers spent an estimated $200 million on these devices in 2025.

Many of us still prefer to address mental health by talking about it rather than feeling it. This helps explain why cognitive behavioral therapy, with its focus on cognitive and emotional processes — largely to the exclusion of bodily ones — has remained the gold standard of psychotherapy since its inception in the 1960s.

Yet for almost as long, some experts who study trauma and PTSD have challenged therapeutic approaches that prioritize talking over feeling. They argue that the imprint of trauma is held in the body and can't be resolved through talk alone.

Two body-centered, or somatic, therapies that took this view emerged during the 1970s: Somatic Experiencing, created by Peter Levine, PhD, and sensorimotor psychotherapy, introduced by Pat Ogden, PhD.

The somatic framework gained still more traction in the 1980s, when psychologist Francine Shapiro, PhD, developed a treatment model called EMDR, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. She was able to document EMDR's effectiveness with such an unprecedented level of scientific rigor that it helped pave the way for a multitude of subsequent mind-body therapies that use eye movement, including accelerated resolution therapy (ART) and brainspotting.

EMDR has proved more effective than talk therapy **for many people.**

EMDR involves a technique called dual attention, during which the patient experiences some form of bilateral sensory input — eye movement, butterfly hugs, or alternate-knee tapping — while focusing on distressing thoughts or memories. Various mind-body models use other forms of dual attention. All of them can help diffuse distress and settle an activated nervous system.

Undoubtedly powerful, EMDR has proved more effective than talk therapy for many people. Still, its speed and intensity can sometimes be overwhelming for those struggling with complex trauma — especially if they are still living in unsafe circumstances. Other somatic therapies are gentler but can be painstakingly slow.

Bringing the Body's Energy to Therapy

As psychologists sought to develop therapies that could bridge the gap between the extremes of body-based techniques, an energy-based model called tapping began to emerge. Its central premise is that, in addition to our mental and physical selves, we have an energetic self — and it is uniquely helpful in the healing process.

On the surface, tapping looks a lot like EMDR: Focus on the distress, add some sensory input, and feel the tension ease. But tapping also engages with a discrete set of acupressure points along the body's meridians, which are energetic pathways in the body's connective tissue. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, the meridians correlate with specific emotions and organs.

Fascinatingly, research demonstrates that tapping on the prescribed points reduces stress much more quickly and effectively than tapping on random points.

Well over 100 studies now support tapping's use in treating a range of conditions, including PTSD, performance anxiety, and eating disorders. This suggests that the meridian system accesses something stronger than attention alone, something that can help move trauma and distress out of the body.

What EMDR did for mind-body approaches, tapping is doing for the practice now known as energy psychology.

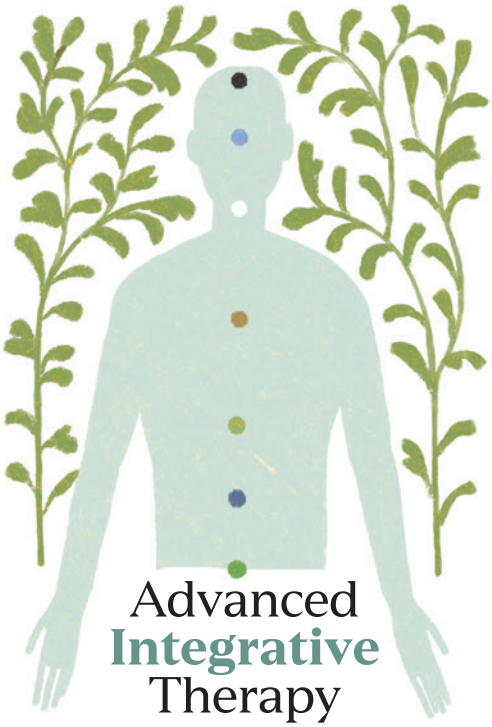
How Energy Psychology Can Help

In a nutshell, practitioners of energy psychology use well-established procedures and protocols, including psychodynamic, cognitive, and mind-body approaches, and then add an element of "subtle energy" to enhance the process. As a result, relief and progress can often happen more quickly and easily and — especially important for patients dealing with trauma — a lot more gently.

"Subtle energy," so named because it can't be directly measured in terms of force or motion, refers to the flow and balance of energy in and around the body. It involves meridians, chakras, and what's called the biofield — the energetic field that extends from our bodies. Energy-psychology practitioners understand any blockages, imbalances, or deficiencies in this energy as potential root causes for illness and distress.

Some practitioners also incorporate muscle testing to help identify problematic beliefs, the root of trauma patterns, suppressed emotions, and even the cause of allergies. Because muscle testing asks the body to identify the problem, it bypasses the analytical tendency of the cognitive mind. (For more insight, visit ELmag.com/muscletesting.)

Energy-psychology practices range from quick self-help interventions to intricate protocols that incorporate psychotherapy, coaching, and integrative medicine. On the next pages are three of the most powerful practices I know.



Advanced Integrative Therapy

In Ayurvedic and yogic practices, chakras are recognized as discrete energy centers positioned along the central axis of the body, from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. Each is thought to regulate the flow of vital energy or "life force" (sometimes known as prana) and to correspond with specific physiological, emotional, and psychological domains.

Advanced integrative therapy (AIT) uses the chakra system to help clear the imprint of trauma, illness, or other persistent negative patterns from the body and the bioenergetic field that surrounds it. This process is as powerful as EMDR but as gentle as a Reiki session.

AIT, which was created by psychotherapist Asha Clinton, PhD, uses muscle testing to hone the traumatic memory or belief before it's released. During a session, you place your hands on your body's energy centers to help move the trauma out. You also work with the therapist to identify negative beliefs and maladaptive reactions, and to instill positive beliefs and responses to replace them.

If you'd like to work through a traumatic experience but are concerned that it might be too frightening, take forever, or send you to places you don't want to go, the gentleness of AIT may be the perfect solution. (Find an AIT therapist at www.ait.institute/find-a-therapist.)

Tapping

The most well-known and well-researched energy-psychology modality is tapping. Sometimes called "acupuncture without the needles," it involves using the fingers to tap on specific acupressure points while focusing attention on stressful thoughts, emotions, or memories.

Different approaches recommend different sequences of points. Thought field therapy (TFT) uses various sets of points — known as algorithms — depending on the issue. There are unique algorithms for anxiety, grief, physical pain, jet lag, even fear of spiders. TFT has several trauma algorithms, and they're especially effective for reducing the vividness of difficult imagery in the mind's eye. These can be powerful interventions for nightmares or traumatic events.

TFT requires little talk: You focus briefly on the distressing material and follow along on the tapping; **the distress may start to dissipate.**

TFT requires little talk: You focus briefly on the distressing material and follow along on the tapping; the distress may start to dissipate. This makes it an accessible and effective tool for all ages, languages, and cultures.

It can be used with individuals or groups. Some of the most notable studies show a lasting reduction in PTSD symptoms among Rwandan communities that survived the 1994 genocide.

Emotional freedom technique (EFT), meanwhile, involves just one tapping sequence. It's easy to use and remember, making it helpful in emergency situations and as an on-the-spot remedy for anxiety. (For more on EFT, visit ELmag.com/eft.)

Follow these steps to test the effects of bilateral tapping on yourself:

- Next time you're feeling anxious, angry, confused, or distressed about anything at all, pause and put a 0–10 score on it.
- Begin tapping alternately on either side of your body while focusing on the source of your stress. This could look like a butterfly hug, wherein you cross your arms and alternate tapping on each shoulder.
- After a few minutes, check in and score your overall tension. If it hasn't come down, do a few more rounds of tapping.

This approach can work equally well on pets that are afraid of thunderstorms or trips to the vet: Tap alternately on each side of their haunches or gently squeeze each ear until they settle down. (To learn more, visit www.thetappingsolution.com or read *Tapping the Healer Within* by Robert Callahan and Richard Trubo. Find a practitioner at www.energypsych.org/practitioner-directory.)

Intention-Based **Scripts**

The word "abracadabra" is not just a dramatic term uttered by stage magicians: Some theorize that it comes from Aramaic and means "I create as I speak." It can remind you that your words often have more power than you realize.

Logosynthesis and Ask and Receive are resources that can help you tap into that power. Both use a series of carefully crafted statements, or scripts, to help align the cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of your being.

They draw on principles from other practices, including psychoanalysis, hypnotherapy, and neurolinguistic programming. The scripts offer a graceful, fun, and speedy approach to overcoming blocks, releasing the imprint of adverse experiences and orienting yourself to what you'd really like to see in the world.

You can silently rehearse the following Ask and Receive basic script to get to sleep, find your keys, finish a project, or meet someone wonderful. One of my clients claims it helps eliminate her motion sickness during air travel.

- "There's a part of my being that already knows [how to go to sleep right now/where I left my keys/how to feel strong and healthy].
- "That part of my being is willing to inform the rest of me now.
- "It is doing so now, with grace and ease.
- "My mind, body, and spirit are receiving this information.
- "Information transfer is now complete."

Take a deep breath and see what floats to mind. Ideally, if you wait a few moments, you'll remember where you put your keys or realize what's needed to finish your project. And if you're afraid of flying, you might notice yourself feeling noticeably steadier.

JANE McCAMPBELL STUART, MA, LMFT, RCC, is a psychotherapist, coach, spiritual consultant, and energy-psychology practitioner specializing in the healing of trauma and PTSD. Find her at www.therapyjane.com.

DIY ENERGY WORK: HEART-COHERENCE EXERCISE

THE NOTION that we can't help being hijacked by our emotions is a common misperception. By repeating the following heart-coherence exercise daily, you may find you can recover from upsets more quickly, reduce your susceptibility to other people's emotional states, and even help improve the regulation of those around you. (Learn more about how our energy can affect other people at ELmag.com/heartcoherence.)

Think of a situation, person, or pet that brings you feelings of deep gratitude. Breathing deeply, focus on the thought and notice the sensations in your body. Is your forehead relaxed? How's your breathing? Are your hands warm or cold?

You may wish to use your preferred biofeedback device to track your body's response.

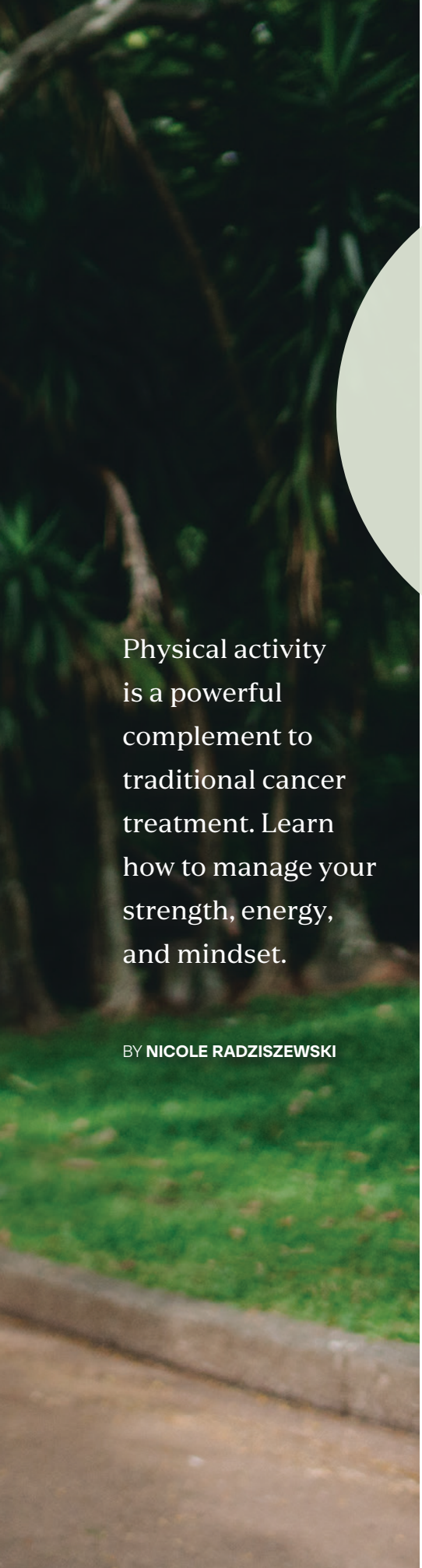
Then throw in a "bomb" — a situation or person that is guaranteed to get a rise out of you. Notice what you feel in your body now. Racing heart? Clenched muscles? Sweaty palms?

If you're using a biofeedback device, check what it reports about your stress levels.

Alternate between gratitude and the bomb response a few times, returning completely to the gratitude state before you go about your day. After a period of practice, you might find yourself better at settling your reactions before they cause trouble.

KEEP MOVING

DURING CANCER CARE



Physical activity is a powerful complement to traditional cancer treatment. Learn how to manage your strength, energy, and mindset.

BY **NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI**

IN 2021, Angela Runyon had finally finished 18 months of treatment for stage IV kidney disease, brought on by a rare postpartum blood disorder, when she got the news: A routine mammogram and subsequent biopsy revealed that Runyon had stage IIB, triple-positive breast cancer.

The mom of three was devastated. "It's an incredibly aggressive cancer. Within a week, I got a port. The day after, I was doing chemotherapy."

Prior to the birth of her third child, Runyon, who lives in Tucson, Ariz., had regularly been doing yoga, running 5Ks, and hiking. But with all the health issues she'd been navigating since then, she felt deconditioned going into cancer treatment.

"It really did impact my mental health and my anxiety," she recalls. "I wanted to try and build up some stamina and do some exercising, but I wasn't quite sure what I was going to be able to do."

A friend invited Runyon to join the Tucson Cancer Conquerors (TCC), a group of about 200 women who meet for exercise classes, walks, and other physical activities.

"The thing about TCC is you don't just sit around in a circle, tell your story, and cry," says Runyon. "This group is really active. They're not going to let you just sit there and wallow in misfortune. They're going to help you literally move through it."

Before she knew it, Runyon was taking TCC's chair-based fitness classes and meeting new friends for walks, which she continued to do throughout treatment. She eventually worked her way up to TCC's most advanced strength-training class. (She is now cancer-free and still attending.)

Not only did exercise help Runyon regain strength and return to the physical activities she loves, but it was key to maintaining her mental health. "I always feel better when I'm exercising," she says. "I'm less anxious and more able to stay in the present moment instead of ruminating about recurrence."

Exercise is a powerful way for cancer patients and survivors to support their bodies and minds amid a multitude of passive treatments.

"Many of the benefits of exercise, whether you have cancer or not, are the same," says Colin Champ, MD, CSCS, a radiation oncologist, integrative- and holistic-medicine physician, and strength and conditioning coach who runs the Allegheny Health Network Cancer Institute's Exercise Oncology and Resiliency Center. "You feel better, you look better, you build muscle mass, you increase mobility. Exercise helps your mood, and it helps you sleep better at night. All those [benefits also] happen when you have cancer; the difference is that all those things are a lot more important when you have cancer."

Our bodies need movement, says Champ — and yet, for many cancer patients, movement is an untapped resource for coping and healing.

A survey led by Memorial Sloan Kettering researchers, published in 2018, shows that 75 percent of respondents reduced their physical activity for a year or more following a cancer diagnosis — and for understandable reasons. Fatigue, pain,

"I'm less anxious and more able to stay in the present moment **instead of ruminating about recurrence."**

lack of motivation or discipline, and treatment side effects were all cited as barriers to exercise. If you're a cancer survivor or have ever supported a loved one through a cancer diagnosis, you know that the fatigue alone is enough to slow someone down.

Even healthcare practitioners have been slow to acknowledge the importance of integrating exercise into treatment protocols. A study published in 2016 found that only 35 percent of oncology providers communicated with patients about the benefits of physical activity. However, a 2018 survey indicated that 79 percent of oncology clinicians agreed that they should recommend physical activity to their patients.

Understanding both the why and the how can help you or your loved ones develop a healthy movement practice during cancer treatment — even with its many challenges.

PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF EXERCISE DURING CANCER CARE

A study published in 2023 in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* found that "people diagnosed with cancer who regularly exercise reduced their risk of dying from all causes by 25 percent compared with people with cancer who did not exercise." The study analyzed 11,480 people with different types of cancer who provided complete data about their exercise. Researchers followed some people for up to 25 years.

Champ is a proponent of the soil-and-seed mindset, where if your soil is healthy, weeds don't have a chance to thrive. "The healthier the terrain overall, the less chance we're going to have cancer coming back," he says. (Learn more about the terrain theory at ELmag.com/cancerterrain.)

We know that exercise can reduce inflammation, increase muscle mass, improve metabolism, boost immune response, and lower blood glucose — all things that lead to improved overall health, he explains. On the other hand, having excess adipose tissue and inflammation can increase the risk of cancer returning.

Cancer patients sometimes report not exercising due to treatment side effects, but regular exercise can offset those side effects, Champ adds. For instance, most women with breast cancer undergo antiestrogen treatment, which leads to bone weakness.

Some women also go through chemotherapy, which causes neuropathy and muscle loss, he says. "You give someone imbalance, poor nerve function, and weak bones, it's a recipe for disaster. It's a huge fall risk and it's a hip-fracture risk."

Resistance training, however, helps maintain or even build muscle mass and bone density to reduce both risks.

"The healthier the terrain overall, **the less chance we're going to have cancer coming back."**

In some cases, exercise may help cancer patients better tolerate chemotherapy, preventing delays in treatment, says Jenny Spencer, RN, BSN, an oncology nurse at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and a cancer exercise specialist.

MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF EXERCISE DURING CANCER CARE

Beyond its many physical benefits, exercise can be a powerful tool for supporting mental health throughout cancer treatment. Aerobic exercise has been shown to be an effective intervention for cancer-related fatigue, sleep disruption, and anxiety.

Coupling exercise with a social support network, such as a group fitness class or walking group, has the additional benefit of improving accountability and helping cancer patients feel like they're not alone.

Elizabeth Almli, MD, is an anesthesiologist, ACSM-certified personal trainer, certified cancer exercise specialist, and founding member and president of TCC. Almli was inspired to head the group because of her own experience with a difficult cancer diagnosis and treatment. Like Runyon, she was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer in her 40s. Though she was supported by family, Almli felt isolated after a year of enduring chemotherapy and multiple surgeries.

"Throughout the entire treatment year, the thing that kept me sane was exercise," she recalls. "Not just the physical part of making my body stronger, but the mental part of socially being out with people and not feeling so fatigued.

"The literature tells us that exercise is beneficial in improving sleep and reducing stress, anxiety, and depression. Often, cancer patients are receiving high-dose steroids with their chemotherapy, making it nearly impossible to sleep. Not sleeping makes you tired, which makes you reluctant to exercise. Ongoing fatigue increases our anxiety [and] our perception of pain and adversely affects our mental health.

"So, when you say, 'I'm so tired I can't exercise,' the truth is, you're so tired you need to exercise."

Oncology-specialized trainer Mark Schneider, NASM-CPT, ACSM, agrees. "We can again look at the benefits [that] exercise has for the long-term health of the general public and amplify that effect for those who have dealt with cancer," says Schneider, who owns the Retreat Strength Gym in Minnesota and is director of Survival to Strength, a nonprofit that connects cancer patients and survivors to free strength training.

"There is evidence of reduced recurrence of many cancers when an exercise lifestyle is maintained. Increased quality of life, sustained autonomy posttreatment, healthier immune and hormone function . . . the whole deck of health is stacked toward a better health outcome for the cancer survivor."

6 GUIDELINES

FOR EXERCISING DURING CANCER TREATMENT

The recommendations for exercising during cancer treatment are not that different from those geared toward the general public, experts say. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends that healthy adults engage in moderate-intensity aerobic exercise for at least 150 minutes per week, of which at least two days should include some resistance training.

1. GET STARTED NOW.

The sooner you start moving, the better, says Spencer. "A lot of people think, *I don't need to work on this now*, and so they wait until treatment is done. At that point, they may be tired and deconditioned, and side effects possibly could have been mitigated if they had started moving sooner.

"For the most part, everyone can be moving more: It's just about meeting [yourself] where you're at. If you haven't been active your entire life and now you're going through treatment, you might be doing five minutes a day and building up from there."

2. MAKE A PLAN WITH YOUR CARE TEAM.

"Besides getting the initial clearance to work out, it's important to find out if there are any issues you should be particularly concerned about," says Champ. "Ask: 'Based on the surgery I had, is there a decreased range of motion? Are there concerns because of chemo? Are there concerns because of [my] immune system?' All those things come into play."

Experts recommend working with an exercise professional who can communicate and collaborate with your care team. This helps ensure safety while increasing the effectiveness of workouts.

"Much like medical treatment, this should all be done in person under expert personnel. But also it has to be dose-escalated," says Champ. "If I give you a low dose of radiation, it's not going to cause any side effects, but also it's not going to work."

Some of the most prominent cancer organizations, including Mayo Clinic and Memorial Sloan Kettering, promote exercise as an integral part of treatment plans. There are also trainers, physical therapists, and other movement professionals who have experience with cancer and may be a resource for you.

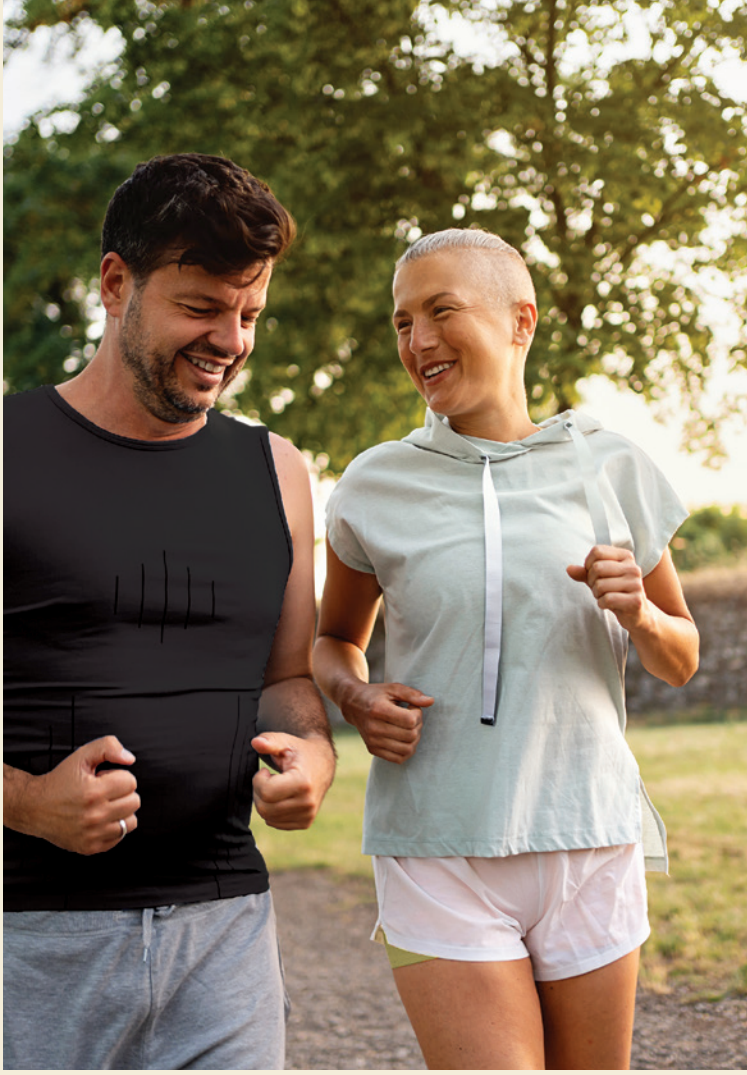
"While there are certifications out there in the field, there isn't a generally accepted approach saying, '[This] is the right way,'" says Schneider. "The best option would be for the fitness professional to stay in contact with the oncology team to make sure they are clear on treatment and potential side effects, and [that] the team is aware of exercise and recovery the patient is going through."

3. TAKE IT ONE DAY AT A TIME.

Cancer treatment has a cyclical nature, explains Spencer. "The first one to five days after chemo, a patient may be feeling bad, but the closer they get to the next cycle, the more energy they'll have. It's important to reassure them it's normal not to feel their best after treatment. Doing something at a lesser intensity is OK, as long as they're still moving." (Find a gentle somatic workout designed to support your well-being at ELmag.com/somaticworkout.)

That said, not every day has to be an easy day. When a patient is feeling good, Spencer advises, the approach to exercise should look much the same as it does for someone without a cancer diagnosis: Progressively increase the load, intensity, and volume of workouts to match energy and fitness level.

Champ uses a red-, yellow-, and green-light system so patients can let him and other trainers know how they're feeling. Red means they need an easy day, yellow means they can push a little harder, and green shows they're ready for a regular workout.



4. TO MAXIMIZE YOUR BENEFITS, MAXIMIZE YOUR EFFORTS.

When patients come to Champ's facility, they get a quick lesson in the principle of progressive overload: To see results, you need to continue to put your body under additional stress.

"Whether you're on nasty chemo or you're not on chemo at all, we're going to overload you. It's just figuring out personally where you are and what that level of overload is," says Champ. This approach helps ensure that patients aren't simply going through the motions — that the work they're putting in is effective.

"If we think we're going to put on muscle with exercise, it has to be exercise that's going to cause you to put muscle mass on," he adds.

Similarly, Almli urges cancer patients to challenge themselves with their cardio workouts. "A lot of people think, *Well, I'm just going to walk*. But you need to walk fast enough to get your heart rate up. If it took you 25 minutes to walk a mile on the treadmill, that's probably not an effective cardio exercise. We're human beings; we're supposed to walk," she says. "I love the idea of some sort of wearable technology so you can see what your heart rate is doing."

5. BE AWARE OF RED FLAGS INDICATING YOU'RE DOING TOO MUCH.

"I tell people it's OK to be tired; it's not OK to be hurting," says Almli. "If you want to stop because you're tired, challenge yourself to do a little bit more."

To gauge if a client has pushed too far — or not far enough — Schneider watches for changes in mental clarity or brain fogginess, windedness, strength gain or loss, pain, decreased range of motion, and fluctuating emotional states.

"The biggest tell will be if they can recover quickly," he says. "The metric I use is 'Work as hard as you can while being able to do it again tomorrow' — not necessarily the same routine but being able to maintain a similar intensity level."

"The metric I use is **'Work as hard as you can while being able to do it again tomorrow'** — not necessarily the same routine but being able to maintain a similar intensity level."

6. FIND AN ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNER.

"It's really hard to exercise on your own, especially if you don't feel well," says Almli. "But if you get a buddy and start slow, you have someone to hold you accountable." You can make regular plans with a friend to meet for walks, join a group fitness class, or work with a personal trainer.

She recommends scheduling exercise like you would an appointment.

"When you're going through cancer treatment, your calendar is so full of things you don't want to do — labs, scans, doctor appointments, chemotherapy, radiation, et cetera. Add some exercise with a friend, so when you look at your calendar, it gives you something to look forward to."

REGAINING SOME CONTROL OVER YOUR HEALTH

When professional runner Gabriele Grunewald was diagnosed with a rare terminal cancer, running became her coping strategy during rounds of treatment. Grunewald not only continued to run but took her career to a higher level, powering through treatment to place second in the 1,500-meter Division I 2010 NCAA Championships.

Before her death in 2019, Grunewald created the Brave Like Gabe Foundation to advocate and raise money for treatment of rare cancers — and to inspire those undergoing cancer treatment to pursue their fitness goals and share their stories of bravery.

"From the very first day I was told I had cancer in 2009, I knew running would be a big part of my journey back to health," she wrote. "Physical activity is a critical part of cancer prevention and is also a way for patients and survivors to ease treatment side effects, tolerate new therapies, and improve their mental health. . . . It has truly been my refuge; when everything else seems to be going wrong and the outcomes are far beyond my control, I can find perspective and hope on the run. . . . You could say I run on hope."

Most people don't take a cancer diagnosis and channel it toward athletic success, but Grunewald's words resonate with many cancer patients and survivors. Exercise is key to supporting mental health. The challenge lies in building a movement practice that feels empowering and supportive. How this looks will vary from one individual to another.

"The hardest thing to maintain while going through a potentially traumatic experience is a sense of curiosity and wonder," says Schneider. "You will have harder days and easier days — days that feel like you can't handle things anymore and other days that feel like your normal.

"Through that entire roller coaster of feelings and experience, continually asking yourself *I wonder if I can* . . . or *I want to try* . . . , will act as a current that pulls you through tough parts, makes the easy parts feel more adventurous, and may shine a light on unknown possibilities."

Ultimately, exercising can be a practice of gratitude — whether you're feeling grateful for the ability to move your arms while sitting in a chair or grateful to keep running when nothing else is in your control.

"Encourage yourself the way you would encourage a friend. Be thankful for what your body can do, instead of focusing on what it can't," says Almli. "Any gains that we have, we need to give ourselves credit. Cancer treatment is the most challenging thing I've ever done. But you can really feel empowered by regaining control over your health and just showing up."

NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI is an *Experience Life* contributing editor and personal trainer in River Forest, Ill.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REAL LIFE

MORE THAN A QUARTER of American adults live with at least one disability. On **page 82**, learn how you can be an ally to the disability community by challenging ableism, advocating for accessibility, and ensuring that the voices of people with disabilities are heard.

Summertime Hygge

Creating a sense of coziness isn't just for winter months.

BY **KATIE DOHMAN**

BY NOW, you might be familiar with the art of hygge (pronounced *hoo-gah*), which hails from Denmark, home to one of the world's most consistently happy populations. The word has no direct translation in English, but according to Meik Wiking, CEO of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen and author of *The Little Book of Hygge*, it may have roots in the Old Norse hygga, "to comfort," to which the English word "hug" is also related. Essentially, hygge means coziness, comfort, and a sense that one is enveloped in well-being.

While many Americans may practice hygge by embracing fluffy down blankets, roaring fires, and candles in their homes for comfort during the days with the least light — an approach Wiking calls a "survival strategy" for "the duvet of darkness" — the concept permeates all aspects of Danish culture. That means hygge has its place in the warmer months, too. Plus, if you live somewhere with warm weather year-round, you needn't miss out on hygge's happifying benefits. Here's how.

USE TRANSITIONAL SPACES.
Porches are the ultimate indoor-outdoor hygge hotspots, but patios, decks, or even a corner of a yard can be welcoming sanctuaries, so long as they're comfy. Think about outfitting the space with a snuggly seat or a swinging hammock. Fill a beautiful pitcher (true hygge fanatics prize ceramics) with icy sun tea or water infused with your favorite fruit. Admire its sweaty, condensation-covered surface as you relax.

KEEP THE FIRES BURNING.
If you snuff the candle wicks in warmer months, think about creating a gathering place at the backyard firepit, says Martin Klarborg, co-owner of the Danish home-decor brand Klarborg.

He suggests keeping fires simple and small in the summer. The point is the gathering. Toast some marshmallows as the sun sets; wear an oversize hoodie if the evening turns cool.

BRING THE OUTDOORS IN.
Think fresh flowers from the garden or finds from the farmers' market. Put your fresh tomatoes in a beautiful bowl at the center of the table.

Open the windows and let in the breeze, especially in the evenings. "Living in hot climates like Texas, where the outdoors can feel oppressive, we create indoor sanctuaries," says Jessica Maros, principal and designer at Maros Designs in Dallas.

PARE THE CLUTTER.
In hotter weather, simple, clean surfaces can feel like relief from the heat. Maros suggests decluttering routinely and keeping in view only the things you need and love best.

ENGAGE THE SENSES.
Hygge means meeting your senses in the moment. Summer hygge could be, as Wiking suggests, enjoying the smell of sunscreen and fresh-cut grass, or appreciating the feel of salt on your skin after a swim. Being present is key.

Touch: Think about the nice light weight of a cotton waffle-weave throw when a breeze creates a slight chill, perhaps during an afternoon downpour. That's hygge.

This feeling extends to fashion — ideally casual and simple. An oversize button-up linen camp shirt or sundress can do the trick here. The idea is comfort and ease.

Smell: Cozy scents still have a place in hygge-like summer venues. If you love having a fragrance linger, consider burning incense. Maros suggests lighter scents, such as palo santo, cedar, or pine. "They not only create a serene atmosphere but also invite a sense of grounded warmth into your home," she says.

In the yard, try incense sticks that incorporate insect-repelling essential oils, like citronella and geranium.

Hear: The sound of a crackling fire is the most hygge-like sound there is, notes Wiking. But any natural soundscape will do: birds singing, waves crashing on a shore, wind blowing through the leaves.

Maros adds that "design around daily rituals" can promote a feeling of ease and comfort. So if you love music, add a nook to your living room for listening to records or playing instruments.

See: In summer, create a warm, welcoming atmosphere and capture the visual feel of candlelight with strings of twinkle lights in the backyard. Cozy up with cushions, light throws, or slouchy camp chairs, and invite neighbors for popcorn and a movie projected onto the side of the garage. The community gathered around you is even more important than the items you choose.

Taste: Hygge often involves a sweet treat, Wiking says. In summer, that could be a midafternoon melty-cold ice-cream cone, a picnic basket packed with cheese and wine, or an evening barbecue smorgasbord — whatever feels like sweetness to you.

As with most things hygge, food rituals emphasize community and beauty. "Set the table outside and take some extra time doing it," suggests Klarborg. "When your guests arrive, they can tell that you created a cozy atmosphere. When the barbecue is going and you are all enjoying yourself, the sense might not be hygge — but just wait until the evening settles.

"When everyone is sitting down around the table, the sun has set, and the sky is lit in the last remaining light and you're all quiet, someone might say, 'This is quite a moment, isn't it?' Right there, in that second and the moment before it, that sense of contentment, safety among friends, and appreciation — that is hygge."

KATIE DOHMAN is a writer and editor based in St. Paul, Minn.

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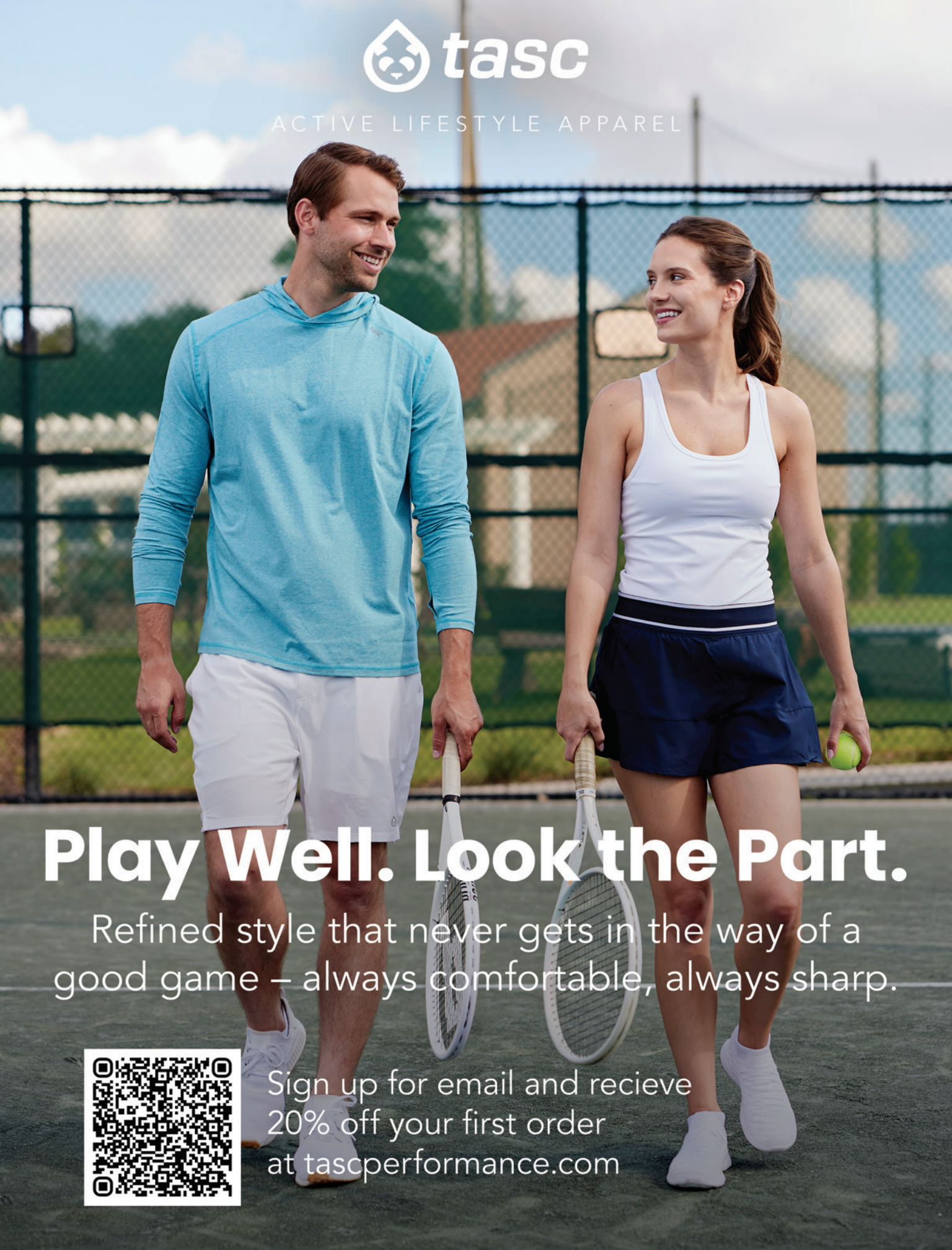
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Creatine and Your Brain

A favorite of athletes, this energy-enhancing supplement might also support your mental health.

BY **HENRY EMMONS, MD**

CREATINE is an enduringly popular supplement among fitness enthusiasts. It supports energy production at a cellular level, and athletes use it to improve endurance, reduce fatigue, and speed recovery.

The majority of the body's creatine is stored in the muscles, but the brain uses it too. It offers the same support for energy in the brain as it does in the rest of the body.

Most research into creatine has focused on athletic performance and skeletal muscle, but studies now confirm that it also bolsters brain function. Around 20 percent of our energy resources go to power the brain, which is taxed by stress.

Some psychiatrists have even begun adding creatine to their patients' toolkits for treating common mental health challenges like depression.

SUPPORTING THE BRAIN

Creatine is a compound made from amino acids, the building blocks of protein. It plays a key role in metabolism by helping to recycle adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the fuel produced in our mitochondria.

ATP is essential for cellular health and overall physical well-being. Creatine helps restore this cellular energy, which is one reason athletes love it.

This energy-production system plays a role in most illnesses, including mental health disorders. Creatine influences the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine, which help regulate mood. It may also protect brain cells by reducing damage from inflammation and oxidative stress.

All of this has led scientists to look at creatine as a means of supporting cognitive function and overall mental health.

ADDRESSING DEPRESSION

Depression is a complex condition, and while most biological treatments target neurotransmitters, like serotonin and dopamine, there's growing interest in targeting the brain's energy metabolism.

This is where creatine plays a key role. Because standard depression treatments are often only partially effective, several studies have explored using creatine alongside other methods — including pharmaceuticals and talk therapy — to produce a more complete response.

A study published in 2012 showed that women with major depressive disorder taking creatine alongside a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor, or SSRI, displayed faster and more complete symptom relief than those on medication alone.

And a 2025 study found that creatine enhanced the positive effects of cognitive behavioral therapy.

Why would creatine help these other treatments work better?

By maintaining ATP levels in the brain, creatine supports neurotransmitter synthesis and function. Its ability to protect neurons from oxidative stress and inflammation — both of which have been implicated in depression — is another likely reason.

Researchers are also studying creatine for its potential to treat additional neurological and psychiatric conditions. Preliminary findings suggest it may help address bipolar disorder, anxiety, and even neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.

The evidence is still preliminary, but creatine's neuroprotective properties and ability to support mitochondrial function make it a promising candidate for healing the brain.

PART OF A HOLISTIC MENTAL HEALTH PLAN

As an integrative psychiatrist, I haven't routinely recommended creatine yet, but I'm watching the research carefully.

I discuss its potential benefits and risks with patients who have persistent fatigue or with those who respond only partially to antidepressants.

Creatine is widely considered safe, but I think it's still important to check kidney function and potential medication interactions.

Finally, I like to remind my patients that supplements are just one piece of the mental health puzzle. Nutrition, sleep, movement, and interpersonal connection are all foundational to mental wellness.

With the support and guidance of a reputable healthcare provider, creatine can be a promising addition to a mental health toolkit, especially when other treatment methods fall short.

There's still no substitute, however, for a holistic approach that addresses the specific needs of your body and mind.

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

How to (Actually) Take Time Off

Many of us feel guilty about stepping away from work — and overwhelmed by the effort it takes to plan, prep, and pay for vacations. These strategies can help.

BY **JON SPAYDE**

WHEN IT COMES to paid time off, American workers get the short end of the stick. In Spain and Germany, for example, full-time employees receive at least four weeks off each year, as mandated by law. In the United States, meanwhile, the average vacation policy for workers with a year of service offers 11 days, and it takes around 10 years of service to accrue up to 19 days per year. As many as a quarter of all businesses don't offer any vacation time at all.

What's more, millions of Americans who do receive vacation time don't use all of it. According to a 2023 survey of U.S. workers by the Pew Research Center, nearly half (46 percent) said they don't use all the time off their employers offer.

The hesitation is understandable. The thought of work piling up, uncertainty about job security in an increasingly unpredictable economy, and the intense return-to-office push on the part of many employers — a reaction to the work-at-home boom of the COVID-19 years — can make workers nervous about leaving their desks unattended.

In addition, travel can be prohibitively expensive, and the challenge of choosing what to do with limited free time can make vacations feel like more trouble than they're worth.

But multiple studies have shown that taking time off isn't simply an indulgence — it's essential for health and productivity.

In short, vacations are worth the trouble.

John de Graaf, editor of the book *Take Back Your Time*, explains how to overcome vacation anxiety and reclaim your leisure time.

STRESS SOURCES

You're concerned about work backlog. "People worry that while they're away the emails will pile up and there will be no one to cover for them," says de Graaf. This can lead people to postpone time off indefinitely.

You anticipate resentment. You may be convinced that the people who cover for you will resent you for it — and that you'll have to deal with their animosity when you return.

You fear being perceived as a slacker. Even though you've earned your vacation time, you might worry that if you use it, you'll be seen as less devoted to your job. If you're self-employed, you might feel pressured to always be on call, lest your clients take their business to someone else.

You've got an antivacation work culture. "You have some managers who will say or imply, 'Loyalty means being here all the time,'" says de Graaf. Some executives brag about never taking time off. It's hard to swim against this tide.

You suffer from workaholism. You may have internalized the widespread American attitude that relentless labor is more commendable than a balanced life, he says. You may believe that taking time off is a sign of laziness, that you don't deserve a vacation, or that a serious job means never taking breaks.

You worry about money. People may feel like a vacation needs to be expensive to be "worth it." If this is your belief and you can't afford the expense of a fancy cruise, a trip abroad, or an all-inclusive resort, you're likely to skip vacations altogether.

Scheduling is a hassle. Planning a vacation can be a challenge, especially when it involves navigating multiple work and social calendars. "You and your partner may have different schedules, so it's hard for the two of you to find time to go away together," says de Graaf. If you add kids or pets to the mix, things can get even trickier.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Treat vacation as a healthcare investment. Contrary to popular belief, taking a vacation is not a luxury: It's essential for your overall health.

"There's plenty of evidence that people who regularly take vacations are much less likely to have heart disease than people who don't," de Graaf notes. "A study found that women who don't take regular vacations are about twice as likely to suffer from depression. And their susceptibility increases the longer they delay taking a vacation."

Plan trips well ahead of time. "People who plan vacations are far more likely to take them," says de Graaf, adding that most planning stress results from a lack of time. Planning ahead lets you take advantage of cheaper airfares and more lodging options. Starting early also lets you imagine a variety of possibilities, which can make planning fun instead of frustrating.

Make arrangements with work colleagues. Give those who rely on you plenty of notice before you take off. Establish who will cover for you while you're gone and agree on how you can return the favor. This can reduce stress on both sides, says de Graaf.

Understand the benefits. If your manager discourages taking time off, try sharing research about how vacations improve productivity. If you're self-employed, read such research articles to your inner taskmaster.

Take the vacation you can afford. If you're strapped for cash, an expensive vacation can cause more stress than it relieves — but there's no reason that a trip has to be expensive. "When I was a kid, my family didn't have a lot of money, so we went camping," de Graaf says. "It didn't cost very much, and it's what I remember most fondly from my childhood."

You can also take staycations, which cost almost nothing. What's not to love about spending a week sleeping late and drinking coffee in your pajamas at home?

Go away by yourself. If coordinating a vacation with your partner or family is simply not feasible every year, take a trip by yourself and encourage your partner to do the same, advises de Graaf. "Vacation can be a nice opportunity to enjoy yourself on your own," he says.

It also gives you a chance to spend your time exactly as you like. This is important to do occasionally, since — like lost vacation days — your time isn't something you can get back.

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

ILLUSTRATIONS: LUCY DAVEY

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Just Do the Thing

Be generous without overthinking it.

BY **OLIVER BURKEMAN**

BACK IN 2001, when David Allen published the groundbreaking productivity book *Getting Things Done*, he coined the "two-minute rule": If you encounter a task that would take under two minutes to complete, just do it now.

He wasn't recommending that you spend your days ricocheting between random little activities the moment they pop into your head. His point was that anyone who takes a systematic approach to managing their time — with some combination of to-do lists, plans, schedules, and so on — inevitably incurs overhead.

Those lists and plans take time and effort, and for some smaller tasks, it's simply not worth it. By the time you've "clarified the next action," or made an entry on a list, or scheduled a time to focus on it, you could have just done the thing.

Case in point: Recently, I realized I'd made three separate reminders to myself to order new bags for the vacuum cleaner. There's no way this didn't use up as much time and effort as just ordering the bags.

AUTHENTIC GENEROUS IMPULSES

I've long practiced the two-minute rule as a way to power through tedious chores (even if far from perfectly, as indicated by my elaborate route to acquiring the vacuum-cleaner bags). Yet I was struck to hear meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein speak in similar terms about his own personal policy: Whenever he experiences the impulse to be generous, he tries to follow through on it, there and then.

What does this look like in practice? Imagine it occurs to you to send someone a message expressing gratitude, or to donate to a charity, offer money to a homeless person, or take a chore off your spouse's plate — and you act. You don't think about it too much. You just write the imperfect message or send off the donation and get back to your life.

Nongenerous thoughts (*I gave at the office*) may arise too, Goldstein notes. This is fine. There's no need to judge them.

But also: Just do the thing. Follow through. Don't wait.

Note that this suggestion isn't about acting on feelings of guilt or obligation. Nor is it another instance of the disingenuous social-media injunction to #BeKind. The point here isn't to try to be more generous than you currently are. On the contrary, the point is to notice the moments when you feel that way already — naturally and effortlessly. And then to not screw it up with overthinking.

I've found this practice fascinating. For one thing, acting on an authentic generous impulse (as opposed to the #BeKind kind) is almost hilariously rewarding, in terms of one's own mood. The power of small generosities is wildly underrecognized as a tool to feel better.

For another, it becomes clear that what usually stops me from being generous isn't that when I delay, some deeper mean-spiritedness takes over. Rather, when I overthink these gestures, I am usually setting the bar too high. I tell myself a message to a friend deserves real focus, so I'd better get all my other tasks out of the way first. Or I tell myself it's inefficient to give money to homeless people rather than to homelessness organizations. Arguably true, but irrelevant if you never get around to the latter.

Without this, I'm forever telling myself that I'm soon going to become the sort of person who does all these good things — and then the result is that I don't actually do them.

THE EASY OPTION

This approach is useful for all sorts of small things that matter but usually never get done, such as two-minute chores, generosity toward others, and generosity toward yourself — a concept more palatable than "self-care," and much needed these days.

It can be helpful to think about the time it takes to complete a task as including all the time you spend thinking about doing it, stressing about not having done it yet, and then actually doing it. This helps clarify that acting immediately isn't a matter of becoming more self-disciplined or pushing yourself harder.

Instead, it means sparing yourself the unnecessary hassle of having to-dos hanging over you — of waking up at 3 a.m. remembering some task you should have completed by now, or of feeling bad about not acting as generously as you wish you had.

From this perspective, taking action is the easy option. It's procrastination that's the burdensome one. So why not cut yourself some slack and just do the thing?

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

5 Ways to Support the Disability Community

Being an ally means challenging ableism, advocating for accessibility, and ensuring that the voices of people with disabilities are heard.

BY **JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC**

MORE THAN a quarter of American adults — that's more than 70 million people — live with at least one disability.

Some disabilities are visible; others, including many chronic illnesses, are not. Some disabilities affect mobility; others affect communication, development, learning, or behavior. Some of us are born disabled; others become so through illness, injury, or aging. And many folks live with multiple disabilities.

Even if you aren't disabled, chances are you love or work, exercise, go to school, worship, or ride the bus alongside someone who is. If you live long enough, you're likely to become disabled yourself.

"There's a saying that you can join the disability community at any time," says activist and author Emily Ladau. "That's not a threat. It's just part of the human experience."

Yet our society is still not built for the human experience of disability.

Despite the achievements of the landmark 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act and other public and private efforts, many disabled people are prevented from participating fully in society as it's structured. Access to spaces, technologies, and activities is often limited. Discrimination, exclusion, and segregation remain in housing, education, healthcare, and the workplace.

We have a long way to go to create a more equitable society, and every one of us, disabled or not, has the capacity to be part of the solution. First, we need to recognize how our assumptions about ability and disability are part of the problem.

Even if you aren't disabled, chances are you love or work, exercise, go to school, worship, or ride the bus alongside someone who is.

PERVASIVE ABLEISM

Ableism is "attitudes, actions, and circumstances that devalue people because they are disabled or perceived as having a disability," writes Ladau in her book, *Demystifying Disability*. She lives with multiple disabilities and uses a wheelchair.

Ableism presumes and prioritizes ability over disability, and it's woven into the fabric of everyday life, she says. Sometimes it's blatant, such as when disabled people are passed over for jobs, when events are held in inaccessible locations, or when disability is mocked or used as the punchline of a joke.

Often, however, ableism shows up as well-intended behaviors that point to an unexamined belief that someone who's disabled is "less than." For example, telling someone they're "so inspiring" for doing everyday tasks like grocery shopping is ableist, as is speaking to a disabled adult like a child, or rushing to help a disabled person without checking if they need or want help.

Ableism is so entrenched in our culture that many of us even shy away from the word "disability."

"There's this fear that it's a bad word," says Ladau. "It's stigmatized. We're socialized to think about 'disability' as a negative. But it really is the most straightforward, accurate terminology. It's not a bad thing; it just describes a facet of somebody's existence."

HOW TO BE AN ALLY

Ladau offers her own guidance for how able-bodied people can shift out of an ableist worldview and support people living with disability.

1. **Own your ableism.** If you're able-bodied, what drives your impulse to "help" people with disabilities? Is it pity, sympathy, or a belief that disabled people are helpless?

"The first step to being an ally is unlearning this misconception and recognizing that disabled people aren't in need of saving," Ladau writes. "We're in need of a world that recognizes our rights and our humanity without question."

2. **Mind your language.** Ableist words and phrases are embedded in our vocabulary, she notes. Euphemisms like "differently abled" or "special needs" reject the reality of disability. Metaphors like "fall on deaf ears" trivialize hearing loss. Words like "crazy" or "lame" are often used in daily conversation to describe people or situations, but to many disabled people, such words can feel like outright slurs.

3. **Work to fix systems, not people.** "There are many things I encounter as a disabled woman that I find very challenging," Ladau says. "I'm not denying myself the opportunity for care, but I'm asking that people don't try to 'fix' me, the human being. Instead, acknowledge that there are certain facets of my being that require support."

4. **"Nothing about us without us."** If you are a nondisabled person engaging with disability issues, yield the floor for your disabled colleagues. "Disabled people should be at the center of the conversation," Ladau says. "Be an advocate alongside. Be an advocate together. Don't try to be the loudest person in the room."

5. **Think journey, not destination.** We all have to start somewhere in understanding that disability is part of the human experience, she says, and we will make mistakes. "Sometimes you're going to say something harmful. Sometimes you're going to do the wrong thing. Sometimes you're going to offer help, and it's going to be awkward."

The key is to remember that the person in front of you is a whole human being and not someone in need of charity. When it's appropriate, just own your mistake, offer amends, and keep going.

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

INCLUSIVE HEALTH AND FITNESS SPACES

Disabled people benefit from health and fitness facilities as much as anyone else, yet they often face barriers the moment they come through the gym door.

"Imagine going to a fitness class and not seeing anyone who looks like you, or not seeing equipment you think you can use," says Sarah Winchester, a personal training leader who specializes in adaptive exercise at Life Time in Frisco, Texas. "The possibilities for you there would seem limited."

The following lists include examples of everyday barriers that disabled people face in some health and fitness spaces.

Physical Barriers

- Equipment placed too close together or gear left in pathways, making it difficult to navigate the fitness floor safely
- Weightlifting platforms without ramps, making it harder for people in wheelchairs to access
- Cable and pulley handles that are out of reach
- Loud, pumping music that overwhelms people with PTSD or sensory-processing issues

Social Barriers

- Mindsets that emphasize "optimal" performance over health and well-being
- Stigma, rude comments, or staring
- Expressed assumptions about what a disabled person should or should not be able to do
- Group dynamics that feel exclusive instead of welcoming

Small changes can make a big difference. As an advocate for making fitness more accessible, Winchester offers the following advice for trainers, staff, and members who want to make their health and fitness centers welcoming for all.

For trainers and staff

- Seek out continuing education through organizations like the National Academy of Sports Medicine or the American College of Sports Medicine.
- Advocate for facility changes — such as equipment relocation and settings adjustments — to make machines and equipment easier to access.
- Get creative with gear and modifications to support your clients.
- Be human. "The No. 1 skill for trainers is basic human connection," says Winchester. "Just be welcoming."

For members

- Put weights and other gear away when you're finished with them. "It may seem tedious, but it does make a difference," Winchester says.
- Lower machine cables and pulley handles to the halfway position when you're finished so people can reach them without asking for assistance.
- If you're able-bodied and regularly work out near or with someone who is disabled, introduce yourself and be friendly. Connections break barriers and lift the feeling of isolation for everyone.


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An Unexpected Question

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

ARE YOU HAPPY? Someone recently asked me this instead of the usual "How are you?" or "What's going on?" It caught me off guard and stopped me cold.

It wasn't because I didn't have an answer. Rather, I was struck by how rarely anyone asks it — and how rarely we ask it of ourselves.

It's a question worth sitting with. Some of the greatest minds in history considered it the only question that truly matters. The Dalai Lama wrote that the purpose of life is to be happy. Aristotle called it *eudaimonia*, the highest good, or the ultimate goal of a human life. Thomas Jefferson considered the pursuit of happiness so fundamental that he wrote it into the founding document of our nation.

Yet today, less than half of Americans report being "very satisfied" with their personal lives. Loneliness and depression are troublingly high. For all our chasing — the books, the apps, the optimized routines — happiness still eludes many of us.

I keep coming back to Jefferson's choice of the word "pursuit." I think he understood something we've forgotten: Happiness isn't a destination; it's the sense of satisfaction, joy, or contentment we experience along the way, when we're living fully, moving intentionally, and feeling connected to something greater than ourselves.

At Life Time, we witness on a daily basis how health and happiness are inseparable. For many, our clubs are a happy place providing connection and community. Not only are these members happy to be there, but they become physically and mentally healthier as they participate in activities day after day, week after week.

Meanwhile, other people walk through our doors relatively healthy, and as they get connected and find a class or routine they enjoy, they end up happier. I've watched this happen for decades, and I've spent a lot of time learning and thinking about why.

The answer is inside us.

When we move and train our bodies, our muscles don't simply get stronger. They act as endocrine organs, releasing proteins called myokines into the bloodstream when they contract. Also known as "hope molecules," myokines function like natural antidepressants, building resilience to stress, boosting immunity, and even reshaping the brain.

Exercise also increases the production of pain-relieving endorphins and endocannabinoids (the latter helps quiet anxiety and open us to connection, too). Our body, in motion, becomes its own pharmacy.

Researchers at the University of Michigan reviewed data on more than 500,000 people and found that exercise was linked to happiness across every age group and demographic. People who exercised even once a week felt happier than those who never exercised. Ten minutes a day produced measurable results. The findings suggest that the type of movement doesn't matter — everything counts.

But movement is just the start. Move with other people, and something even more powerful happens. Oxytocin, the bonding hormone, is released, helping us feel like we're part of something bigger.

This is known as "collective effervescence," that electric charge that's generated when humans move together. It's what we feel on a packed dance floor, doing the wave at a sporting event, or in a group fitness class.

Those connections may be the most important happiness variable of all. Researchers at Harvard have been studying happiness for over 80 years, and they've found that the greatest predictor of long-term human happiness isn't wealth, success, or even physical health. It's the quality of our relationships and the time we invest in the people we care about. We are wired for each other.

So, here's what I know to be true:

We have to move. Start as small as you need to. Take the stairs. Walk around the block. Do five minutes of anything. Notice the shift in your body and your mood.

We have to connect in real life. Have a conversation in person. Get lunch with a friend. Go on a group bike ride or run.

We have to contribute. Consider how you can give your time, attention, and care to others; you might feel a "helper's high" as a result.

Happiness isn't in the next thing you achieve or accomplish. It's already inside you — in your muscles, your physiology, and your capacity for human connection — and it's waiting to be released.

It shows up when you take care of yourself, your health, and your people.

So, I'll ask you the same question: Are you happy? If not, start moving. Your body knows the way.

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

I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.

— **BRENÉ BROWN**

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