

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL. •

Experience Life

SLEEP WELL

Tips for Getting
More Quality Z's

PAGE 66

6 Vagus-Nerve Activation Practices for **FINDING CALM**

PAGE 54

TAKE A BREATH

How to Rest Right
During Exercise

PAGE 60

REST & RESET

Self-development coach and author

AMBER LYON

on taking time for reflection and
greater self-awareness — so you
can be who you truly are.

PAGE 16

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2024

LIFETIME

TEN THOUSAND



NO-PINCH WAISTBAND

ANTI-ODOR TREATMENT

PREMIUM PERFORMANCE FABRIC

QUICK-DRYING & SWEAT-WICKING

OPTIONAL BUILT-IN LINER

5 POCKETS:
1 PHONE
1 CASH/CARD
1 KEY
2 FRONT

BONDED HEM

4-WAY STRETCH



**“IT’S MY GO TO SHORT FOR
ANY WORKOUT”**



THE INTERVAL SHORT

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CONTENTS

FEATURES



54 The Science of Settling Down

Stimulating the vagus nerve can relieve stress and anxiety, as well as depression, physical pain, inflammation, digestive distress, insomnia, and more. Discover tools and strategies that make relief accessible to anyone.

By Mo Perry



60 Right Rest, Right Time

We often consider exercise alone to be the key to achieving our fitness goals, but how we treat ourselves between sets of movement also makes a difference. Experts explain how to be more intentional about resting during your workouts — and why it matters.

By Andrew Heffernan, CSCS



66 A Good Night's Sleep

The healing power of sleep may elude us for any number of reasons — including insomnia — leaving us lying in bed worrying about the all-important rest we're *not* getting. Learn why quality sleep is so essential and what you can do when it becomes elusive.

By Laine Bergeson

Experience Life

November/December 2024

REST & RESET

IN EVERY ISSUE

4 EXPERIENCE LIFE DIGITAL

7 EDITOR'S NOTE

By Jamie Martin

9 TALK TO US

10 WELL INFORMED

New research on plant-based eating; how daytime activity contributes to better sleep; the science of why we dream; and more.

16 ON THE COVER

Becoming Naturally Magnetic

Author and self-development coach Amber Lyon on the principles that guided her through dark times — and how we can all find a path to self-discovery, courage, and joy. By Jill Patton, NBC-HWC

20 ONE HEALTHY HABIT

Create a Nighttime Ritual

Embrace the waning light of the season by creating cozy and calming practices for more restful, meaningful evenings.

By Courtney Lewis Opdahl

22 MY TURNAROUND

Power Up

On stepping back into the gym after a yearslong hiatus and finding a new passion in powerlifting.

By Joe Hays

87 PERSPECTIVE

By Bahram Akradi

88 MEDITATION





DEPARTMENTS

Real Fitness

26 THE WORKOUT

On the Wall

Lengthen and strengthen your body with these eight wall-Pilates moves.

By Nicole Radziszewski

31 BREAK IT DOWN

Savasana

This restful yoga pose can help reset and restore your body.

By Maggie Fazeli Fard, RKC, MFT-1, Alpha

32 UP YOUR GAME

Fall Better

Falling is inevitable, but you can minimize injury by practicing the right way to take a tumble.

By Lauren Bedosky

37 EXPERT ANSWERS

Your Evening Workout Wind-Down

When exercising at night leaves you too amped up for sleep, these expert tips can help you relax.

By Sarah Tuff

Real Food

40 NUTRIENTS

Nitrates Are Not What You Think

Despite their bad reputation, these nitrogen-based compounds are a vital piece of a nutrient jigsaw puzzle. Our bodies use them to make nitric oxide, which plays a major role in how well we age.

By Catherine Guthrie

46 SOMETHING SIMPLE

Deconstructed Roasted Turkey With Gluten-Free Gravy

Save time and oven space this Thanksgiving with this simple method for roasting a turkey.

By Kaelyn Riley

48 FOODSTUFF

The Place for Processed Food

Not everything that comes in a box, can, or bag is unhealthy. These are some of the minimally processed foods you may want to keep on hand.

By Rachel MacPherson

50 CONFIDENT COOK

The Plantiful Holiday

These entrées bring vegetables to the center of your holiday table.

By Maddie Augustin

32



80



Real Life

74 BALANCE

5 Ways to Practice Humility

An author and Soto Zen teacher on how humility can create connection — with others and yourself.

By Ben Connelly

76 JOY LAB

Seeking Self-Acceptance

Accepting yourself, just as you are, can free you from depression's grip.

By Henry Emmons, MD, and Aimee Prasek, PhD

80 RENEWAL

The Dilemma of Parenting Your Parents

Strategies to help adult children support their aging parents in a way that nurtures an even deeper relationship.

By Jon Spayde

83 NATURAL HEALING

What Is Reiki?

This energy-healing technique is designed to help the body heal itself.

By Courtney Helgoe

84 GREATER GOOD

The Gift of Giving Back

More than 20 ideas for practicing generosity this holiday season.

By Jill Patton, NBC-HWC

Experience Life

DIGITAL



Why Sleep Matters

Good sleep is essential to our health, vitality, and well-being. Unfortunately, it's also one of the first things to go when we're stressed. In this digital collection, we offer dozens of strategies and tips for sleeping well and reclaiming your health — along with natural remedies for insomnia. Scan the QR code below or go to ELmag.com/sleephealth to check out the collection.



CONNECT WITH US!

END THE YEAR STRONG

Keep your fitness efforts alive during the holidays with this countdown to 2025. It's designed to help you finish the year feeling powerful, confident, and grounded.

ELmag.com/endtheyearstrong

NATIVE WELLNESS

The founders of Well for Culture, Thosh Collins and Chelsey Luger, discuss the importance of decolonizing wellness and what we can all learn from Indigenous ancestral knowledge.

ELmag.com/nativewellness

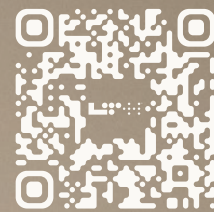
ZERO-WASTE GIFT WRAPPING

Looking for alternatives to wrapping paper? Try furoshiki — a traditional Japanese method — to make your holiday more eco-friendly. ELmag.com/giftwrap

15 EASY BRUNCH RECIPES

We've put together 15 simple and delicious brunch recipes that are perfect for feeding a crowd during the holidays. These nourishing recipes — including Autumn Breakfast Hash, Green Shakshuka, and Sheet-Pan Blueberry Pancakes — can fuel your days and save you time in the kitchen. Download our free guide by scanning the QR code or visiting ELmag.com/brunchguide.





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LIFE TIME
HEALTHY WAY OF LIFE

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

A Place Between

THE YOGA STUDIO was warm and dark, the only sounds the subtle instrumental music in the background and the quiet, steady breaths of my fellow practitioners. It was dusk on a brisk Sunday evening in the fall, and we had just arranged ourselves in seated wide-leg forward folds, our upper bodies and heads resting on bolsters and blankets, our legs splayed out to our sides.

We were maybe two-thirds of the way through the class, and this, the teacher shared, would be the longest hold of our practice. We'd already performed a variety of long-hold postures, which had challenged both my body and my mind. I wasn't sure how intense this stretch would be — would I struggle to stay in it? Would I crave movement instead of stillness?

Yet as I settled into the pose and reconnected with my breath, my body relaxed into the mat despite the persistent stretch in my hamstrings. My mind went quiet. I don't know how many breaths I took before I became aware of the seemingly in-between state I was in.

I wasn't asleep, but I definitely wasn't awake. I was aware of my surroundings yet restful; I didn't feel the need to react or do anything other than be. My mind felt open, clear, and at peace. And I remember thinking I wanted to stay there as long as possible — that I shouldn't do anything that might draw me out of that blissful experience.

I remained there until the instructor's voice brought us back to complete the practice. I have no clue how long we actually held the pose, but I do know I came out of it feeling wide awake and well rested — and wanting more of whatever *that* was.

I later learned that this calm and balanced state is often achieved through yoga nidra, or yogic sleep, a practice similar to guided meditation. The intent is to reach a deeply relaxing wakeful consciousness that supports the autonomic nervous system; it's particularly calming for the sympathetic nervous system (a.k.a. fight-or-flight), and has been found to help reduce stress and anxiety. It typically happens during savasana, or final resting pose (more on that on page 31).

Now, more than five years later, I still think about that class and the restful bit in the middle because of how good I felt afterward. It's something I've only experienced a handful of times but want more of in my life, especially now.

I'm in a phase that is particularly hectic and intense, in part by choice (i.e. training for a marathon) and in part by circumstance (think family and work responsibilities). Rest — particularly in the forms of postworkout recovery and unscheduled downtime — has been minimal, and I'm noticing the effects. Physically, my body is holding more tension and tightness; mentally and emotionally, I'm less patient and more reactive.

This issue of *Experience Life* is a reminder for me — and I hope for you too — of rest's importance to our health and well-being, and that it's available in many forms. Whether it's getting a good night's sleep (page 66), taking a few deep breaths (page 54), or establishing a calming nighttime routine (page 20), there are countless ways we can take good care of ourselves.

For me, that means slowing down and giving myself permission to just be — including returning more consistently to my yoga practice, stretching and breathing deeply, and, hopefully, revisiting that place between that feels so good.



I wasn't asleep, but I definitely wasn't awake. I was aware of my surroundings yet restful.



YOUR THOUGHTS?

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TALK TO US

PREPPING FOR A MARATHON

✉ I enjoyed Jamie Martin's Editor's Note about running her first marathon ("Ready to Expand," July/August 2024). She sounds like she's done all the right things so far in preparation for the event.

As a former marathoner (and running coach), I'd respectfully suggest she add one more thing: Either consult a running coach who helps people prep for their first marathon or go online and find a good marathon training plan. This will maximize two important goals in marathon running: First, get to the starting line! Don't underestimate how important this is. Second, finish the race with a smile on your face! (Extra-credit goal: Finish in a specified amount of time, e.g., under five hours.)

Fred B.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

🕒 After years of deep tissue massages, I added cupping to the repertoire ("What Is Cupping?," July/August 2024). I love it! I'm not sure yet whether it speeds recovery time, but I can say that it feels fantastic and adds an element of relief to bound-up back tension and pain.

@mrnsenfield

👤 This new approach sounds good ("The Problem With Using the RICE Protocol to Treat a Soft Tissue Injury," May/June 2024). For older people, however, trying to move something too soon can cause re-injury, which happened to me with my rotator cuff.

David W.

NO STATINS FOR ME, THANKS

👤 I've refused to take statins for years now ("Overstating the Case for Statins?," June 2024). Doctors want all diabetics on them, but I have no cholesterol issues and want to avoid chronic muscle cramps and spasms. A few friends have taken them, and now they suffer from cramps and spasms they never had before.

Timothy D.



UNDERSTANDING PARKINSON'S

👤 "Fighting Parkinson's" (June 2024) is the most detailed, comprehensive article I have ever read about this disease — and I read everything I can find about it. Not even I had any idea how many people are diagnosed with Parkinson's. It is, sadly, growing by leaps and bounds. This is an important read for everyone. No one knows when their life or that of a loved one may be affected.

Linda C.

THOUGHTS ON AGING & HEALTH

👤 We only slow down if we stop moving, stop exercising, and stop living a healthy lifestyle ("Do We Really Slow Down as We Age?," May/June

2024). I'm 64, I bike between 22 and 34 miles a day, and I've never felt better.

I also push-mow our yard weekly and handle all the yard maintenance. My doctor says that he rarely sees a heart, kidneys, and bones as youthful as mine. The secret to a long, healthy, and active life is moving. We were built to move, not to sit on our butts for hours at a time.

Marsha L.

👤 We can't reverse physical brain damage, but the effects can likely be mitigated ("On the Alzheimer's Frontier, Big Pharma Plays Regulatory Roulette," June 2024). Alzheimer's and dementia are nothing new. But instead of shutting Uncle Frank in a bedroom and feeding him, we now have better options due to better understanding. It's a long road ahead, but we must pursue it with or without government help.

Mike Y.

👤 I am 91 years old and have been a lifelong swimmer. My current water routine is two or three times a week of water aerobic exercises, stretching, and swimming a combination of crawl and backstroke for 50 to 60 minutes ("How Swimming Supports Healthy Aging and Longevity," July/August 2006). I walk independently, and I have worked through knee and shoulder arthritis problems. I attribute my full range of motion and general well-being to swimming.

Pat

LOVE LETTER

✉ I recently subscribed to your magazine after viewing it at a colleague's office. I fell in love! Your May/June 2024 issue would save me so much time having to explain the whys and wherefores of your "Dig In" and "The 7 Types of Rest" articles. These are the conversations I have with all of my clients. It's as though you were in my head! Reading it in your magazine would give credence to what I say every day.

Patti N.

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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In Praise of a PLANT-BASED DIET

STANFORD RESEARCHERS

in 2022 followed 22 pairs of healthy identical twins, randomizing one twin from each pair to either a vegan or omnivore diet. Their findings? The vegan diet improved cardiovascular health, insulin levels, and weight loss in as little as eight weeks.

The study was reported last fall in *JAMA Network Open* and formed the basis for the 2024 Netflix documentary *You Are What You Eat*.

Dietary studies are often hampered by several factors, including participants' genetic differences, upbringing, and lifestyle choices. "By studying identical twins, however, the researchers were able to control for genetics and limit the other factors, as the twins grew up in the same households and reported similar lifestyles," a study press release explained.

The twins averaged 39.6 years old; 34 identified as female, 10 as male. While 72.7 percent were white, others were Asian, Black, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or multiracial.

To further control for what they ate, participants were provided

The vegan diet improved cardiovascular health, insulin levels, and weight loss **in as little as eight weeks.**

planned meals delivered by a service for the first four weeks; they were asked to prepare the same types of meals on their own for the next four. Meals were chock-full of vegetables and fruits, legumes, and whole grains and lacking in sugars and refined

starches. The vegan diet was entirely plant-based, while the omnivorous diet included chicken, fish, eggs, cheese, dairy, and other animal-sourced foods.

Researchers weighed and drew blood from the twins at the start of the trial, half-way through, and at the end.

After eight weeks, all the participants had lower levels of LDL cholesterol, one of the key factors in cardiovascular health, but those eating a vegan diet saw a dramatic 10 to 15 percent drop. The average baseline LDL-C level for the vegan twins had been 110.7 milligrams per deciliter, and for the omnivore participants it was 118.5 mg/dL; it dropped to 95.5 for vegans and 116.1 for omnivores by the trial's end.

The vegan twins also saw their fasting insulin levels decline by about 20 percent (a higher insulin

level is a risk factor for developing type 2 diabetes).

In addition, vegan participants lost an average of 4.2 pounds more than the omnivores.

In a related study with the same twins, researchers looked at the effects of the two diets on epigenetics (gene activity that doesn't alter DNA), immune-system efficacy, and other aspects of aging. Again, the findings supported the benefits of a plant-based diet.

"Notably, the vegan cohort exhibited a significant decrease in epigenetic age acceleration, as demonstrated by reductions in multiple epigenetic aging clocks," the authors summarized. "These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the potential antiaging effects of plant-based diets, known for their rich antioxidant content and anti-inflammatory properties."

"Based on these results and thinking about longevity, most of us would benefit from going to a more plant-based diet," senior author Christopher Gardner, PhD, said in the release, adding, in a separate interview: "My science doesn't say people should be vegan; it just says people should eat less meat and more plants."

— MICHAEL DREGNI



**ACTIVE DURING
DAYTIME,**
Better Z's
at Nighttime

Conventional wisdom has long proclaimed that a healthy bedtime ritual is key to a good night's sleep. But a recent study suggests that physical activity may have more of an influence on sleep quality than was previously understood.

"When people think about sleep quality, they tend to focus on adjustments immediately before bedtime — for example, avoiding screens, not eating too much, and avoiding alcohol — but our research looks beyond this to the range of activities we undertake during the day," explains University of South Australia researcher Lisa Matricciani, PhD, in a news article about the research.

"What we found is that our daytime activities are tied to different aspects of our sleep, from sleep quality, sleep efficiency (how much of the time you

spend in bed when you are actually asleep), and the overall amount of sleep we get to levels of tiredness during the day and when we choose to go to bed."

Matricciani and her team analyzed data from 1,168 children (average age of 12) and 1,360 adults (average age of 44). Participants wore an activity monitor for eight consecutive days to measure their levels of activity and sleep.

When adjusted for a variety of socioeconomic variables, the results, published in the journal *Sleep Health*, indicate a strong associa-

tion between daytime physical activity and sleep quality.

At the same time, participants who spent more of the day sedentary had delayed bedtimes and earlier waking times in the morning, resulting in less overall sleep. Healthy bedtime rituals certainly won't hurt, but getting a restful snooze may not even be that complicated. "Everyone wants a good night's sleep. If it's simply a matter of being more active during the day, then it may be a relatively achievable goal for most of us," says Matricciani.

"Everyone wants a good night's sleep. If it's simply a matter of being more active during the day, then it may be a relatively achievable goal for most of us."

— CRAIG COX

**A CLOSER
LOOK AT
SKIN
CANCERS**



That lump on your shoulder that seems to be growing? The scaly lesion on your cheek that never seems to heal? Those minor blemishes may not be as benign as you think.

Signs of basal cell carcinoma, the most common form of skin cancer, are worth noting — and investigating. Leave these lesions and other nonmelanoma skin cancers (NMSC) untreated long enough and they can cause serious damage to tissue and even bone. Recent research, in fact, suggests that these forms of cancer now cause more deaths worldwide than does the more notorious melanoma.

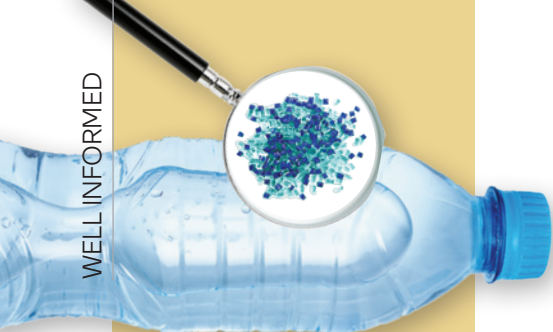
In an October 2023 paper, French researchers reported that NMSC were responsible for more than 63,700 deaths worldwide in 2020, compared with an estimated 57,000 melanoma-related fatalities.

These numbers can be deceptive: NMSC accounted for more than three-quarters of all skin cancers, with some 1.2 million reported cases in 2020, so the percentage of those cases that are fatal is much lower than that of melanoma. Yet lead study author Thierry Passeron, MD, PhD, a dermatology professor at the University Hospital of Nice, says that people need to take them seriously.

"We have to get the message out that not only melanoma can be fatal, but NMSC also," he says. "It's crucial to note that individuals with melanin-rich skin are also at risk and are dying from skin cancer. There is a need to implement effective strategies to reduce the fatalities associated with all kinds of skin cancers."

People at high risk include outdoor workers, older adults, and those with suppressed immune systems. Passeron calls for early detection by general practitioners to help lower the mortality rate. "Skin cancers are preventable and treatable, so we need to do more to ensure we are stopping the progression of this disease as early as possible to save lives."

— CC



THERE'S PLASTIC IN YOUR Bottled Water

That liter of bottled water that you're drinking contains an average of 240,000 microscopic pieces of plastic, according to a Columbia University study recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Using a new laser-imaging technique, researchers discovered that the number of micro- and nanoplastic particles in bottled water is between 10 and 100 times higher than previously estimated.

Nanoplastic particles are smaller than a micron, or 1/25,000th of an inch — far smaller than the human eye can see.

Where do these particles come from? The authors speculate that they may originate from the single-use polyethylene terephthalate (PET) and polyethylene (PE) bottles or from materials, like tubing or filters, used in the production, purification, or bottling process. But they also note that plastic contamination is in our environment at large.

The findings come amid increased warnings about the proliferation and hazards of nanoplastics. Recent studies find that nanoplastics in our system could lead the way to Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, cancer, and other systematic concerns.

— MD

HOLIDAY GIFTS FOR OUR PLANET

Between Thanksgiving and New Year's, Americans reportedly discard 25 percent more trash than usual. Consider these environment-friendly choices and you can not only reduce waste but also help keep our world a little cleaner during Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and other holidays.

HOLIDAY DECOR

Opt for real trees from a local, sustainable tree farm. Or consider a potted tree that you can plant when the ground thaws in the spring.

Dispose of your tree by finding a holiday-tree recycling initiative near you. Or if your community offers the service, put it out for curbside pickup and composting.

Choose energy-efficient LED holiday lights for decorating. They use at least 75 percent less energy than incandescent bulbs, plus they last many seasons longer. Put your lights on a timer to save even more energy. Old light strings can be recycled thanks to companies such as HolidayLEDs.com.

GIFTS

Think outside the store: Give homemade crafts or foods, educational gifts, or experiences instead of more stuff. And when you do buy gifts, opt for durable, recyclable, energy-efficient ones or items made from natural products.

Shipping a gift? Save and reuse packing material.

Avoid gag gifts and donate unwanted gifts to charity. A recent survey found that 53 percent of Americans receive an unwanted gift during the holidays — and while more than half will return or regift them, 12 percent throw unwelcome presents straight into the trash.

Rethink the gift wrap. It's said that up to half of the paper Americans consume is used to wrap and decorate products. Cut down on this by reusing gift bags, wrapping paper, and tissue paper.

Or consider other creative options, such as old maps, posters, calendars,

newspaper comics, or fabric. You could also wrap the present in another gift, such as a scarf, dish towel, or cloth napkin.

Save and reuse old ribbon, and consider alternatives such as string and yarn.

ALL THE TRIMMINGS

Send holiday wishes in recycled cards and envelopes. Americans send more than a billion holiday cards a year. Avoid cards and wrapping paper with plastic coatings or nonpaper additives; though pretty, these materials are not recyclable.

Or make your own cards and gift tags out of last year's cards and the wrapping paper you saved.

Remove your name from the mailing lists of mail-order catalogs you no longer wish to receive.

Offer rechargeable batteries and a charger if you're giving a gift that requires batteries. Americans

throw away an uncountable number of disposable batteries annually — billions, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

HOLIDAY MEALS

Forgo food waste with some thoughtful planning. In 2019, more than 66 million tons of food was wasted in the United States — 40 percent

of which came from households. Count your guests, plan menus, and buy only what you need. And invest in some sustainable food storage for all those tasty leftovers.

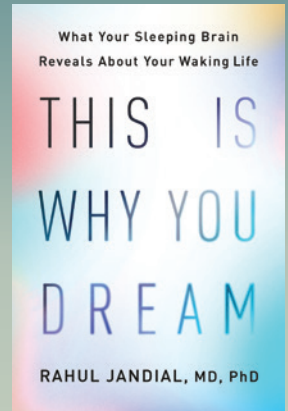
Bring out the real plates and flatware for special meals instead of paper plates and single-use plastic utensils. It's a special time! And invite family, kids, and even guests who want to help to join together and lend a hand with washing the dishes. It's all in the holiday spirit.

— MD



On the Forefront of Dream Science

Q&A With
Rahul Jandial, MD, PhD



WHEN WE DREAM, the brain's central executive network shuts down, which allows us to suspend our disbelief and not question the weird time, space, and logic jumps that take place in our dreams, explains neuroscientist and neurosurgeon Rahul Jandial, MD, PhD, author of *This Is Why You Dream: What Your Sleeping Brain Reveals About Your Waking Life*.

This is why you may dream that you're having an ice cream in a Paris café with an old boyfriend when your cur-

rent boss shows up and demands an overdue project. You turn to look at her, and suddenly you're in the office.

Forget the folklore of dream interpretations. Jandial's book explores and explains the frontiers of dream science to help you better understand your dreams — and the power they have to improve your life, alert you to possible illness, and provide insights about your deepest desires, your relationships, or your life choices.

Jandial spoke to us from his office in Los Angeles.

EXPERIENCE LIFE • Why do we sometimes wake up from dreams and still feel emotions sparked in the dream — including anger or fear?

RAHUL JANDIAL • That's an interesting point on the residue of an emotional dream. The dreaming brain is metabolically active, sparking electricity and using glucose just like the waking brain. The executive network is dampened; that gets out of the way. That's why we can have illogical jumps. And that's why dreaming about math is very rare.

The dreaming brain can have emotional "top speed," if you will, that the waking brain can't get to. So, when you tell me you experience something at night, those neurons are firing just the same as if that experience really happened. The top speed can be higher than the top speed of any emotion during the day.

So to me, it's not surprising that sometimes dreams affect you during the day. They endure; they color your temperament. It speaks to the biology of the dreaming brain and its hyperemotional states that the waking brain cannot get to.

The emotional systems in the waking brain might go 100 miles per hour at their most emotional, but the dreaming brain can get [even faster]. Not always, but

when it does, it shouldn't surprise you that the next day you're just viscerally affected by it.

EL • What about some of the myths about dreaming — such as if you die in a dream, you're going to die in real life? And what does it mean if you are falling in a dream?

RJ • The people who died in real life, they didn't come back to tell us. Falling and being chased are common dreams — through centuries, through cultures. What it speaks to is that if this is common to people in other parts of the world, from writings when there was a horse and carriage, there's something built in. We're inheriting the dreaming process from our ancestors. It's not an accident.

EL • You write about identifying early warning signs of health issues from your dreams.

RJ • These are called warning dreams. The research relies on surveys and questionnaires, but some people with cancer and other diseases have felt that in the past they had dreams that may have suggested they should get evaluated.

EL • Can we solve creative problems during dreams?

RJ • When we go from our waking brain to our dreaming brain, the sleep-entry period is not crisp; it's a blurry state of 10 or 15 minutes. During that time people feel they can introduce or extract thoughts. Not every time, not always, but there is a portal there for original ideas. Of course, "original idea" doesn't mean creative genius. That's got to be tested.

Sleep exit is on the other end. These hybrid or blurry states offer insights. That's when we're not completely under our own control. These windows may offer precious insight into ourselves that really no other technology or app or technique can. The liberated imaginative process is connecting dots we can't connect during the day, and then it kind of bubbles up for that aha! moment. 🧠

— KATHERINE REYNOLDS LEWIS



LEARN MORE

For a longer Q&A with neuroscientist Rahul Jandial, visit ELmag.com/whyyoudream.

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FLYVA







BECOMING NATURALLY MAGNETIC

Author and life coach Amber Lyon
guides us along a path toward
self-discovery, courage, alignment, and joy.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC • PHOTO BY KWAKU ALSTON

FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC and tumultuous childhood, Amber Lyon sought healing. Her early life in Auckland, New Zealand, was wracked by her father's drug addiction and the high-profile criminal case that sent him to prison just as she was heading to college. After years of internalizing the shame of her father's choices and trying to distance herself from her family's chaos, she became paralyzed by anxiety and depression.

"I was in a really dark space," Lyon recalls.

She turned to some of the most prominent voices in self-help, personal development, and spiritual wisdom. The teachings of author and seminar leader Tony Robbins were particularly valuable, launching her on a journey of healing and self-discovery. "His work helped me get clear on conscious attention, focus, goal-setting, and forward momentum, which was a wonderful place for me to start and an anchor during some hard times."

After graduating from the University of Auckland in 2018, Lyon moved to New York City to be close to her sister and pursue a career in modeling. But chasing modeling jobs left her feeling increasingly disillusioned and distant from what she felt was her true self.

Lyon's continued self-education led her to other popular sages, including meditation teacher Tara Brach, writer Michael A. Singer, and spiritual teacher Gary Zukav. Along the way she delved into visualization, self-hypnosis, neurolinguistic programming, and other tools for cultivating self-awareness and healing.

As she forged her path, Lyon turned to writing — a practice she began as a child as "an outlet for my own processing of the world." She launched Modern Mind, "an online journal of philosophical ideas and reflections on how to show up in alignment with more joy, ease, and opportunity." She soon extended her reach to Instagram, created the *Light Work With Amber Lyon* podcast, and started privately teaching what she calls the Magnetic Method as a self-development coach.

Published in June 2024, her book, *You Are a Magnet: Guiding Principles for a Magnetic and Joyful Life*, synthesizes the principles and teachings that have supported her, as well as the lessons she's gleaned from working with clients. Her Magnetic app offers daily meditations and affirmations to help rehearse new inner narratives.

Lyon uses the metaphor of a magnet to explain the nature of our minds and how to make lasting change.

"Magnets are always attracting or repelling. We are no different," she writes in the book's welcoming first pages. "Like a magnet, when we change our point of attraction, we change what we pull into our lives. . . . Whether consciously or not, we are co-creating our lives with our thoughts, feelings, and responses to our external environment. Magnetism requires us to take responsibility for our internal world and how our inner state shapes what we experience."

At 28, Lyon is translating age-old wisdom for a new generation of seekers and those wishing to live more authentically and joyfully. We spoke with her about the approach she lays out for others on a path of self-discovery.

**"Whether consciously
or not, we are
co-creating our lives
with our thoughts, feelings,
and responses to our
external environment."**

Q & A

WITH AMBER LYON

EXPERIENCE LIFE • Could you elaborate on the way you see the idea of magnets and how they either attract or repel as a foundational element of your book?

AMBER LYON • Our minds are magnets for information that validates our thoughts, feelings, and inner narratives. We don't create our lives so much as we curate them. It's fascinating to see this confirmation bias in real time. We have the same triggers and then the same flow of thoughts, and most of the thoughts we have today are the same thoughts we had yesterday. So what was once a conscious thought has now become unconscious.

But we each have the capacity to make our lives more conscious. It can be empowering to recognize our role in what we notice in our lives. I want people to feel a sense of possibility that they can draw in different data points and reaffirm a new story that leaves them feeling more capable, more joyful, and more loved.

EL • Can you summarize the basis of your Magnetic Mindset principle?

AL • Having a Magnetic Mindset is about trusting yourself to be the best source of your worth, of your decision-making, and of your values. This is where you shift away from trying to find answers from friends, family, celebrities, your job, your relationship, or the role you play for other people. It now comes from within, and you radiate it out. You bring it with you into every room you enter.

There's a deep sense of peace and grounding that comes when you no longer need to prove or justify yourself. The Magnetic Mindset is about living aligned with your values and your goals and building a life from a sense of self-trust and self-worth.

EL • In your book, you outline a path toward living more authentically and joyfully, starting with the principle of Alchemizing Fear. What do you mean by this, and why do you begin here?

AL • We're all coming from different energetic spaces. Working with clients

has taught me that if we try to jump ahead of where we're ready to work — if we dive into creating visions or taking new action too soon — we can shut down or pull back in a sort of fight-flight-freeze response. So I encourage people to start where it feels manageable and digestible so they can stay in a regulated emotional state.

Each section of the book is centered on a guiding principle. The section on Alchemizing Fear is about distinguishing between the fearful thoughts in your mind and your own internal guidance system, which is what I call intuition. It's about building self-awareness so that you can create space between a situation or thought and your response to it.

It's not sexy to be self-aware, but everything starts with self-awareness. Journaling is one way to get your thoughts out and see them in front of you. Breathwork and movement practices can be helpful. My practice, every day without fail, is meditation. I wish I could jazz it up and introduce different elements, but meditation is what allows me to become aware of my thoughts.

EL • How does the principle Cultivating Courage move us beyond being stuck in our resistance to change and growth?

AL • Cultivating Courage is about embracing the vulnerability to get it wrong, knowing it's all forward motion toward the outcome we're trying to build. Once we have more self-awareness and a reference point for what feels good in our body and in our heart, we can practice showing up in our life in new ways. We can take new action — giving ourselves permission to get it wrong sometimes and knowing we can make adjustments.

Fear festers in not making a choice, in our inaction. The more action we take, the more data points we have, and the more fine-tuned our decision-making becomes.

EL • You've said you could have written an entire book about the principle Living in Joy. Why is this so powerful for you?

The truth is, the things that truly deliver joy in our lives are often what we did not see, and could not have seen, coming.

@modernmind

AL • Many of us believe that joy is reserved for certain moments, and it can be triggering for someone in a lot of pain to hear that joy is available in every moment. Life is challenging, life is difficult, and life is pain. At the same time, life is joy, delight, connection, and beauty. It's really two sides of the same coin, but we may forget there's another side.

I have a lot of compassion for that resistance. For someone who's feeling far away from joy, I would just start with what's in reach. It could be a simple pleasure — drinking your favorite beverage, recalling a fond memory. What brings joy? What thoughts lift you up a little higher? And how can you make a little more time for that in your week?

When you are connected to joy, you bring that into every conversation, every room you enter. That energy is magnetic. 🧲

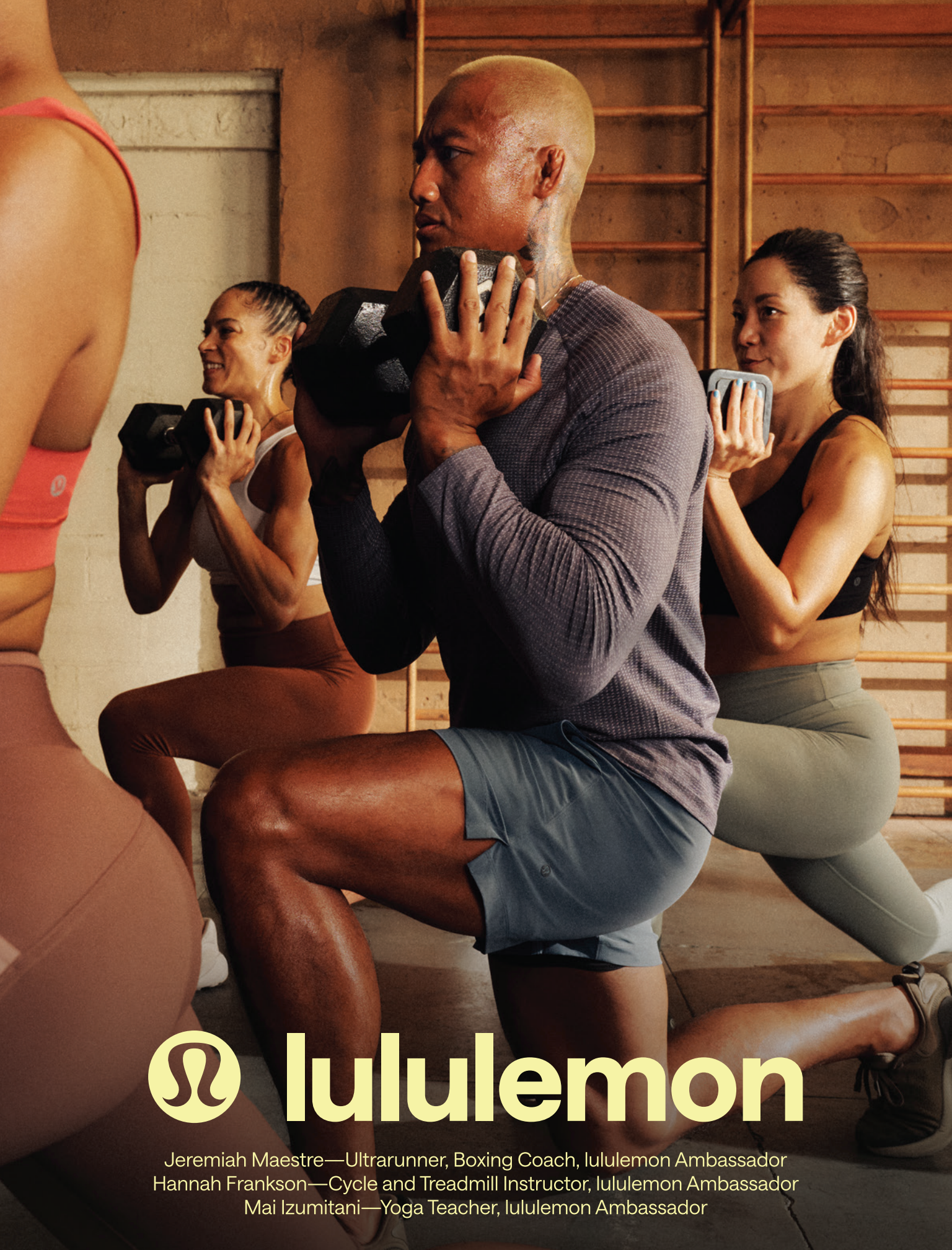
JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC, is an *Experience Life* contributing editor and an integrative health and wellness coach.



GO BEHIND THE SCENES

For a peek at our cover shoot with Amber Lyon, visit ELmag.com/lyonvideo.





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Hannah Frankson—Cycle and Treadmill Instructor, lululemon Ambassador
Mai Izumitani—Yoga Teacher, lululemon Ambassador

Create a Nighttime Ritual

Embrace the darker, quieter winter nights with habits that give your evenings more meaning.

BY COURTNEY LEWIS OPDAHL

WHY

After a full day, it can be tempting to collapse on the couch in front of the TV to disengage from the busyness of life. A mindful nighttime ritual, on the other hand, can make evenings more purposeful, healing, and calming. These meaningful self-care moments can help ease you into sleep more quickly by quieting busy brain chatter. Over time, they may even boost overall well-being.

HOW

Pick practices that help you transition from the workday or wind down after dinner: a relaxing bath, yoga, or reading a good book under a cozy weighted blanket; lighting candles and listening to music or writing in a gratitude journal. Perform these rituals slowly, and avoid heavy or fraught conversations, blue light, or scrolling mindlessly online.

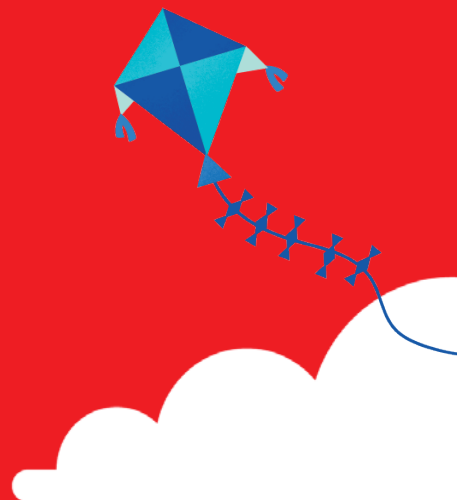
TAKE ACTION

Got 20 minutes or even an hour to spare? We've got a nighttime ritual idea for you! Find more calming rituals, including a bedtime yoga routine, at [ELmag.com/onehealthyhabit](https://www.ELmag.com/onehealthyhabit).



COURTNEY LEWIS OPDAHL is *Experience Life's* managing editor.

Nourishing a happy healthy future.



Power Up

On returning to the health club after a yearslong hiatus and finding a new passion in powerlifting.



BY JOE HAYS

Joe Hays readies for a squat at the 2022 International Powerlifting League Drug Tested World Championship in Cosa Mesa, Calif.

WHEN I ENTERED my first powerlifting competition, at age 58, I didn't know what to expect. I was an old, skinny guy with a gut, and I was worried that I would fail. I'd only gotten serious about fitness at age 55, a time when a lot of guys think they're past their prime.

Yet I swept every category in my age group at that 2018 event — I even broke four state records. It was so much fun and so validating: It proved that my hard work was paying off.

My performance surpassed my wildest expectations. I realized I had a talent, as well as a passion, for powerlifting.

I wanted to do it all again.

STAYING ACTIVE

I wasn't particularly athletic growing up. I played baseball, recreational soccer, and football, but I didn't do organized sports after sixth grade. I stuck to neighborhood hockey and discovered rock climbing in high school.

Fitness became less accessible after I graduated from college, but I found ways to fit exercise into my life. At one of my first jobs, I met a guy who was into bodybuilding. I wanted to be stronger, so I asked him for advice. He gave me a routine that

included free weights and machines, but I didn't have goals. Simply working out and "being in shape" felt like what I was supposed to do. Without direction, my progress stalled.

A couple of years after my first son was born, in 1993, Life Time opened a club near my job in Woodbury, Minn., and I joined as a founding member. I stopped by the club to work out during lunch and brought my family on weekends. It became more of a family affair after my second son was born, in 1995.

I can only focus on getting stronger now — and having as much fun as I can along the way.

Life got in the way as my sons grew older. I did a little of this and a little of that to stay in shape, but nothing stuck. Meanwhile, my diet consisted of fast food, ice cream, soda, and pizza.

In 2015, after our boys left home, my wife and I moved to be near the Life Time where I'd maintained my founders membership. I had no excuse not to go — but even so, I found

enough reasons to keep me away for a full year. I'd drive by the club and beat myself up for not going in. I told myself, many times over, *I have to start going there.*

And finally I just did.

BOOT CAMP

I walked in one night and saw a sign for an advanced group fitness class. I decided to give it a try — and got my butt kicked. I wasn't in any shape to participate in a class like that.

One of the instructors encouraged me to try a boot camp-style class with a combination of cardio and strength training. When I did, I was hooked. That's where I learned how to deadlift for the first time, and it turned out that I was pretty good at it. After that, I attended class three or four days a week.

I sought advice on how to change my eating habits to support my strength gains. At a trainer's recommendation, I began tracking my meals and monitoring my macronutrients. Hitting these goals more consistently helped me feel stronger and more energized for my workouts.

In early 2018, I started working with another personal trainer at Life Time, who helped me focus on building my chest. He introduced me to

powerlifting, and I quickly realized that I could keep up with the big guys. After a few months, he suggested I enter a powerlifting competition.

At these events, there are three lifts: squat, bench press, and deadlift. When it's your turn for a lift, you have to follow a referee's instructions for when to start, and you get three attempts.

Going into my first competition that August, I felt uneasy. *Would I be able to listen to and respond correctly to the referee's prompts while standing with 281 pounds on my back for a squat? Would I be able to squat to the proper depth so my attempt would be counted?*

I decided to let go of my anxiety. My coach would be there competing as well, and my wife and son were coming along for moral support. And what the heck — even if I failed miserably, I could at least say I tried.

Needless to say, my success at that event felt unreal. I couldn't believe I'd won and broken four records. I soon signed up for another competition, excited about my future with the sport.

RECORD BREAKER

Most competitive powerlifters compete two or three times per year with a focus on getting stronger. For the past few years, I've focused on entering as many competitions as I could — I did 12 in 2023 — maxing out as much as possible to break state and national records. As of April 2024, I've broken 310 state, national, or world records.

Unfortunately, when you're trying to max out, sometimes things go sideways. You start thinking negative thoughts, or you get distracted or tired, and you wind up doing something stupid. That happened to me in September 2023,



Joe embraces an "old man look" in 2019.

when I competed in two national-level competitions on the same day.

I did great in the morning session. I was tired when the afternoon session began, but I still felt ready to go. I made it through the squat and bench press, and my first attempt at the deadlift went great. But on my second, I must have been distracted because as I pulled the bar off the floor, I heard a pop and put the bar down.

I didn't make a third attempt, which was good because I found out later that I'd torn 75 percent of my right biceps tendon. I had surgery after Thanksgiving and started the long, slow process of healing, which I was told would take four to six months.

Meanwhile, I wasn't going to let this injury sideline me or slow me down — I had records to break! I was back in the club the next week working on my legs while I waited for my biceps to heal. I also did light work with bands on my right arm, stopping anytime I felt pain.

At a follow-up appointment, in January 2024, my surgeon gave me the green light to do all my normal exercises. At a competition three months later, I broke the Minnesota and national deadlift records for my age group.

MAX STRENGTH

Since then I've shifted my focus. Now, instead of aiming to break records, I'm homing in on my strength. My coach likes to say, "Perfect your technique and strength will follow." Six years into my fitness journey, I'm still working on my technique, changing little things to make improvements.

If only I'd found powerlifting 45 years ago! It would be amazing to see what my younger self could have done with the right training. But I can only focus on getting stronger now — and having as much fun as I can along the way.

In the next few years I'd like to continue to finish among the top 10 in the world for my age group. Last year I was ranked No. 3 in the world.

Meanwhile, over the long term, my goals are to stay in shape and to continue powerlifting for as long as I can. I've competed against guys who are 85 or older, so I know I can keep doing this for a good 20-plus more years. Let's go! 🏋️

Joe's Top Takeaways

1.

Be obsessive about technique.

"Good form will help you get stronger quicker — and help protect you against injury."

2.

Join a training group.

"With like-minded people you will learn faster, help each other out, and spot each other so no one gets hurt."

3.

Have fun!

"My first squat record was 281 pounds, and my latest squat record was 424.5 pounds. In only five years I added 143.5 pounds to my squat. It's fun to push your body to see what you can do next."



TELL US YOUR STORY

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

[ELmag.com/myturnaround](https://www.ELmag.com/myturnaround).



LSKD

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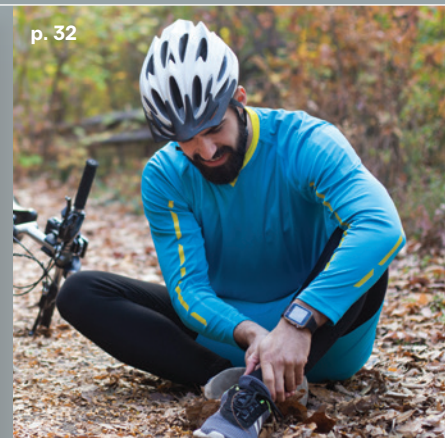
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REAL FITNESS



WALL PILATES offers the best of both mat and reformer Pilates — and you can do it most anywhere, anytime. Stretch and strengthen your body using just a wall as a prop with our workout on page 26. It features eight exercises, plus some more challenging options to up the ante.



On the Wall

No access to a Pilates reformer? Stretch and strengthen your body with a wall as your prop.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

BOTH REFORMER

and mat Pilates can help you improve your strength and mobility, but each has its unique benefits — and limitations. The reformer and other Pilates exercise machines provide support and reduce pressure at your joints, but most people don't have access to this equipment at home. Mat Pilates is more accessible, but it can be harder to execute exercises

with good form when your body is not anchored by an apparatus.

Wall Pilates offers the best of both worlds.

It provides support for your body anywhere, anytime, says Agnieszka Karasek, a Life Time Pilates instructor based in Roseville, Calif.

“The better control you have, the better your alignment, the better the results.”

“Every exercise that you can do on a mat, you can do on a wall. And the wall can give you support similar to the reformer, ensuring that you do the exercises correctly,” she says.

The Pilates system trains you to anchor and move from your core, says Karasek. Because of this, she notes, Pilates is especially beneficial for athletes. “For example, if you're a soccer player, you're kicking from your core; you're not just kicking with your legs.”

To enjoy the benefits of Pilates, technique is key. “The better control you have, the better your alignment, the better the results,” she says. “Pilates is about controlling the movements — it's like slow-motion gymnastics.”

The following 15-minute wall-Pilates workout, designed by Karasek, is gentle enough to do every day, and all you need is a mat and a wall. Perform the exercises in order, because they gradually become more challenging and functional.

The Workout

- HUNDREDS
- LEG CIRCLES
- SINGLE-LEG STRETCH
- SPINAL ARTICULATION
- SHOULDER BRIDGE
- SIDE PLANK
- WALL SIT
- HIP EXTENSION



HUNDREDS

- Lie on your back and place your feet on the wall about 1 to 2 feet off the floor (lower is harder) with your legs straight. Keep your heels together, turn your toes out, and squeeze your inner thighs together. Inhale.
- Exhale as you curl your head and shoulder blades off the ground and flatten your low back to the floor. Look toward your belly and reach your hands toward the wall.
- Engage your arms, and begin pumping them up and down. Inhale for five arm pumps, then exhale for five arm pumps, continuing to press your low back into the floor. Consciously engage your pelvic floor while you exhale — during this exercise and all of the moves in this series.
- Continue for a cycle of 10 full breaths.



LEG CIRCLES

- Lying on your back, place your right foot on the floor and press it against the wall while lifting your left leg straight up and slightly turning your left hip out. Your left knee can be slightly bent.
- Press into the wall with your right foot while you make small circles

with your left leg. Drive the movement from your belly, not from your hip, knee, or ankle. Exhale to initiate each circle; inhale as you bring the leg back toward the midline. Perform five to eight circles in a counterclockwise position before switching directions. Then switch legs.





SINGLE-LEG STRETCH

- Lie on your back and straighten your right leg, pressing your right foot into the wall while bringing your left knee toward your chest.
- Exhale as you curl your head and shoulder blades off the ground and flatten your low back to the floor. Place your left hand on the outside of or just above your left ankle and your

right hand on the inside of your left knee. Take three breaths.

- Inhale to slowly lower your head and shoulders to the floor. Then exhale as you switch your left foot to the wall position and curl up as you draw your right knee toward your chest.
- Alternate sides for a total of six reps on each side.

SPINAL ARTICULATION

- Lie on your back and place your feet on the wall with knees bent about 90 degrees.
- Exhale as you press your feet into the wall and begin to curl your hips and low back off the ground, one vertebra at a time, until you're resting on your shoulders. Inhale.
- Exhale as you slowly lower your body back to the mat, starting with your upper back and moving vertebra by vertebra until your hips are on the floor.
- Repeat four to six times.



SHOULDER BRIDGE

- Lie on your back and place your feet high on the wall with your legs straight.
- Exhale as you press your feet into the wall and lift your hips high, extending them fully. Squeeze your inner thighs. Take three breaths.

• Exhale as you slowly lower your body back to the mat, starting with your upper back.

- Optional progression: Once in the shoulder bridge, alternate lifting one leg at a time on an exhale, for a total of eight reps on each side.



SIDE PLANK

- Lie on your left side with your knees slightly bent, feet pressing into the wall; if it's more comfortable, place the right (top) foot slightly in front of the left (bottom) foot.
- Exhale to engage your core and press up onto your forearm,

using your lats to actively push the ground away without sinking into your shoulder. Hold for three breaths.

- Inhale to lower yourself down to the starting position. Perform five reps, then switch sides.

WALL SIT

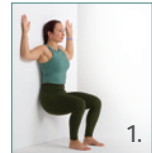
- Stand with your back to the wall, your arms extended straight in front of you, palms facing down. Bend at your hips and knees to lower into a squat. Maintain a neutral spine and keep your head pressed against the wall.



- Breathe and hold this position for as long as you can with good form.

To make the Wall Sit more challenging, try one of these variations:

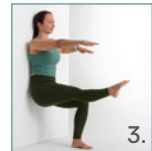
1. Once in the squat position, place your elbows on the wall at shoulder height and bring the backs of your hands toward the wall. Breathe and hold this position for as long as you can with good form.



2. From the squat position and with your elbows on the wall at shoulder height and the backs of your hands toward the wall, hinge at the elbow to draw your palm toward the wall on one side at a time for a total of five reps on each side.



3. Starting in a squat position with triceps pressed against the wall, lift one leg off the floor and straighten it in front of you while you also extend the same-side arm out in front of you. Hold for three breaths, then switch sides.



HIP EXTENSION

- Stand facing the wall and hinge at your hips as you reach your arms forward and place your palms on the wall; lengthen through your spine and keep your back as flat as possible.
- Exhale and lift your left leg off the floor, extending at your hip, while avoiding arching your low back. Keep your knee

straight if it allows you to maintain proper spinal alignment; otherwise, soften the knee. Keep your hips squared toward the floor. You should feel your glutes working on both sides. Hold for three breaths.

- Repeat on the opposite side. ↻

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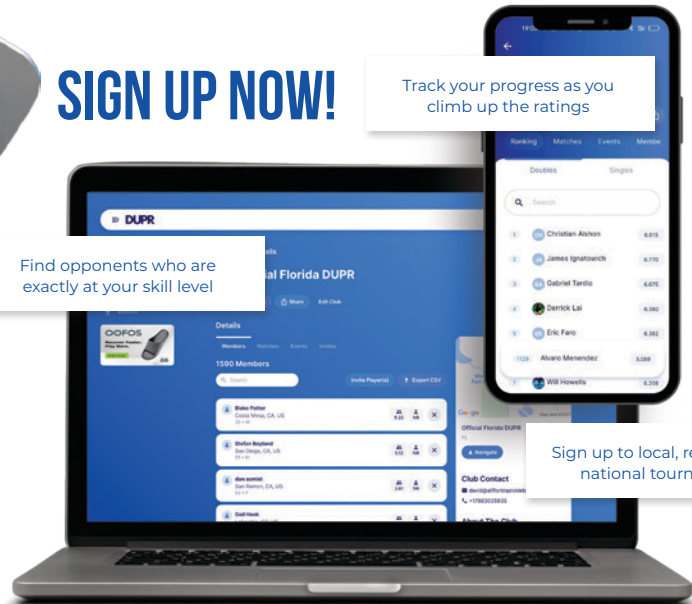


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Savasana

Restore and reset your body and mind with this restful yoga pose.

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

LIE DOWN and do nothing. For many people, savasana, or corpse pose, is one of the most challenging asanas in their practice. Not because it's physically demanding, but because it's precisely the opposite: Savasana is a call to rest.

Across many styles of yoga, savasana (also called mrtasana, or death pose) is considered the most important aspect of a practice. It promotes mindfulness, body awareness, and recovery. Whether done as the final resting pose in an asana practice or on its own, savasana can shift the body and mind into a restorative phase after a period of active work. It can help regulate the nervous system,

reducing the impacts of stress, and ease the body into meditation or sleep.

But in a busy world where productivity rules and true rest is rare, savasana can seem a trifling way to spend five minutes. It looks simple (read: unproductive) and therefore easy to skip. Those who overcome this initial obstacle and assume the supine position may find it difficult to stay there. If it's hard to calm the body, the mind, or both, savasana becomes uncomfortable on multiple levels.

There's no quick fix to master savasana. In fact, like much in yoga, it's not a pose that needs to be mastered at all. It's an invitation to submit to gravity and breathe — and, in doing so,

release tension in the body and in our thoughts. Some days, this might come easily; other days, there may be more resistance. The practice is to practice.

Focus on your breath and scan your body, allowing your thoughts to come and go and sensations to rise and fall. Avoid the urge to do anything, even when your thinking brain is telling you to get up and move.



SETTLE IN

Learn how to modify savasana at ELmag.com/savasana.

INSTRUCTIONS

1.

Lie on your back with legs and arms angled away from your midline. Turn your palms up and let your feet relax.

2.

Close your eyes and relax your body into the floor, tuning in to your breath as you give in to gravity.

3.

Focus on relaxing and releasing tension in your body, starting at your toes; move up your body until you reach the top of your head.

4.

Rest here. If you have trouble relaxing your mind, focus on counting long, slow, deep breaths, from 20 to one.

5.

When you're ready to come out of the pose, begin by wiggling your fingers and toes. Stretch as desired, then roll to one side. Slowly move to a seated position.

HELPFUL PROPS: To help relax your eyes, place a soft cloth over them. To help relax your belly, place a block, pillow, or folded blanket across your abdomen. To help relax your neck, tuck a folded blanket or towel under your head and neck. To help relax your lower back, place a rolled-up blanket or bolster under your knees.

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

Fall Better

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

FALLING IS PART OF LIFE.

Whether tripping over a pet or uneven pavement, tumbling off a bike, slipping on ice, or wiping out while skiing, unintentional falls can occur at any age and are a leading cause of injury-related ER visits.

What you can learn to avoid — or at least minimize — is getting injured. Training agility, coordination, and multiplanar movement can build resilience in the event of a fall. And learning how to fall safely can help you react quickly when you do take a tumble.

“If you have to go through the thought process of *I’m tipping backward — what do I do?*, you’re too late,” says Dan Kirkpatrick, PT, DPT, NCS, a board-certified clinical specialist in neurological physical therapy with Motion Physical Therapy in Minnesota.

Just knowing the right way to fall isn’t enough, he says. Building muscle memory and creating a new, safer default reaction in the event of a fall requires repetition.

In other words, you have to practice falling — and practice often.

We all fall down at some time or another. Minimize injury by practicing the right way to take a tumble.

The Basics

There are several key principles to falling safely, though some go against our instincts. For instance, many of us naturally become rigid when we lose our balance. However, allowing our bodies to relax helps us better absorb the impact.

“Don’t stiffen up,” says Olivia Freeman, CPT, a personal trainer and football player with the Atlanta Rage. “When we tense up, it typically makes the impact worse.”

Keep these tips in mind in the event of a fall:

Lean in. You have some control over the direction of your fall, so lean your weight forward and to the side, if possible. Aim toward grass, dirt, sand, or snow and away from concrete, obstacles, and sharp objects.

Stay loose. Bend your arms and legs, and never try to catch yourself with your hands with straight arms. Try exhaling through your fall to encourage a relaxed frame.

Protect your head. If you’re falling forward, turn your face to

the side and try to shift your weight sideways to roll onto a shoulder. If you’re falling backward, tuck your chin to your chest to avoid hitting your head on the ground.

Aim for the meat. Landing on a meaty part of your body, like the muscles of your back, butt, or thighs, can help protect your tailbone, hips, knees, elbows, and wrists. If you’re falling straight forward or backward, try to turn your body to land on your side.

Roll with it. Rolling into the fall is a good technique to help spread the impact over more of your body and avoid concentrating the impact on just one area.

Slap out. If you’re falling backward or sideways, try extending your arms to the sides with palms down and slap the ground. This can help fight the instinct to catch yourself with your hands or elbows while also helping you position and brace for impact. This isn’t a requirement for a safe fall, but it can be helpful with practice.

Fall Practice

To put these principles into practice, functional-fitness specialist Ryan Hurst offers three techniques: falling backward, falling forward, and falling sideways.

“Falling can be scary no matter when and where you are,” says Hurst, the head coach and program director of GMB Fitness. “If you’re unprepared, it can have devastating consequences. The good news is the body is really

good at adapting when you train it to do something, so if you practice these techniques often, you’ll be much better prepared if and when an unexpected fall happens.”

Hurst, a former competitive gymnast and martial artist, recommends adding these techniques to your warm-up whenever you can. “It’s going to make a big difference in protecting you from future injuries.”



HOW TO FALL BACKWARD

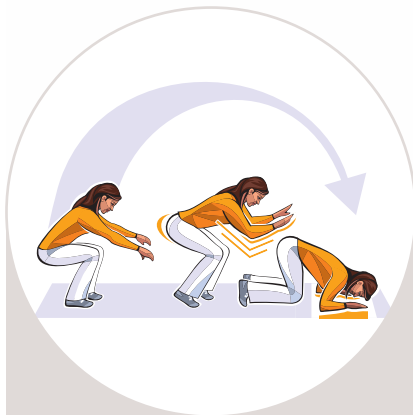
Practicing this technique is important for instances of slipping or being knocked backward. Protect your head by tucking your chin to your chest and using a slapping motion with your arms to break your fall.

- Start by lying down on a mat with knees bent, feet planted. Tuck your chin to your chest, curling up through your core to raise your head away from the ground. Extend your arms straight in front of you, in the direction of your knees, with palms down. Reach your arms out to the sides and down to slap your palms on the mat.

- Sit up with your feet planted on the mat. Roll back along your spine, taking care to keep your chin tucked and head away from the floor, and again practice slapping the mat at your sides on each rep.

- Assume a squat position. From here, lower your hips as close to the floor as you can and begin the backward roll. Gradually work on starting the squat higher and higher so you have to lower your hips more before initiating the roll.

- Finally, practice from a full standing position.



HOW TO FALL FORWARD

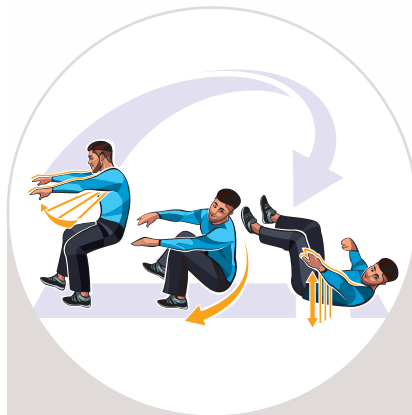
This technique can help prepare you for an event like tripping or getting bumped forward. As in the backward fall, the position of your arms is extremely important.

- In a high kneeling position, bend your arms in front of your face with palms open and facing outward. Push your butt backward as you lean forward. Rock forward on your knees and catch yourself with your forearms and palms. Turn your head slightly to either side, and keep your hands in front of your face to protect your head. Avoid landing with your elbows first.

- Practice this same movement while keeping your hips extended and body straight, without pushing your hips back.

- Move to your feet and practice this movement from a squat position.

- Gradually work up to a full standing position. This can be scary, notes Hurst, so work up to it and make sure to practice on a soft surface. Again, remember not to fall on your elbows. You want to land on your forearms.



HOW TO FALL SIDWAYS

Falls don’t always happen either straight forward or straight backward. For instance, you might fall while rounding a corner, lose balance on a bike or skateboard, or try to correct a forward/backward fall and shift your weight to one side. Practicing falling to the side can help you prepare for dynamic, real-life situations. This drill follows the same steps as the backward fall, but with your weight shifted to one side.

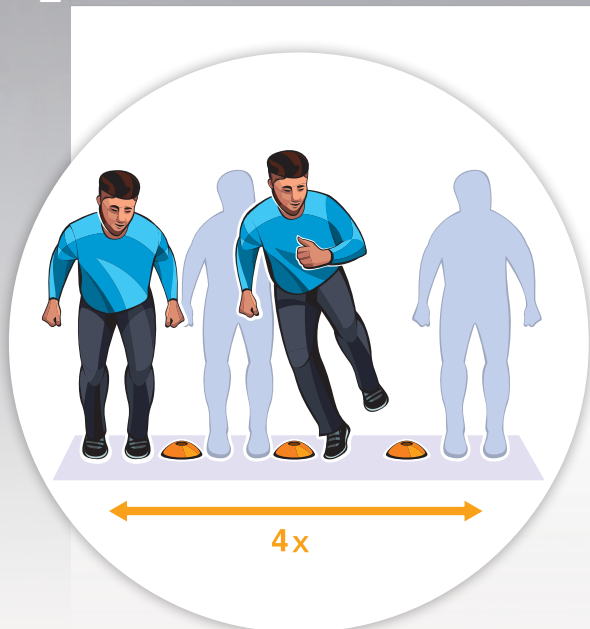
- Sit on a mat with your feet planted and arms extended. Roll back along your spine, taking care to keep your chin tucked and head away from the floor, while turning your body slightly to the left. Reach your left arm out to the side, and slap that palm on the mat on each rep.

- Practice the full progression (sitting, squatting, standing) on both sides.

- For a more advanced variation, lean your weight into the side that you’re falling toward — so much that you actually end up falling forward. From here, catch yourself on your forearms, as in the forward-fall stance.

2 Exercises for Safer (and Fewer) Falls

In addition to practicing safe falls, you can improve your reaction time and coordination by training your agility and lateral movement. The better you can change direction and decelerate and accelerate your body with control, the less likely you are to fall, says Kirkpatrick. If you do fall, you can react quickly to minimize or avoid injury. Sprinkle these two exercises into your weekly routine.



LATERAL CONE STEP-OVERS

Agility drills like the lateral cone step-over can teach you how to side-step obstacles without tangling your feet, a skill that can decrease your risk of stumbling. "If you can't move sideways without crossing one foot over the other, you're going to be at a higher risk for falling," Freeman says.

Do this exercise two or three times per week. She recommends pairing it with a lower-body exercise during one of your weekly strength sessions.

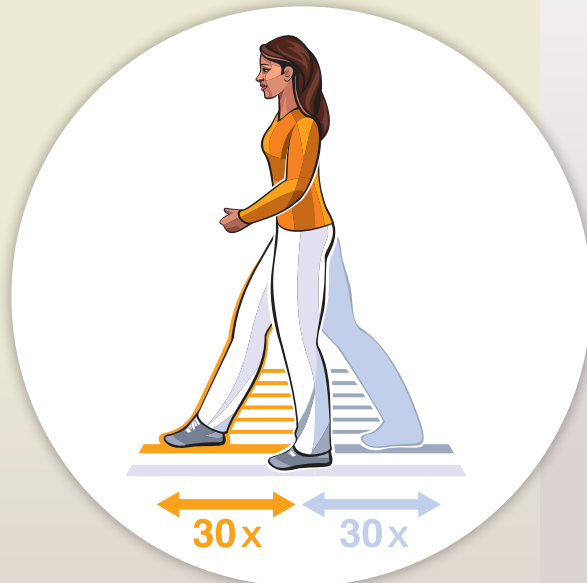
- Set three or four cones in a line on the floor about a foot apart. If you don't have cones, use objects that are roughly the same size, like yoga blocks or water bottles.
- Stand to the right of the first cone with your feet hip width apart, knees slightly bent, and arms by your sides.
- Lift your left knee and step your left leg sideways over the first cone. Follow with the right leg.
- Continue stepping sideways over each cone until you reach the end. Then perform the exercise in the opposite direction to return to your starting point.
- Repeat until you've gone in each direction two or three times. Do three or four rounds.
- Move at a slow, comfortable pace; increase your speed as your coordination improves. Add more cones for a greater challenge.

FORWARD STEP, BACKWARD STEP

A great way to prevent falling when you feel off-balance is to kick a leg out, either in front or behind you, depending on the direction you're falling. "By throwing a leg out, you can catch your momentum and stop yourself from falling. Otherwise, you're at the mercy of gravity and your body weight," Kirkpatrick says.

He advises practicing this fall-prevention strategy by simply stepping one foot forward or backward as quickly as possible. Do this drill at least two or three times per week.

- Stand with feet hip width apart.
- Step forward with your right foot, keeping the left foot planted. Return your right foot to the starting position.
- Repeat until you've completed 30 repetitions with your right foot. Then switch to the left foot.
- Aim to step faster and farther forward with each rep (without lifting your back foot).
- Once you've completed 30 forward steps with each foot, do 30 backward steps with each foot.
- Hold on to a chair, countertop, or bar during this exercise if you need help with balance. 🔄



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

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Your Evening Workout Wind-Down

Any tips for relaxing after exercising at night?

BY SARAH TUFF

FOR MANY GYM-GOERS, nighttime is the only time to fit in a workout. But training past 8 p.m. can also trigger physiological adaptations that could interfere with circadian rhythms and natural sleep patterns. “The primary thing to be proactive about is protecting your sleep,” says Samantha McKinney, RD, Life Time trainer, dietitian, and national program manager for nutrition and metabolism. “If working out late is disruptive to sleep patterns, implementing strategies to dampen those effects is important.” McKinney and other experts share their top wind-down tips.

COOL DOWN

Spend the first five minutes after your workout bringing your heart rate down to baseline levels with low-intensity cardio, followed by long-hold static stretching and foam rolling, says Life Time personal trainer Joe Meier, CSCS.

Finish up with a short breathwork session: Take 10 full, slow breaths, exhaling for about twice as long as you inhale.

“Breathwork and meditation can help you channel energy [from your workout] into a more relaxed and focused state,” explains Matthew Hurley, a Colorado-based endurance coach and the owner of Wyld Endurance.

CONTINUE TO HYDRATE

Ideally, you’ve been hydrating throughout the day to get ahead of potential fluid loss during your workout. Saving your day’s hydration for after your workout can lead to bathroom trips disrupting your sleep.

Drinking a high-quality electrolyte blend is one of the best ways to balance body fluids, McKinney advises.

“Most of us could benefit from some electrolyte support,” she says. And though the best time to use electrolytes to optimize hydration is prior to exercise, it can be valuable during and after exercise — especially if you’ve lost a notable amount of sweat.

PREFUEL AND REFUEL

Meier advises consuming about 30 grams of protein as part of your dinner before working out.

Then, “during workouts, consider a gentle-on-the-stomach blend of essential amino acids,” says McKinney. “Think of these as already-broken-down proteins that can help build and repair muscles and kick-start your recovery process.”

Postworkout, choose a light, protein-rich snack, such as Greek yogurt or cottage cheese with veggies, like cucumbers or celery for added hydration, suggests Meier. If eating close to bedtime doesn’t sit well with you, a shake can be a nice alternative.

SUPPLEMENT FOR SLEEP

Taking 1 to 3 mg of melatonin about 30 to 60 minutes before bed can signal to the body that it’s time to wind down, though McKinney notes that it’s best when taken only intermittently.

Magnesium glycinate, magnesium malate, and magnesium citrate each can aid relaxation and support muscle and nerve function; doses vary, but generally, taking 200–400 mg of magnesium in the evening is best.

CBD, as well as calming herbs like lavender, valerian root, and chamomile, can also promote sleep. (Learn more at ELmag.com/calmingherbs.)

TAKE A COOL SHOWER

A warm shower or bath before bed can be relaxing for many, but some athletes may want cool water instead to lower their body temperature after a bout of evening activity in order to wind down and fall asleep.

“Taking a cool shower — it doesn’t need to be freezing cold — is a good strategy,” says Meier.

Whatever temperature you prefer, don’t skip bathing before bed. A shower or bath is important not only for good hygiene but also as a transitional ritual.

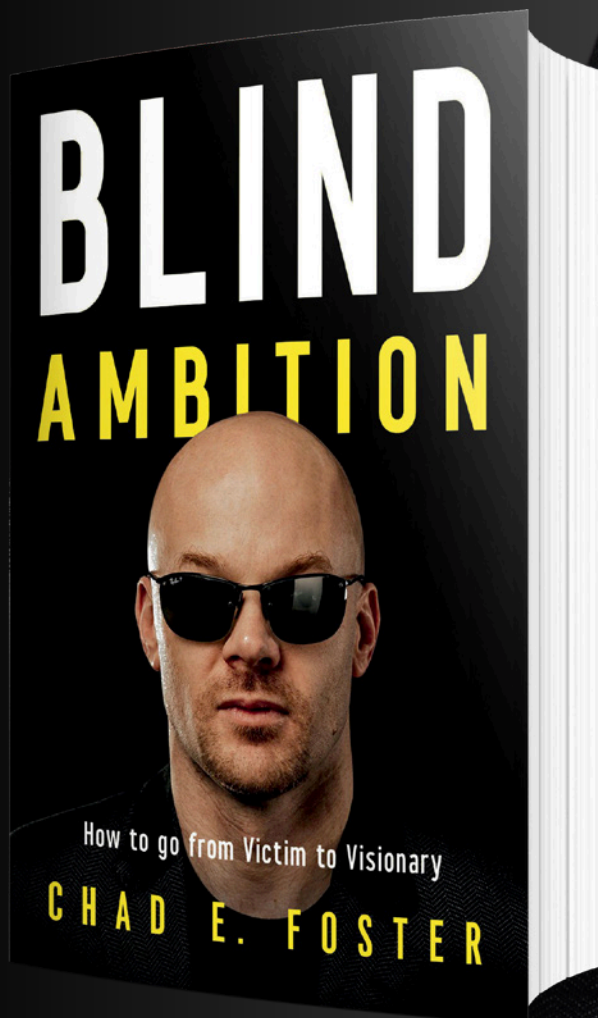
TURN DOWN THE LIGHTS

Bright light — and especially blue light from screens — stimulates your internal clock.

While you’re at the gym, try to avoid areas with a view of television screens. Use a towel to cover the lights on equipment, and set your smartphone to a nighttime setting. You can also download an app that filters out blue light or wear blue-light-blocking glasses if you can safely exercise while wearing them.

Back home, dim the lights, and power down your screens at least an hour before bedtime, allowing your mind and body to reap the maximum benefits from a good workout.

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REAL FOOD



p. 40



p. 48



p. 50



p. 46

MANY HOLIDAY DINNERS are traditionally centered around roast beef, turkey, or ham, with some veggies on the side. This year, try one of our three plant-forward entrées perfect for celebratory gatherings — starting on page 50. They're flavorful, healthy, and oh so festive!



Nitrates

Are Not What You Think

These nitrogen-based compounds have a bad reputation, but they are critical to helping the body make nitric oxide. And that matters for your health.

BY CATHERINE GUTHRIE

WHEN WE HEAR “nitrates,” we often think of the problematic preservatives lurking in processed meats. Yet these are only one piece of a nutrient jigsaw puzzle; the full picture is much more interesting.

Naturally occurring nitrates and nitrites found in vegetables, fruits, and drinking water are the focus of promising new longevity research — primarily because of their role in producing nitric oxide.

Nitric oxide is a beneficial gas formed by the cells of the endothelium. It plays a substantial role in how gracefully our bodies age — or don't. The body can make nitric oxide, but it relies more on dietary nitrates to do so as we age. Without these compounds in our diets, our health can wither.

Nitric oxide is an unstable gas, so its presence in the body is fleeting — diffusing in less than a second. Yet it adds life to almost everything it touches. It acts as a signaling molecule in the brain and nervous system, regulates insulin, guards against pathogens, and unglues blood platelets, making them less likely to clump together into dangerous clots. It's so important to health that a Nobel Prize was awarded in 1998 to scientists who first identified nitric oxide's role as a signaling molecule.

Most important, nitric oxide is a vasodilator, meaning it enables the body's 60,000 miles of blood vessels to open and relax. When nitric oxide is present, blood flows more freely.

“What could be more important than increasing blood supply to every organ, including the brain?” asks board-certified neurologist David Perlmutter, MD, FACN.

“Nitric oxide is a molecule at the very fulcrum of our well-being.”

All the more reason to overcome our fear of nitrates — and to include more nitrate-rich foods in our diet.

NITRIC OXIDE AND AGE-RELATED DECLINES

The body makes nitric oxide in two ways. Cells lining the blood vessels produce nitric oxide from L-arginine, an amino acid found in meat and nuts. This process declines with age, but the body also makes nitric oxide by processing nitrates directly from food.

Nitrates are found in dark, leafy greens and certain root vegetables, like beets. Understanding their importance requires a quick hit of chemistry.

A nitrate is made up of a nitrogen atom bonded to three

the body works less efficiently.”

Blood pressure is a case in point. As blood circulates, it presses against vessel walls. In younger bodies, arteries and blood vessels are usually more supple, expanding and contracting with each heartbeat. As arteries stiffen with age, pressure against their walls climbs to keep blood flowing. When blood pressure rises and stays up, it's called hypertension.

Nearly half of Americans over age 20 have hypertension. It's a risk factor for heart disease



“Without nitric oxide, every function in the body works less efficiently.”

oxygen atoms (NO_3). A nitrite is a nitrogen atom bonded to just two oxygen atoms (NO_2). Both are essential to the body's production of nitric oxide from food. Eating nitrate-rich foods kick-starts a process in which the body converts nitrates to nitrites and, eventually, nitric oxide.

As the L-arginine pathway declines with age, nitrates in the diet can pick up the slack — if we're eating enough of them.

“By the time we reach 40, we have lost roughly 50 percent of our [endothelial] nitric oxide production,” says Nathan Bryan, PhD, coauthor of *The Nitric Oxide (NO) Solution*. “Without nitric oxide, every function in

and stroke, two of the leading causes of death in the United States. Type 2 diabetes, vascular dementia, and chronic kidney disease can also be triggered or exacerbated by hypertension.

“The epidemic of hypertension in our culture has a strong correlation to a deficiency of nitric oxide,” says functional-medicine practitioner Christopher Bump, DC. He attributes that deficiency, in part, to weak digestion.

“I don't know why more people aren't talking about nitric oxide as a means of increasing blood flow,” says integrative physician Frank Lipman, MD.

“It's very important and yet underreported.”



NITRATE SOURCES

In 2022, the journal *Environment International* published a panoramic view of the link between nitrates and hypertension. Analyzing more than 55,000 subjects from the famous observational Nurses' Health Study, scientists looked at the relationship between the nurses' risk of high blood pressure and how many nitrate-rich foods they ate.

Results showed that for each 150 mg hike in dietary nitrates, the nurses' risk of hypertension dropped proportionally.

In a much smaller study, healthy, young participants consumed an average of two servings of high-nitrate vegetables daily for one week. Nitrates in their plasma increased by approximately 250 percent and their blood pressure lowered significantly.

All in all, vegetables and fruit account for approximately 80 percent of the nitrates in the average person's diet. Groundwater contains nitrates, so drinking water is our second-largest source. Finally, meat makes up roughly 6 percent for nonvegetarians.

Food manufacturers add nitrates and nitrites to processed meats to slow bacterial growth, impart flavor, and enhance color. The dangers with these compounds

arise during cooking and digestion, when added nitrates and nitrites can transform into nitrosamines, which are carcinogenic. Studies link nitrosamines to a heightened risk of colorectal cancer. (Many organic cured meats are preserved with nitrites derived from celery nitrates, thought to be a safer alternative to synthetic nitrites, though the research is mixed on this point.)

Nitrates in vegetables don't pose the same risk. Vegetables high in nitrates — such as arugula, spinach, and beets — contain a bounty of antioxidants that offset potential harm. Fruits such as watermelons and bananas also contain trace amounts of nitrates that contribute to your total intake.

"The presence of antioxidants inhibits the generation of troubling nitrosamines," explains Kathie Swift, MS, RDN, LDN, cofounder of the Integrative and Functional Nutrition Academy. "So, veggie up, and fill your plate with reds, like beets, and greens, such as spinach, arugula, lettuce, chard, and celery."

THE IDEAL AMOUNT

There is no recommended dietary allowance for nitrates, but Bryan sug-

gests aiming to eat roughly 300 mg a day. The typical American diet contains about 150 mg.

It bears repeating that nitrates are most plentiful in arugula (also called rocket), beets, Swiss chard, celery, lettuce, and spinach. Arugula tops the list with 480 mg of nitrates per 100-gram serving. Other good sources include Chinese cabbage, endive, fennel, leeks, and parsley.

Though supplements are a tempting shortcut, nitrates from whole-food sources are a safer choice. Produce packages nitrates alongside antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and trace elements, while supplements make it easy to get too much.

"It's all a matter of concentration," says Bump. "In lower concentrations nitric oxide has many positive effects, but in higher concentrations it becomes the evil empire. It becomes a free radical leading to increased oxidative damage that can interfere with health."

For a 2023 study published in the journal *Foods*, researchers examined 50 beetroot supplements. Most products did not deliver the number of nitrates touted on the label. At the same time, the quantity

of other antioxidants was too low to balance nitrates' propensity for free-radical production.

Those who find the siren song of supplementation irresistible may want to consider beet juice. The authors of a 2017 meta-analysis of 43 trials found the juice had a significant beneficial effect on blood pressure, especially in trials that lasted more than two weeks.

Still, Lipman cautions anyone watching their glucose to be moderate with beet juice, which contains a substantial amount of natural sugar.

MADE TO MEASURE

Because nitric oxide is an unstable gas that dissipates quickly,

it's nearly impossible to measure. But that hasn't kept people from trying, at least indirectly.

The nitric oxide saliva-test strips available online claim to measure whether the body has the raw materials necessary to

make nitric oxide. But the strips don't hold up to scientific scrutiny.

Authors of an exhaustive study, published in 2015 in the journal *Nitric Oxide*, wrote that the test strips did show a relative level of nitrites in subjects' saliva, but they are "not likely to accurately assess nitric oxide bioavailability."

A more useful approach may be certain blood tests. Asymmetric dimethylarginine (ADMA) interferes with L-arginine, the amino acid the body needs to make nitric oxide. High blood levels of ADMA are a sign of endothelial dysfunction.

"When that marker is high," says Lipman, "it's an indication that some-

one needs more nitric oxide."

To boost nitric oxide levels, Lipman sometimes recommends supplements that include L-arginine and L-citrulline, a byproduct the body makes when it converts L-arginine into nitric oxide.

One sign of flagging nitric oxide levels can be sexual dysfunction. The body employs nitric oxide to relax blood vessels, allowing a surge of blood to reach the sex organs during arousal. Difficulty achieving arousal and erection is even considered an early warning sign for heart disease.

Sexual dysfunction and hypertension are so closely linked that the drug Viagra was discovered by

scientists who were developing a drug for hypertension and angina chest pain caused by constricting blood vessels. The drug makes vessels more sensitive to nitric oxide, and the resolution of erectile dysfunction was an unexpected side effect.

Lipman even prescribes daily low-dose Viagra off-label to offset the nitric oxide depletion that comes with aging. He says low-dose Viagra has practically become standard practice in antiaging circles. He takes it himself and recommends it to male and female patients alike.

"I'm obsessed with what happens to our bodies as we get older," Lipman says. "Most of us aren't paying enough attention to nitric oxide, but we really should."

Meanwhile, increasing nitric oxide can be as easy as adding more beets and arugula to your plate. If only everything that offsets the effects of aging could be that easy.



Swishing mouthwash may seem like a bedrock of good oral health-care, and studies do show that it — along with brushing and flossing — can lower the risk of gum disease. But nitric oxide experts say the cost is way too high.

"Mouthwash does a good job at killing bad breath," says Nathan Bryan, PhD, coauthor of *The Nitric Oxide (NO) Solution*, "but it also kills the bacteria essential to nitric oxide production."

The mouth is home to more than 700 species of bacteria. Mouthwash does to the oral microbiome what antibiotics do to bacteria in the gut — annihilates good and bad guys alike. Decimating the oral microbiome every day (or sometimes twice a day) can have negative repercussions for systemic health.

Bryan draws a direct line from the estimated 200 million Americans who use mouthwash daily to the 122 million Americans with high blood pressure.

When scientists followed 540 higher-weight adults in San Juan, Puerto Rico, for three years, they found that those who used mouthwash twice daily were 85 percent more likely to develop hypertension than their peers who used mouthwash less frequently.

"The No. 1 thing a person can do to protect their levels of nitric oxide is to stop using mouthwash," Bryan says.



5 MORE WAYS TO BOOST NITRIC OXIDE

Nitric oxide is a gas that can't be harnessed well in a supplement, so nitrate-rich foods are your best source. There are also nondietary ways to increase the body's production, including the following.

1. **Exercise 20 to 30 minutes daily.** It may seem obvious that exercise lowers blood pressure. What's new is that scientists now know exercise triggers endothelial cells to release nitric oxide. "It is one of the most powerful ways to increase how much nitric oxide your body makes," says board-certified neurologist David Perlmutter, MD, FACN.
And, he notes, the downstream effects of more nitric oxide are "good for the brain, good for the immune system."
2. **Wean off the antacids.** Antacids and acid suppressors, like proton pump inhibitors, seem like an easy fix for a sour stomach, but the body needs stomach acid to make nitric oxide from food and exercise. Regular use of proton pump inhibitors has been linked to an increased risk of heart attack, stroke, and dementia.
"Turns out that shutting down stomach-acid production is a really bad idea," notes Nathan Bryan, PhD. "Our entire digestive, endocrine, and cardiovascular system depends on our ability to produce stomach acid."
3. **Buy local produce but not necessarily organic.** In what may seem counterintuitive, a 2015 study found conventionally grown vegetables have substantially more nitrates than the same vegetables grown organically. Bryan suspects it's because U.S. organic growers are not allowed to use synthetic nitrogen-based fertilizers.
"Without nitrogen, vegetables can't assimilate nitrates," he says. "Your best bet is to buy local, conventionally grown vegetables." (At least sometimes: Most organic growing practices are still better for the soil and overall biodiversity.)
4. **Practice deep breathing.** Oxygen is essential to the body's production of nitric oxide. "Breathing deeply stimulates receptors in the body that turn on nitric oxide production," says Bryan. "Taking in that life-giving oxygen will help support every biological function in the body."
He advises taking 10 deep breaths, inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth, at least three times a day.
5. **Eat nitric oxide-adjacent nutrients:** Nudge up nitric oxide production by giving your body ample potassium and magnesium, says integrative physician Frank Lipman, MD. Potassium helps balance dietary sodium, which on its own can drive up blood pressure.
And magnesium prompts muscles and the endothelium to relax. As a bonus, magnesium glycinate is a mild sleep aid. "Magnesium is easy and cheap," he says. "I recommend it to everyone." 🌱

CATHERINE GUTHRIE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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Deconstructed Roasted Turkey With Gluten-Free Gravy

BY KAELYN RILEY

Take half the time and half the oven space — and achieve an even cook — with this simple method for roasting a turkey.



Deconstructed Roasted Turkey

Makes 10 to 12 servings • Prep time: one hour, plus up to 24 hours to dry brine • Cook time: 90 minutes



1 10–15 lb. turkey



¼ cup kosher salt



2 lemons



1½ tbs. dried thyme



1 tbs. freshly ground black pepper



1 tbs. brown sugar



2 tsp. ground coriander



1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil



4–6 sprigs fresh thyme



4–6 sprigs fresh rosemary

Remove the turkey neck and giblets; reserve for making stock. Pat the turkey dry with paper towels.

Break down the turkey: Flex the wings away from the breast and use a sharp knife to cut through each wing joint. Cut through the skin along each leg to find the leg joints. Flex the legs away from the breast, then cut along the backbone to release each leg. Cut through the backbone to separate the carcass from the breast; reserve the carcass for stock. Arrange the turkey wings, legs, and breast on a wire rack set inside a rimmed sheet pan.

Make the dry brine: Place the salt in a medium bowl and add the zest of both lemons. Cut the lemons into quarters and reserve for roasting. Rub the lemon zest

into the salt until the zest is broken down and aromatic, about 30 seconds. Add the dried thyme, pepper, brown sugar, and ground coriander, and mix well.

Coat each turkey piece with the dry brine. You might not use all of the mixture, and some of it will end up on the sheet pan. Allow the turkey to sit at room temperature for one hour, or refrigerate, uncovered, for up to 24 hours.

If the turkey's been refrigerated, allow it to rest at room temperature for two hours. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Remove the rack with the turkey pieces from the sheet pan, and drain off any liquid in the pan. Then arrange the lemon quarters on the pan and place the wire rack with the turkey pieces over the

lemons. Drizzle the turkey lightly with the olive oil and tuck the herb sprigs between the pieces. Pour 1 cup of water into the bottom of the sheet pan.

Roast the turkey for 30 minutes. Rotate the pan, lower the heat to 325 degrees F, and roast for another 30 minutes, adding more water to the pan as needed to keep the drippings from burning. Remove the legs and wings when an instant-read thermometer reads 170 degrees F when inserted into each piece (about one hour total). Continue roasting the breast until it reaches 150 degrees F (about 90 minutes total).

Let the meat rest for at least 30 minutes before serving. Reserve the roasted lemons for seasoning the gravy.

Gluten-Free Gravy

- Roasted-turkey pan drippings
- Low-sodium turkey or vegetable broth, as needed
- 2 tbs. cornstarch (or arrowroot powder)
- 2 tbs. salted butter, melted
- ¾ tsp. sea salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- Reserved roasted lemons

While the turkey rests, make the gravy: Strain the pan drippings through a fine mesh sieve into a large measuring cup. Add enough broth to reach 2 cups of liquid.

Transfer the liquid to a pot and bring to a boil. In a small bowl, combine the cornstarch and melted butter to create a slurry.

When the broth reaches a boil, turn off the heat and gradually whisk the slurry into the broth until it begins to thicken. Season with the salt, pepper, and juice of the roasted lemons. 🍴



The Place for Processed Food

Not everything that comes in a box, can, or bag is bad for your health. Here are some minimally processed foods you may wish to keep on hand.

BY RACHEL MACPHERSON

YOU'VE LIKELY HEARD the advice to shop the perimeter of your grocery store, because the most wholesome foods — fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy — are along the outer edges. This advice is well meaning, but there are still nutritious, convenient options in the interior aisles. You just have to know the difference between minimally processed and ultraprocessed foods.

“Think of foods on a spectrum, starting with whole foods all the way to ultraprocessed foods,” explains nutritionist Avery Zenker, RD, MAN. Near the whole-foods end of the spectrum are minimally processed foods. They’ve often been washed, chopped, frozen, or blanched prior to packaging — methods similar to those you might use in your own kitchen. This keeps many of their nutrients intact while extending their shelf life.

In the middle of the spectrum are processed foods, which are further refined and often include added oil, sugar, or salt. These foods can often be eaten without preparation.

Ultraprocessed foods undergo multiple industrial processes, like milling, molding, and extrusion. They

typically contain additives and preservatives, plus plenty of sugar, trans fats, and salt — and they’re usually low in fiber and micronutrients, says Zenker. Items like breakfast cereals and frozen chicken nuggets are considered ultraprocessed.

It’s no secret that ultraprocessed foods aren’t health tonics. They’ve been linked to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and more. “A chronic diet of nutrient-poor ultraprocessed foods . . . decreases the nutrition quality of the diet and displaces healthier options,” says Boston University nutrition professor Joan Salge Blake, EdD, RDN, LDN.

And yet, Salge Blake explains, many affordable, convenient products get lumped into the ultraprocessed category. In food deserts, where fresh options are scarce or prohibitively expensive, some processed items can help people access essential nutrients in a shelf-stable form.

Consider the protein in a can of beans, the fiber in a slice of whole-grain bread, or the antioxidants in a can of tomatoes. These items can offer shortcuts to cooking and eating a balanced, accessible, and sustainable diet.



FROZEN, CANNED, AND BAGGED PRODUCE

Presliced or prechopped vegetables and fruits are great for quick meals, explains registered dietitian Lauren Twigge, MCN, RDN, LD. "Frozen fruit and vegetables are convenient ingredients to build up a colorful smoothie," she says. She uses baby carrots and bagged salad mixes to get more color into her diet.

Likewise, Salge Blake recommends frozen and canned veggies as sources of potassium and fiber — nutrients that most Americans lack. She'll use both, along with a can of beans, to make a homemade soup. "It's an easy, inexpensive, and comforting way to add more veggies," she explains.

Zenker suggests looking for packages that contain only vegetables and fruits, so you get the fiber and micronutrients without added sugar or preservatives. She also recommends against steaming anything in a bag, even if the package says it's OK to do so. "I would especially encourage avoiding plastic in contact with hot food," she says.

CANNED FISH

Canned proteins make it easy to boost the protein content of meals, Twigge says. Tinned tuna, sardines, clams, crab, salmon, and herring are nutritious options that make for quick salads, sandwiches, and other dishes — plus, some of them come with a bonus of omega-3 fatty acids, iron, zinc, vitamin D, calcium, and more. Research has shown those who eat more canned fish have a lower risk of developing certain cancers and cardiovascular disease.

WHOLE-GRAIN CEREALS, PASTA, AND BREADS

"Whether rolled, quick, or instant, oats are a great breakfast option that will leave you full and satiated," says Patricia Kolesa, MS, RDN, founder of Dietitian Dish LLC. Kolesa frequently recommends oats to her clients and keeps them on hand herself. One cup of cooked rolled oats contains 5 grams of fiber, which can help reduce insulin resistance and the risk of certain cancers.

"My favorite oatmeal is savory, with a fried egg, chicken broth, and veggies mixed in," says Kolesa. (Try our savory oatmeal recipe at [ELmag.com/savoryoats](https://www.ELmag.com/savoryoats).)

Salge Blake says whole-grain breads and pasta can add crucial fiber and protein to one's diet — but don't trust the "whole grain" label on the package. Ensure that whole grains are first on the ingredient list; if they're listed lower, the product may not necessarily be healthy. Likewise, seek products higher in fiber and lower in sodium and sugar.

CANNED BEANS

Beans and other legumes are full of fiber and protein, plus minerals like calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium, and zinc. Research shows that beans can help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and colorectal cancer while supporting blood-sugar control and gut health.

"I use these in casseroles, rice and pasta dishes, and soups to add potassium and fiber," Salge Blake says. And because beans are a relatively affordable protein source, they can help you stretch a dish and make it less costly per serving. Buy them in BPA-free cans, ideally with no added salt.

CANNED AND BOXED SOUPS AND BROTHS

Low-sodium, vegetable-based canned soups are a staple in Salge Blake's pantry. Boxed broth is another processed food that can infuse your meals with vitamins; just be sure to opt for low-sodium versions.

Consider your nutritional goals when choosing canned or boxed soups — or any processed food, for that matter, says Zenker. "These products can be high in added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat. The nutrition content and ingredients can vary greatly between different brands, so be sure to check the label carefully."

A boxed broth can be a good weeknight shortcut to a soup full of fresh veggies. But typically, the healthiest, most flavorful (and least expensive) broth is the one you make at home with whole-food ingredients. Get our bone broth recipe at [ELmag.com/bonebroth](https://www.ELmag.com/bonebroth) and freeze a batch for your future soup needs. 🍲



FERMENTED FOODS

"Fermentation is a type of processing that may increase the nutritional benefits of foods," says Zenker, who keeps kimchi, sauerkraut, and tempeh stocked in her kitchen. These fermented foods contain a plethora of microscopic organisms that play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy gut microbiome.

Yogurt and other fermented dairy products — buttermilk, cottage cheese, kefir — may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, help control blood sugar, and aid muscle recovery post-exercise. (Try making your own fermented goodies with the recipes at [ELmag.com/fermentedfoods](https://www.ELmag.com/fermentedfoods).)



NUT AND SEED BUTTERS

Zenker also keeps a variety of nut and seed butters on hand; she prefers brands with only nuts or seeds and perhaps some salt — but zero added sugar. These spreads are perfect for dipping fruit, spreading on whole-grain toast, or drizzling over yogurt.

Nut and seed butters are rich in anti-inflammatory fats, fiber, protein, and many essential vitamins and minerals. Including them in your diet may help prevent chronic diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer. (Learn more about the health benefits of nut and seed butters at [ELmag.com/butterup](https://www.ELmag.com/butterup).)

The Plantiful Holiday

Festive, meat-free entrées perfect for celebratory gatherings.

BY MADDIE AUGUSTIN

WHAT IMAGE COMES TO MIND

when you think of a holiday celebration? For me, it's the vision of my family gathered around a glorious meal to which everyone has contributed. Most often, the main event is an animal protein: turkey, ham, prime rib . . . you get the point. Sure, there are always veggies, but they're often relegated to the periphery of our plates — practically an afterthought.

This year, I'm offering an alternative to the traditional meat-centric feasts — with vegetarian entrées worthy of center stage.

Whether you're a plant-based eater, a flexitarian looking to diversify your holiday menu, or an omnivore aiming to make your vegetarian family members feel included at the table, I hope these recipes inspire and empower you to introduce vegetarian entrées to your holiday feasts.





Stuffed Acorn Squash With Creamy Tahini Dressing

Makes six servings
Prep time: 15 minutes
Cook time: two hours

FOR THE SQUASH:

- 3 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 large yellow onions, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp. sea salt, divided
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup long grain brown rice, rinsed
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup brown lentils, rinsed
- 8 leaves fresh sage, about 2 tbs.
- 8 sprigs fresh thyme
- 3 cups vegetable broth
- 3 medium acorn squash
- 1 tsp. avocado oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup roasted pistachios

FOR THE DRESSING:

- 1 clove garlic, minced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup tahini
- 2 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tbs. lemon juice
- 2 tbs. warm water
- Sea salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Preheat a large saucepan with the 3 table-spoons of olive oil over medium-low heat. Add the onions and a pinch of the salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are deeply caramelized, about 60 minutes.

While the onions are cooking, soak the rice and lentils in warm water. Finely chop the sage, and remove the thyme leaves from their stems. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

Once the onions are caramelized, remove half of them and set aside. Add the sage and thyme leaves to the saucepan, and cook until fragrant, about one minute. Strain the lentils and rice, and add them to the saucepan with the vegetable broth and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of the salt. Increase the heat to high and bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to a simmer and cover. Cook until the liquid is absorbed and the lentils and rice are cooked through, about 45 minutes.

While the lentils and rice are cooking, halve and seed the squash. Lightly coat the squash with the avocado oil, and season with the remaining salt and the black pepper. Place cut-side up on a baking sheet and bake until the squash is tender, about 40 minutes.

Once the lentils and squash are done, distribute the filling into the cooked squash and top with the reserved caramelized onions. Return to the oven for another five minutes.

While the stuffed squash is in the oven, prepare the tahini dressing by whisking the ingredients in a small bowl until smooth.

To serve, drizzle the squash with the tahini dressing and garnish with the pistachios.

Mushroom Bourguignon With Creamy Polenta

Makes six servings
Prep time: 15 minutes
Cook time: one hour

FOR THE POLENTA:

- 4 cups water
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- 1 cup polenta
- 2 tbs. salted butter

FOR THE MUSHROOM STEW:

- 16 oz. mixed mushrooms of choice, sliced
- 1 tbs. avocado oil
- 1 tsp. sea salt, divided
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tbs. salted butter
- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 3 medium carrots, roughly chopped
- 2 tbs. tomato paste
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tbs. cornstarch
- 1 cup dry red wine
- 4 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 cups pearl onions, ends trimmed and peeled
- 1 cup vegetable broth, plus more as needed
- 1 tbs. coconut aminos, tamari, or soy sauce
- ½ tsp. smoked paprika
- ½ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley, to garnish

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees F.

Bring the water and salt to a boil. Slowly whisk in the polenta, then cover the pot and reduce the heat to low. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the polenta is creamy and tender, about 30 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in the butter, then cover to keep warm.

While the polenta is cooking, toss the mushrooms with the avocado oil, ½ teaspoon of the salt, and the pepper. Spread the mushrooms in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet, and bake until deeply browned, about 15 to 18 minutes.

Meanwhile, add the butter to a large Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the yellow onion, carrots, and remaining ½ teaspoon of salt, and cook until the vegetables are tender and begin to brown, about 12 to 15 minutes.

Push the carrots and onion aside, and add the tomato paste to the center of the pan. Cook,



stirring frequently, until caramelized and darkened in color, about two to three minutes.

Stir in the garlic and cook until fragrant, about one minute more. Add the mushrooms and cornstarch, and stir until the vegetables are evenly coated.

Add the wine, scraping the bottom of the pot to deglaze any brown bits, and cook until the wine is halved in volume, about three minutes. Add the thyme, pearl onions, vegetable broth, coconut aminos, and paprika. Adjust the heat as needed to maintain a steady simmer, cover, and cook for 15 minutes or until all the vegetables are tender and the liquid has thickened. Add a splash of vegetable broth to thin the stew if desired. Pluck out the thyme sprigs and discard.

Serve the stew over the creamy polenta, garnished with the fresh parsley.

Butternut Squash Risotto

With Miso Butter Beans and Greens

Makes eight servings
Prep time: 20 minutes
Cook time: 50 minutes

FOR THE RISOTTO:

- 6 cups vegetable broth
- 4 tbs. salted butter, divided
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 1 lb. butternut squash, peeled, seeded, and chopped
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups arborio rice
- 2 oz. Gruyère cheese, grated
- 4 oz. Parmesan cheese, grated
- Shaved Parmesan, to garnish

FOR THE MISO BUTTER BEANS AND GREENS:

- 2 bunches Swiss chard
- 2 tbs. white miso paste
- ¼ cup warm water
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 15-oz. cans butter beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 tsp. apple-cider vinegar
- ½ tsp. sea salt

Heat the vegetable broth on the stove over medium heat.

Place a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat and add 3 tablespoons of the butter. Add the onion and cook until tender and translucent, about six to seven minutes. Add the squash, salt, and pepper, and cook until softened, about six to eight minutes more.

Add the rice and stir to coat the grains in butter. Add a ladle of hot broth and cook, stirring frequently, until the liquid is fully absorbed. Repeat until all the broth is absorbed and the rice is cooked yet firm in the center, about 25 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in the remaining butter and grated cheeses, and cover to keep warm.

Separate the stems from the chard leaves and chop the stems into small pieces. Roughly chop the leaves. Whisk together the miso paste and warm water in a small bowl until smooth.

Preheat a large skillet over medium heat, then add the olive oil. Pour in the miso-paste mixture and bring to a simmer. Add the garlic and stir, cooking until fragrant, about one minute. Add the chard stems and cook until softened, about three to four minutes more. Add the chard leaves and beans, and cook about two to three minutes, until the leaves are wilted and the beans are warmed through. Remove from heat and stir in the vinegar and salt.

Serve the risotto topped with the beans and greens, and garnish with the shaved Parmesan. 🌱

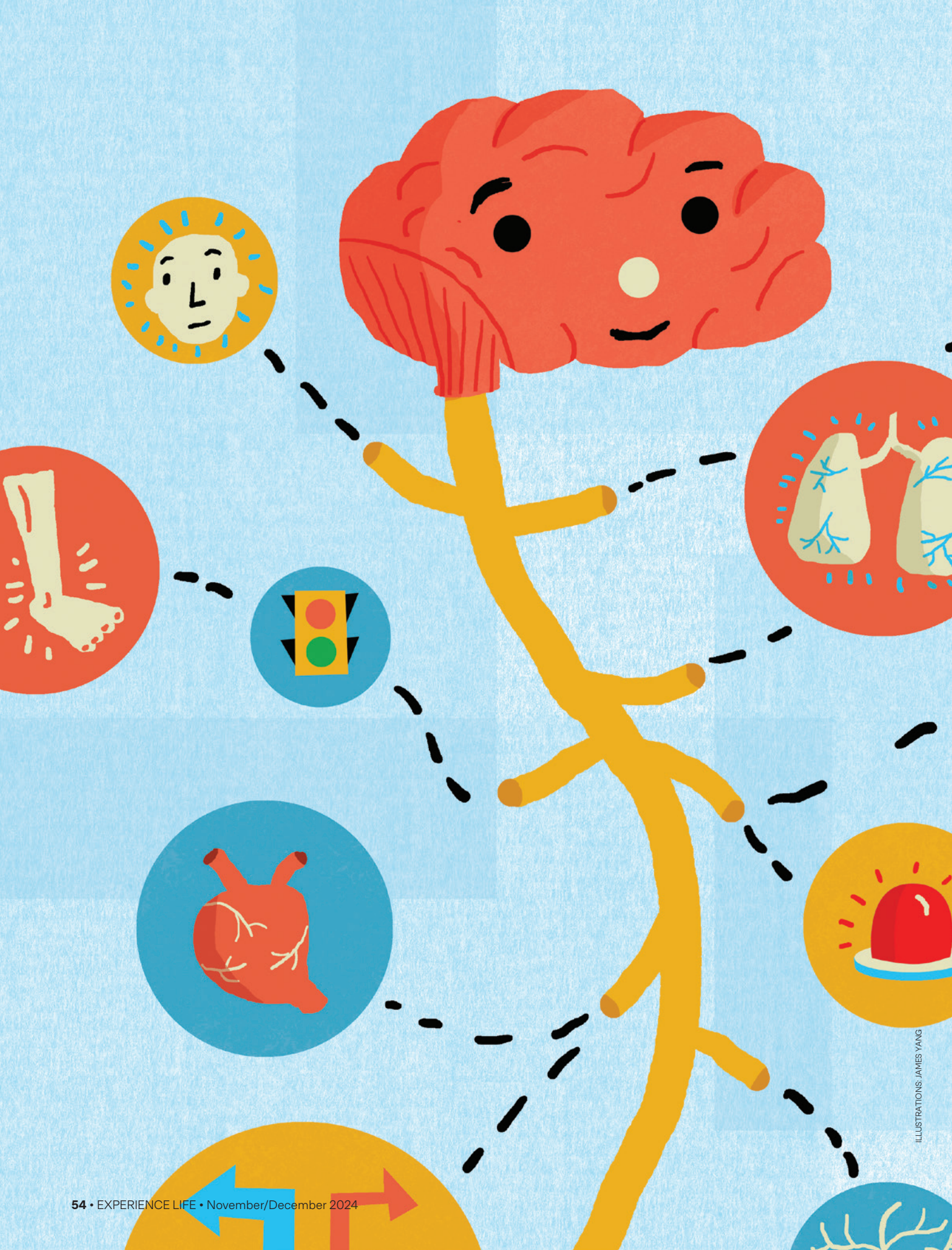
MADDIE AUGUSTIN is a Minneapolis-based recipe developer.



ENJOY MORE!

Find our recipe for Mushroom-Walnut Lasagna at [ELmag.com/plantbasedholiday](https://www.ELmag.com/plantbasedholiday).





ILLUSTRATIONS: JAMES YANG



THE SCIENCE OF Settling Down

Stimulating the vagus nerve can help relieve stress. These tools and strategies make that relief accessible to anyone.

BY MO PERRY

FITNESS COACH Mark Schneider, NASM-CPT, recently worked with a client with a stubborn, mysterious pain. “She had an ongoing foot-ankle issue for several months that was starting to inhibit her ability to walk,” says Schneider, who’s trained in functional medicine and specializes in helping clients with injuries and chronic pain.

Her doctors hadn’t been able to find anything physically wrong. Schneider suggested various exercises, but nothing seemed to help — until they tried a relatively new tool for transcutaneous vagus nerve stimulation, or tVNS. For this treatment, the client wore an illuminated, headband-shaped device around her neck, where it delivered electrical stimulation through the skin to both sides of her vagus nerve for 20 minutes at a time.

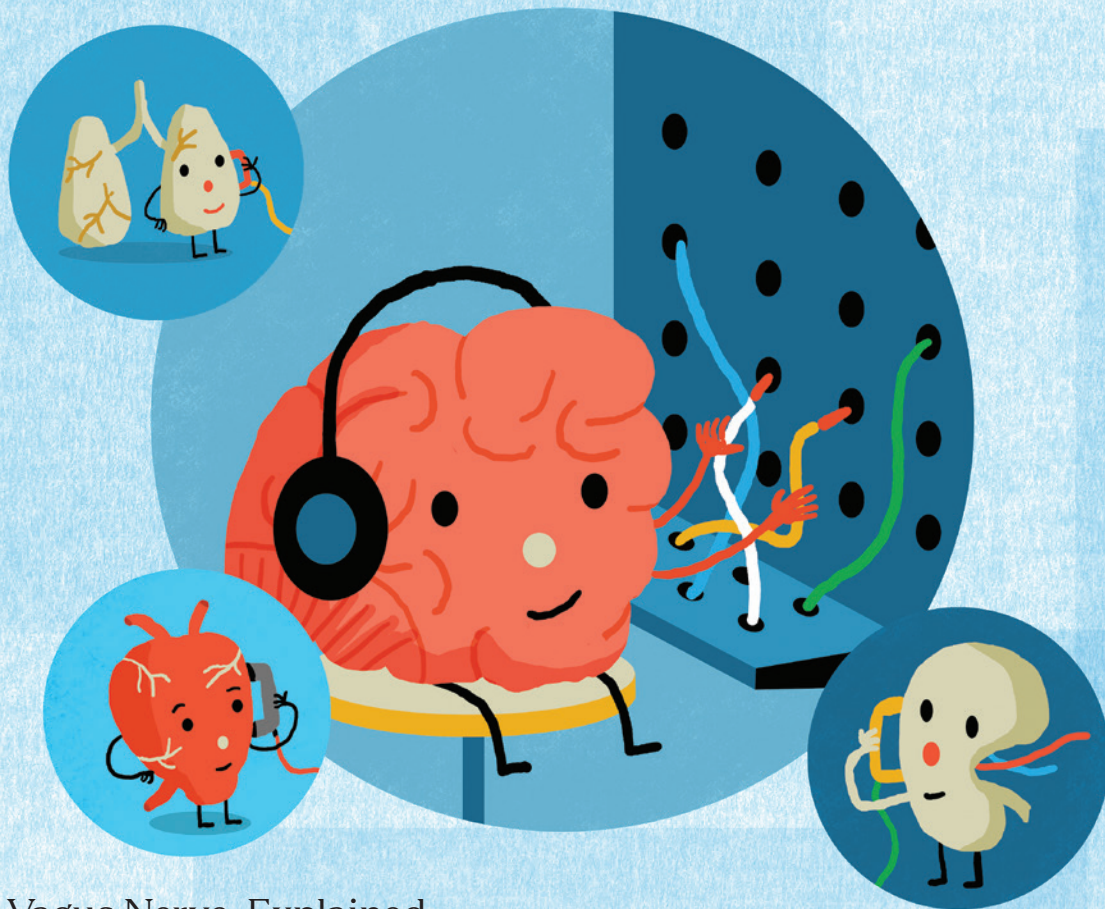
“We were using the tVNS to address her emotional stress and general anxiety,” Schneider says. “Surprisingly, when she got up, her ankle wasn’t hurting anymore.”

Her pain disappeared after the first session. Months later, it still hasn’t returned.

It’s long been known that stress, anxiety, depression, physical pain, and inflammation can work together in self-reinforcing feedback loops. Researchers are now recognizing the vagus nerve as a key mechanism underlying those connections — and they’re studying how vagus nerve stimulation (VNS) can help.

“There are or have been nearly 500 clinical trials around the world looking at how stimulating the vagus nerve can help with medical conditions in which inflammation plays a critical role,” says functional-medicine physician Gregory Plotnikoff, MD. Those trials have examined issues including psychiatric concerns, neurodegenerative conditions, gastroenterological problems, and more.

Yet there’s no reason to wait for the outcomes of clinical trials to start harnessing the benefits of vagus nerve stimulation for stress relief. These are available to anyone.



The Vagus Nerve, Explained

The vagus nerve runs from your brainstem to nearly every organ in your body — from the heart and lungs to the gallbladder and spleen, all the way down to the depths of the digestive tract.

The body's longest cranial nerve, the vagus is like a telephone line connecting distant parts of a rural community. It conveys messages between the brain and the body's essential systems, keeping the organs functioning smoothly and carrying their information back to the brain. This bidirectional communication allows the brain to adjust bodily processes in real time, responding to activity, nourishment, and the need for rest.

The vagus nerve is part of the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which regulates heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion, immune function, and metabolism. The ANS has two primary arms: The sympathetic arm is associated with the fight-or-flight response; the parasympathetic arm, dominated by the vagus nerve, is associated with the rest,

digest, and restore mode. (A third branch, called the enteric nervous system, is located in the intestine and typically communicates with the brain through the vagus nerve.)

Functional-medicine provider Navaz Habib, DC, compares the two main branches of the ANS to the gas and brake pedals of a car. Both need to operate strongly and smoothly for maximum well-being.

“Without an accelerator — the sympathetic branch of the ANS — we would be unable to move efficiently and effectively through life. Without a brake pedal — the parasympathetic branch of the ANS — we would be unable to slow down, control our movements, and stop when necessary,” Habib explains in his book *Upgrade Your Vagus Nerve*.

The fight-or-flight response can get a bad rap, but it is crucial for daily life. It prepares the body for strenuous physical activity by increasing blood flow and improving oxygen delivery to the lungs. And it is not only the body's accelerator, notes functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoie, DC, DACNB:

“The sympathetic system allows your nervous system to tolerate stress.”

The parasympathetic system acts as the brake with the help of the vagus nerve. It assists in regulating the heart rate, stimulating digestion, and relaxing the breath, all of which downshifts an activated stress response. It allows us to self-soothe.

“A healthy vagus nerve keeps you calm in stressful situations and lets you know when danger is gone. This allows your body to rest and repair itself,” writes somatic therapist Anna Ferguson, CCATP, in *The Vagus Nerve Reset: Train Your Body to Heal Stress, Trauma, and Anxiety*.

After periods of prolonged stress or anxiety, it's common to have some trouble activating the parasympathetic response. When we're stuck in fight-or-flight, techniques that stimulate the vagus nerve manually can help slow and eventually stop the stress response.

“VNS is a game-changing therapy that helps to push on the brakes, allowing the body to begin the healing process,” says Habib.



An Extinguisher for Inflammation

One crucial function of the vagus nerve is to dial down inflammation in the body. This occurs through the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway, explains Plotnikoff.

When the vagus is stimulated, it sends electrical signals along its length. These lead to the release of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that regulates inflammation.

Acetylcholine interacts with specific receptors on immune cells, inhibiting the production of proinflammatory proteins called cytokines. Reducing proinflammatory cytokine production can lower inflammation not just locally but throughout the body. When we're in fight-or-flight mode, the vagus nerve isn't being stimulated, so it can't send these important inflammation-reducing signals.

"This pathway is the functional relay circuit between the nervous system and the immune system — the neuroimmune system," says Habib. This relay plays a key role in conditions characterized by widespread inflammation, such as rheumatoid arthritis or inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD). It's why stress is linked with higher inflammation and worse symptoms in so many conditions.

It's also why VNS is so promising for any condition worsened by stress in which inflammation plays a role.

Understanding Vagal Tone

The fitness of the vagus nerve is described as its "tone." This determines how effective it is in regulating the stress response, among other things.

"It's like water pressure in the shower," explains Habib. When pressure is too low, the water can't rinse away dirt or soap. Too high and it's overpowering. "We want nice, strong, comfortable pressure. That's good vagal tone — it's strong enough to send signals to all the cells it needs to communicate with."

Low vagal tone can lead to difficulty relaxing, poor digestive function (often with bloating and constipation), frequent infections, mood instability, and chronic inflammation. High vagal tone is associated with excess passivity in the body, as with the freeze response to stress. This is indicated by bradycardia (a too-slow heart rate), nausea, fainting, and respiratory problems.

Good vagal tone is neither high nor low; its sweet spot is right in the middle. This contributes to healthy digestion, stress resilience, a rightsized immune response, and reduced

risk of inflammatory diseases.

Vagal tone is influenced by a variety of factors, including genetics, nutrition, exercise, breathing patterns, sleep, and environmental toxins.

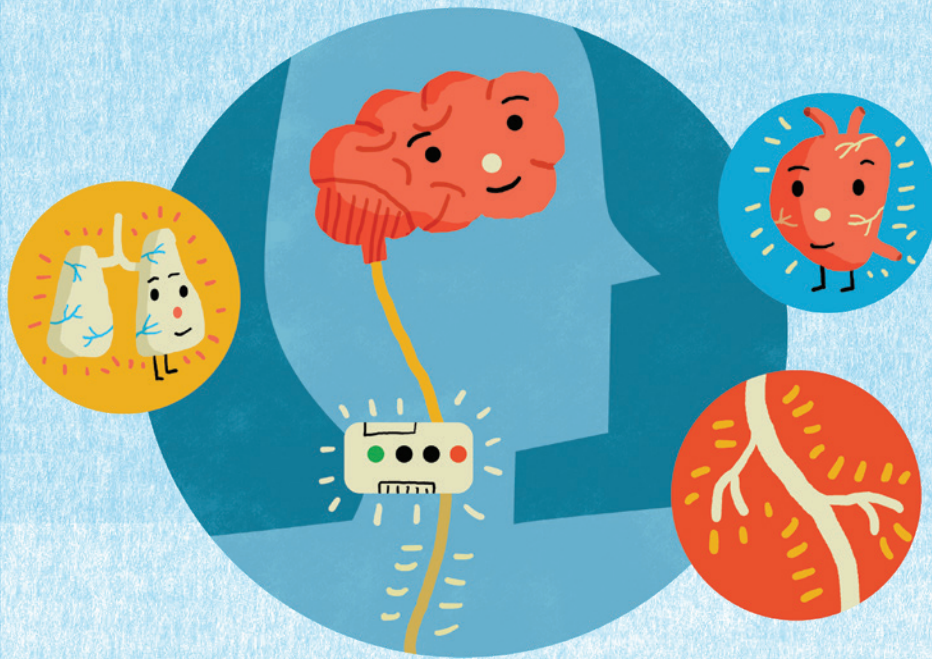
Stress is also a major factor, Habib says, and it usually falls into one of four categories:

- **Physical stress**, such as overtraining, chronic inactivity, physical injury, or illness.
- **Biochemical stress**, such as exposure to environmental toxins or lack of adequate nutrition.
- **Emotional stress** in our relationships.
- **Psychological stress**, including past traumas that "scuff the lens through which we see the world," Habib says.

"All those stressors force us to push the accelerator. When we try to slow down, we push the brake," Habib explains. "If there's too much stress over time, the vagus nerve [starts] to wear out and lower vagal tone."

With some deliberate effort, however, we can restore healthy function of the parasympathetic system and strengthen vagal tone. This is what VNS techniques allow us to do.





Improving Vagal Tone With VNS

Heart-rate variability (HRV) — the time between individual heartbeats — is one of the best measures of vagal tone. A healthy heart doesn't beat like a metronome; its rhythm varies by hundreds of milliseconds as the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems engage in a dynamic push and pull.

Chronically stressed people tend to have low HRV, writes Sara Mednick, PhD, in *The Power of the Downstate*. "This represents a system stuck on overdrive and unable to flexibly respond to life's demands and then appropriately calm the system down."

Our HRV and vagal tone are highly responsive to daily experience, and we can influence them positively when we take good care of ourselves. Several lifestyle habits have an outsized impact, including time in nature; regular, high-quality sleep; a varied whole-foods diet; regular exercise; and routine social connection.

When these interventions are not available — or are not enough on their own to regulate the nervous system, as with illness or the aftereffects of trauma — vagal tone can also be enhanced through direct stimulation of the nerve.

Physicians first used modern electrical VNS in the 1980s to treat epileptic seizures; the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved implantable electrical stimulation devices for epileptic patients in 1997. In recent years, research into noninvasive versions of this technology has expanded.

"The technology is not a cure for any particular condition at all," explains Habib. "It is a device meant to help create a state shift."

Studies of VNS suggest it can effectively treat symptoms of depression, anxiety, migraine, stroke, traumatic brain injury, PTSD, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease. Long COVID clinics have deployed VNS to help relieve fatigue, brain fog, and anxiety.

Because the vagus nerve is central to the gut-brain connection, VNS may be a promising treatment for gut-related conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome and IBD. "When gut function is compromised, the vagus nerve tends to be the first area that needs to be turned on in order to regulate and support overall health," says Habib.

A 2023 report published in *Bioelectronic Medicine* found transcutaneous

auricular vagus nerve stimulation — a type of tVNS via the ear — improved symptoms and inflammatory markers in a small group of children and young adults with mild to moderate IBD. A 12-month pilot study looking at surgically implanted VNS found that it restored healthy vagal tone and reduced inflammation in a group of seven patients with Crohn's disease.

Noninvasive VNS devices are increasingly available without a prescription. Some are designed to be used on the ear, where electrical pulses stimulate the vagus nerve in the brainstem. Others can be held directly against the neck (like the one Schneider used with his training client), where a substantive part of the vagus nerve sits near the surface.

"Noninvasive VNS results in a quick improvement in vagus-nerve signaling," says Habib. He's seen a startlingly fast response in his patients who were previously unable to shift from sympathetic to parasympathetic states.

Though not a cure-all, VNS can help restore a sense of balance and calm, says Plotnikoff. Particularly for those with low vagal tone, who may have struggled with chronic stress and inflammation for years, it can provide a kick-start to the body's relaxation response. This offers proof to the body and mind that another state is possible.

VNS can even be used during an acute stress response or panic attack, says Schmoie. By activating the parasympathetic nervous system, VNS helps the body counteract the surge of adrenaline and cortisol. This enables the return to a regulated state.

The one time to avoid using VNS, says Habib, is when the body is in a freeze response. This is signaled by fainting, low heart rate, or a general lack of affect. These symptoms are a clue that the parasympathetic system is overactivated, and VNS could make matters worse.

How to Activate the Vagus Nerve

The following techniques all safely stimulate the vagus nerve, but people with severe asthma, sleep apnea, or heart conditions should use caution with any electrical forms of VNS.

- 1. Practice long, slow exhalations.** Slow breathing helps activate the vagus nerve. Simply slowing the breath and increasing the length of your exhalations can stimulate the parasympathetic response.
- 2. Immerse your face in cold water.** When you plunge your face into cold water or splash some on your face, it stimulates a natural reflex called diver's reflex, which slows the heart rate.
- 3. Hum, chant, sing, or gargle.** Try gargling water for 30 seconds in the morning and evening, right after you brush your teeth. Activating the muscles around the vocal cords can stimulate electrical activity along the vagus nerve, says Habib.
- 4. Use an isometric hold.** Isometric holds can act as a kind of nervous-system reset. "Holding a lunge or a squat, strongly gripping the hand, or doing a Valsalva maneuver [bearing down while pushing breath out against your sealed nose and mouth] can quickly release and calm the nervous system," Schmoie says.
- 5. Try transcutaneous vagus nerve stimulators.** Handheld or wearable tVNS devices specifically include the Pulsetto and Truvaga. Some are designed for use on the ear; others target one or both sides of the cervical branch of the vagus nerve in the neck.
- 6. Apply transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulators.** TENS units are typically used to treat pain by delivering electrical currents to targeted areas, but they can be used off-label to stimulate the vagus nerve. Follow the guidance of a health professional to ensure safety.
- 7. Get ARPwave.** This is a type of neuromuscular electrical stimulation mainly used by physical therapists for pain relief and muscle re-education. These are typically found only in therapeutic settings.
- 8. Explore implanted vagus nerve stimulators.** Surgically implanted stimulators are FDA-approved only to treat epilepsy and treatment-resistant depression. Research is ongoing to explore their potential for several other conditions, including migraine, rheumatoid arthritis, and IBD.

Habib recommends practicing some method of VNS twice daily — upon waking and right before bed. "I like bookending the day with it," he says. "It's great for helping people become alert and in a state where they can handle things in the morning. And it's wonderful for helping people sleep, [and] sleep is the gym for the vagus nerve."

In short, a VNS practice can help you keep calm and carry on. Who among us doesn't need a little more of that? 🧘

MO PERRY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

HOW TO MEASURE YOUR VAGAL TONE

The most precise metric for assessing vagal tone is heart-rate variability (HRV), says functional-medicine provider Navaz Habib, DC. A healthy heartbeat is not perfectly symmetrical; the rhythm varies slightly as the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems engage in a dynamic push and pull. HRV measures the time between individual heartbeats.

High HRV (more variance between heartbeats) corresponds to greater vagal tone, while low HRV suggests an overactivated sympathetic response and lower vagal tone. A number of large studies indicate that a robust HRV is predictive of a range of positive health outcomes, including a lower risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease. It also corresponds to sharp cognition and emotional regulation.

Many devices on the market measure HRV, including watches, chest straps, and even rings to track trends and patterns. But there are also several tech-free ways to dial into your vagal tone.

One is the palatine-arch response test. The ability to lift the soft palate is directly linked to the effective function of the vagus nerve. Try depressing your tongue with a toothbrush and looking at the uvula in the back of your throat in a mirror. Observe how the arches framing your uvula move as you say, "Ahh."

Ideally, the arches lift symmetrically, and the uvula points straight down. If the arches don't rise or rise unequally, or the uvula points toward one side, it can indicate vagus nerve impairment.

If the vagus nerve can't effectively lift the soft palate, your voice may have a nasal or monotone quality — another indicator of poor vagal tone.

The most accessible window into vagal tone is simply checking in with how you feel. In general, can you meet the demands of your day and then let them go? Or do you find yourself ruminating, feeling simultaneously tired and wired, and struggling to self-soothe?

"At its core, a regulated nervous system is a resilient nervous system," explains somatic therapist Anna Ferguson, CCATP, in *The Vagus Nerve Reset*. "Burnout, illness, and chronic pain are all manifestations of a stressed nervous system."

Right Rest, Right Time



BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS



OPTIMIZING HOW YOU REST DURING YOUR WORKOUTS CAN HELP YOU REACH YOUR FITNESS GOALS.

EXERCISE takes work. But by itself, work is no guarantee of success. Whether you're seeking improvements in strength, endurance, athleticism, or body composition, it's the interplay of work and rest during your exercise sessions — known to exercise physiologists as intraworkout rest — that determines both the short-term effect of each workout and the long-term results you ultimately achieve.

“We need to shift away from this idea that fatigue is the goal,” says conditioning expert Joel Jamieson, CSCS. “That’s not the goal. Improving by resting long enough is the goal — and rest is the key ingredient.”

As a rule of thumb, easier workouts require fewer and shorter breaks; harder workouts call for longer, more frequent ones.

While this sounds intuitive, exercisers often fail to put this principle into practice.

“Many people make their easy workouts too hard and their hard workouts too easy,” explains Jessie Syfko, ND, CSCS, Life Time’s vice president of group training. As a consequence, she says, every workout regresses toward a generalized medium-hard.

That’s not necessarily bad: Such workouts can still spur progress — especially

if you’re a beginner. “The lower someone’s level of fitness is, the less it takes of any type of training for that to improve,” says Jamieson. “If you’ve only been training a few months, there’s such vast room for improvement [that] you can put everything together in one bucket and they’re all going to get better.”

That honeymoon period — when all your workouts net you noticeable improvements in all aspects of fitness — is short-lived, explains Jamieson. “Once you’ve reached a certain level, the body needs a [change in] stimulus for each particular thing to improve.”

When you’re seeking a higher rung on the fitness ladder — be that greater levels of strength, power, and endurance, or more muscle mass and less fat — you need to pay greater attention to your rest periods to effectively target those metabolic and muscular functions.

“This is what’s known as the SAID principle — specific adaptation to imposed demands,” says Life Time senior personal training leader and performance coach Michael Middleton, MS, CSCS. “The body adapts to whatever stimulus you throw at it . . . so you better get specific with your work and your rest.”

The Science

OF INTRAWORKOUT REST

To understand the nuances of rest, you need to consider how the body makes and stores the energy necessary for movement.

As you may remember from biology class, all physiological functions, including exercise, are powered by adenosine triphosphate. Because ATP is so essential to life — we'd die instantly without it — the body has several ways to produce it. One of them, oxidative phosphorylation, is aerobic, meaning it requires oxygen.

The other two — the glycolytic system and the ATP-CP energy pathway (also known as the phosphagen system) — are anaerobic, meaning they require no oxygen. (Learn more about these metabolic energy systems at ELmag.com/energysystems.)

Slow and steady **aerobic metabolism** is the one you use most of the time, resting or moving. For fuel, it burns carbohydrates, protein, and fat, in combination with oxygen. It calls primarily on the dark-colored, high-endurance slow-twitch muscle fibers distributed throughout your body.

The aerobic system isn't terribly fast, but it can hum on for extended periods. That's why it's possible for the average person to walk for hours without a break. As long as your energy needs remain low — you don't move too fast or work too hard — the aerobic system can keep you going for a long time.

If you run a little faster or lift a little heavier, your aerobic system can quickly become overwhelmed. The slow-twitch muscles aren't strong enough, and your aerobically powered ATP-production line isn't fast enough to keep up with the energy demands of intense activity.

"REST IS A BYPRODUCT OF INTENSITY. THE HIGHER INTENSITY YOU GO, THE MORE YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO REST."

That's when your **glycolytic metabolism** — along with your larger, lighter-colored fast-twitch muscles — springs into action. Glycolytic metabolism burns carbohydrates and requires no oxygen; this allows it to produce energy faster than your aerobic system.

Push your limit — with an ultrafast sprint or an ultraheavy lift — and you'll call on the potent anaerobic engine known as the **ATP-CP metabolism**. It burns fuels stored in your muscles to produce the fastest, most powerful bursts of energy your body can produce.

There's a catch to calling on either of these anaerobic metabolic systems, though: Both produce massive amounts of heat, lactate, and metabolic byproduct, which inhibit muscle contraction and cause muscles to burn and, ultimately, fail. Even though they don't use oxygen, you'll still breathe heavily during and after anaerobic work as your aerobic system struggles to cool you off, clear the metabolites, and replenish necessary fuels.

"The anaerobic side is disruptive to our internal environment," says Jamieson. "It's like slamming the gas pedal on a car: Keep it there, you burn everything out. It's a harsh environment for your body."

That's why you can't sustain anaerobic work for long, and it's why, when you're doing bursts of repeated high-intensity activities, like sprints or strength training, you need to intersperse frequent breaks.

"Rest is a byproduct of intensity," says Jamieson. "The higher intensity you go, the more you're going to have to rest."

In practice, your aerobic and anaerobic systems usually work in tandem, with your aerobic system going as hard as it can and your anaerobic systems making up the difference.

"Let's say you ride a bike at 8 miles an hour aerobically," Jamieson offers. "You can sustain that pace for a long time." But if you increase your pace to 10 miles an hour, he says, "now you have to make up that 2-mile-per-hour difference anaerobically." The further you go up that scale, the higher the contribution of your anaerobic metabolism and the less time you can exercise at that same intensity.

Different activities require different relative contributions from your metabolic engines. Learn to rest and work right, and you can get better at any of them.



The Slow, Steady Stuff

RESTING FOR HEART HEALTH, ENDURANCE, AND FAT LOSS

Cardiovascular Endurance: If your goal is to improve your cardiovascular health, to cultivate calm and focus in your life, or to complete a 5K or marathon, then you're seeking mainly cardiovascular endurance. Keep your effort low and use rest intervals (either half as long or as long as the duration of your effort) to help maintain it.

To begin, use a 2:1 or 1:1 work-to-rest ratio. With time and experience, your endurance will improve, and you'll be able to maintain the slow, steady effort with little to no rest.

"Let's say you find yourself working at too hard a pace for your aerobic system," says Syfko: You feel your muscles begin to ache, and your heart rate is climbing. "Focus on your breathing and maintain your form. Do your best to hold yourself accountable to the work interval, even if it means slowing your pace."

If you know your heart-rate zones and use a heart-rate tracker, zone 2 — that low- to moderate-intensity level

of 60 to 70 percent of your maximum heart rate — is a good range to aim for. (Learn more about zone 2 training at ELmag.com/zone2.)

Muscular Endurance: If you're after greater stamina, performance in team or endurance sports, or muscle mass for health, injury prevention, longevity, or body composition, then you're going to focus on muscular endurance. Perform sets of 15 to 30 reps of strength-training moves at a steady pace, focusing on excellent technique, up to and past the point when your muscles start to burn.

Between sets, rest for 30 to 60 seconds — just enough to give your slow-twitch muscle fibers a chance to relax and reset, but not so much that you recover fully — before you repeat the same exercise.

You can also perform circuits of exercises — one move for the chest, one for the legs, one for the core, and then repeat, for example. Between exercises within the circuit, rest only as long as needed. Between rounds, rest up to 30 to 60 seconds. Because maintaining good form is key, you might not be able to do the same number of reps in subsequent sets of

each individual exercise, and that's OK. Some of that muscular fatigue and burn is desirable if muscle endurance and mass is your goal.

Improved Metabolic Health and Fat Loss: People seeking improved metabolic health and fat loss should also emphasize aerobic activities in their training.

You might think that the best way to lose fat would be to work as hard as possible to burn the optimum number of calories during your workout. That's how many people seeking fat loss organize their training: Each session is an all-out, heart-pounding, sweat-pouring frenzy that requires lots of rest. But that's a mistake.

Recent research shows that when at rest, most people burn only small amounts of fat. "It's between 0.2 and 0.4 grams per minute," says Jamieson — about one-fifth the weight of a paper clip. And, in general, once you start exercising, you're actually burning even less fat per minute compared with when you're at rest.

That's because most people don't have an efficient aerobic engine, which means their anaerobic engines kick in almost instantly. Consequently, he adds, "they end up burning almost all carbohydrates the whole time they're working out."

Don't focus on caloric burn if you're training for fat loss, Jamieson advises. Instead, think of exercise as a way to tune up your fat-burning metabolism so that you're better at burning fat 24 hours a day. And the way to do that is to improve your aerobic engine with long, slow, no-frills, low-intensity cardio sessions.



The Grind

RESTING FOR HIIT AND MUSCLE BUILDING

Hard Anaerobic Activity: If you're doing high-intensity interval training (HIIT), then your goal is improved work capacity — or the ability to do lots of hard anaerobic activity in a short period of time. In that case, rest no less than 90 to 150 seconds between sets. That may seem like a long time, but work-capacity training, which consists of all-out 30- to 60-second work sets of intervals, sprints, or other high-intensity cardio work, is extreme exercise.

"Your rest intervals are designed to optimize recovery and help your body find a new balance, which permits the next high-intensity interval to be at a peak output again," says Syfko.

Let's say you're doing 200-meter sprints on a track, and on your first set, you complete that distance in 40 seconds. You need to rest long enough to complete your next sprint in 40 seconds or less. At first, you might have to estimate an appropriate rest period, so you might try resting for two minutes. If you match or improve on your 40-second time, you guessed right. If you're slower, you'll need to wait longer before your next effort.

Err in the direction of resting more — not less — between rounds so you can give your all to each sprint. "Your goal is to improve your performance," says Jamieson.

Sufficient rest between sets is essential for maintaining that high intensity, which, if you're monitoring your heart rate, will likely translate to zones 4 and 5. (Learn how to calculate and train according to your heart-rate zones at ELmag.com/ama.)

Muscle Mass: If your goal is building muscle, you'll be focusing on basic, compound strength-training exer-

cises, like deadlifts, squats, rows, and presses, using weights that allow you to perform about five to 12 reps per set.

Here, you'll rest anywhere from 90 seconds to three minutes between hard sets. This approach requires that you have a firm enough grasp on exercise technique such that your form doesn't fall apart as you fatigue.

"Do your best to find a weight that challenges your ability to finish the total rep count, and adjust accordingly to maximize each set," says Syfko. "For example, if you choose a weight to perform 12 reps but you could really perform many more than that, increase your weight until you find a challenging finish to every set."

As with HIIT training, there's some trial and error required with relatively lower-rep strength training. A recent meta-analysis found that one minute or slightly more of rest was, on average, about right for people seeking muscle growth.

When in doubt, though, rest longer. You want to avoid a steep drop-off in your reps from one set to the next.

"If you are training for maximal

strength-and-power gains but don't allow adequate time in between sets, you are not actually achieving maximal strength," Middleton says. "You are training endurance."



MIND YOUR MINDSET

IF YOU'RE USED TO training for aerobic fitness, taking long breaks during a strength or power workout can feel like an uncomfortable leap of faith. If you're used to training strength, taking short rests during an aerobic workout may leave you feeling rushed and out of breath.

"Converting to a different approach takes a change in mindset," says Life Time's Michael Middleton. "So I explain to my clients what the goal is and make sure they understand the benefit of resting shorter or longer."

A few tech options can help. A phone with a stopwatch app or a wristwatch with a second hand can be valuable, particularly as you

make the leap from one training goal to the next. After a few workouts, you'll be able to sense when 90 seconds has passed and you're ready to go.

For aerobic work and HIIT, a heart-rate monitor can be useful. During aerobic efforts, aim to maintain a heart rate in zone 2. During intervals and sprints, Middleton says, your heart rate will likely climb higher, into zones 4 and 5, approaching your max.

Between rounds, though, he adds, "you're looking for that point when your heart rate comes down at least 20 beats per minute, and ideally closer to 40." So, if you finish a round at 160 beats per minute, don't start the next sprint until your heart rate drops to about 130.

Blink and You're Done

RESTING FOR SPEED AND POWER

Maximum Power: Explosiveness and short-burst speed are important attributes in athletics and everyday life. To build power, practice heavy basic strength moves — think squats, deadlifts, cleans, and the like, performed at weights that you can lift for one to five reps — along with maximal-force jumps, medicine-ball throws, and short sprints. These pure anaerobic moves are as strenuous as it gets: all-out blasts of speed and strength that last no more than a few seconds.

Because these are top-effort activities, your rest periods should be even longer than the ones you take for high-intensity interval training — at least three minutes.

“On power, it’s short work, long rest,” says Syfko. This might seem counterintuitive: The moves are so

brief in duration that you may think you don’t need much rest. But remember, your goal in performing them is not cardiovascular endurance but raw speed and power. And your ATP-CP system — responsible for generating speed and power — takes a long time to recharge.

“If you’re training yourself to get faster, work on explosive movements at your max effort with long rest ratios,” says Syfko. “Work to bring the best version of yourself back to the sprint, effort, or movement in order to facilitate the muscle memory of what you seek to obtain. Tired muscles and low energy don’t produce the optimal environment to make you faster.”

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



Middleton stresses that these are basic guidelines, not strict rules: “Everyone is different, and everyone changes day to day based on stress, sleep, hydration, and other factors.” So let the numbers — rest periods and heart rate — inform you, but allow your intuition to dictate ultimately when you’re ready to go.

“Completing an active metabolic assessment will ensure that your efforts and rest periods are spot-on,” he says.

Bored during rest periods? Middleton suggests stretching or foam rolling between sets. “You can accomplish a lot by being smart with your rest periods,” he says. “I might have a client perform chest

stretches between sets of back exercises.” Or they might foam roll the quadriceps (front thighs) between sets for the hamstrings (rear thighs).

The idea is to relax and release the muscles opposite the ones you’re working: Stretch your lats while working shoulders, your biceps while working triceps. “This can make your workout feel a lot better,” says Middleton. “Plus, you’re not spending an extra 15 minutes stretching and foam rolling at the end of your workout.”

Alternatively, boost your brain power with low-impact neurobic exercises geared to improving your coordination and focus. (Find the moves at ELmag.com/neurobic.)

Whatever you do, don’t stress about making the rest periods too active or productive. After all, the key to resting is, well, resting. Conditioning expert Joel Jamieson prefers a relatively passive approach. “Maybe walk around and listen to music, but that’s about it.”

Whether you choose to stretch, roll, or rest fully during your downtime, be sure to bring attention to your breath. “The breath is the key that unlocks any optimal health, fitness, or well-being goal,” says *Life Time*’s Jessie Syfko. A hard set, she says, “is like climbing a fitness mountain: You want to get off that mountain as fast as you can so you can get to the next mountaintop faster.”

Between sets, she explains, “deepen the breath and feel the spherical expansion of your torso. Breathe low into your abdomen — not up into your chest. The better you breathe, the faster you’re going to recover.”

Do it consciously, she advises, and the breathwork will spill over into the workout. “Suddenly, you’re breathing better while you lift, while you run on the treadmill, or while you’re doing a high-intensity workout.”

Along with those appropriately timed rest periods, that better breath means you bounce back faster from your workout — and make more progress. Says Syfko: “That’s the Holy Grail of optimal.”



A Good Night's Sleep

**WHY WE NEED
QUALITY REST —
AND WHAT TO DO
WHEN IT'S ELUSIVE.**



Why We're Not Sleeping

BY LAINE BERGESON

IMAGINE YOU SEE A HEADLINE

announcing a new miracle cure. You discover this medicine supports and improves the health of every organ in the body, eases depression, reduces anxiety, and primes you to perform your best at work and in all other facets of your life.

It also protects against age-related conditions like Alzheimer's disease and cancer, helps curb sugar cravings, and improves physical appearance. It even makes you a safer driver.

Oh, and there are no known side effects.

Most people would think this is a scam — no single intervention could offer all that. But not only does this remedy exist without the hassle of a prescription; it's available to all of us every night when we get into bed.

Unless it isn't.

The healing power of sleep may elude us because of insomnia. Or because we can't fall asleep for other reasons, in which case we might lie in bed worrying about the all-important, cures-most-things sleep we're not getting. It's a common complaint.

But there are ways to overcome the hurdles standing between you and a good night's rest. Learn why finding your way back to sleep is worth the effort.

Roughly one in three American adults doesn't get the recommended amount of sleep each night, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Some suffer from occasional insomnia — involuntary sleeplessness or restless, truncated sleep lasting three nights or more — and others struggle with a chronic version. In either case, the inability to fall or stay asleep can produce a loss of focus and other negative outcomes the following day.

According to Phyllis C. Zee, MD, PhD, a sleep circadian-health researcher and insomnia specialist at Northwestern University, insomnia disorder is usually the result of three P's: a biological predisposition; a precipitating factor (such as grief or shift work); and perpetuating factors, such as naps and caffeine, that sustain the sleeplessness.

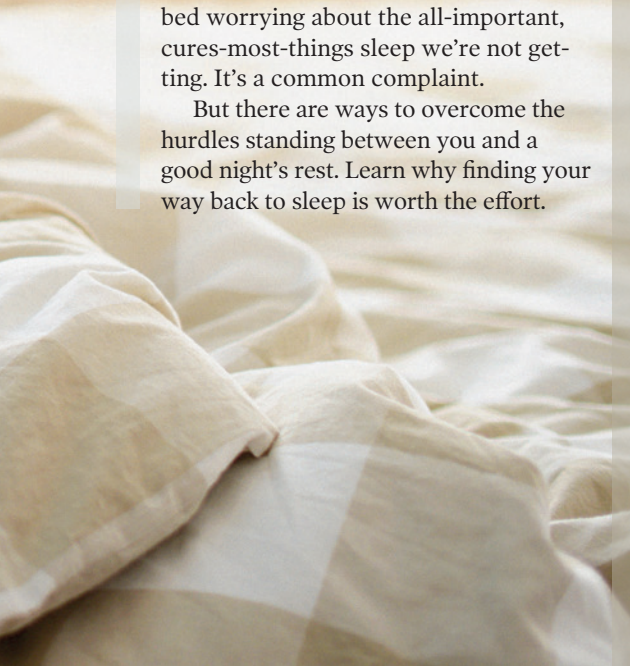
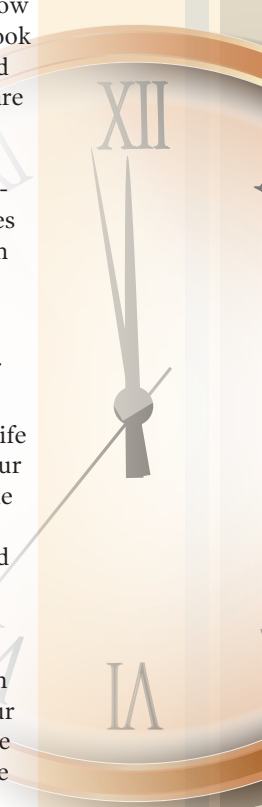
Meanwhile, plenty of Americans are involuntarily sleep-deprived due to choice or circumstance, like late nights at the office or caring for an infant.

Finally, many of us skimp on sleep because

we're busy, or restless, or just don't see any reason to prioritize it when the show we're watching or the book we're reading is too good to quit. "Human beings are . . . the only species that will deliberately deprive themselves of sleep without legitimate gain," notes Matthew Walker, PhD, in *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*.

Even with the best of intentions, sleep can be elusive. Contemporary life has wreaked havoc on our circadian rhythms. While our bodies are designed to wake with the sun and fall asleep at dark, the combination of brightly lit environments and blue-light exposure from screens can stimulate our brains to believe it's time for activity long after the lights are out.

"When electricity became widely available, we lost our natural bearings to live with our normal rhythms," says integrative psychiatrist Henry Emmons, MD. "People could stay up late, and it really changed our relationship with sleep."



The Beauty of Sleep

There are plenty of good reasons to turn out the lights and climb into bed at a reasonable hour. These are just a few of them.

SLEEP DETOXES THE BRAIN.

There's a reason you feel so refreshed when you get a good night's sleep — and so groggy when you don't. When you're exhausted and it feels like the gears of your brain are clogged, it's because, in a sense, they are.

During the day, waste products accumulate in the brain. These are natural byproducts of our waking brainpower. When we're asleep at night, the brain's glymphatic system gets to work flushing away the day's waste products. When we don't sleep (or don't sleep enough), the byproducts collect and muck up the gears.

"It's sort of like having a party and leaving a mess in the dining room," says integrative physician Frank Lipman, MD. He notes that consecutive nights of too little sleep compound the situation. "Then, say, the next day you have another party and don't clean. The mess just builds up until it's cleaned. The same thing happens in the brain, which is cleaned by sleeping."

A "clean" brain allows us to learn, concentrate, and perform at our best. This is evidenced by a 2019 study that examined how the sleep habits of a group of MIT students influenced their performance on examinations. The amount and quality of sleep students got directly correlated with their test scores.

Interestingly, how much students slept the night before a test didn't have much influence on their scores — what mattered most was the quality and quantity of sleep they'd gotten throughout the semester in which they learned the material. This showed that a good night's sleep before a big day can be less important than quality sleep over time.

Surprising no one, sleep loss also reduces productivity on the job. A 2022 Gallup study found that more than \$44 billion of lost productivity each year can be chalked up to unplanned absences due to sleep deprivation.

SLEEP BALANCES MOOD.

For many years, sleep problems were considered one byproduct of depression. But a series of longitudinal studies, in which researchers tracked the same individuals over time, have shown that sleep problems may actually be a causal factor in depression. This suggests more sleep may offer depression relief.

"People who have trouble with insomnia often have depression," says Emmons. "If they can get their sleep back on track, their chances of recovering [are substantially better than] they would have been without improving their sleep."

Insufficient sleep also increases anxiety, according to a study published by the American Psychological Association in 2023. Researchers showed that even short periods of sleep loss, like staying up an hour later than usual, resulted in participants experiencing fewer positive emotions, like joy and contentment, the next day.

Another important factor in emotional well-being is dreaming. Walker has described dreaming as a form of overnight therapy, helping us process and integrate difficult memories. These dreams can also help remove the "visceral, painful emotional charge that had previously been wrapped around those memories."

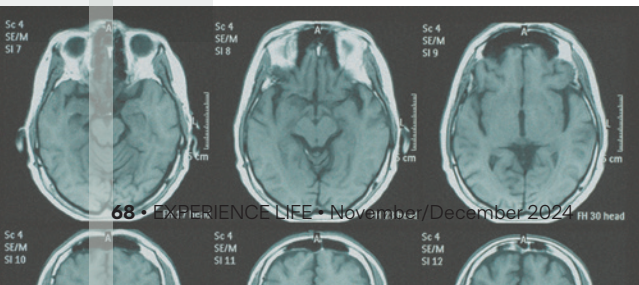
To demonstrate, he suggests recalling a difficult childhood memory, such as feeling scared when you got lost at the mall and couldn't find your parent. If the memory no longer conjures much fear and sadness, it's because you've released those feelings through dreaming. "You have not forgotten the memory," he writes. "But you have cast off the emotional charge, or at least a significant amount of it."

SLEEP IMPROVES CREATIVITY.

Dreaming helps boost creativity by acting as a sort of mixer for all our acquired knowledge. During dreams, the brain makes new connections and divines new meaning from the facts of our life. This is why we often wake with an ability to see things in a new light.

Walker describes this process as "informational alchemy" and cites the apocryphal tale of the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev as an example of its power. Mendeleev, who was obsessed with bringing "an organizational logic to the known elements of the universe," is said to have suffered through three sleepless nights in 1869 before finally sleeping soundly.

In his dreams that night, he allegedly saw how all the elements could fit together and, upon waking, immediately wrote it down. It was the framework of the periodic table of elements as we know it today.





When sleep is in short supply, leptin levels drop, making it harder to feel full.

SLEEP SUSTAINS LONG-TERM HEALTH.

Sleep helps regulate the body's cyclical systems, such as hormones and the immune system. If we don't sleep enough, these systems can start to falter, potentially leading to the development of neurodegenerative illnesses and type 2 diabetes.

One way sleep loss and poor-quality sleep appear to contribute to the development of type 2 diabetes is by disrupting hemoglobin A1C, a marker of blood-sugar control. Research suggests that better sleep may help people with the disease improve their blood-sugar markers.

Sleep apnea, which seriously reduces sleep quality, increases the risk of cardiovascular conditions, like hypertension, coronary heart disease, and stroke, most likely by fostering systemic inflammation.

Disruptions in a person's circadian rhythm, such as night-shift work, increase the risk of certain cancers. And research suggests that chronic sleep deprivation contributes to neuroinflammation and the development of neurodegenerative diseases, including Alzheimer's.

All good reasons to put that book down and turn out the light.

Sleep helps regulate the body's cyclical systems, such as hormones and the immune system.

SLEEP REGULATES APPETITE.

Getting enough quality sleep ensures that the body produces adequate amounts of the hormone leptin, the chemical messenger that promotes a feeling of fullness. It's sometimes called "the satiety hormone."

When sleep is in short supply, leptin levels drop, making it harder to feel full. At the same time, levels of the hunger-promoting hormone ghrelin go up, making us likely to eat more than we need.

This isn't the only reason those extra pancakes always sound so good after a late night — or why we usually crave pancakes but not a spinach omelet when we're tired. A study from Northwestern University showed sleep deprivation distorts our sense of smell, which scrambles the brain's messages to the body about how much energy we really need. Researchers suspect this confusion helps make energy-dense foods such as sweets and processed carbohydrates even more irresistible.

SLEEP SUPPORTS IMMUNE FUNCTION.

Sleep quantity and quality even influence how likely we are to catch a cold. A study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found that people who averaged less than seven hours of sleep per night before being exposed to a cold virus were almost three times more likely to get sick than participants who slept an average of eight hours or more.



How to Sleep Well

A few basic routines that support good sleep: Set a regular bedtime and stick to it. Quit screens at least an hour before bed. Maintain a cozy, peaceful bedroom with light-blocking blinds or curtains. Some people find a warm bath or shower can also help them wind down.

Experts also offer these strategies for getting better rest.

INVEST IN AMBER LIGHT BULBS.

Screens emit blue light, which signals the brain that it's time to be awake; incandescent and LED light bulbs give off blue light too.

Consider installing a few amber light bulbs around your home for a less-stimulating light source, especially in the bedroom. Try turning these lights on only after the sun sets; reducing light stimulation to your brain can help you shift toward sleep more easily.

Consider installing a few amber light bulbs around your home for a less-stimulating light source, especially in the bedroom.

EXPLORE SLEEP-SUPPORTIVE SUPPLEMENTS.

Several supplemental nutrients help support better-quality sleep, and they spare you the side effects associated with conventional sleep medications.

- **Magnesium glycinate** helps regulate nerve function and calm the body for sleep.

- **L-theanine** is an amino acid that helps settle the central nervous system. It's available as a supplement, and it's also found in green tea — though the latter is not ideal before bed because it contains caffeine.

- **Melatonin** is a sleep hormone the body naturally produces, but production decreases as we age. Lipman recommends melatonin supplements, especially for most people over 50.



If you tend to wake up at 3 or 4 in the morning and have trouble falling back to sleep, rest assured that you've already enjoyed your most beneficial rest.



CONSIDER A SLEEP TRACKER.

Not sleeping can quickly become a self-perpetuating cycle. The less sleep you get, the more you worry about it — and the more you worry about it, the less sleep you get.

A sleep tracker may help. “I suggest people use a sleep watch,” says Emmons. The data may reveal that when you thought you were lying awake worrying about not sleeping, you were actually in light sleep. “People who are concerned about not sleeping enough will often find that they’re actually getting more sleep than they think,” he adds.

Tracking devices do emit electromagnetic radiation, so consider using them on a temporary basis to establish a baseline and then only on occasion, when you want feedback.

PRIORITIZE THE EARLY SLEEP PHASES.

The first half of the night is when most deep sleep happens, Emmons explains — and deep sleep is when the healing and restorative benefits accrue.

“Pay attention to what helps you sleep your best in the first half of the night,” he suggests. “One thing is not eating very much late in the evening so your body isn’t working hard to digest your food.”

If you tend to wake up at 3 or 4 in the morning and have trouble falling back to sleep, rest assured that you’ve already enjoyed your most beneficial rest. You may wish for more sleep, but the sleep you did get really counted. 🕒

LAINE BERGESON is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



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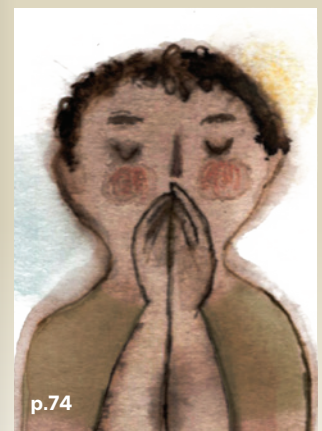
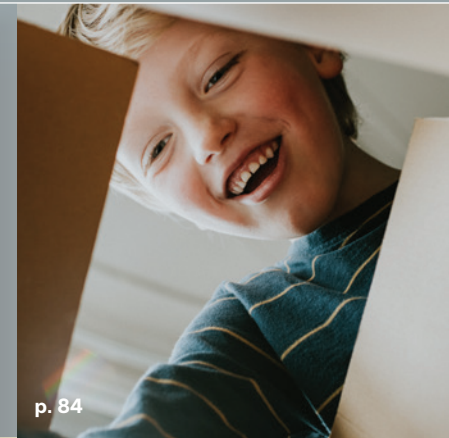
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REAL LIFE



THE PARENT-CHILD ROLE REVERSAL that often accompanies aging can be difficult to navigate. On page 80, one expert offers tips for parenting our parents while maintaining healthy boundaries — all in a supportive way that fosters an even deeper relationship.



5 Ways to Practice Humility

Cultivating humility offers a host of benefits for you and the people around you. Discover why it's a virtue worth investing in.

BY BEN CONNELLY

OJIBWE ELDER Mary Lyons, world-renowned activist, humanitarian, and spiritual advisor, stood in front of an audience near the headwaters of the Mississippi River. She delivered a rousing speech, imploring us to take a day of action to protect the waters of her northern Minnesota homeland, as reporters jockeyed for position with cameras and microphones. Then, with a sly grin toward the emcee, she regaled us with a hilarious story about the morning's struggle to get out the door with her grandkids, and how she'd barely arrived in time for the event.

Even at the height of her rhetorical powers, Lyons was comfortable laughing at her own foibles. Her humility shone through. She called on us to be humble, too, and to recognize our intimate relationship to the earth and each other.

Grounded in the Latin word for "earth," *humus*, humility describes a lack of self-centeredness, which allows us to embody dignity and stability without the baggage of egotism.

As a recovering alcoholic, I have been humbled in many agonizing

ways, but facing my failures directly has given me a clearer vision of myself and my power to choose the life I want. Far from being a weakness, humility can actually be a reflection of inner strength.

Although we live in a culture that often celebrates arrogance, we can learn to stand up for our own values with genuine humility. This doesn't mean sacrificing our self-esteem.

On the contrary, humility is a cornerstone of healthy relationships: It can allow us to acknowledge both our shortcomings and our strengths while holding space for someone else in our lives.

In *Mere Christianity*, writer C. S. Lewis describes the humble man this way: "He will not be thinking about humility: He will not be thinking about himself at all." Every day, people caring for others embody this attitude without giving it a second thought, wishing "Shabbat shalom" to their Jewish colleagues, or saying "happy holidays" to a stranger.

Humility makes room for connection in a world rife with division. Consider these five ways we can practice it.

1.

LISTENING

If we really wish to develop humility, listening to others is fundamental. Hearing other perspectives helps us shift from our own limited position to a broader, more inclusive point of view.

To deepen humility with listening, bring your whole focus to whoever is speaking to you and release any thoughts of fixing, judging, or controlling. This helps us see beyond the lens of our own narrow understanding.

Recently, one of my Zen colleagues offered a series of trainings on protecting the environment. Afterward, she spent a half-hour with each attendee simply listening to their independent reflections about the experience.

For her, the most powerful moment of the day occurred when one of the trainees told her that something she'd done had been hurtful. This opportunity for apology, amends, and humble connection is where she found the most growth — but she never would have had that revelation had she not first listened with an open mind and heart. (For more on changing the way you listen, see ELmag.com/howtolisten.)





2.

MINDFULNESS

Paradoxically, self-awareness can help free us from self-centeredness. Mindfully observing our own bodies and emotions while interacting with others may reveal self-indulgent patterns. It can help us learn to recognize when our shoulders are tense, when our breath is shallow, or when we feel worried.

Often, those anxious or irritable feelings can compel us to focus on controlling other people to achieve our desired result. But trying to manipulate other people is not a mark of humility.

By focusing on our own bodies and hearts through a mindfulness practice, we can make space for enhancing our capability to understand those around us and to communicate our needs in a confident, respectful way.

It is possible to be mindful of our bodies, emotions, and environments at any time, but it really helps to practice when things aren't too stressful. Mindfulness meditation, or time spent mindfully doing simple, low-stress tasks like cooking or gardening, can help us be more mindful when things get challenging. (Get more advice for starting a mindfulness practice at ELmag.com/mindfulness.)

3.

OPENNESS

Sometimes, life humbles us. When you make an error, do you respond with defensiveness or denial, or with openness and a willingness to grow?

Jazz musician Herbie Hancock sometimes tells a story of playing a terribly wrong note during a concert with Miles Davis. He felt wracked with guilt, as if he'd ruined the whole night.

But Davis took the note and incorporated it into his solo, so it fit beautifully. Hancock realized that there is always a way to mend a mistake and move forward.

The truth is that everyone makes mistakes. Humility can give us the power to meet those blunders with compassion and courage — to turn the poison into medicine, as the Buddhist saying goes. (For more on making the most of your missteps, see ELmag.com/failbetter.)



4.

GRATITUDE

There are many ways to shift our perspective beyond the self, to realize our true relationship with the world. Few are more pleasant and effective than cultivating gratitude.

Have you ever known someone to go on vacation just to spend all their time complaining about the other drivers, the people waiting in line, the slow service, or the irritating crowds? How about someone who focuses on the interesting sights and the people who helped them along the way? Odds are that one of those folks is going to have a more pleasant travel experience than the other.

The humble heart can appreciate the good things life brings. We can cultivate gratitude by remembering to voice our appreciation when we talk to others or by writing a list of things we are grateful for at the end of every day — expressing thanks for having access to food, for the people who serve us. The opportunities are boundless. (Discover more ways to express gratitude at ELmag.com/gratitude.)

5.

GIVING AND RECEIVING

I recall two times my son seemed happiest: First, during his high school graduation ceremony, when his community and family were showering him with congratulations and praise. The second time was during the COVID-19 pandemic, when he was volunteering overnight as a medic for a homeless encampment. Receiving offerings and giving of ourselves with an open heart can both remind us of the power of community and counteract our self-centered tendencies.

As I recovered from addiction and trauma, I had to learn to accept the love and support of people around me, even when I wasn't sure I deserved it. While those lessons were difficult for me, they opened the door to a full life of healthy connections.

When I trained as a volunteer meditation instructor in prisons, my teacher told me, "You will gain far more than you give, doing this work." Meeting the anguish in prison was hard, but it helped me recognize the fragility and value of human life and the possibility of practicing humility among people I might have assumed were inferior to me.

Whether the gift is large or small, if we receive it with gratitude and give it with no strings attached, we prepare the ground where humility blooms. 🌱



Seeking Self-Acceptance

Embracing yourself, just as you are, can help you get out of your own way.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD, AND AIMEE PRASEK, PhD

TWO PRACTICES may make the difference between recovering from depression and getting stuck. One is connection and the other is self-acceptance.

These are two sides of the same coin. Connection involves cultivating authentic relationships with others, and self-acceptance means creating an authentic relationship with yourself. Yet our brains often experience a major block to self-acceptance: the negativity bias.

Imagine you're having a quarterly review at work, or someone has just given you feedback on your box jump or poetry manuscript or parenting style. Most of the response is positive, but there's one wee piece of negative feedback.

Which part of the conversation lingers in your brain? If it's solely the negative part, you're not alone. Positive feedback typically disappears into the ether, while negative feedback is much stickier.

There may be an evolutionary reason for this: When our early ancestors

were foraging for plants to eat, they needed to remember which ones previously made them sick. Recalling the negative — in this case, the poisonous plants — would help ensure they survived.

Even if your boss's feedback won't kill you, you're still likely to ruminate, analyze, and try to explain it. Furthermore, if you're like many people, you'll internalize it and turn it into self-criticism.

This overprocessing is a major obstacle to self-acceptance. Without awareness, we may become preoccupied with avoiding criticism rather than working for positive change.

We can escape these loops. If we practice savoring the positive, it helps balance the asymmetry. It's also freeing when we treat our negative habits with more kindness.

There's a quote from psychologist Carl Rogers describing what he calls a curious paradox: "When I accept myself just as I am, then I can change." The following meditation can help.

SELF-ACCEPTANCE MEDITATION

1. Settle in as comfortably as you can. This may mean sitting, standing, or lying down. Quiet your mind. Tune in to your body and notice how you are holding yourself. See whether there's any way to make yourself even more comfortable.

2. Notice the earth supporting you. Allow yourself to feel grounded, even rooted, in the earth. Bring awareness to your breathing. There's no need to do anything; just breathe in and out at a comfortable, normal pace. You might notice how the thinking part of your mind begins to settle down.

3. Shift your focus from your breathing to the heart center in the middle of your chest. Allow the heart center to be as open and still as possible. If you're having trouble feeling your heart center, recall an experience when you felt grateful or moved. You might notice a sense of warmth or expansion — or not. Whatever you're feeling is fine. Accept that, in this moment, you're doing the best you can.

4. Broaden your attention to your whole body. Notice any physical pain or discomfort you might be feeling. There's no need to change it right now; you can just invite it in and hold it lightly. Next, scan your mind and heart to see whether you're carrying any emotional pain, any sense of heaviness, fear, shame, or regret. Gently invite these feelings to be part of the experience. Breathing in, notice what you're feeling. Breathing out, say to yourself, *Can I just be with this, at least for this moment?* Then imagine releasing your grip on your emotions and your emotions releasing their grip on you.

5. Turn your awareness toward your stories and beliefs about yourself. These might include things you've done wrong or things that are wrong with you. See if you can allow one or two of those beliefs to rise into your awareness. Invite yourself to release them. You might ask yourself: *Is this story I've told myself really true?* Consider that it might not be.

6. Bring yourself back to your body. See if you can find a sense of appreciation and gratitude for your body and for simply being here, right now. Take a couple of deep breaths and look for a sense of release as you breathe out.

7. Let your eyes open. Come back to the space you're in. Sense how it feels to be there without trying to change yourself, without striving for perfection or accomplishment, without trying to please anyone else. Just be exactly as you are, right here and now.

Feels pretty good, doesn't it?

HENRY EMMONS, MD, is an integrative psychiatrist and cofounder of Natural Mental Health. He is the author of *The Chemistry of Joy*, *The Chemistry of Calm*, and *Staying Sharp*. **AIMEE PRASEK, PhD**, is an integrative-therapies researcher and the CEO of Natural Mental Health.

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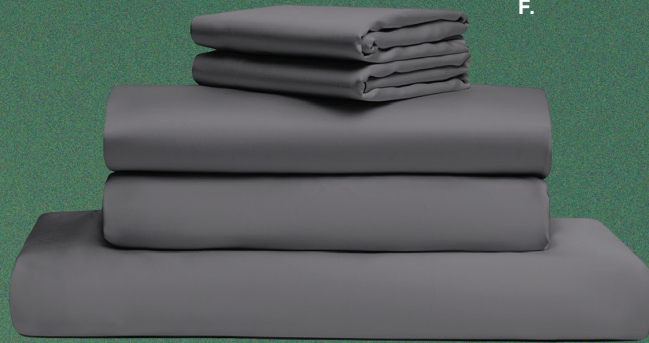
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F.

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C.

D.



H.



G.



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Seven levels of compression, extended battery life, and feeling like a new person after you wear them? You're officially the GOAT of gift giving.



The Dilemma of Parenting Your Parents

Adult children often struggle with the role reversal that occurs as their parents age. Creating a strong support network and holding space for emotions can help ease the transition.

BY JON SPAYDE

OUR PARENTS spent years helping us develop from helpless little bundles of need into independent adults — a favor many adult children want to return. We get that chance as our parents reach an age when they need help negotiating life's challenges.

Yet aiding Mom and Dad when their bodies weaken and, in some cases, when their minds decline is one of the most stressful things we face as adults.

We have to rethink and renegotiate our relationship with those who raised us. We have to find ways to guide them without dominating them. We have to take into account their unique personalities as well as the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes they experience as they age.

Meanwhile, worries loom in the background: *Will there be enough money and support? Will I make mistakes that damage my relationship with my parents permanently? Will arguments with siblings about our parents' care damage those relationships?*

Social worker and attorney Jane Wolf Frances, MSW, JD, author of *Parenting Our Parents* and the founder of the Parenting Our Parents online support community, offers some recommendations for making the profound transition to parental caregiver. By prioritizing practicalities, allowing space for all emotions, and practicing self-care, she believes adult children can support their aging parents in a way that fosters an even deeper relationship.

STRESS SOURCES

You feel overwhelmed by the pressure, sense of responsibility, and emotions that surface as you watch your parents age. These daunting weights can leave you feeling helpless.

You feel resentful of your parents. All of us have sore points about our upbringing, Frances notes, and some of us carry long-lasting resentments or enduring conflicts with our parents that complicate the prospect of caring for them.

A parent expects more help than you can provide. "Your parent has called you a third time at 3 a.m. wanting you to come over *right now*, and none of those times was an emergency," says Frances. Is it OK, or selfish, for you to say, "Mom, I'm not coming over"?

Your parents resist help. "They may be proud of their independence and not recognize how needy they are," she notes. "So they may balk at your taking the necessary steps for their care."

Your approach to caring for your parent conflicts with the approach that a care team, siblings, or other family members want to take. "What I've discovered from years of leading groups for people whose parents have Alzheimer's is that dealing with family members, especially siblings, is one of the biggest stressors," says Frances.

Disagreements can stem from different perceptions of the parents' situation, she points out. "Those who live close to the parents tend to be pretty realistic about what's going on and the need for solutions; the siblings who are farther away are often in denial."

You feel that if you don't "do it right," you and your parents will suffer. The parent-child relationship brings up feelings of obligation and guilt, and — especially if you have a tendency toward perfectionism — it's easy to feel that you're obliged to handle this important time in their lives without a slip-up.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Do your best to settle past or current relationship issues with your parents. Working through old grudges or resolving enduring conflicts — potentially using a counselor or neutral third party — can clear the air and prepare all parties to handle future obstacles that could arise during this new phase of your relationship.

When resolving conflict isn't possible, "at least find a way to make some peace with the things that troubled you earlier on or that you are not peaceful with," says Frances.

Seeking therapy or joining a support group can be helpful. "If you absolutely can't resolve these conflicts, and you [or your parents] still harbor resentments, it might be best for you *not* to take on parenting your parents."

Plan ahead. As an attorney, Frances was a careful planner when she argued cases; she recommends the same approach for supporting a parent. "I think of planning as the exact opposite of worrying," she says.

The planning should start early — ideally, as soon as you or your parents notice they need help. It can take multiple forms, including apportioning responsibility among siblings or other family members, checking into and dealing with finances, and learning about what resources are available to your parents.

Ask questions. An important aspect of care planning is a willingness to ask your parents questions that help you understand their situation and wishes for their future, says Frances. "Ask things like, 'Dad, I understand that you're thinking about retiring. When do you think you will? Will you and Mom move? How are you going to afford retirement? Is the house paid off? Do you need any help figuring these things out?'"

Making sure you're on the same page also helps your parents know that you want them to have the future they envision for themselves.

Share responsibilities. "I'm a fan of sharing the responsibilities for caring for parents," Frances notes. "Share them

with your own children or grandchildren, if they're old enough, and with neighbors and friends of your parents, so the onus doesn't fall on you alone."

Widen the net of your support system. You're likely to know people with skills you don't possess, and Frances strongly recommends bringing them into the care picture. "If you have a cousin who's really skillful at accounting,



maybe they could help your parents out with the banking," she says.

If you don't live near your parents, recruit someone who does and can be a supportive physical presence. "They could take them to the doctor, bringing a phone with so that you, who are at a distance, can ask the doctor questions."

Frances also encourages communicating with the social workers who do discharge planning after a parent's hospital stay. "They can be knowledgeable and helpful about resources in the community that you can draw on."

Realize that being present can be enough. As an antidote to worrying about doing the right thing every time for your parents, Frances reminds us that no one does either parenting or parent-parenting perfectly. You may not be able to answer every call or attend every appointment, but your presence — in

whatever form that takes — is more important than you realize.

"So many people feel like they're not doing enough," she says. "But caring for a parent isn't always about *doing*." Most of the time, showing up for them as you are able to do so is the best support you can give.

Don't try to manage your parents' emotions. Aging and facing mortality generate powerful emotions, she notes. It's best to allow your parents to feel everything that comes up for them. Offer a listening ear when and if you are able, or help connect them with those who can.

Seek support for managing your own emotions and boundaries. Similarly, it's essential to allow yourself to feel the fears, anxieties, and other troublesome emotions that come with caring for your parents. But these feelings can be overwhelming, Frances says.

"I strongly recommend that people try to find support groups and therapists who are equipped to deal with the emotions in this process." Professionals can also help you establish and maintain boundaries with needy or demanding parents, so that drawing a line with them doesn't trigger guilt or shame.

Care for yourself. Self-care takes forms beyond seeking professional help, she explains. It can entail remembering to do things you enjoy and decompressing with physical activities. It is also useful to remind yourself to be grateful for what you have.

Share joy. As stressful as parent-parenting can be, it's also a time that can bring real intimacy between adult children and their parents, reminding both parties of their importance to each other. Reminiscing, conveying your appreciation for who your parents are and what they do, and expressing your love for them can go a long way toward making these years better for everyone. 🧡

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



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What Is Reiki?

This energy-healing technique may help the body heal itself.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE

DURING A REIKI healing session, it's easy to think nothing much is happening. You lie on a table, fully clothed, while a practitioner hovers their hands over or rests them gently on different areas of your body. There is no tissue manipulation of any kind, and there is no talking.

Yet when a skilled Reiki practitioner is holding the session, something is definitely happening.

"I held a session for a genocide survivor who hadn't slept through the night in years," recalls Reiki master Rosie Cataldo, who is also an advocate for survivors of human trafficking. "When I checked in with her a couple days after our session, she said she had the best night of sleep she can ever remember having."

Cataldo is quick to point out that *she* isn't healing people. The energy that comes through her during a Reiki session helps clients heal themselves, clearing up energy from lingering traumas and old resentments.

"I serve as a pipeline," she explains.

She describes energy from a divine source being funneled through her hands to the client, who does the rest. "Their mind, body, spirit pulls in the energy so that it goes to where it's needed."

Cataldo also emphasizes that Reiki, while spiritual, is completely non-denominational. She believes it can be useful for anyone who's open, curious, and seeking new tools for healing.

ORIGINS OF REIKI

In Japanese, the word "reiki" loosely translates to "universal life-force energy." The current practice appears

to have been founded in Japan in the late 19th century, when Buddhist scholar Mikao Usui devised the method in his pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. When an earthquake struck Tokyo in 1923, he began using Reiki techniques to heal the injured; Usui was so effective that military leaders asked him to train naval medics in Reiki to treat wounded soldiers.

Reiki has been practiced in the United States since the 1930s, and today it is most likely to be found in a range of healing environments, from massage studios to complementary wellness programs in hospitals. It's been studied for its effect on fibromyalgia, anxiety, and the discomfort of cancer symptoms, where it generally outperforms placebos.

Still, research on Reiki's efficacy remains thin, a fact some practitioners attribute to the difficulty of studying energy-healing practices.

Cataldo discovered Reiki following the sudden death of her mother, when a friend suggested she try it to help ease her grief. After the first session, she recalls feeling like a heavy weight had been lifted from her chest. She felt more like herself again and knew she wanted to offer this same kind of relief to her clients. Many had experienced organized violence, and they often carried the weight of heavy experiences they couldn't unload on their own.

Most Reiki sessions begin with a conversation. The client can ask the practitioner to focus on a physical or emotional issue directly — or not. One of the powerful things about Reiki is that it can stimulate healing without relying on verbal explanations.

"Sometimes, talking about the bad things that happened can unintentionally reinforce those neural pathways, making it hard to find a new way of thinking about something — or releasing it," Cataldo says.

EXPLORING REIKI

Practitioners become certified in Reiki by receiving an "attunement" from a master teacher. There are several levels of training, culminating in Reiki master. Some practitioners, like Cataldo, offer Reiki healings exclusively, though many massage therapists and other healers include Reiki among their services.

If you're in a remote area where no Reiki practitioners are available (or if you prefer to stay at home), you can receive a "distance" healing from a practitioner who's received Level 3 training or above.

When Cataldo does a distance session, she has a brief call with her client to assess their needs, then asks them to sit in a quiet place and relax while she visualizes being present in the room doing a healing with them. "It doesn't matter if you're in the room together or across the country," she says. "The energy has no limits."

When you're choosing a practitioner, she suggests, take a curious, open-minded approach while still trusting your gut. "Go by your own discernment and not what someone tells you," she advises. "You are your best healer."

COURTNEY HELGOE is the *Experience Life* features editor.

The Gift of Giving Back

A collection of ideas for being generous this holiday season.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC

WHEN TARYN ELLIS and her family first volunteered at their local Toys for Tots holiday program years ago, she was told her children were too young to participate. But at 7 and 10, her kids were already seasoned volunteers: They'd packed meals for children experiencing malnutrition, donated toys and clothing to local charities, and exchanged letters with a child overseas whom the family had "adopted" by helping with support through a charitable organization. Plus, they followed directions well, so they got the job.

The kids' first role was simply to welcome parents and caregivers who were there to shop for their families. Now as teenagers, they join the adult shoppers, helping them find just the right gifts.

"It's nice because sometimes parents don't know what to pick out for their kid, and most of the time I can help with that," says Ellis's daughter, Emelyn, 16.

Ellis and her husband teach their kids to "give back, give better." Ellis herself comes from a family culture of giving: Her mother was active in community-service work, and her father was a volunteer coach for young athletes. "Giving back was normal behavior in our house," Ellis recalls. "It seemed natural and good to care for others."

The family finds opportunities to practice generosity and service throughout the year, but their annual Toys for Tots outing has become a cherished holiday tradition.



'TIS THE SEASON FOR GIVING

The songs, stories, and symbols of the holidays encourage generosity, says Stephen Post, PhD, coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People: How to Live a Longer, Healthier, Happier Life by the Simple Act of Giving*.

Of course, it can also be a difficult time for many, including for those who struggle with grief, depression, or loneliness. Whether you're feeling bountiful or burdened, giving of yourself can bring a deeper sense of meaning to the season, promote personal well-being, and ease the harmful effects of stress.

"Sometimes the best way to overcome the anxiety of our time is to help others. It gets the mind off the self and the problems of the self," says Post.

For Ellis and her family, the benefits of generosity are visceral.

"When the kids help pick out toys or clothes or books, I can see their gratitude emanating from them. I feel like their hearts grow bigger every time we volunteer," she says. "And I feel gratitude. We have things we can share with others, and what we get in return is gratitude and connection, and that's what we need."

GIVE BACK, GIVE BETTER THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Even when schedules feel busy and finances are tight, we all have something we can give.

"You do have time. You do have skills. You do have money," Ellis contends. "It's about being intentional with what to do with what you have. Could you work one shift at a food bank? You don't have to sign up for the whole year."

These ideas can provide a jump-start to your giving this holiday season.



DISCOVER MORE RESOURCES

December is important for charities, which often rely on giving during the month to support their organizations into the next year. These resources can help you identify **charities making an impact:**

- www.charitynavigator.org
- www.guidestar.org
- www.charitywatch.org

Having trouble finding the right volunteering opportunity? Check out these sites to find **organizations seeking volunteers:**

- www.volunteer.gov
- www.volunteermatch.org
- www.pointsoflight.org



Share Your Skills

In what areas do you naturally excel? What talents come easily? Think about how your hobbies or professional skills could be helpful to others.

If you're crafty, **(1) create holiday decor** for local shelters, group homes, or assisted-living facilities. If you're handy with a hammer, **(2) offer to do small repair jobs** for neighbors or local organizations. **(3)** If you're a spreadsheet wiz, **help a small business or nonprofit** with data analysis or year-end record keeping. If you're a marketing maven or graphic-design guru, **(4) lend your creativity** to an organization that needs help with its next campaign. If you're a salesperson, **(5) make fundraising calls** for a giving campaign; if public speaking is easy for you, volunteer to emcee an event.



Make a Connection

Do relationships make you tick? Look for opportunities to connect meaningfully with those you want to serve.

If you love kids, contact a children's hospital or find an afterschool program in your area:

(6) Read stories,

sing songs, play games, help with homework, or just be a friend.

A recent survey in Poland found that loneliness affects nearly 40 percent of residents in assisted-living facilities.

(7) Visit with seniors on a weekend afternoon. Ask them about holiday memories and create new ones at the same time. **(8) Pet a dog or cat** to lower your stress levels — and the animal's as well. Research has found that animals who interact with people while at an animal shelter are more likely to be adopted.

Gather a Group

Join forces with colleagues, friends, your pickleball league, or your faith community to multiply your giving impact.

(9) Raise funds for something you care about. Gather sponsors for a race or a walk, set up a donation-based gift-decoration station at the mall (get permission!), or host a donation-themed holiday party for all your friends.

(10) Spread cheer by caroling at local nursing homes or decorating their community spaces for the holidays.

(11) Sign up together for a shift at a local food bank or food distribution center. **(12) Volunteer** with a homebuilding organization and help a family settle into a new home for the holidays.

Shop for a Cause

Toys and games make fun gifts, but many people have a greater need for basics you may take for granted.

(13) Ask a local shelter what people need most. Nice undergarments (ask about sizes needed), warm socks, towels, toiletry items, and feminine-hygiene products are usually appreciated.

(14) Talk to a local food bank or distribution center about what items they need. Note that it may be even more effective to donate money if the organization can get bulk deals with their funds.

(15) Research retailers that support or give back to communities based on your purchase. For example, companies like TOMS and Newman's Own make it part of their mission to promote philanthropy by donating a share or all of their profits to good causes.

Make It a Family Affair

Build a family culture of giving. Invite your kids not just to participate but to



choose projects that feel meaningful to them.

(16) Adopt a family in need. Myriad organizations offer ways to support other families, including those in your own community, in the military, or overseas.

(17) Ask your kids to set aside gently used toys, games, and books.

Check with local shelters, libraries, schools, or hospitals to ensure they accept these items — and bring the kids when you donate.

(18) Guide your kids in conversations about money and giving. If they have an allowance or another way of earning money, invite them to donate to a cause they care about. **(19) Have a family baking day** and share your home-baked goods with neighbors or members of the groups or communities you're a part of.

Provide for the Providers

Who are the people in your community whose work you value and appreciate? Let them know this holiday season.

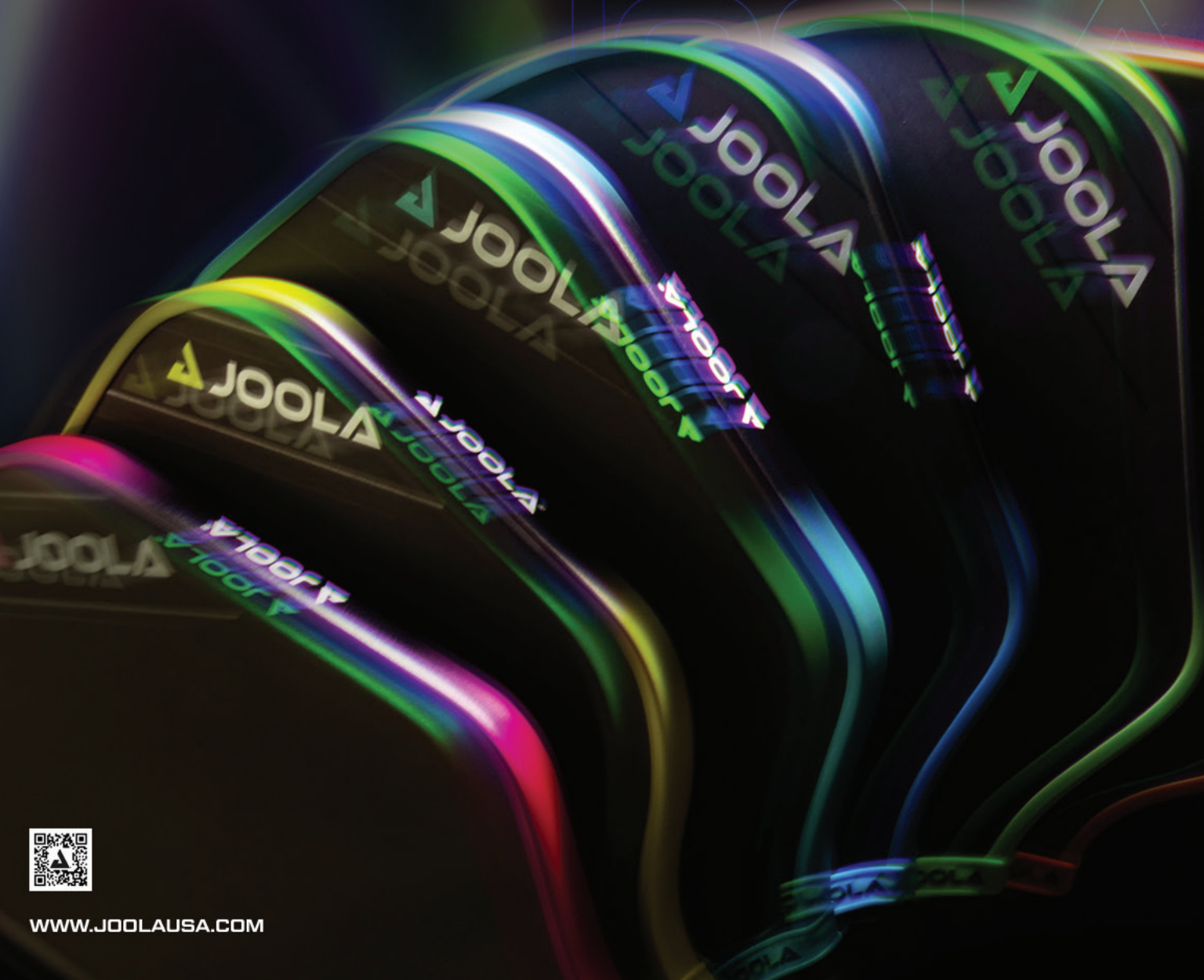
Expecting holiday deliveries? **(20) Assemble a goodie basket** filled with snacks and beverages (unless freezing is an issue) and set it by your door for delivery drivers.

(21) Drop off cookies or other treats at your neighborhood firehouse or police station (and throw in some dog toys for the K9 cops). **(22) Extend your generosity** to your favorite mail carrier, schoolteacher, healthcare provider, barista, housekeeper, or any other person who makes your life better. 📍



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

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From Dream to Reality

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

AS WE ROUND the corner toward the end of the year, a lot of us recognize these final months as an opportunity for reflection. A little thoughtfulness and contemplation, we know, can lead to growth, growth can lead to progress, and progress, ideally, can lead to success in some form.

While many of us already practice self-examination, standing at the threshold of another year is an invitation to choose greater introspection and quiet. As the days grow shorter and the nights become darker, we can take a longer, deeper look at ourselves and our reality.

This time offers us a chance to contemplate what's happened over the last several months (what worked and what didn't) and to look forward and get excited about what's next and new. It's time to start dreaming: What are you envisioning? What energizes you? What are you curious about?

Our dreams are an expression of who we are: manifestations of our potential to be, do, and achieve. Every dream is unique to us, representing something only we could give the world. That idea is humbling — and incredibly motivating.

Deciding to actually follow a dream is, at its core, an act of faith combined with determination and a willingness to put in the work. As the only one who can bring your specific dream to fruition, it's up to you to forge the path forward.

So, how do you make a dream a reality? I believe it begins with a few simple strategies, starting with knowing yourself.

- **Take time to reflect** — on who you are, your purpose, and what makes you tick. What are your values? What's your *why*?

- **Consider your dream** and define exactly what you want to achieve. How does it align with your purpose? What does success look like? How will it feel once you reach it?

- **Get specific** and break your big idea down into small, workable parts — clear and concise goals that align with your vision.

That's what makes dreams so important: **They connect us with our deepest desires and passions, while helping us grow.**

- **Visualize the steps** and milestones necessary to reach your goal — and believe in your ability to arrive at each one and keep going, even if it takes some trial and error; even if it takes longer than you originally thought it would.

- **Share your ambition:** Take it out of your head and say it out loud. Tell your friends, who can help hold you accountable.

When you're pursuing a dream that you believe in, the real fun often comes before it's actualized. The journey is as rewarding as the destination. It feels good to jump out of bed and get to work; you have the energy and can-do attitude to problem solve and handle whatever comes your way.



It's in the process that your passion is validated, your courage is kindled, and your vision and values become crystallized. And with each box you check on the path of progress, you encounter new opportunities and challenges, so you're constantly iterating, adapting, and learning.

That's what makes dreams so important: They connect us with our deepest desires and passions while helping us grow. They provide hope and optimism — along with something to look forward to.

Without dreams, it's easy to get bogged down in the mundane and lose sight of what's truly important in life. So, this season, I encourage you not only to reflect but also to dream. Remember who you are and what matters to you. Reconnect with what you'd like to accomplish.

Take care of yourself, prioritizing your health and building the vitality you need to pursue your goals with confidence and vigor.

It's never too late to start, to change course, or to go back to the things that light you up. May you recognize what takes you buoyantly forward, and enjoy the fulfillment of your dreams along the way.



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

“And the best kind of self-care,
I will argue, is **rest.**”

— Claudia Hammond

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