

Experience Life

HEALTHY. HAPPY. FOR REAL.

UNDERSTANDING THE
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
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AND
DESIRE**

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HEALTHY CONNECTIONS

PSYCHIATRIST AND AUTHOR
JUDITH JOSEPH
SHARES INSIGHTS FOR RECLAIMING
JOY — IN YOUR DAILY LIFE, IN YOUR
RELATIONSHIPS, AND WITH YOURSELF.

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2025

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November/December 2025

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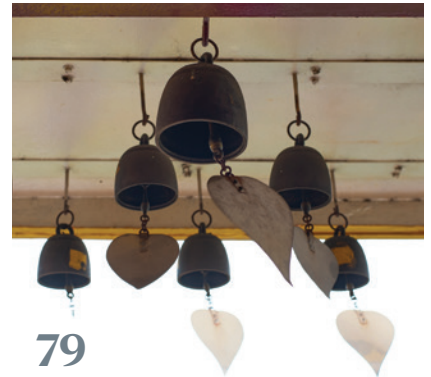
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Experience Life DIGITAL



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Even if Thanksgiving dinner is your favorite meal of the year, a few days of reheating leftovers and making turkey sandwiches can get old. Try these recipes instead: Turkey and Stuffing Dumplings, Turkey Fried Rice, Mashed-Potato Pancakes, and Baked Brie With Cranberry Sauce. Scan the QR code or go to ELmag.com/leftovers to check them out.



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AUTOIMMUNITY AND EXERCISE

Fatigue and joint pain — hallmark symptoms of many autoimmune conditions — can make it tough to exercise. Learn how to move your body in ways that are safe and beneficial.

ELmag.com/autoimmunityexercise

GINGER WELLNESS SHOT

Make your own fermented “ginger bug” at home with just water, fresh ginger, and sugar.

ELmag.com/gingerbug

HEALTHY WEDDING PLANNING

An *Experience Life* senior editor offers tips for staying healthy and true to yourself as you prepare for your nuptials.

ELmag.com/healthywedding

TALKS

BLUE ZONES HABITS FOR HAPPINESS

Why are Costa Rica, Denmark, and Singapore among the world’s happiest places? According to Blue Zones researcher Dan Buettner, they foster three paths to a happy life: pleasure, purpose, and pride. Scan the QR code or visit

ELmag.com/bluezoneshappiness to listen to the podcast.



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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.

LESS IS MORE

MY DAUGHTER Lizzy and I were about two hours into our road trip to my hometown when a call from my husband came through: “Do you know where Maddy’s tennis shoes might be?” Our older daughter had tennis practice in 30 minutes — and her first tournament the next morning — and her new shoes were missing.

“She was wearing them when she got home from morning practice — they have to be there,” I replied. We ended the call, the two of them continuing to tear apart our home in search, Lizzy and I continuing our drive. Until a few miles down the road.

As I mentally retraced the actions I’d taken before leaving home, I recalled throwing my running shoes in my suitcase. Between wrapping up some work and packing for a quick weekend away, I had been in a rush. I had a sinking feeling: *Could I have grabbed her shoes? I couldn’t have grabbed her shoes!*

I stopped to check my bag as soon as we pulled into the next town — and sure enough, there they were. I began to cry as I dialed my husband to let them know the shoes were, in fact, with us.

That might seem like a strong reaction, but I had been maintaining a jam-packed schedule for several weeks leading up to this, with minimal downtime. I had just returned from a longer-than-expected work trip and was barely home for 24 hours before hitting the road again. I was physically and emotionally spent.

I’d been ignoring all sorts of signs that I was running on fumes. My sleep tracker had been flagging low heart-rate variability along with an elevated resting heart rate — yet I continued to push myself in workouts. Recent bloodwork pointed toward high stress levels and adrenal fatigue — yet I was compromising sleep and recovery. My energy was flagging, and my mood was all over the place.

Packing Maddy’s shoes instead of my own was another sign that I needed to slow down — because my go-go-go lifestyle was affecting the people I love most too.

Coincidentally, this incident occurred just a few days after I met and interviewed this month’s cover feature, Judith Joseph, MD, MBA, a psychiatrist and the author of *High Functioning: Overcome Your Hidden Depression and Reclaim Your Joy* (see her story on page 16).

After reading Joseph’s book and then talking with her, I decided to delve deeper into her practices. I had found myself checking the boxes for several of the tendencies associated with high-functioning depression: nonstop busyness, restlessness, chronic productivity, people-pleasing, and self-care neglect. I felt deep down that I had some work I needed — and, importantly, wanted — to do.

I’m still early in the process of putting in the work; it’s three steps forward, two steps back. But I’m on the path of reconnecting and being more in tune with that inner knowing that’s trying to tell me what’s good and right for me. I’m setting some personal and professional boundaries, I’m delegating where I can, and I’m listening more closely to my body.

“Healthy Connections” — the theme of this issue — begin with the one we have with ourself, expanding from there. This season, let’s give ourselves the gift of recognizing and prioritizing our own well-being and self-care. Ultimately, that’s also one of the greatest gifts we can give to the people we love.



I’m on the path of reconnecting and being more in tune with that inner knowing that’s trying to tell me what’s good and right for me.



YOUR THOUGHTS?

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TALK TO US

GLIMMERS OF HOPE — AND INSPIRATION


 I get glimmers often throughout the day (“In Search of Glimmers: How Micromoments of Awe Can Boost Your Mood,” July/August 2025). I didn’t really know what to call them before reading this article, but I find myself seeing something and a smile comes to my face. Now I will pay attention to even more opportunities to see more joyful glimmers.

Julia

✉ Kara Goucher’s grit and determination is an inspiration to all of us (“How Long-Distance Runner Kara Goucher Reclaimed Her Power,” July/August 2025). A remarkable athlete and person.


Richard L.

A BETTER WAY

 Thank you so much for this article (“My Fitness Routine Pyramid,” July/August 2025). It made me smile because I, too, struggle to achieve the perfect fitness journey. I routinely fail, and then I berate myself for not having the willpower to follow through. Maggie Fazeli Fard’s article is a beautiful reminder to give myself a break and be appreciative of what I can do and have achieved.


Rhonda W.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

 I’ve cut out 95 percent of ultra-processed food over time and my body thanks me (“Your Brain on Ultraprocessed Food,” July/August 2025). I used to have digestive issues and allergies, but not anymore.

Vicki O.


MUSCLE MEMORY

 I believe this article (“How Muscles Remember — and Regain — Lost Strength,” July/August 2025). I was stressed about having to take a break from the gym due to surgery, but I was surprised at how quickly I



got back into the routine when I was able to return.

Amy S.

 They do remember! I took a break for two months and got my strength back very fast. I’ve been lifting weights my whole adult life. We need a strong upper body to walk, run, do chores [around the] house, and grocery shop. [We also need to] remember to practice balance exercises.

Betty B.


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**Letters to the Editor
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SHAME, SILENCE, AND SEX


 I really appreciate how this article (“The Case for Sex Therapy,” September 2023) opens the door to a topic so many people quietly struggle with. As a sex therapist, I often see how shame and silence can build walls between partners. One small shift I recommend is setting aside 10–15 minutes a week just to talk about intimacy — without expectations or pressure. Also, remember that desire can ebb and flow, and that’s completely normal. Therapy isn’t about fixing something broken; it’s about growing stronger together.

Kim R.

POWERFUL PROTEIN


 I made the High-Protein Honey-Pistachio Ice Cream (“5 Healthy DIY Alternatives to Ice Cream,” May 2025), which is made with cottage cheese. My husband, who does not like cottage cheese, loved it! I told him it was cottage cheese after he tried it.

Heidi R.

 I’ve been vegan for over 40 years (“How to Get Enough Protein From a Plant-Based Diet,” September 2022). I am now 75 with no health issues. It’s not hard to get enough protein — much of the world eats beans.


Sunny B.

SPUR OF THE MOMENT

 Some of my favorite memories are from spontaneous moments (“The Many Benefits of Spontaneity — and How to Cultivate More of It,” July/August 2025). However, I always considered them interludes in a life consumed by obligation and responsibility rather than a philosophy for happiness.

Wayne M.

SEASONAL HYGGE

 Love this article (“How to Practice Hygge in the Summer,” June 2025)! Thanks for the useful information and the fresh ideas.

Maria S. B.

STROKE, DEPRESSION, AND DEMENTIA:

The Overlapping Risks — and Antidotes

WHAT IF YOU COULD lower your risk of developing three common brain-related diseases — stroke, depression, and dementia — with a single set of behavioral changes?

That's the question Sanjula Singh, MD, PhD, and her research team set out to answer when they analyzed the data from 59 studies, published between 2000 and 2023, that identified modifiable risk factors for these three diseases. Singh's team discovered a surprising overlap of lifestyle choices that can reduce the risk of their onset.

"If you're starting to work on one of [these behavioral changes], very often you're actually improving multiple [health markers] at the same time," Singh, a principal investigator at the Brain Care Labs at Massachusetts General Hospital, tells *The New York Times*. "That's a great way to start."

Because vascular damage in the brain may contribute to all three diseases, modifiable factors — dietary choices, cognitive activity, social connections, exercise — can make a difference. Research shows the cumulative effect of these adjustments may reduce the chances of developing hypertension, high blood-

sugar and cholesterol levels, chronic loneliness, and unmanageable stress — any of which can contribute to cognitive decline.

Controlling those baseline conditions, earlier research notes, can delay or prevent 60 percent of strokes, 40 percent of dementia cases, and 35 percent of depression diagnoses in later life.

Because vascular damage in the brain may contribute to all three diseases, modifiable factors — dietary choices, cognitive activity, social connections, exercise — can make a difference.

"Those are striking numbers," Stephanie Collier, MD, MPH, a geriatric psychiatrist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., tells the *Times*. "If you can really optimize the lifestyle pieces or the modifiable pieces, you're at such a higher likelihood of living life without disability."

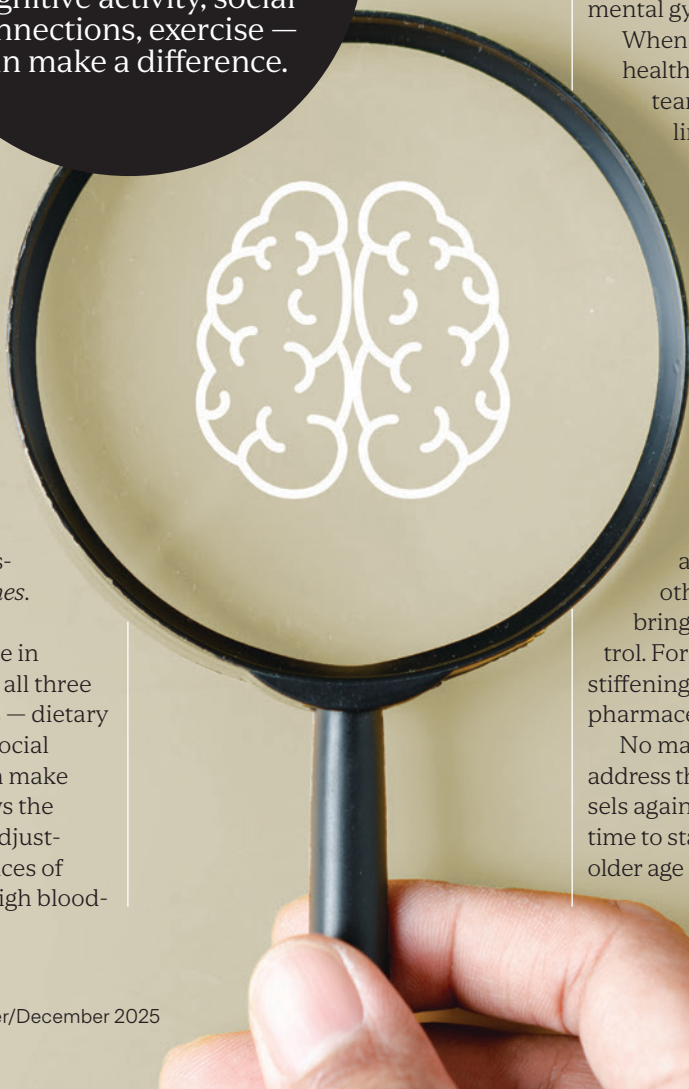
Supporting long-term brain health can be as simple as joining a friend for regular walks around the neighborhood, a routine that offers both exercise and social connection, or challenging your cognitive muscles with puzzles, word games, or other mental gymnastics.

When it comes to working with a healthcare provider, Singh and her team discovered that controlling hypertension offers the greatest benefits to overall brain health. High blood pressure almost triples the risk of stroke. And in a recent research study, participants who lowered their blood pressure into healthy territory were 15 percent less likely than their hypertense counterparts to develop dementia.

Physical activity and dietary changes, as well as stress management, are other effective strategies to bring hypertension under control. For older adults, however, the stiffening of blood vessels can require pharmaceutical intervention.

No matter how you decide to address these conditions, Collier counsels against procrastination. The best time to start, she says, "is generally not older age — it's middle age."

— CRAIG COX



A CLUE TO THE CAUSE OF EARLY-ONSET COLORECTAL CANCER

The number of people under 55 diagnosed with colorectal cancer doubled from 1995 to 2019, a trend that has troubled public-health officials and confounded scientists. Now, researchers from the University of California, San Diego, have unearthed a possible explanation.

Their findings, published in the journal *Nature*, suggest that a “genotoxin” produced by certain strains of bacteria, including *E. coli*, may be linked to the rise of these early-onset cancer cases. The toxin, colibactin, can attack cells in the gut of a young person and cause gene mutations that increase the risk of developing the disease.

Think of it as one bacteria’s weapon system for defending itself from other harmful bacteria, explains lead study author Ludmil Alexandrov, PhD, in an NPR interview.

Alexandrov and his team studied tissue samples from nearly 1,000 colorectal cancer patients across four continents. They discovered that these gene mutations were three to five

times more prevalent in patients under age 40 than among those 70 or older. The colibactin attacks, they concluded, are occurring during childhood — when *E. coli* and its siblings dominate the gut microbiome — and manifesting as disease in middle age.

“Our estimate is that it happens within the first 10 years of life,” Alexandrov says.

“So if you get that mutation at age 5, that puts you 20 to 30 years ahead of schedule for getting colorectal cancer.”

Researchers noted that the prevalence of this early-onset cancer was much lower in “rural, nonindustrialized” areas of Africa and Asia than in the United States and Western Europe. That suggests diet and other lifestyle factors may be at play.

“All of these factors are known to substantially affect the microbiome, and there is some evidence they may impact this [colibactin-producing] bacteria,” Alexandrov notes. “But we really need to investigate each one carefully.”

— CC

A “genotoxin” produced by certain strains of bacteria, including *E. coli*, may be linked to the rise of these early-onset cancer cases.



STRENGTH TRAIN FOR BETTER SLEEP

New research suggests that strength training may be a powerful sleep aid.

The older we get, the worse we sleep, note the authors of a sweeping 2025 systematic review of insomnia sufferers age 60 and older. Almost half of all seniors complain of sleepiness, and up to 20 percent experience insomnia.

Evidence links sleeplessness to depression, anxiety, and other mental health concerns; metabolic syndrome, hypertension, and heart disease; and cognitive decline and other issues.

Past studies have found that exercise can help older adults overcome insomnia. But the authors of the 2025 review sought the most effective type of movement. They analyzed strength training; aerobic and endurance activities, such as cycling, dancing, running, swimming, and gardening; and combination exercises like Pilates and tai chi that mix aerobic, strength, balance, and flexibility work.

They concluded that while all forms of exercise helped improve sleep quality, resistance training stood out as the most effective.

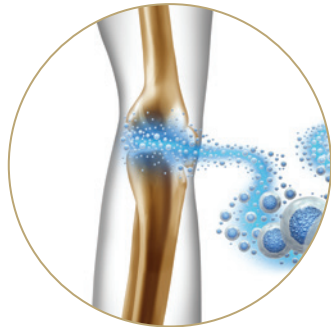
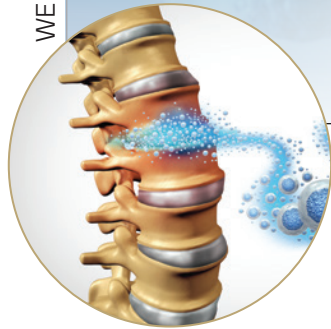
The authors did note that further study is needed because exercise routines were not necessarily comparable or consistent across all studies.

— MICHAEL DREGNI



ASK THE EXPERT: WHAT ARE STEM-CELL AND EXOSOME THERAPIES?

Life Time's chief science officer explains.



Stem-cell and exosome therapies are now being tested as a treatment for a wide range of health concerns, including tissue and organ injuries, autoimmune conditions, blood diseases, and inflammatory diseases. Researchers are also studying them for their potential to boost athletic performance and enhance longevity.

Yet many people aren't sure what these regenerative-medicine therapies are, how they work, or what their risks might be.

Stem-cell therapy involves introducing live stem cells into the body for tissue repair and cellular integration. Stem cells can be injected into a particular area, such as a degenerated joint, or administered via an IV and put into general circulation.

Their regenerative potential lies in their ability to change into various types of cells.

Stem cells also secrete exosomes, which are bioactive signaling vesicles. These nano-sized substances carry proteins, lipids, mRNA, and microRNA that affect cell-to-cell communication and influence cell behavior. Exosomes act as messengers to stimulate repair processes and help restore immune function.

But there are concerns about stem-cell treatments. Because stem cells replicate, they may lead to the formation of tumors. They

also have the potential to migrate and provoke immune rejection.

Exosomes alone, on the other hand, do not replicate and are less likely to create an immune response. Researchers are increasingly discussing their potential use in neurology, orthopedics, dermatology, cardiology, and oncology.

The most common side effects of exosome treatments are local redness or swelling at the injection site and flu-like symptoms after injection.

Allergic reactions are rare but can include itching, hives, or, in severe cases, breathing difficulties that require immediate medical attention.

Regenerative medicine is highly regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which

has issued several safety notifications and consumer alerts concerning stem-cell and exosome products and therapies over the past half-dozen years. The FDA has not yet approved exosome products for use.

Stem-cell and exosome therapies may eventually lead to a wide range of beneficial outcomes, but more study into their safety and effectiveness is needed before we can explore their full potential.

—JIM LAVALLE, RPh, CCN, MT

Their regenerative potential lies in their ability to change into various types of cells.

UNSCRAMBLING THE PROTEIN CONTENT OF EGGS

Eggs are often touted as a perfect food thanks to their protein and nutrient content. Still, if they're your meal's only protein source, you'll need a lot of them. A single large egg contains about 6 grams of protein. So, five eggs give you 30 grams of protein, a per-meal target recommended by many experts, says Anika Christ, RD, CPT, Life Time's senior director of nutrition.

If you opt only for egg whites, you'll need about eight eggs to yield 30 grams of protein. You'll also be missing out on important nutrients, because most of an egg's benefits come from the yolk.

"Eggs provide key nutrients, including vitamins D, B12, and A and minerals like iron and selenium," Christ explains. "My favorite egg nutrient is choline [because] it supports brain and neurological health, the liver, and the body's metabolism."



How hens are raised and what they're fed has an impact on the eggs' nutrients, she explains. "Pasture-raised hens are known to have eggs with higher amounts of vitamin D and omega-3s due to being fed their native diet of grubs, insects, and what's provided from the environment. Factory-farmed hens usually consume red corn, soy, or other industrialized and subsidized crops — foods that aren't part of their traditional diet." (Note that shell color indicates only the type of hen.)

If five eggs in a sitting are too many for you, pair them with another protein source to reach 30 grams. Plate two or three eggs with chicken or turkey sausage; add extra egg whites to a scramble; include hard-boiled eggs and chicken breast in a salad; or serve eggs alongside a protein shake.

— TINA NGUYEN

How to Help Your Body MANAGE MICROPLASTICS

Microplastics are near-invisible invaders infiltrating our bodies through the water we drink, the food we eat, and even the air we breathe. As researchers learn more about this health threat, they're trying to quantify exactly how much microplastic we absorb. One study suggests we ingest the equivalent of a plastic credit card weekly; another estimates the amount is akin to 50 plastic bags annually.

Thankfully, the body's natural detoxification functions — which help protect us from bacteria, viruses, and other intruders — may ultimately rid our bodies of at least some plastic.

"Our data suggests that the amount of microplastics does not simply accumulate as we age but probably gets cleared by our bodies, even if slowly," says University of New Mexico professor of toxicology Matthew Campen, PhD, MSPH, colead author of a 2025 study that found microplastics in participants' brains.

How efficiently our bodies can detox this unnatural invader is a more difficult question.

"The short answer is, we have no idea," Campen explains. "We think that the liver can move plastic particles back to the gallbladder and put them back in the GI tract for elimination. The kidneys may similarly be eliminating plastics in urine. The plastics may degrade in our body."

Some researchers are concerned that microplastics may impede such detox functions: A 2023 study on mice found that microplastics could accumulate in the liver and kidneys.

SUPPORT DETOX

We may be able to support our body's other systems of detoxification, though. In an online article, integrative- and functional-medicine physician Aaron Hartman, MD, reports on research-based strategies for protecting ourselves.

Eat your fiber. "High-fiber diets may help trap microplastics in the gut and facilitate their elimination. Fiber-rich foods promote bile secretion, which can bind to toxins, including microplastics, and remove them through stool,"

Hartman writes. (For more on the benefits of fiber, see [ELmag.com/fiber](https://www.ELmag.com/fiber).)

Supplement with activated charcoal and bentonite clay.

"These natural adsorbents have been studied for their ability to bind toxins in the gut, potentially trapping microplastics and facilitating their excretion," he notes. (For more on other detox strategies, see [ELmag.com/safedetox](https://www.ELmag.com/safedetox).)

REDUCE EXPOSURE

Meanwhile, the best defense against microplastics is to limit exposure in the first place, says environmental health researcher Tracey Woodruff, PhD, MPH, professor of OB-GYN and reproductive sciences at the University of California, San Francisco. She lists the following strategies:

Avoid mixing food and plastics.

"It's not easy!" she acknowledges. "But

generally, eating food not cooked in plastic or packaged in plastic will help. This means never microwave food in plastic. I would also avoid eating out of plastic containers and try to avoid food wrapped in plastic."

Woodruff recommends buying fresh food instead of processed food when possible and preparing meals at home to reduce plastic exposure. "Do not use plastic cutting boards or plastic utensils when cooking," she says.

Steer clear of drinks in plastic bottles. Choose glass, stainless steel, or ceramic containers for storing food. And don't wash your dishes with plastic-covered dishwasher pods.

Opt for clothes made of natural fabrics. "People often don't realize that synthetic fabrics like polyester, nylon, acrylic, or fleece fabrics are made from plastic and shed microplastics when washed and discarded, so choosing natural fabrics like cotton or wool is better to reduce microplastics," she advises. "Washing clothes in cold water and not using dryer sheets also cuts down on microplastics and chemical exposures."

Clean your home, frequently.

"Microplastics can collect in dust, so it's important to vacuum with filters such as the HEPA filter," Woodruff says. "Wet-mopping floors can help to further remove these particles from the home."

And leave your shoes at the door, which can help keep plastics from the outdoors from getting inside in the first place.

Cut back on overall plastic use.

"The most important thing we need to do is reduce plastic use, especially single-use plastics like water bottles, plastic packaging, and other plastics that turn into microplastics upon disposal," she says. "Packaging is by far the No. 1 source of plastic waste, followed by clothing." 🌱

— MD

The best defense against microplastics is to **limit exposure in the first place.**



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Reclaiming Joy

Psychiatrist Judith Joseph unmask the hidden face of high-functioning depression — and offers insights to help restore the pleasures of life.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC

PHOTOS BY JEFF LIPSKY

IN 2020, psychiatrist and researcher Judith Joseph, MD, MBA, was in high demand. Her clinical practice overflowed with patients as the COVID-19 pandemic took its emotional toll, and the media sought her perspective on mental well-being so often that she had to decline appearances. Her lab buzzed with research to meet deadlines, and she was invited to join an elite group of women in medicine at Columbia University.

Rather than riding high on her success, however, Joseph staggered under the weight of it. Overwhelmed and exhausted — yet dissatisfied and restless — she teetered between fatigue and a relentless drive to keep busy.

Joseph noticed a similar phenomenon among many of her therapy patients: The go-getters, high achievers, and super-reliable types in her practice were at best feeling “meh”

about their accomplishments. And they typically felt guilty about not doing enough.

Was this depression? Like her, Joseph’s patients didn’t check all the diagnostic boxes for clinical depression. They could still get out of bed in the morning. They could get through the day without becoming overwhelmed with sadness. But there was a distinct absence of joy in their lives.

Joseph identified this phenomenon as high-functioning depression. She had seen HFD mentioned colloquially on blogs and websites, but it wasn’t an official diagnosis according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.


Still, she knew it was real. “We wear this mask of pathological productivity: On the outside, things look perfect, but on the inside, we are lacking joy,” Joseph explains. “Eventually we either slip into a low-

functioning depression, or we start coping in ways that are not healthy.”

Joseph could find no medical or psychiatric research on the health risks of HFD or how to treat it. So she began doing research herself, conducting a first-of-its-kind peer-reviewed study.

Joseph discovered that people struggling with HFD almost always have a history of trauma. These traumas might have been lifeshattering events, or they might be lasting wounds inflicted over time by, say, an overly critical parent.

This year, she published her findings and wrote about them in her book *High Functioning: Overcome Your Hidden Depression and Reclaim Your Joy*, and she dramatized HFD in short skits that she shares on social media. We sat down with her to learn about HFD and how to move through it.



“Joy is built
into your
DNA.
It is your
birthright as
a human
being. Know
that you
deserve it.”

Q & A

WITH JUDITH JOSEPH, MD



EXPERIENCE LIFE • The term “high-functioning depression” seems like a paradox. How can someone be depressed and high functioning?

JUDITH JOSEPH • Depression can have multiple faces. It’s not just the person who’s crying, who’s not getting out of bed, who’s not showing up.

Depression can look like the person who *is* showing up, who is the rock, who is taking care of everyone but themselves. This person likely struggles with anhedonia, which is a lack of interest, pleasure, and excitement. Anhedonia is a hallmark of high-functioning depression.

EL • Can you talk about the role of trauma in HFD?

JJ • When you think of classical trauma, [you think of] people [who] want to avoid places, situations, or other people who trigger them. Folks with HFD try to avoid pain by busying themselves. When they are still, they feel empty and restless. We found that these people are trying to cope with pain that’s not processed.

From the trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder research, we know that a lot of traumatized people internalize shame: If something happened to them, they think that they must be a bad person. For some people, this leads to overwork, or they bend over backward for others. A lot of people with HFD are too busy taking care of other people to think about their own pleasure.

EL • In your book, you identify five Vs on the path out of HFD. Can you explain the first V — validation?

JJ • Validation is about acknowledging the pain you’ve experienced — which is hard if you were raised to think about others and not yourself. A lot of people feel uncomfortable validating their own feelings and experience. You may push down your emotions as a coping mechanism.

There’s a grounding technique known as 5-4-3-2-1. You think about five things

you can see. Then you think of four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. Over time, this trains your brain to be present and to listen to your body and experiences.

EL • The second V is venting. How can we vent in a healthy way rather than just complain?

JJ • There’s a large body of data showing that if you just trauma dump and tell everybody your emotions, you don’t feel better. You feel worse.

Instead, think of one or two people you trust — and with whom your relationship is reciprocal. Ask for emotional consent and whether it’s a good time to talk. Rather than gossiping or airing your dirty laundry, ask for honest feedback, even it’s not what you want to hear.

EL • How do you think about the third V — values?

JJ • Values bring meaning and purpose to your life — and a lot of people don’t know what their values are anymore. When I work with my clients, it’s like we’re archaeologists trying to figure out when was the last time they truly felt joyful. That points to their values.

Many of us are taught about superficial values, things with price tags. Personally, I used to chase the accolades and degrees — all price tags!

During the pandemic, I started to wonder: *What do I value?* I recalled my past — when my dad, a minister, would have us go on stage to perform at church. I thought I’d never perform again. Lo and behold, I started doing social media. I had forgotten my value of entertaining and uplifting people while simultaneously informing them about themes and principles that may ultimately improve their lives. We all have values and joy. They’re somewhere in our past — we just have to take the time to dig them up.

EL • Your fourth V is vitals. What do you mean by that?

JJ • Vitals support your body and brain — things like movement, sleep, and nutrition. But they also include your relationship with technology: If you spend too much time on your screens, you’re changing the way your brain derives joy.

Two other nontraditional vitals are your relationships with other people (if you’re partnered with a toxic person, you’re not going to be joyful) and your relationship with work. Many of us with HFD have a hard time leaving work at work.

EL • How do you define the final V — vision?

JJ • To me, vision is about planning for joy in your life so you can keep moving forward instead of getting stuck in the past. In our happiness research, we ask things like “When you eat your food, is it delicious? When you take a nap, do you feel refreshed? When you are lonely and reach out to someone, do you feel connected?” All of these are points of joy.

Happiness is an idea, but joy is an experience. I want people to slow down. Take the time to understand where you’re losing your joy and how to replenish it. Joy is built into your DNA. It is your birthright as a human being. Know that you deserve it. 🧡

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 photo shoot with Judith Joseph, visit ELmag.com/josephvideo.



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What's Your Favorite WELLNESS TOOL?

EL staffers share theirs.



I'm not much for gadgets, so my favorite wellness tools tend toward the analog: **MY TEAPOT, MY WALKING SHOES, MY BICYCLE, AND MY POETRY BOOKS.**

— **Courtney Helgoe**, executive editor

I love my outsize **100-OUNCE WATER BOTTLE**, with its sturdy flip-top lid and built-in straw. Having an entire day's water-intake goal in one container has been a game-changer. Proper hydration is much easier when I don't have to fill up smaller water bottles all day long.

— **Brett Fechheimer**, fact checker/copy editor



My **THERACUP** offers rapid tension relief in the palm of my hand. I appreciate its compact size and its ability to add heat and vibration to my cupping sessions.

— **Laura Lineburg**, director—digital marketing and media strategy



We talk a lot about **GUA SHA TOOLS** at *EL*, and I've found one that comes with built-in light-therapy options. I can change the color-light setting depending on the season and how my skin is feeling, and the vibration and heat leave me feeling refreshed and relaxed.

— **Jennifer Jacobson**, art director

I began by listing my bicycle, my water bottle, and my new massage gun (which miraculously cured my plantar fasciitis after I suffered for years), but I have to say **MY DOG** takes top billing. She's always ready and willing to go for a frolic, which spurs me to get outside and get moving.

— **Michael Dregni**, deputy editor

MY HEATED MATTRESS PAD.

— **Maggie Fazeli Fard**, editorial director—fitness

It's hideous-looking, but I would be lost without my **HEATED SHIATSU FOOT MASSAGER.**

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

I love my **KETTLE-BELL!** With just one simple piece of equipment, I can get a quick, full-body cardio and strength workout.

— **Christy Rice**, digital content specialist/special projects coordinator



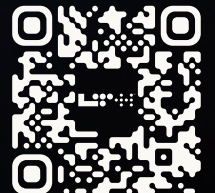


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Radical Self-Care

How I found fitness, wellness, and renewed creativity by embracing lessons I learned from my childhood best friend.



BY CHRISTINA CHANG

From left: The author running a 5K in September 2024; showcasing a gallery wall of her original oil paintings.

IN 2019, I was a single mom with two kids, trying to make ends meet on an art educator's salary. I rarely had enough energy to make it through the day, let alone follow a consistent workout routine.

I knew I shouldn't take my health for granted. I'd watched my mother battle four types of cancer and my childhood best friend, Lea, struggle with complications from a bone-marrow transplant for leukemia.

It was a stark reminder of how precious and precarious health is. Lea's cancer, especially, shocked me — she had always been the picture of health. While managing health issues related to the transplant, Lea convinced me to embrace one of her favorite concepts: radical self-care.

I learned to direct more energy toward caring for my body and making small changes to improve my health, and my strength grew. Even today, I feel most connected with Lea when I'm in motion.

KINDNESS AND BRAVERY

I met Lea in seventh grade at the lunch table. We were very different — she was tall, blond, and athletic, and I was a petite, artistic Asian American girl in a creative Chinese and Italian family. We became fast friends.

Lea was one of a kind. She lit up every room she entered and cared deeply about others. In school, she noticed how differently we were treated and wasn't afraid to stand up for me. When kids made fun of me for my Chinese American background, she was always there. Her support was priceless.

Our friendship grew after my mom was diagnosed with lymphoma when I was 15. Lea adored my mom and became my main support person. Lea and I spent a lot of time together, and she would often show up at my door out of the blue with freshly baked cookies.

We remained close through high school and college. Lea was always training for something. I cheered her on when she competed in triathlons, and I was there when she finished the Boston Marathon in 1999.

In 2005, Lea was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia, caused by a genetic mutation that drives the uncontrolled growth of white blood cells in the bone marrow. I still remember the day she called me with the diagnosis. I was stunned — she was the last person I expected to get cancer. We cried on the phone together, and I listened as she weighed her options.

Throughout her treatment, I supported her as much as I could. We no longer lived in the same city, so I couldn't help with in-person needs, but we often spoke on the phone, and I sent her lots of cards. She maintained her positive attitude through it all.

When Lea underwent a bone-marrow transplant in 2007, her body struggled to accept it. But she never complained. It sent her cancer into remission, and she was able to maintain her full, active lifestyle as much as she could for over a decade.

COMMITTING TO SELF-CARE

In August 2019, my boyfriend, Shawn, who is now my husband, gifted me a Life Time membership. I was hesitant to pursue a fitness routine — especially as a single mom — but Lea encouraged me. One of her favorite phrases was “radical self-care,” which she defined as self-care above all else.

Given what she'd been through, Lea certainly understood the importance of caring for yourself. Despite her health challenges, she loved to hike and practice yoga and Pilates. Her commitment to her own self-care helped me overcome my nerves.

Shawn and I began taking cycling classes together. On a real bike, I'd

never be able to keep up with him, but it was a great activity to do together at our different levels. Sometimes I'd even get him to take a yoga class. Things were starting to feel good.

Then, in late 2019, Lea died from complications related to her transplant. The loss was devastating and left a huge void in my world. I was honored to be one of five speakers at her celebration of life and to meet so many people who also loved her.

My relationship with Shawn was a blessing in my grief. He reminds me of Lea in many ways, and our relationship has helped ground and motivate me.

RADICAL RECOVERY

When COVID-19 shut the world down, in March 2020, my fitness routine was limited to walking. I wasn't sure what else to do without access to the club, and I felt more connected to Lea when I walked outdoors. With Shawn's encouragement, I started using exercise bands and lifting light weights at home.

As the world was reopening a year later, I developed debilitating back pain. It was so overwhelming that I had to take a leave of absence from my teaching job. I couldn't walk or maintain my exercise routine.

Scans showed that I was suffering from adenomyosis, a condition in which endometrial tissue grows into the uterine wall. Surgeons removed the painful tissue with a hysterectomy in June 2021, which brought immediate relief.

Recovery was slow, however, and I felt weak at my post-op appointment six weeks later. I expected my doctor to tell me to take it easy. Instead, she said

that I felt weak because I was deconditioned and encouraged me to start moving again.

Lea's radical self-care was now an essential part of my own recovery.

I started with low-

impact exercises, including the cycling and yoga classes I had once enjoyed. Over the following months, I ramped up my running, dedicating my runs to Lea. I completed my first 5K in September 2022 and my first 10K the following June.

Meanwhile, fitness was transforming my work. As an artist, I view my body, mind, and heart as tools for creating. Committing to exercise was helping me feel stronger and more balanced so that I could bring my art to life.

Shortly after running my first 10K, I suffered a stress fracture in my right shin. While recovering, I focused on building muscle. I hired a personal trainer, who helped me progress from fitness bands and free weights to heavier weights and bigger pieces of equipment. I haven't had any further issues with stress fractures since building up my strength.

LIVING LIKE LEA

These days, I'm running more consistently again, and I've registered for a half-marathon. I never feel closer to Lea than while I'm on a run. When I'm out on a trail, I talk to her — about how my kids are doing, about fond memories we shared, and about my dreams for her kids.

My art career is thriving thanks to the energy I've gained from fitness, which flows into my work. My strength and stamina allow me to create larger pieces, and I'm painting more landscapes — partly inspired by running through the woods.

Fitness is an important part of my relationship as well. Exercise is something Shawn and I value, both because it makes us feel great and because we want to stay healthy and strong for the rest of our lives together.

I think Lea would be proud that I get up each morning and work out before leaving to teach. Her belief in radical self-care was grounded in the idea that this practice allows us to show up as our best selves for others.

That's how she lived her life, and I'm proud to honor her legacy by living mine that way too. 🌱

How to Live Like Lea

1.

Be brave. "Take chances, be willing to look like a fool, and don't follow what everyone else is doing," Christina says. "Just be real with yourself and those around you."

2.

Be kind to yourself. "You don't get extra credit in life for depriving yourself of needs, love, rest, and kindness."

3.

Prioritize both fitness and creativity.

"I believe that my art and creativity benefit from my good health and ability to move my body," she notes.



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Christina and her childhood best friend, Lea, in 1998.

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REALFITNESS

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE an elite athlete or master meditator to turn your workout into a moving meditation. "Sensory experiencing" is the practice of cultivating awareness of sensations inside and outside of your body. The benefits, detailed on **page 32**, can include strengthened neural pathways, improved performance, and even increased enjoyment during a workout.



Stack these three multiplanar exercises for an efficient and effective full-body routine.

BY LAUREN BEDOSKY

GYM STAPLES LIKE SQUATS, pushups, and lunges are powerful compound exercises that build full-body strength — but did you know they're not quite as full body as they could be? That's because these and many other common exercises move the body through the sagittal, or longitudinal, plane. Sagittal-plane exercises take you forward and backward, but you can also move side to side (through the frontal plane) and in a rotational arc (through the transverse plane).

Triplanar exercises — that is, moves that cross all three planes — can help shore up imbalances and build what functional-movement

specialist Gary Gray, PT, FAFS, calls “three-dimensional strength.”

“We live in three-dimensional space, and we ourselves are three-dimensional, so it makes sense to exercise in 3D,” says Gray, founder of the Gray Institute in Adrian, Mich.

3D training has existed for centuries — tai chi is a perfect example — but Gray notes that modern fitness programs have drifted away from the multiplanar approach.

Instead of moving the body in every direction, the typical workout isolates joints with movements through limited ranges of motion. And even when compound, multijoint exercises are programmed, people

often forgo multiplanar variations for conventional ones.

Returning to a 3D training approach can improve your movement quality in sports and daily life, says Gray. He also notes that 3D training tends to be more efficient than conventional strength training because it targets more muscle groups and joints at once. Often, that means 3D strength workouts can require fewer moves — and less time — than what many gym-goers expect.

“If your goal is to move better, enjoy life more, and be more effective and efficient with your training,” he says, “the strategy should be to move in 3D.”

THE WORKOUT

For a full-body routine, Gray recommends the following three — yes, three — exercises. Flow through the different components of each exercise in order, slowly and with control. Begin with five reps of each exercise flow. Gradually work up to performing 10 reps each as you build strength and improve body awareness. Perform the workout up to three times per week on nonconsecutive days.

3D LUNGE MATRIX

This lunge variation targets all the major muscles in the lower body: the quadriceps, hamstrings, glutes, and calves.



- Stand with your feet about hip width apart.
- Step your right foot forward and lower into a forward lunge.
- Reverse the movement by pressing through your heel and stepping your right foot back to the starting position.
- Repeat with the left foot.

- Then step your right foot backward and lower into a reverse lunge.
- Reverse the movement by stepping your right foot back to the starting position.
- Repeat with the left foot.



- Next, step out to the right and lower into a side lunge.
- Reverse the movement by stepping your right foot back to the starting position.
- Repeat with the left foot.

- Then step your right foot behind the left into a curtsy lunge.
- Reverse the movement by stepping your right foot back to the starting position.
- Repeat with the left foot.



- Next, open your hips and rotate your body to the right as you take a large step back with your right foot. Allow the right knee to bend.
- Reverse the movement by stepping your right foot back to the starting position.
- Repeat with the left foot.

- Then step your right foot forward and diagonally across the front of your torso; allow both knees to bend.
- Reverse the movement by stepping your right foot back to the starting position.
- Repeat with the left foot.

3D

HAND SWINGS

This upper-body exercise works the shoulders, latissimus dorsi, rhomboids, and trapezius in every direction.



- Standing tall, extend both arms out in front of your chest, palms facing each other. This is the starting position.
- Keeping your arms straight, lift them overhead, and then lean back as far as you're comfortably able.
- Return your arms to the starting position.
- Then bend at the hips to swing both arms toward the floor; allow your hands to sweep along the outside of your legs and behind you.
- Return your arms to the starting position.



- Lift your arms overhead, palms facing forward. Lean your hips to the left and bring your arms to the right; then repeat on the other side.



- Return your arms to the starting position; then turn your palms so they're facing down.
 - Rotate at the hips to swing your arms to the right and behind you; repeat on the other side.
- Tip: To increase the challenge, hold a light dumbbell in each hand, or hold a medicine ball.

3D

SQUATS

This squat variation emphasizes every muscle in the lower body, with the focus shifting depending on the position of your feet.



- Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart, toes pointed forward. Brace your core. This is your starting position.
- Bend your knees and hips to squat down until your thighs are about parallel to the ground.

- Press through your feet to stand up.
- Step your right foot slightly forward and squat down. Stand up, then return your right foot to the starting position. Repeat with your left foot.



- Bring your feet narrower than hip width apart. Squat down. Press through your feet to stand up.
- Step your feet wider than shoulder width apart. Squat down. Press through your feet to stand up.



- Return your feet to the starting position, but rotate your toes inward. Squat down. Press through your feet to stand up.
- Rotate your toes outward. Squat down. Press through your feet to stand up. ↻

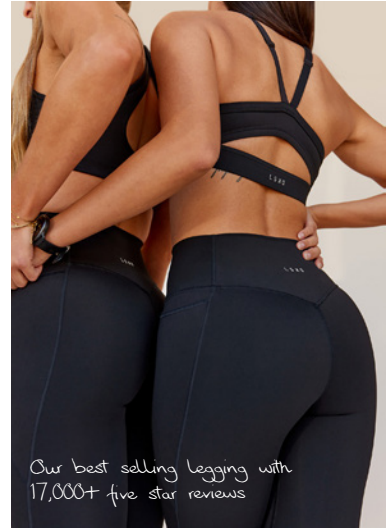
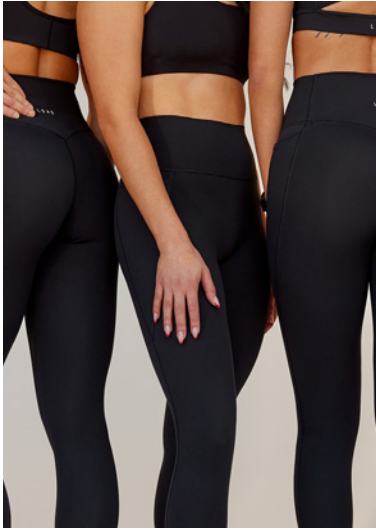


SEE THE EXERCISES

View these moves in action at ELmag.com/3Dworkout.



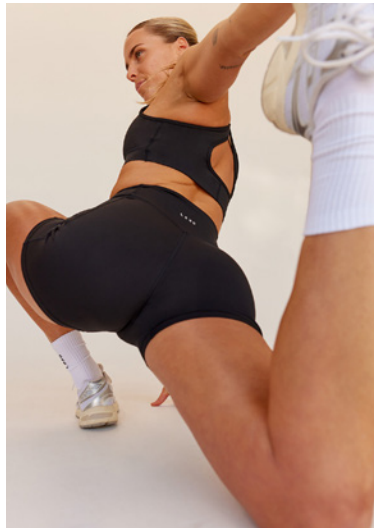
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The Bird-Dog Row

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

Improve core strength and spinal stability with this twist on a classic ab exercise.

THE BIRD-DOG

exercise is a fan favorite for core conditioning — and for good reason. Among its benefits, the movement recruits the deep-core muscles, from the chest to the hips and around the back; trains the spinal muscles that contribute to good posture and pelvic-floor health; and improves cross-body coordination, a boon for mobility and cognition.

The bird-dog *row* builds on all these benefits by add-

ing elevation (on a bench) and load (with a dumbbell, kettlebell, or handled weight plate).

This variation engages the core from multiple angles — working antiflexion and extension, antilateral flexion and extension, and antirotation.

It also adds an upper-body pull, working the mid- and upper-back muscles, which are key components of core stability.

As a bonus, performing rows in the bird-dog

position can improve your horizontal pulling form overall. This challenging posture can reveal — and help correct — faulty movement patterns, such as excessive pulling, stretching, momentum, rotation, and low-back compensation.

To incorporate the bird-dog row into your training, keep the following guidelines in mind.

Progress to progress.

If you're new to the bird-dog movement, spend

some time practicing the body-weight-only variation. (Learn how at ELMag.com/birddog.)

Start light. Even 3 to 5 pounds is enough to increase the challenge. Add weight gradually.

Prioritize good form.

Common mistakes include arching your back, scrunching up your shoulders, holding your breath, and rotating your hips or shoulders. Consider taking a video to check your alignment.

INSTRUCTIONS

1.

Begin by kneeling on a bench in a tabletop position. Find a comfortable position where you can balance on just one knee and the opposite hand.

2.

Grasp a light weight in your free hand. Extend your free leg directly behind you. Engage your core to set your spine in a neutral position from head to extended heel.

3.

Bend your elbow and draw the weight up. Squeeze your shoulder blade and pause for a two-second count at the top.

4.

Keeping the extended leg raised and your core engaged, lower the weight with control until your arm is fully extended.

5.

Repeat for two or three sets of eight to 10 reps per side. Use only as much weight as you can control without compromising form.



SHARPEN YOUR SENSES

Embrace your sensory experience — and boost your brain health — by tuning in while working out.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

ULTRARUNNER Barbara Powell used to run as an escape from everyday life — a chance to zone out while burning off energy and clearing away stress. She aggressively pounded the pavement while ignoring sensations in her body. She loved running, but she frequently found herself injured and burnt out. Disconnecting from the world had led to disconnecting from herself.

It was only when Powell swapped asphalt for dirt paths that her running shifted from painful to freeing.

“When I go trail running, I *need* to pay attention to what’s going on around me,” says Powell, MA, NBC-HWC, a holistic performance coach for Life Time Mind. “It gives me the perfect environment to connect to my senses.”

Instead of zoning out, she began tuning in — first out of necessity, then with intention. And this brought new rewards: “I was able to make important shifts in order to nurture my body and create sustainability with my workouts.”

Whether she’s doing a long weekend run through Minnesota woodlands or traversing the Rockies in preparation for the Leadville Trail 100 Run, Powell now scans for obstacles like roots and rocks, tunes in to the sounds and smells of her surroundings, feels the ground beneath her feet, and takes heed of each breath. Every run is a moving meditation — a multisensory, mind-body experience.

You don’t have to be an elite athlete or master meditator to enjoy

a sensory experience while working out. The benefits for all exercisers can include enhanced body awareness, strengthened neural pathways, improved performance, and simply more enjoyment during a workout.

“Sensory experiencing” is the practice of cultivating your awareness of sensations inside and outside your body. Internally, you might pay attention to muscle tension, balance, body position, a change in breathing or heart rate, pain, or even the sense of time passing. Externally, you might notice aspects of your environment — relying on visual, auditory, olfactory, and other systems to take in what things look, sound, smell, feel, and taste like.

These five expert tips can help you tune in during your next workout.

1. UP YOUR FOCUS.

As Powell discovered when she took up trail running, choosing movements and activities that demand your full attention is one way to ramp up your sensory experience and stimulate the brain during a workout. “Some of the most impactful exercises are those that require either reaction to the environment or some kind of coordinated movement,” says Tommy Wood, PhD, an athletic-performance consultant and associate professor of pediatrics and neuroscience at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

He recommends activities that require a coordinated sensory response and involve dynamic and

unpredictable environments. Examples include outdoor activities such as trail running, mountain biking, and rock-climbing; team sports like soccer, basketball, and doubles pickleball; and dancing — especially choreographed routines. With strength training, incorporate movements that involve timing and coordination, such as medicine-ball tosses, agility ladders, and partner exercises.

Balance training is another way to force the body and brain to work together. Wood, who is cohost of the *Better Brain Fitness* podcast, emphasizes that tasks must be appropriately challenging to reap the mental benefits. “For balance work to be challenging, you have to have a risk of falling over,” he says.

To that end, Wood recommends dual-task training. Try standing on an unstable surface while catching a ball. Balance on one foot while doing an upper-body exercise. Whatever you choose, it should be difficult enough that you feel like you really need to concentrate.

2. SENSE THE NATURAL WORLD.

Engaging with the natural world allows you to take a “sensory rest,” says Powell, borrowing a term from author Sandra Dalton-Smith, MD, who champions the concept in her 7 Types of Rest framework. Natural inputs — hearing ocean waves, seeing a beautiful mountain landscape, feeling the texture of rocks or sand beneath

your feet — give your nervous system a break from the sensory overload of the modern world.

Cultivating a calm state also makes it easier to tune in to your senses and meet yourself where you are, Powell explains. “When we make the deliberate choice to turn down the noise, we can listen to our bodies and become more connected to our physical well-being.”

And engaging the senses through nature is often more accessible than paying attention to the body’s intrinsic experience.

For some people, it might be overwhelming or even impossible to detect internal sensory cues — even basic ones like hunger and thirst.

Powell notes that various factors — neurodiversity, body dysphoria, social conditioning, and cultural variations in how sensory cues are valued — can make it more difficult to observe one’s own physical signals. Dissociation stemming from traumatic experiences, as well as from racism, ageism, or gender bias, can also play a role.

Meanwhile, noticing the effects of the environment on your senses — what it looks, sounds, smells, feels, even tastes like — is a relatively safe and easy place to start.

3. GO BAREFOOT.

Your hands and feet are particularly rich in sensory receptors, relaying messages to your brain via touch, pressure, temperature, and pain. While most people’s hands are

experienced sensors, our feet are less adept at using their touch receptors to feel and explore objects.

“If your feet are not stimulated over time, they can tune out and become a sensory dead end — where ultimately the sensory organs aren’t ready to pick up information the way they need to,” says Kate Strozak, MSc, NCPT, LMT, a movement coach and massage therapist who specializes in applying neuroscience to movement training.

If you’re accustomed to wearing thick, cushioned shoes, Strozak recommends transitioning to more minimal footwear and eventually going barefoot while walking around your house and during workouts. “Once you’re comfortable walking barefoot on firmer surfaces, then you can expose your feet to unpredictable surfaces,” she says.

At home, consider creating a rock box: Fill a box with rocks of different sizes and shapes, and practice standing on and moving around in them, incorporating movements such as squats or hip hinges. “Your feet are constantly bringing sensory information in, so your brain has to be more aware of what you’re doing, which primes your focus and attention,” explains Strozak.

4. REDUCE ARTIFICIAL INPUTS.

Technology is a ubiquitous part of many workouts. Exercisers might listen to music or a podcast, watch a show, catch up on news, scroll social media, or check in with their fitness

tracker while training. There are certainly benefits to tech: Listening to a curated playlist can be energizing, and monitoring your heart rate can help you stay in the zone.

But when it comes to sensory experiencing, tech isn’t a friend. The combined effect of technology is sensory overload, overwhelming the brain’s ability to process information and pushing the nervous system into a more stressed state, explains Powell. We may then zone out to cope with the barrage of inputs.

Adds Strozak: “I think the hardest but most significant thing for most people is to not listen or watch things while they’re exercising, because it’s a distraction and it’s not offering value to what you’re doing. Rather than watching or listening to something, be aware of your environment and let your brain have that chance to process.”

5. STAY FLEXIBLE.

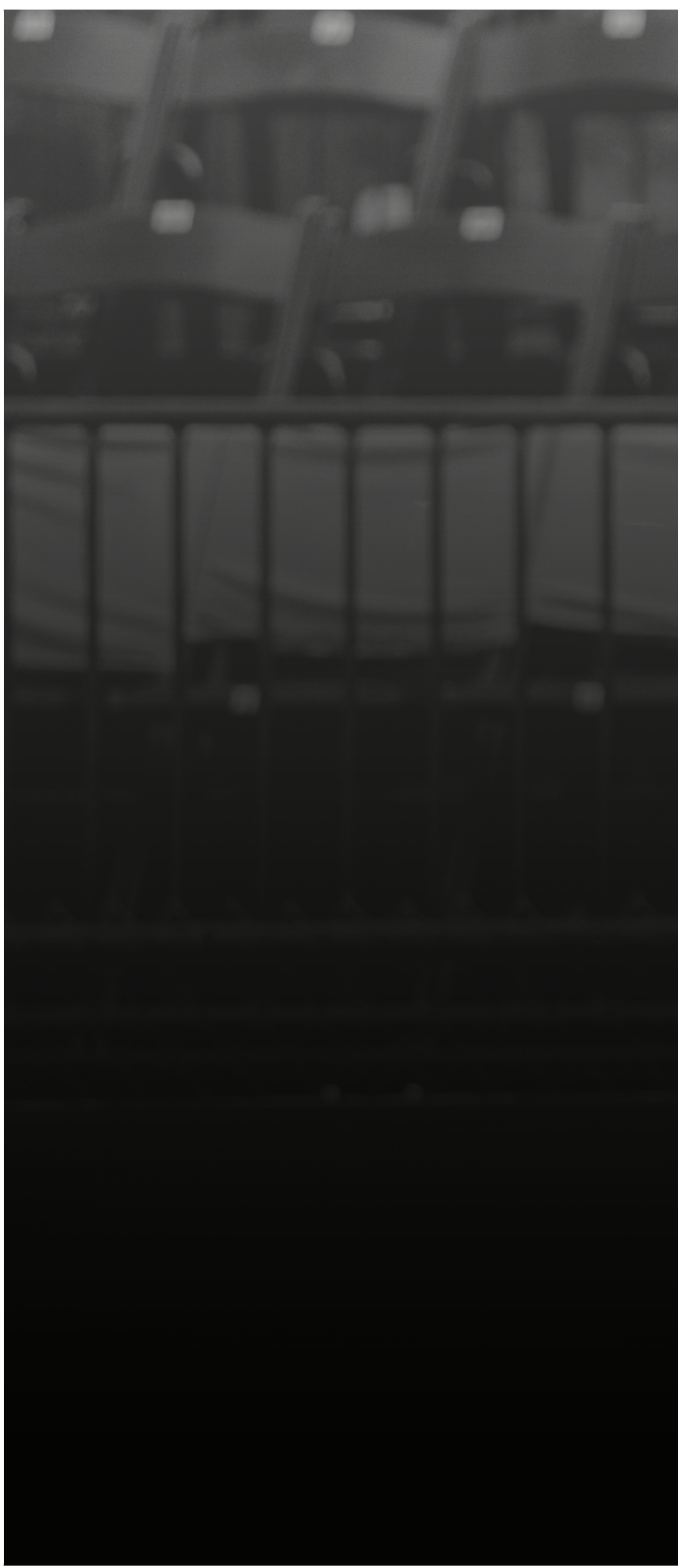
Not every training session needs to be a sensory experience. Wood recommends considering your goal during a workout and asking yourself whether being more in tune with your senses can support that goal.

“If you can afford to get more sensory input or do something more cognitively complex without hindering a given performance or training goal, then go for it,” he says. “But sometimes the goal is just to get the work done.”

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



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Zero In on ZONE 3

How to build endurance — and avoid “junk miles” — by training in this midrange cardio zone.

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

IN THE DISCOURSE around heart-rate-zone training, high intensity (zones 4 and 5) and low intensity (zone 2) garner the most attention. Both training approaches, when leveraged the right way, can help people improve their endurance and boost cardiovascular fitness.

Then there’s medium-intensity zone 3. This midrange, challenging-yet-doable zone — reached by performing an exercise at 70 to 80 percent of your max heart rate — is polarizing.

Some experts love zone 3 and consider it the sweet spot of training. Spending time in zone 3 during your cardio activity of choice can improve VO_2 max, build mitochondria, and train your ability to go farther and faster. Others consider zone 3 a gray zone, leading to “junk miles” that zap energy without payoff.

What’s often overlooked in conversations about zone 3 is that it is neither bad nor good — it’s simply a training tool. And as such, it’s important to consider how it’s used within a broader training plan.

With more than 25 years in the fitness industry, Jeff Rosga, NASM-CPT, PES, CES, Life Time’s director of team member development for Dynamic Personal Training, shares his top takeaways for incorporating zone 3 into your training.



EXPERIENCE LIFE | What is zone 3?

JEFF ROSGA | Zone 3, also known as the tempo or moderate-intensity zone, is typically defined as cardio exercise at 70 to 80 percent of maximum heart rate, or 90 to 100 percent of anaerobic-threshold heart rate.

Often called the gray zone, zone 3 lies between low-intensity endurance training and higher-intensity threshold training. It bridges these zones, offering valuable performance gains, including the following:

- Improved aerobic capacity, making your body better at handling higher intensities
- Enhanced lactate threshold, training your body to handle lactate buildup so you can go longer and faster
- Improved cardiovascular health, strengthening the heart and lungs
- More efficient fat oxidation, training the body to use fat stores as fuel while keeping the intensity up
- Enhanced performance, helping athletes simulating race-day intensities

EL | What does a typical zone 3 cardio workout look like?

JR | Zone 3 cardio can take various forms and can be adapted to various activities, including running, cycling, and using machines like a rower, SkiErg, stepmill, elliptical, or VersaClimber.

Here are three examples of formats that work well for zone 3:

- Tempo efforts. These are continuous steady-state efforts that last 20 to 60 minutes.

- Long intervals. These are intervals of five to 20 minutes with shorter recoveries.

- Sustained climbs. These are rides or runs going uphill at a moderate intensity.

EL | Who can benefit from zone 3 training?

JR | While everyone can benefit from some zone 3 training, it is especially useful for athletes seeking performance enhancement for racing.

Specifically, if your event requires sustained moderate to high intensities, zone 3 training simulates race conditions, preparing you physically and mentally. Combine zone 3 with occasional zone 4 and 5 sessions to stimulate adaptations.

EL | How can someone know if they’re in zone 3?

JR | It’s possible to gauge your zone by using a rate-of-perceived-exertion scale. You’ll recognize zone 3 as a moderate to challenging effort that requires you to breathe more deeply, likely through your mouth, [where you’ll be] able to speak but only in short sentences.

A more accurate method is to use an anaerobic threshold (AT) test to identify your unique zones. AT testing, available at many health clubs and sports medicine clinics (as well as some hospitals), involves running on a treadmill or riding a stationary cycle with a mask over your face to capture and analyze oxygen and carbon dioxide

Often called the gray zone, zone 3 lies between low-intensity endurance training and higher-intensity threshold training.

levels at varying stages of exercise intensity. (Learn more about AT testing at ELmag.com/atfactor.)

EL | Why is accuracy so important?

JR | Because many athletes unknowingly experience something called “zone drift.” For instance, they may find themselves in zone 3 during workouts intended for zone 2 or zone 4, leading to fatigue without desired adaptations. And vice versa: Athletes may drop into zone 2 or spike into zone 4 during an intended zone 3 workout, undermining their efforts and losing out on the benefits of zone 3.

EL | So, you can’t spend time in zone 3 and expect it to be the average of 2 and 4?

JR | No, each zone has distinct qualities and unique benefits. Zone 2 is an easy effort; you can easily chat while exercising. It’s primarily aerobic, and you use fat as fuel. You won’t build up much lactate. These are usually long-duration workouts lasting anywhere from one to four-plus hours. Training in this zone is great for endurance and for recovery.

Zone 3 is a moderate effort. You can talk but only in short sentences because you’re breathing deeper. It’s a mix of aerobic and anaerobic activity based on the top or bottom half of the zone. You can build up some lactate, but it’s manageable over longer workouts. These are moderate-duration workouts of 20 to 90 minutes maintained through continuous activity or interval training. Training in zone 3 improves your lactate threshold, lets you work at moderately high intensities, and improves your aerobic capacity.

Zones 4 and 5 range from hard to very hard effort — you feel a lot of discomfort during these workouts. You rely heavily on glycogen and glucose for fuel and experience quick lactic buildup.

Zone 4 can be maintained for about 40 minutes, but as you reach the upper end of the zone, that will be reduced to only a few minutes. Zone 5 is something that most people can maintain for only seconds. These zones boost your VO₂ max, lactate threshold, buffering capacity (how well you handle lactic-acid buildup), muscular power, speed, and top-end performance.

EL | Any advice for someone who wants to start doing zone 3 cardio?

JR | More is not better. Too many regular zone 3 sessions can increase fatigue without improving performance and can negatively affect recovery and long-term fitness.

Start with one zone 3 session per week as part of a comprehensive training plan that also includes zone 2 sus-

tained efforts and zone 4 or 5 intervals. As a rule of thumb, aim to spend about 80 percent of your cardio training time in zone 2, plus one workout each in zone 3 and zone 4 or 5.

You can progressively add zone 3 sessions, but for best results, avoid doing more than three each week. If you’re feeling unsure, it can be helpful to work with a certified endurance coach. 📞

A LOOK INSIDE THE ZONES

The specified heart rates within each zone are examples only; each individual has unique zones. Learn how to determine yours at ELmag.com/ama.

ZONE	DESCRIPTION	FEELS LIKE	GOOD FOR
ZONE 1 133–142 heartbeats per minute	Promotes fat-burning and aids in recovery from days of more intense exercise	Easy peasy. You could do this for hours.	• Recovery workouts
AEROBIC BASE 143 heartbeats per minute	The heart rate at which your body most efficiently burns fat		• Endurance training • Recovery workouts
ZONE 2 143–155 heartbeats per minute	Trains your body to burn fat efficiently and improve endurance	Your breathing is heavier but still fairly comfortable. Nasal breathing is possible.	• Endurance training
ZONE 3 156–168 heartbeats per minute	Increases your tolerance for anaerobic training; improves anaerobic threshold (AT)	You’re working hard and you need to breathe through your mouth.	• Cardio training • Exercise tolerance
AT 169 heartbeats per minute	The point at which your body shifts from burning mostly fat to mostly carbs		• Interval training • Circuit-style resistance training
ZONE 4 169–178 heartbeats per minute	Increases your peak VO ₂ and anaerobic threshold	You feel winded and you’re pushing yourself very hard.	• Cardio training • Speed training
ZONE 5 179–189 heartbeats per minute	Increases your peak VO ₂ and anaerobic threshold	You can barely catch your breath. You’re at your body’s absolute max.	• Sprinting • High-intensity interval training



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REAL FOOD

CORN, BEANS, AND SQUASH are known as the Three Sisters in many Native American traditions. They also complement each other in the kitchen and provide powerful nutritional benefits. Find our Three Sisters recipes on **page 48** and the recipe for these Butternut Squash and Black Bean Enchiladas at ELmag.com/threesisters.

NATURAL REMEDIES FOR PMS

Try plant-based solutions for premenstrual syndrome and period pain.

BY CAMILLE BERRY

AT SOME POINT between menarche and menopause, premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms may affect up to 90 percent of women. For some, the effects are mild and manageable; others find themselves canceling plans, calling out from work, or missing class for days each month. And that's before their monthly flow even begins.

Symptoms are many and varied, ranging from the physical to the emotional. Headaches, breast tenderness, bloating, and nausea are common, as are fatigue and insomnia. Many people report changes in appetite, acne breakouts, or mood-related symptoms, like depression and irritability.

Ever-changing hormones are the culprits behind these symptoms.

Fluctuations in hormone levels throughout menstrual cycles are both natural and necessary.

Estrogen levels rise during the mid-follicular phase, then plummet post-ovulation. During the luteal phase, when the uterine lining thickens in preparation for a potential pregnancy, estrogen levels rise once again, only to fall at the start of your monthly menses.

A bit of hormonal acne or bloating isn't unusual, but if you're frequently in pain or feeling excessive discomfort, it might be time to have a closer look.

"If you are experiencing premenstrual mood or physical problems, your body is signaling that something is awry physiologically," says functional-medicine physician Sara Szal, MD,

author of *The Hormone Cure*. "Potential causes? A hormonal imbalance. Or cellular dysfunction. Or a combination of the two."

Research points also to genetics and potential lifestyle factors that may contribute to PMS and its sister syndrome, premenstrual dysphoric disorder. PMDD is similar to PMS, but the symptoms are usually far more severe.

THE PROBLEM WITH PERIOD PAIN

PMS symptoms tend to crop up toward the end of the luteal phase, just before you begin menstruating. Typically, once your period starts, the symptoms fade away — but this is when menstrual cramps (dysmenorrhea) can kick in. Period pain is much more common in people with PMS or PMDD symptoms.

Although some discomfort is to be expected, extremely painful periods are not normal, and they drive many women to seek assistance from their healthcare teams, who often prescribe hormonal birth control to curb PMS.

But hormonal birth control is not a good fit for everyone. It can come with a host of side effects, including headaches, mood swings, reduced sexual desire, and a minor risk for blood clotting. For those who would rather avoid taking the pill, there are other ways to manage PMS and period pain.

"If you've gone to see the gynecologist for PMS or PMDD, the solution has probably been to medicate with an oral contraceptive," Szal explains. "But the pill masks symptoms by suppressing ovulation with synthetic hormones."

While she acknowledges that medication can be necessary in certain circumstances — for patients with endometriosis, for example — Szal believes

"For women with nonurgent health issues, implementing natural methods to rebalance hormones usually provides relief within a few short months."

it's not always the best option for those with mild to moderate symptoms.

"For women with nonurgent health issues, implementing natural methods to rebalance hormones usually provides relief within a few short months," she explains. "Your periods might normalize, and you could get your life back."

BACK IN BALANCE

There are several lifestyle changes that can help rebalance hormone levels. Ample research shows that exercise can ease both physical and psychological symptoms, while a diet rich in healthy fats, fiber, and high-quality protein may reduce the severity of PMS.

Avocados, dark chocolate, fatty fish, and leafy greens are good food choices for those with PMS or PMDD; highly processed foods, sugar, caffeine, and alcohol are thought to exacerbate symptoms.

While lifestyle tweaks can certainly help, your spice cupboard is also brimming with plant-based remedies that can offer relief. And your herb garden is nature's apothecary: Fresh leaves may be plucked and brewed into infusions to help soothe nausea, bloating, and even cramps.

Herbal remedies are widely considered safe by most integrative-medicine practitioners, but before starting a new regimen, check in with your healthcare provider. This is especially true if you take any medications or have certain health conditions.

"Most herbalists will use a mixture of herbs rather than one single [herb]," explains herbalist Catherine Tupper, BM, BS, BSc. She stresses the importance of working with "an herbalist you trust. They will find the most appropriate herbs from a safe source and monitor your progress." If you're buying herbs online, get them only from a company you know well, she emphasizes.

If PMS and period pain have been disrupting your life, try one of these plant-based remedies to find some relief.



CHAMOMILE

An herb used in both traditional European and Mexican medicine, chamomile may help regulate depression and anxiety. "Stress is the biggest factor that can worsen PMS symptoms. So many hormonal problems in women are due to the downstream effects of cortisol," says Szal. "Cortisol is a bully, and if it is high, it impacts all the other hormones in our bodies. Addressing your cortisol response and finding ways to manage your stress is probably the most important first step you can take to balance your hormones." (For more counsel on balancing cortisol levels, see ELmag.com/cortisol.)

Chamomile has been linked to cortisol reduction, so your evening cup of tea may help lower overall cortisol levels in your body. The herb's antispasmodic properties may also offer relief from menstrual cramps.

Herbalist and midwife Aviva Romm, MD, recommends taking a daily chamomile tincture from the week following ovulation to the onset of your period.

A word of caution: Chamomile can be estrogenic, so people with a history of hormone-sensitive cancers, such as breast, uterine, or ovarian cancer — as well as those who are pregnant or breastfeeding — should steer clear of this herb. People with ragweed allergies shouldn't take chamomile, because it's a member of the daisy family and could cause a reaction.

CHASTEBERRY

Vitex agnus-castus, more commonly known as the chasteberry, has long been used to treat a variety of menstrual issues. "Its efficacy in treating many of these symptoms makes it one of the most widely used treatments in Germany, where herbal medicine is a standard part of regular medical care," Romm writes in her book *Hormone Intelligence*.

Whether as an extract or in capsule form, the fruit from this Mediterranean tree has anti-inflammatory and hormone-balancing properties that can provide relief from mood swings, depression, breast tenderness, and headaches.

"It is thought that chasteberry alters progesterone

sensitivity and restores normal progesterone levels in the body," Szal explains. "PMS symptoms are typically related to a problem with progesterone, especially in perimenopausal women. Most researchers believe that chasteberry increases the release of luteinizing hormone from the pituitary [gland], which raises progesterone and normalizes the second half of the menstrual cycle."

Tupper echoes the benefits of chasteberry as a treatment for PMS-related anxiety, depression, and insomnia. "My first herb would always be *Vitex agnus-castus*," she says.



GINKGO BILOBA

Best known for its potential to alleviate the symptoms of cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease, the leaves of the antioxidant-rich ginkgo tree can also ease anxiety and depression. In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), it's a widely used treatment for headaches and migraine.

Romm notes that taking ginkgo "twice daily, throughout the month, reduces breast pain associated with fluid retention." She recommends 80 to 160 milligrams standardized extract, or 24 percent ginkgo biloba.

Note that if you're on a blood thinner, you should avoid this herb because it slows blood clotting. Never eat raw or roasted ginkgo seeds, which can be poisonous.



GINGER

This spicy, antioxidant-rich rhizome, used in everything from curries to cakes, has long been praised for its anti-inflammatory properties. Ginger's history as a medicine spans thousands of years, and it's used in both TCM and Ayurveda. It's also widely renowned in modern medicine, considered a gastrointestinal panacea for safely soothing nausea, irritable bowel syndrome, bloating, and other digestive woes.

What's more, studies indicate that taking ginger capsules a few times a day can relieve menstrual-cramp pain to the same degree as over-the-counter anti-inflammatories like aspirin.

Romm suggests cooking with ginger or enjoying ginger tea to help with digestive issues, nausea, and cramps. She also recommends taking ginger capsules — often more effective than tea at combating pain — three times a day for the first three days of your period.

PEPPERMINT AND SPEARMINT

Like ginger, peppermint offers relief from some of the gastrointestinal symptoms of PMS and PMDD. Its antiemetic effects are so potent that peppermint oil is used as a viable natural treatment for nausea in cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Peppermint's sister plant, spearmint, boasts antiandrogen properties, which means it may help with hormone imbalances.

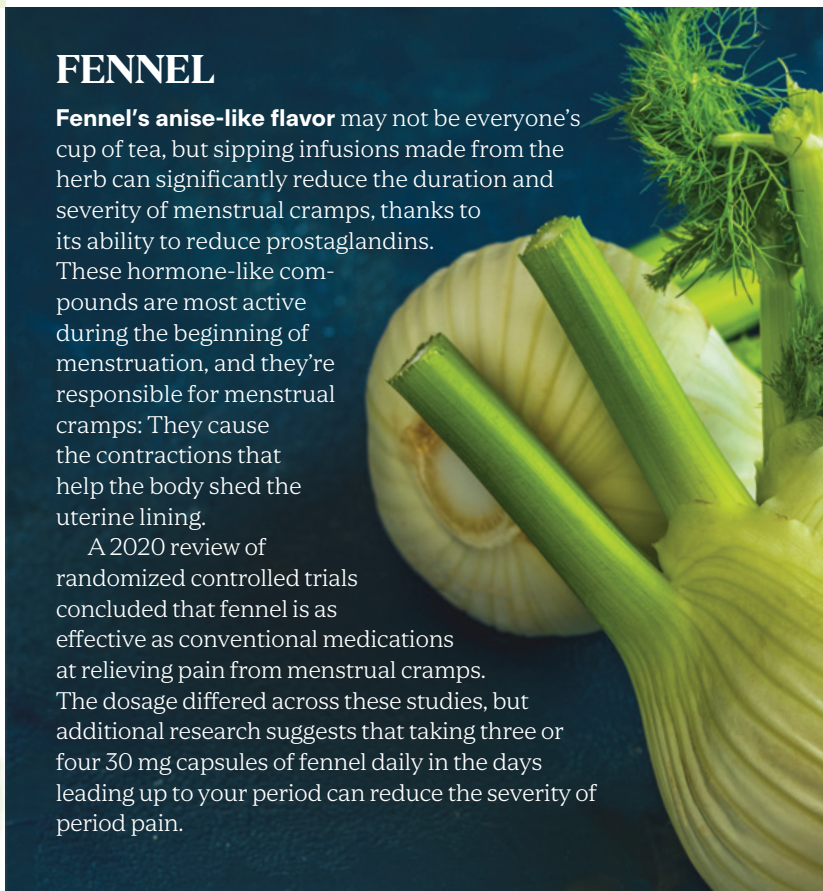
Try spearmint or peppermint tea in the week before your period to curb nausea. Once your period starts, peppermint may help relieve menstrual cramps or shorten their duration.



FENNEL

Fennel's anise-like flavor may not be everyone's cup of tea, but sipping infusions made from the herb can significantly reduce the duration and severity of menstrual cramps, thanks to its ability to reduce prostaglandins. These hormone-like compounds are most active during the beginning of menstruation, and they're responsible for menstrual cramps: They cause the contractions that help the body shed the uterine lining.

A 2020 review of randomized controlled trials concluded that fennel is as effective as conventional medications at relieving pain from menstrual cramps. The dosage differed across these studies, but additional research suggests that taking three or four 30 mg capsules of fennel daily in the days leading up to your period can reduce the severity of period pain.





SAFFRON

The red-gold stigmas of the saffron crocus plant are best known for being the world's most expensive spice. Harvested from the *Crocus sativus* flower, saffron contains a trove of antioxidants, and recent studies have suggested that its anti-depressant and pain-reducing powers may ease PMS and PMDD symptoms.

"[Saffron] is less proven than chasteberry," explains Szal. "But it is a safe option for depression, painful periods, and PMS."

Saffron is a delicious ingredient to use in the kitchen, but for those looking to treat PMS symptoms — including cramps — taking saffron in capsules daily is the easiest and most affordable option. Romm suggests that PMS sufferers take between 5 and 15 mg twice a day, with food to avoid nausea.

LEMON BALM

This member of the mint family boasts a light citrus fragrance and is easy to grow in an herb garden. Lemon balm can ease insomnia and anxiety, both of which are common with PMS. Changes in hormone levels can lead to plenty of tossing and turning at night; lemon balm may help reduce anxiety and clear the way to restful sleep. A 2017 study indicates that lemon balm can also reduce cramps.

Romm suggests taking 80 mg a day for insomnia or between 40 and 60 drops if you prefer a tincture over pills. A lemon-balm infusion can be soothing too. Pick about five to 10 fresh leaves and steep them in boiled water for five to 10 minutes; the longer you steep them, the more potent the flavor. If you're using dried lemon balm, start with about 1 teaspoon, and experiment with more or less based on how strong you like your tea.

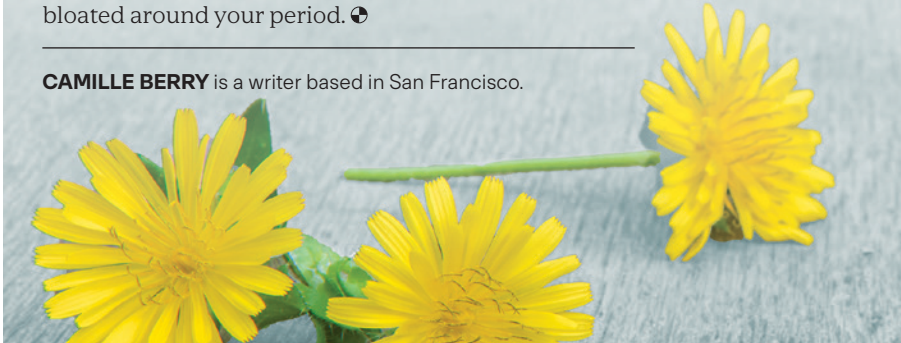


DANDELION

The sunny yellow blooms many of us think of as weeds boast potent diuretic properties, which means they can help with fluid retention and bloating — common in the days before menstruation begins. Its antioxidant-rich polyphenols boast anti-inflammatory properties, and dandelion root may help increase bile flow, improving liver function.

Pour yourself a cup or two of dandelion tea when you begin feeling bloated around your period. ☘

CAMILLE BERRY is a writer based in San Francisco.



SUPPORTIVE SUPPLEMENTS

Some supplements can support hormone balance and reduce the symptoms of PMS and period pain. Sara Szal, MD, author of *The Hormone Cure*, recommends the following supplements for people struggling with PMS.

Calcium: Research has shown that people experiencing PMS often have lower-than-normal calcium levels. Calcium supplementation can help ease the symptoms — particularly psychological effects, like mood swings and anxiety.

Szal recommends 600 milligrams of calcium carbonate or calcium citrate twice a day, taken orally.

Magnesium: Studies show that magnesium, too, can reduce the severity of PMS, especially physical symptoms, like cramping, bloating, and headache. A research review suggests that magnesium supplementation might help by "normalizing the actions of different hormones (mainly progesterone) on the central nervous system." Szal recommends 200 mg per day.

Vitamin B6: "Taken with magnesium, B6 reduces PMS-related anxiety," Szal writes. "B6 is involved in the production of many neurotransmitters, including serotonin, which controls mood, sleep, and appetite, and dopamine, which controls pleasure and satisfaction."

She recommends 50 to 100 mg daily and adds that it's important to be cautious when supplementing with B6 because overdosing can lead to dizziness, nausea, and even nerve toxicity.



Gluten-Free Pumpkin Muffins

All you need is a can of pumpkin and a handful of pantry staples to make these autumnal treats.

BY KAELYN RILEY

STARTING SOMETIME in my early 20s, I was seized by a desire to start eating healthier — burgeoned partly by the splendid farmers' markets where I was living in Northern California, and partly by the profusion of food blogs I read ravenously throughout the 2010s. As a result, I went through a protracted phase in which I made my own *everything*.

I'm talking homemade yogurt, bread, and even mayonnaise. I brewed kombucha at home, using a slightly dubious method I learned through some now-defunct online forum for new vegans. I soaked almonds overnight, then blended and pressed them through paint-strainer bags to make almond milk. I bought seeds in bulk and ground them up to bake into crackers — which I ate with hummus made from slow-cooked dried chickpeas and, yes, homemade tahini.

My grocery list included absolutely nothing from a box, jar, or can. I'm not sure I even owned a can opener.

I don't regret any of it — those years taught me a lot of indispensable health skills. They nurtured my love of cooking and my curiosity about where my food comes from — and set me on the path to my job at *Experience Life*.

But like a lot of people who start out just wanting to eat a little better, I

looked up one day and realized that my life had become impossibly, even frighteningly, small: I was bound to an ever-expanding number of rules that governed my eating habits and hamstrung by the diminishing list of foods that I could let myself enjoy.

Back then, were I making these muffins, I'd have roasted and puréed a pumpkin and eschewed the canned stuff. There's nothing wrong with that — roasted squash might be my favorite cold-weather food. But while hacking open a winter squash to roast is, in my humble opinion, infinitely worth the effort for the savory recipes starting on page 48, I don't think the same is always true for baked goods.

That's because baking is something of a science, comprising precise measurements of specific ingredients and both chemical and physical reactions. (Of course, there's also a fair bit of art involved — the moment a carefully kneaded loaf of bread is ready to go into the oven, for instance, is as much a feeling as it is a measurement — but that's a topic for another time.)

When you're baking, consistency matters, and on that front, your favorite brand of canned pumpkin has done the hard work for you. A single brand contains roughly the same amount of moisture in every can. But because

water content varies from gourd to gourd, using homemade purée has as much chance of rendering dense, gloppy muffins as light, fluffy ones.

It was a tough lesson for me to learn, but it's true: Making something from scratch doesn't always mean better results.

I still make a lot of those same homemade foods on occasion — because I love to cook, and I still want to avoid the preservatives, artificial flavors, and excess packaging that often come with processed fare. But I also buy hummus from the grocery store sometimes, because there is a whole wide world outside of my kitchen and I want to spend my time living in it.

The line between healthy habits and obsessive fixation probably looks different for each of us. For me, figuring out how to feed myself well while still living a vibrant, active life meant accepting foods I'd once considered verboten. When I released myself from the limiting dogma that *processed* equals *bad*, my world grew so much bigger and brighter. I even realized that there are quite a few shortcut convenience foods that — far from being unhealthy — actually enable a more bountiful life than I could have imagined for myself back when I first started learning what healthy eating really means.



Makes 12 muffins • Prep time: 10 minutes • Cook time: 30 minutes



¼ cup melted coconut oil, plus more for the tin



1¾ cups gluten-free baking flour



1 tbs. pumpkin pie spice



1 tsp. baking soda



½ tsp. sea salt



½ cup plus 2 tbs. turbinado sugar, divided



2 large eggs



1 cup canned pumpkin



½ cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt



1½ tsp. vanilla extract

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F, and lightly oil a 12-cup muffin tin with coconut oil. In a large bowl, whisk the flour, pumpkin pie spice, baking soda, and sea salt to combine.

Place ½ cup of the turbinado sugar in a medium bowl, then pour in the ¼ cup melted coconut oil and whisk until the mixture looks like wet sand. Add the eggs one at a time and

whisk to incorporate, then add the pumpkin, yogurt, and vanilla and whisk until smooth.

Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and mix with a spatula until just combined. Scoop the mixture into the muffin tin, filling each cup about three-quarters full. Sprinkle the tops of the muffins with the remaining turbinado sugar and bake for 28 to 30 minutes or

until a toothpick inserted in the center of a muffin comes out with just a few crumbs attached.

Let the muffins cool in the tin for about 10 minutes, then remove them and place on a wire rack to cool completely. Store the muffins in an airtight container at room temperature for up to four days, or wrap them tightly and freeze for up to three months. 🍪

Common Kitchen Mistakes

(and How to Avoid Them)

Step up your home-cooking game with these expert tips.

BY ADAM MEYER

WHETHER YOU'RE an experienced home cook or a newbie in the kitchen, a bungled bake, dish, or meal can be discouraging.

Maybe you've scorched the garlic, overcooked the pasta, or ended up with a soggy stir-fry instead of the golden, crispy masterpiece you imagined.

Slip-ups are part of the learning process, but many of the most common mishaps are easy to avoid once you know the basics.

"The path to culinary excellence is paved with many mistakes," says chef Renee Guilbault, a food-industry veteran and CEO of the Open Food Company. "This is normal and happens to the best of us."

Fortunately, becoming a better cook doesn't require mastering complicated cooking techniques overnight. The key is practicing small habits that build better results over time — simple strategies that boost your confidence, help you sidestep kitchen blunders, and unlock bigger, bolder flavors in every dish. Start by learning to avoid these common cooking mistakes.

DULL KNIVES

Unsharpened knives aren't just a minor annoyance: In the kitchen, a blunt blade can be dangerous.

"Dull knives can slide off whatever you're trying to cut — you may end up with finger nuggets," warns Brian Theis, author of *The Infinite Feast*.

Though sharp knives might seem intimidating, they're actually safer and more efficient. They require less force, thereby giving you more control and precision with every cut. This makes prep easier and cleaner while also protecting your ingredients — and your fingertips.

It's a worthwhile investment to buy a good sharpening tool or have your knives professionally sharpened a few times a year. Keep your blades honed regularly and store them properly to protect their edges. (Get our knife maintenance tips at ELmag.com/honeknife.)

FEAR OF HIGH HEAT

Many home cooks shy away from high temperatures for fear of burning their food — or themselves. But dialing down the flame can sabotage your dish.

Without enough heat, sugars in foods don't caramelize properly, vegetables turn soggy instead of crisp, and proteins come out pale and rubbery rather than golden and flavorful.

Cooking with heat doesn't just mean turning up the burner knob; it's also important to allow the pan to heat up properly before adding ingredients. A well-heated pan helps drive off moisture, which is essential for getting that just-right sear on meat or achieving crispy edges on vegetables.

"Splattering oil can be a scary thing, but getting a proper sear on your proteins is one way to add great flavor to your cooking," says chef Daniel Holzman, coauthor of *Food IQ: 100 Questions, Answers, and Recipes to Raise Your Cooking Smarts*. "If the pan isn't hot enough to boil away the water in your food, it will never get the proper crust and color."

Guilbault concurs: "Low heat simply won't get you there. It's like trying to start a fire with wet wood — you'll get smoke, but no real flame."

Holzman suggests starting with the right tools, especially if you're nervous about cranking up the heat. Good-quality pans cook more evenly, and they can give you more control and confidence at the stove.

"A well-heated, thick-bottomed pan will maintain its heat," he explains. "Laying proteins away from you to avoid splattering oil is a great safety trick, and using long enough tongs or other utensils can keep you out of danger's reach."



NOT ENOUGH SALT

The right seasoning can take a dish from good to great. Without salt, in particular, even the best ingredients can end up tasting bland. That's because salt does more than just make food salty — it brings out the natural flavors of your ingredients and helps everything taste more cohesive.

But timing is crucial. If you salt your dish only at the end, it won't have time to penetrate the ingredients and amplify the layers of flavor throughout the cooking process. "Salt enhances all the other flavors in a dish," explains Roberta Muir, cookbook author and gourmet-tour leader, "but only if you add it during cooking, not just at the table."

An undersalted dish tends to taste flat, muted, or unbalanced, notes Holzman. "Proper seasoning is at the very core of great-tasting food," he adds. "It's prudent to start with less salt than you may need, but taste often and don't be afraid to keep adding salt until it tastes great."

OVERCROWDED PANS

More isn't always better, especially if it means trying to cook too much food at once.

"Adding food to a pan sucks the heat from the surface," Holzman explains. "If you overcrowd the pan, there won't be enough energy to keep the temperature consistent, so you tend to release liquid from your food and boil rather than sear your ingredients."

In other words, overcrowding leaves no room for liquid to escape and evaporate, and that leads to soggy, steamed food instead of beautifully browned dishes. "We think if we put everything in at once, we'll save time," Guilbault says. "But in reality, we're just creating more work for ourselves and sacrificing quality."

To avoid this common mistake, make sure your ingredients have enough room to cook in a single layer, especially when searing proteins or roasting vegetables. If your skillet or roasting pan isn't large enough for that, cook in batches. It may take a few extra minutes, but the crispy edges, caramelized surfaces, and deeper flavor are well worth it.

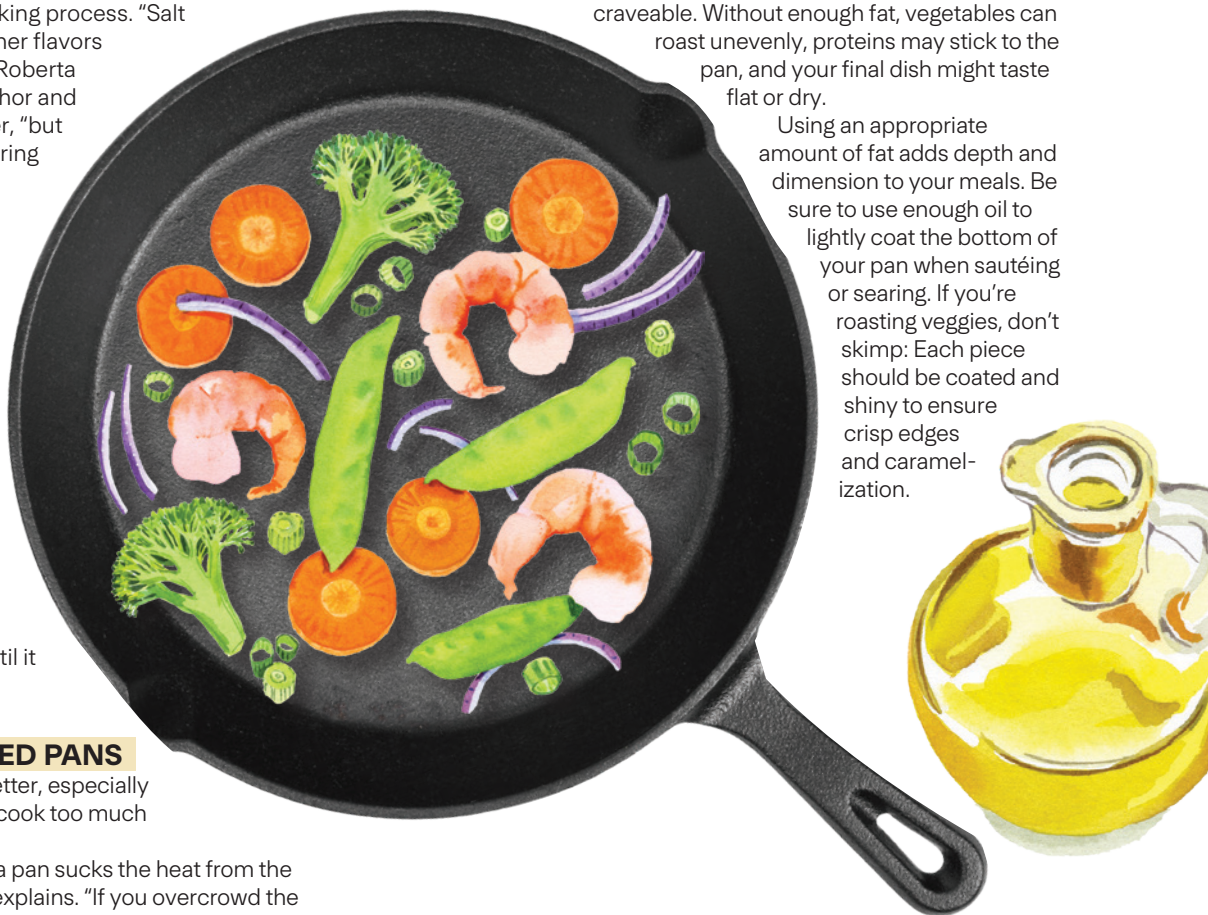
TOO LITTLE FAT

Some people are hesitant to cook with fat, but healthy options like olive oil, avocado oil, and ghee are critical for flavor, texture, and nutrition. (Wondering which cooking fats are healthy? Learn more at ELmag.com/cookingfats.)

"Fat is flavor," says Maricel Gentile, owner of Maricel's Kitchen in East Brunswick, N.J., and author of *Maricel's Simply Asian Cookbook*. "Home cooks often dry out their food because they are afraid of fat."

In the kitchen, fat serves many functions. It carries fat-soluble flavor compounds, helps herbs and spices bloom, and contributes to that rich, satisfying mouthfeel that makes a dish craveable. Without enough fat, vegetables can roast unevenly, proteins may stick to the pan, and your final dish might taste flat or dry.

Using an appropriate amount of fat adds depth and dimension to your meals. Be sure to use enough oil to lightly coat the bottom of your pan when sautéing or searing. If you're roasting veggies, don't skimp: Each piece should be coated and shiny to ensure crisp edges and caramelization.



LACK OF PATIENCE

Like any worthwhile endeavor, proper cooking demands discipline and patience.

What does impatience look like in the kitchen? Often, it's stirring too frequently. "Every time you stir your food, you're cooling your pan," Holzman explains. "It's best to stir only as often as needed to cook your ingredients evenly. This is especially important when trying to sear proteins, which should ideally be turned only once."

Like overcrowding the pan, constantly poking at ingredients can prevent proper browning and flavor development.

"Think of patience as the silent key ingredient, the unseen hand that guides a dish to its full potential," Guilbault advises. "Without it, we're like a gardener who constantly digs up their seedlings to see if they're growing — disrupting the very process we seek to nurture." 🍌

ADAM MEYER is a writer based in British Columbia.

COOKING WITH THE THREE SISTERS

Corn, beans, and squash are a traditional combination in Native American gardening. They also complement each other in the kitchen.

BY JOSE GUZMAN, RDN

CORN, BEANS, AND SQUASH are known as the Three Sisters across different Indigenous foodways in North America. The Hopi of northeastern Arizona have an elegant way of describing their relationship: Corn (or maize) is the soul of the mesa, beans are the climbers that seek the sky, and squash is the protector that shelters the earth.

Corn grows tall and sturdy like the mesas, providing support for the climbing bean vines. In return, beans fertilize the soil with the nitrogen that squash requires, and the large leaves of the squash shade the earth from the sun so it holds moisture for the corn to thrive.

These crops aren't just good garden companions — they also provide serious nutritional benefits.

Corn is a whole grain rich in prebiotic fibers that nourish your microbiome and regulate blood sugar.

Beans are an excellent source of soluble and insoluble fiber, providing more than 25 percent of daily needs in just half a cup. They're also rich in protein, and paired with a whole grain like corn, the result is a complete protein containing all nine essential amino acids.

The deep golden color of squash is an indicator of its abundant vitamins and minerals, especially beta-carotene, an antioxidant that slows cell damage and may aid in chronic-disease prevention.

The following recipes are not traditional uses of the Three Sisters, but they showcase creative ways to highlight each delicious ingredient.



Roasted Pumpkin and Corn Bisque

Makes four servings • Prep time: 20 minutes • Cook time: 1 hour 15 minutes

FOR THE BISQUE

- 1 3-lb. sugar pumpkin, halved and seeded
- 1 tbs. plus ½ tsp. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ½ tsp. plus ¼ tsp. sea salt, divided
- 1 medium leek, halved, rinsed, and chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped



PHOTOS: TERRY BRENNAN; FOOD STYLING: BETSY NELSON

- ½ tsp. cayenne
- ½ tsp. paprika
- ¼ tsp. ground nutmeg
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 1 bay leaf
- 1½ cups fresh corn kernels, from about 2 large cobs (or use frozen)
- 32 oz. chicken stock
- ¼ cup plus 2 tbs. plain, full-fat Greek yogurt

FOR THE ROASTED CHICKPEAS

- 1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained, rinsed, and dried
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ tbs. cornstarch
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- ½ tsp. paprika
- ½ tsp. chipotle powder (or chili powder)
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE YOGURT SAUCE

- ½ cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt
- Juice of ½ lemon
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley
- 2–3 tbs. water, as needed

Roast the pumpkin and chickpeas: Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Oil the pumpkin flesh with ½ teaspoon olive oil and sprinkle with ¼ teaspoon sea salt. Place the pumpkin flesh-side down on a parchment-lined sheet pan, then roast in the oven until fork-tender, about 30 to 45 minutes total.

As the pumpkin cooks, prep the chickpeas by tossing them in a medium bowl with the olive oil, cornstarch, cumin, paprika, chipotle powder, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon black pepper. Spread them on a small parchment-lined sheet pan, then roast in the oven alongside the pumpkin for 20 to 30 minutes, until crisp.

Let the pumpkin sit until it's cool enough to handle, then use a spoon to scoop out the flesh; discard the skin.

Prepare the soup: Heat the remaining tablespoon of olive oil in a medium pot over medium heat. Add the leek, garlic, spices, and bay leaf, and cook for three to five minutes until the spices are aromatic. Add the corn and cook for five to seven minutes, until softened.

Stir in the chicken stock and roasted pumpkin, bring the mixture to a simmer, and cook for 15 minutes.

Remove the bay leaf. Blend the soup with an immersion blender until smooth, or use a traditional blender, adding soup in batches (removing the small top cap and covering with a towel to prevent explosions). Return to the pot and bring the bisque back to a simmer.

Place ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons Greek yogurt in a small bowl. Temper the yogurt by slowly stirring in 1 cup of the hot bisque until fully combined. Gently stir the yogurt mixture back into the pot and bring the bisque up to serving temperature.

Make the yogurt sauce: In a small bowl, whisk ½ cup Greek yogurt with the lemon juice and parsley, then add the water slowly until the sauce is thin enough to drizzle.

To serve, top each bowl of bisque with ⅓ cup roasted chickpeas and add a dollop of yogurt sauce.

Three Sisters Fritters With Cranberry Chutney

Makes 15 2½-inch fritters

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cook time: 1 hour 10 minutes

FOR THE FRITTERS

- 1 2½-lb. spaghetti squash, halved lengthwise and seeded
- ½ tsp. avocado or other neutral oil, plus 2–3 tbs. for the pan
- ½ tsp. plus ¼ tsp. sea salt, divided
- 1 large egg
- 1 cup black beans, drained, rinsed, and dried (either canned or home-cooked)
- ½ cup minced red onion
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 jalapeño, minced
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley, plus more for garnish
- 1 tsp. paprika
- ¼ tsp. red-pepper flakes
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup fine cornmeal

FOR THE CHUTNEY

- 1½ cups dried cranberries
- 1 cup water
- ¼ cup plus 2 tbs. apple-cider vinegar
- Sea salt, to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Roast the spaghetti squash: Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Oil the squash flesh with ½ teaspoon oil and sprinkle with ¼ teaspoon sea salt. Place the squash, flesh side down, on a parchment-lined sheet pan. Roast for 30 to 45 minutes, until the squash is fork-tender. Let the squash sit until it's cool enough to handle, then use a spoon to scoop out the flesh, and discard the skin. Wrap the squash flesh in cheesecloth or a clean kitchen towel and squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

Prepare the chutney: In a small saucepan over medium-low heat, combine the cranberries, water, and apple-cider vinegar, and bring to a simmer. Simmer for eight to 10 minutes until almost all the liquid has evaporated and the cranberries have softened. Mash with a fork until a thick consistency is achieved, adding a splash of water to smooth the texture if needed. Season with salt and pepper to taste.



Prepare the fritters: In a large bowl, beat the egg until fluffy. Add the rest of the fritter ingredients and mix with your hands until combined. Scoop out ¼ cup of the mixture at a time, roll it into a ball, and press it down into a patty 2½-inches in diameter, on a large sheet of parchment.

Heat a large sauté pan over medium-high heat with 2 to 3 tablespoons oil. Pan-fry the fritters for six to seven minutes per side, until golden brown and crisp. If it's necessary to cook in batches, use fresh oil each time.

To serve, top the fritters with chutney and the remaining parsley.



ENJOY MORE

Find a recipe for Butternut Squash and Black Bean Enchiladas at ELmag.com/threesisters.



Acorn Squash and White Bean Hummus With Corn Relish

Makes eight servings

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cook time: 45 minutes

FOR THE HUMMUS

- 1 1½-lb. acorn squash, halved and seeded
- 1 tbs. plus ½ tsp. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ½ tsp. plus ¼ tsp. sea salt, divided
- 1 15-oz. can white beans, drained (5–6 tbs. canning liquid reserved) and rinsed
- 2 tbs. tahini
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tsp. paprika
- 1 tsp. ground cumin

FOR THE RELISH

- ½ tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1½ cups fresh corn kernels, from about 2 large cobs (or use frozen)
- ½ cup minced red onion
- ½ cup minced red bell pepper
- 1 jalapeño, minced
- ½ tsp. ground cumin
- ½ tsp. paprika
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tbs. apple-cider vinegar
- 2 tbs. water
- 2 tbs. honey
- ¼ cup chopped cilantro

Roast the acorn squash: Preheat the oven to 375 degrees F. Oil the squash flesh with ½ teaspoon oil and sprinkle with ¼ teaspoon sea salt. Place the squash, flesh side down, on a parchment-lined sheet pan. Roast for 30 to 45 minutes, until the squash is fork-tender. Let the squash sit until it's cool enough to handle, then use a spoon to scoop out the flesh, and discard the skin.

Prepare the relish: While the squash roasts, heat a small pan over medium-low heat with ½ tablespoon oil. Add the vegetables and spices; season with salt and pepper. Sauté for eight

to 10 minutes, until the corn is cooked through. Add the vinegar, water, and honey, and simmer for six to seven minutes, until the liquid has mostly evaporated. Remove from the heat. Stir in the cilantro once the relish has cooled.

Prepare the hummus: Combine all hummus ingredients, except for the canning liquid, in a food processor. Process until smooth, adding canning liquid as needed to achieve a smooth consistency.


To serve, scoop the hummus into a bowl. Create a well in the center and fill it with the relish. Serve with sliced vegetables, tortilla chips, or pita bread. 🌱



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

A woman with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking out over a landscape at sunset. Her hands are clasped near her face, and she is wearing a dark jacket. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with a warm, golden light from the setting sun.

PLEASURE
IS THE MEASURE



**MANY PEOPLE WORRY ABOUT THEIR
DESIRE FOR SEX — OR THEIR LACK OF IT.
SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM
DESIRE TO PLEASURE CAN MAKE
ALL THE DIFFERENCE.**

BY EMILY NAGOSKI, PhD

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN having long(ish)-term sexual relationships during my college years, I believed, like a lot of people, an old-fashioned narrative about how desire works.

It goes like this: Early in a relationship, it's all passion and spark, and that lasts a couple of years, maybe. Then we have kids or buy a fixer-upper house or generally get busy with work and life, and the spark fizzles out. Especially after 50, when supposedly every hormone we ever had floats away on a sea of aging and we're left, sexless and neutered, to hold hands at sunset.

We're usually told that at this point, our options are either to accept the fizzling of our desire or to fight against it — to invest our time, attention, and even money in “keeping the spark alive.”

Well, I'm a sex educator with decades of experience. And it turns out that every part of this narrative is not merely wrong but wrong-headed. I call this mess of wrong-headedness “the desire imperative.”

The desire imperative goes as follows:

- At the start of a romantic relationship, we should feel a spark — a spontaneous, giddy craving for sexual intimacy with our partner that might even feel obsessive.

- This sparky desire is the correct, healthy, normal, best kind of desire, and if we don't have it, we don't have anything worth having.

- If we have to put any planning or preparation into our sex lives, then we don't want it "enough."

- Finally, if our partner doesn't just want us spontaneously, out of the blue, without effort or preparation, on a regular basis, they don't want us "enough."

The desire imperative puts desire at the center of our definition of sexual well-being. It says there is only one right way to experience desire, and without that, nothing else matters.

And so people worry about sexual desire. If desire changes or seems to be missing, people worry that there's something wrong. It's among the most common reasons couples seek therapy.

Here's the irony of the desire imperative: Does all that worry about spark make it easier to want sex?

It does not. Worry mainly hits the brakes and puts sex further out of reach.

But there's an alternative. What if we shelve the entire concept of desire and, in its place, prioritize pleasure? Because great sex is not about how much you want sex — it's about how much you like the sex you're having.

RESPONSIVE DESIRE IS NOT SPONTANEOUS DESIRE

A simple way to start changing how you think about desire and pleasure is by understanding what sex researchers and therapists say about desire. They call the spark of the desire imperative "spontaneous desire." This is one of the normal ways to experience desire, but as it happens, it is not associated with great sex in a long-term relationship.

Researchers also describe "responsive desire," which is not a spark feeling but an openness to exploring pleasure



and seeing where it goes. It often shows up as "scheduled" sex, where you plan ahead, groom, and get a babysitter.

Whereas spontaneous desire emerges in anticipation of pleasure, responsive desire emerges in response to pleasure.

Both are normal, and neither is better than the other. But it's responsive desire that is associated with great sex over the long term.

Responsive desire — not passion, not spark, but pleasure, trust, and mutuality. That's the fundamental empirical reason to center pleasure over spark.

So, what's pleasure?

PLEASURE IS SENSATION IN CONTEXT

In a lot of movies and romance novels, even when the main characters may be running away from the villain or just exhausted and overwhelmed by life, as soon as Partner A touches the magic spot on Partner B's body, it doesn't matter what else is going on — Partner B's knees melt.

If that's how desire works for you, that's great. You have spontaneous desire.

Yet for many of us, pleasure isn't about the right spot on our body being touched in the right way. It's the right place, the right way, by the right person, at the right time, in the right external circumstances, and with the right internal state.

Pleasure happens when we feel safe enough, **trusting enough, healthy enough, welcome enough, at low-enough risk.**

In short, it's sensation in context. That's responsive desire.

A simple example of this is tickling. Tickling is not everyone's favorite, but you can imagine a scenario where partners are already turned on, in a trusting, playful, erotic situation, and Partner A tickles Partner B and it feels good!

But imagine those same partners are in the middle of an argument about, say, money, and Partner A tries to tickle Partner B. Will that feel good? Or would Partner B feel more like punching somebody in the nose?

Because pleasure is sensation in the right context, that means any sensation may feel good, great, spectacular, just OK, or terrible, depending on the context in which we experience it.

Pleasure is a shy animal. We can observe it from a safe distance, but if we approach it too fast, it will run. If we try to capture it, it will panic. We have to build trust with our pleasure before it will allow us to observe it closely.

Pleasure happens when we feel safe enough, trusting enough, healthy enough, welcome enough, at low-enough risk. Everyone's threshold for "enough" is different, and it changes from situation to situation.

But when we create that safe-enough context, our brains have the capacity to interpret nearly any sensation as pleasurable. And it's completely normal for a sensation to feel good today and not so good tomorrow, simply because the context has changed.

PLEASURE IS NOT DESIRE

According to psychologists, pleasure and desire use different systems in the brain. At the level of the emotional, mammalian brain, desire is known as "wanting" or "incentive salience," and pleasure is discussed as "liking" or "hedonic impact."

In the brain, wanting involves a vast network of dopamine-related circuitry that mediates how motivated we are to pursue a goal. Liking, by contrast, involves "a smaller set of hedonic hotspots" where our bodies' own opioids and endocannabinoids mediate how good a sensation feels.

You might still be asking yourself, *How are pleasure and desire all that different?*

Put simply, pleasure is perception of a sensation. Desire is motivation toward a goal.

In a sense, pleasure is satisfaction and desire is dissatisfaction, because pleasure is enjoying an experience, while desire is motivation to pursue something different. You can want more of something without liking it, as with doomscrolling. You can also like something without wanting more of it, as when you've just finished a perfect piece of cake and you feel full.

If I wanted to spark controversy, I'd say that there's no such thing as a sexual-desire problem, and that all the news articles, think pieces, self-help books, and medical research focused on a "cure" for low desire are irrelevant.

The cure for low desire is pleasure. When we put pleasure at the center of our definition of sexual well-being, we eliminate any need to worry about desire.

But I'm not here for controversy; I'm here to make your sex life better. So I'll just say: Don't sweat desire. If you're worried about your partner's low desire, ask them about pleasure. If you're worried about your own desire, talk to your partner about pleasure.

I don't expect you to believe me right away. I know you've been taught to worry about desire. It might even feel troubling or problematic to say that desire doesn't matter. Maybe you're thinking, *What could you possibly mean, Emily — to not worry about wanting it and just enjoy it instead? Are you telling me to enjoy sex I don't want?*

On the contrary! I'm saying: Imagine a world where all of us only ever have sex we enjoy. And anything we don't enjoy, we don't do! We don't do it *and* — get this — we don't worry about not doing it!

When we put pleasure at the center of our definition of sexual well-being, sex we don't like is never even on the table.

In a sense, pleasure is satisfaction and desire is dissatisfaction, because pleasure is enjoying an experience, while desire is motivation to pursue something different.



FINDING YOUR RIGHT CONTEXT

I described pleasure earlier as a shy animal, appearing only in the right context and staying only when we approach it gently and observe it calmly. So, what is the “right” context?

That will be different for every couple, and it’s something you discover together.

Couples who sustain pleasure over the long term find ways to co-create a context that makes pleasure easier to access. They treat their shared context for pleasure as a “third thing,” a joint project or hobby for which they both feel enthusiasm and investment.

Building your context together also helps you avoid falling into blame traps, where a sexual difficulty is one person’s fault. Instead, difficulty is always understood as a problem within the context, which you can adjust together.

As it happens, I wrote an entire book about how to identify the contexts that make it easy for your brain to access pleasure. It can help you co-create, with a long-term partner, a context that makes pleasure easier for the two of you. It’s called *Come Together: The Science (and Art!) of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections*.

For now, you can start with this simple exercise:

Think of a specific experience where you had easy, abundant pleasure with a partner. Consider what aspects of the context made accessing pleasure easy. Don’t fall into the desire imperative’s trap of imagining an experience where you had a lot of spontaneous desire; your easy pleasure may coincidentally have been accompanied by desire, but it’s not the desire that matters. If you’ve never experienced easy, abundant pleasure with another person, you could try to imagine a situation that would make pleasure easy for you.

Assess your experience of easy pleasure: How was your relationship with that partner? What was the state of your connection? Relaxed



and close? Playful and silly? Serious and intense?

Focus on setting. Where are you during this experience? Are you at home, in your shared bed with your certain special someone? Are you on vacation together? Are you in front of your screen at one end of a wireless connection while your partner is at the other end? The settings that make it easier for the brain to access pleasure vary from person to person and relationship to relationship.

When you’ve got a sense of the context that makes it easy for your brain to access pleasure, try thinking about your current context.

Ask: How’s your relationship? Are you feeling connected or distant? Can you find connection in an easy way, maybe by focusing together on a shared interest, like your favorite TV show or your love of sushi or your hometown sports team? (These are all examples of third things that help couples stay bonded.)

Ask: How’s your space? Even small adjustments to your real-life setting can make a big difference. My spouse and I realized we could remove one barrier to sex by making it easier to close the bedroom door. Most of the time, we kept the door propped open with a small linen chest so the dogs could come and go, but during sexy

The settings that make it easier for the brain to access pleasure **vary from person to person and relationship to relationship.**

times we opted to keep the dogs out of the room. Closing the door required moving the chest and then pulling up a large corner of the rug to get it out of the path of the door. It was a minor hassle with a simple solution: We removed the rug and the little chest, propping the door with a small, easy-to-move wastebasket instead.

Sometimes that's all it means to create a supportive context. Go out for sushi. Move a piece of furniture. Some problems are just that easy to solve.

Meanwhile, some problems might seem easy to solve, but you still find yourself avoiding them. If these exercises are difficult for you — or even if they're not — it's worth asking yourself another simple question: *How do I feel about pleasure?*

Many of us were taught to fear, resent, or otherwise disparage pleasure, and that can really get in the way of cultivating a context for it. If you struggle mightily with resistance to pleasure, a skilled therapist can help you address that.

Or start small, seeking out pleasures that have little or nothing to do with sex, so you can safely start to remember how feeling good feels.

YOU ARE NOT BROKEN

In any relationship that lasts long enough, it is not just normal but inevitable that partners have different levels of interest in sex, different sexual experiences they're interested in having, and different abilities to be sexual. Normal. Not a problem. I've been through it myself, and I've used these tools and found my way back to my certain special someone.

You can have that too.

The most efficient way to turn these normal, inevitable seasons into a problem is to worry about them. The guardians of the desire imperative want you to worry, want you to believe that something bad could happen if you jettison their rules and

wholeheartedly embrace who you truly are, as you are right now. That's why joy — loving what's true — can feel scary sometimes, like jumping off a cliff in the dark, with no idea what comes next.

But isn't that just like life? We step into each new day with no guarantee of what will come next, only a commitment to make of the day and our lives something worth remembering. Our only certainty is that one day we won't get any more days. So, in my house, in the face of all the life-altering and life-threatening events that happen daily, we practice pleasure.

Life is too short and too uncertain to have sex you don't like. So go ahead and love how you love. And don't let anyone else tell you how that should look or feel. 🍷

Life is too short and too uncertain to have sex you don't like. **So go ahead and love how you love. And don't let anyone else tell you how that should look or feel.**



EMILY NAGOSKI, PhD, is a sex educator and author of several books. This article is adapted from *Come Together: The Science (and Art!) of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections* copyright © 2024 by Emily Nagoski, PhD. Published by Ballantine Books, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York. All rights reserved.



Escape From People-Pleasing

How to stop putting others' needs ahead of your own — and bring more authenticity to your relationships.

BY LAINE BERGESON

IMAGINE that your sister calls out of the blue and announces, “We’re visiting you this weekend. Get the guest room ready!”

You mentally go through the many reasons this is a terrible idea: Your spouse has been sick, your kids have back-to-back sporting events, and you’re hosting your book club on Saturday night. Still, you respond brightly, “Great! We can’t wait to see you!”

You spend the weekend stressed, exhausted, and resentful. Your guests spend the weekend wondering why you’re aloof, exhausted, and grumpy. They leave confused.

You were trying to be generous and kind, but you ended up feeling cranky and hostile.

This is often how it goes with people-pleasing.

“When we people-please, we’re trying to be nice,” says Melissa Urban, author of *The Book of*

Boundaries: Set the Limits That Will Set You Free. “Though our intentions are good, being ‘nice’ often hurts our relationships.”

People-pleasing can be so subtle — or so habitual — that you don’t even recognize it in yourself. Maybe you let your friends do all the talking

every time you hang out, or you routinely claim to be neutral about where to get dinner when you genuinely want Tex-Mex.

Or you’re so afraid to offend that when someone hurts your feelings, you stay silent about it — or go out of your way to apologize

to *them*.

All this focus on the wants and needs of others almost inevitably leads to exhaustion, disconnection, and bitterness on your part. Fortunately, with time and effort, it’s possible to unlearn the people-pleasing habit.

People-pleasing can be so subtle — or so habitual — that you don’t even recognize it in yourself.

The High Price of People-Pleasing

It might look like generosity, but the reality of people-pleasing is less sanguine. When you reflexively agree to things you can't really afford or obligations you can't easily honor, it takes a toll on your time, energy, and wallet.

There's also a psychic toll. Ignoring your own wants and needs can leave you feeling hollow, anxious, resentful, and sad. "When we're not being authentic to ourselves, when our self has no expression, that's basically what depression is," says trauma therapist Jane McCampbell Stuart, MA, LMFT, CPCC.

The more habitual concessions you make to others, the more your authentic self will start to recede into the background. This can lead to isolation and loneliness.

Chronic people-pleasers are also hard to read. "The other person ends up feeling exhausted and overwhelmed because they're constantly having to do the work of reaching you and decoding what you're saying," says McCampbell Stuart. "They're always second guessing: 'Is this really you? Or are you just trying to make me happy?'"

"It's a lot of work to be in a relationship with somebody who's not holding their own weight in the world."

On top of that, McCampbell Stuart adds, people who minimize their own needs and make themselves small often attract others who take advantage of them. "That's when we get those repeated relationships where people are not taken care of, not treated very well."



The Roots of People-Pleasing

The tendency to people-please usually begins in childhood, often very innocently. If you learn that saying yes — even when you don't mean it — earns you affection or praise, you're apt to keep up the behavior. It feels good to please others.

In other cases, people-pleasing may start as a coping mechanism; it helps you feel safe when the world around you feels scary. "Many of us learn to people-please in childhood in order to get safety or affection from preoccupied, unavailable, or abusive caregivers," explains life coach Hailey Magee in her book, *Stop People Pleasing and Find Your Power*.

When a childhood behavior gains attention and support from caregivers, it makes perfect sense that the child's psyche would pack it up and take it into adulthood. "We don't want to shame anybody for people-pleasing," says McCampbell Stuart. "People come by the behavior really, really honestly."

Children are dependent on their caregivers for everything — food, care, shelter, and affection. "If we have parents who are overwhelmed or angry or unable to regulate their own emotions, that puts us in danger. We run the risk of not getting those needs met," she explains. "So, in order to get our needs met and keep ourselves safe, we learn how to tiptoe around our caregivers. We become experts at not tripping their emotions or being a burden."

Caregivers who struggle with addiction or who are caring for someone with addiction can add fuel to the fire. "Children learn that tending to the addict is their primary responsibility, and they don't receive the support they need to identify or communicate their own basic feelings and needs," writes Magee.

Cultural expectations can also lead to people-pleasing. Women are routinely socialized to put the wants and needs of others first, while men are usually conditioned to hide their emotions at the risk of seeming needy.

People from marginalized communities, meanwhile, may adopt people-pleasing behaviors to offset potential danger. "When acts of violence and harassment against members of your identity group are commonplace, becoming as small and unnoticeable as possible is a survival strategy," Magee notes.

Traumatic experiences themselves can trigger people-pleasing. In fact, some experts have identified exceedingly deferential behavior — dubbed "fawning" — as a fourth trauma response, after fight, flee, and freeze. "When threatened, a person with the fawn response will try to please, gratify, or accommodate the source of threat instead of fighting back, running away, or shutting down," Magee explains.

Finding the Line

The very concept of people-pleasing raises questions about what it means to be in relationships. Where does healthy kindness end and people-pleasing begin?

The difference between the two is in your motivations, explains Magee. People-pleasing behaviors are typically not born out of kindness but out of four decidedly less prosocial feelings: obligation (“I’m doing this because it’s expected of me, and I’ll feel guilty if I don’t”); transaction (“I’m doing this so you will do something similar for me”); compulsion (“I’m doing this because I’ve always done this”); or loss aversion (“I’m doing this so you’ll still love me/let me be part of the group/not reject me”).

“For many, this pattern is based upon a covert contract or unspoken agreement: ‘I will overgive and trespass my own boundaries for you,

and in return, you will make me feel loved, wanted, and needed,’” Magee notes. “The problem is that others never agreed to this transaction. . . . This transactional mentality imbues our relationships with piles of invisible debt.”

An act of healthy kindness feels different. It allows you to satisfy your own needs and enhance the lives of others. It is rooted in goodwill (“I want to do this for you because I care about you”); choice (“I’m choosing to do this”); and abundance (“I can give this to you because my own cup is full”).

“When we give out of kindness, it’s because we could say yes or no, and [we] choose, of our own free will, to say

yes,” Magee explains. “We aren’t necessarily expecting anything in return.”

If you’re not sure about your motives, McCampbell Stuart suggests, check for the telltale sign of people-pleasing: resentment.

“Resentment is often the first thing people-pleasers start noticing,” she says. “They feel bitter

and angry and really ticked off with a person or with the world, but they can’t put their finger on why, and they don’t believe they have the ability to change it.

“But actually, you do.

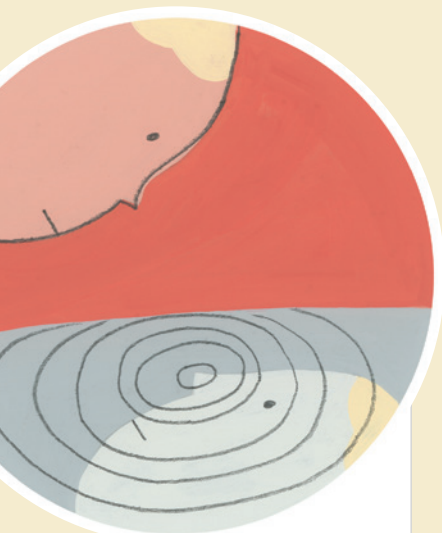
If you notice what you’re feeling resentful about, it will point you to your unmet need. And if you start meeting that need for yourself, that can help you to break the people-pleasing habit.”

Where does healthy kindness end and people-pleasing begin? **The difference between the two is in your motivations.**



Getting Real

Giving up the people-pleasing habit takes time. You're unlearning a behavior that's served you in the past and may have become second nature. But the rewards are myriad. Get started on the path to greater integrity and self-care with these strategies.



Cultivate feelings of safety. The brain is a predictive organ. If you've experienced threatening situations before, your brain is more likely to anticipate threats in your environment — even if you're not in immediate danger.

You can overcome this hypervigilance by making the automatic process of scanning for danger more explicit, says McCampbell Stuart. Sit for a moment, scan your environment, then ask yourself: *Is there anything here right now that's life-threatening or dangerous? Is there a bear coming to get me? Is there an angry person coming at me? No? OK, then right now, in this second, I'm OK.*

This can delay the fear response. It trains you not to automatically fear the person walking toward you, which frees you to see them as an equal rather than a threat. "We give ourselves a different experience," she says.

Look inward. People-pleasers are forever looking outward, having often spent their lives focusing on other people and trying to determine whether they're safe. This can make it hard to feel one's own feelings.

"When we people-please, we're not really in our body," explains McCampbell Stuart. "We leave our body as we try to manage the other person's energy."

Moving beyond people-pleasing starts by turning your focus inward, she adds. This can feel unsafe at first, and unwise — like driving with your eyes closed. Still, looking inward is what allows you to begin using your own feelings to guide your decisions.

We all have an internal guidance system; yours can help you find your way without constantly checking in with others.



Learn your own wants and needs.

It sounds so simple — know what you want and need. But for those accustomed to putting others' needs first, it can be shockingly difficult.

Asking someone prone to people-pleasing what they need right now can legitimately stump them.

To get in touch with your core needs and preferences, begin paying attention to your body. It can be easier to identify physical needs than emotional and social ones — at least at first. Ask yourself simple questions: *Am I tired? Am I thirsty? Am I hungry? Am I restless?*

"Meeting our basic physical needs may seem like a small thing, but by tending to these needs time and time again, we slowly increase our sense of self-trust," Magee explains.

Soon you can expand your awareness to needs that are more emotional or social, like relaxation, support, creativity, community, and solitude.

Tend to your self-esteem.

Low self-esteem is another barrier to effectively communicating your wants and needs. To express those wants and needs, you must believe that you deserve to occupy some space in the world. If low self-regard is a problem for you, consider working with a therapist who can help you see yourself more accurately.





Change your self-talk. Start telling yourself you're someone who can set boundaries and advocate for what you want, and it will become easier to be that person.

"Breaking the people-pleasing pattern requires us to update our self-concept," notes Magee. "Someone who believes they're a slacker will avoid studying for a test, and someone who believes they're a people-pleaser will avoid setting boundaries or speaking up."

Pause before you answer.

When people-pleasing is your default setting, your instinct is to reflexively agree to any request in the moment. There's no pause to think, *What would make me happy?* That's why waiting a beat before submitting to a request can make all the difference.

"If there's one tip I could give people-pleasers, it's to pause before responding automatically," says Urban. "You deserve happiness just as much as they do."

This does not require an elaborate explanation, she adds. "If your best friend says, 'I need you to babysit on Saturday,' pause and say, 'I'll let you know later today if I'm free.'"

You can wait for a moment, an hour, a day, or a week, depending on the situation. Just make sure you pause, Urban says. "Use this time to ask yourself, *Do I have the time, energy, and capacity to say yes authentically? Will saying yes lead to resentment, anxiety, frustration, or burnout? What could I say yes to that meets their needs and my own?*"

Address anxiety. People with higher levels of anxiety are more sensitive to other people, worry more about others' reactions, spend a lot of time trying to mind-read, and tend to crave attention and approval, writes Kathleen Smith, PhD, LPC, in *True to You: A Therapist's Guide to Stop Pleasing Others and Start Being Yourself*. So, anything that helps quiet your anxiety — including therapy, exercise, nutritional strategies, and interventions like EMDR and somatic experiencing — can reduce a propensity for people-pleasing. (For more on EMDR, visit ELmag.com/emdr.)



Set boundaries. People-pleasing may be nice, but setting boundaries is truly kind. Urban explains how this might look in response to your sister's surprise announcement of a visit.

"Being kind means saying, 'This weekend doesn't work, but the next weekend and the weekend after that, we'll all be home and would love to see you,'" she suggests.

This boundary helps ensure your sister's visit is a success. You'll be more relaxed and more welcoming, and everyone will have a better time.

Inviting her when you really don't have time or energy is a recipe for resentment, adds McCampbell Stuart. "Resentment tells you that you are not honoring your own needs."

It also poisons the well of good feelings in a relationship, which is the opposite of the people-pleasing goal.

Get comfortable with disappointment.

Setting healthy boundaries and advocating for yourself requires accepting disappointment from others. Doing so can feel awkward and scary at first, but this will pass.

"When you start setting boundaries, you're often taking away a privilege the other person was never meant to have, like access to your kids whenever they want, or a built-in babysitter whenever they need one," says Urban.

If someone is really upset when you say no, it might be worth asking yourself if that relationship is a balanced one.

"If someone only likes me because I roll over every time they demand it, is it a healthy relationship in the first place?" she asks.



THE HABIT of people-pleasing won't vanish overnight, but it can be unlearned over time. As you become more authentic about what you want and need, you're likely to feel freer, more alive, and more like yourself. And that is one of the greatest gifts you can give to others — and the world. 🌍



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THE FASCIA- FITNESS CONNECTION

THE HEALTH OF THIS OVERLOOKED TISSUE AFFECTS NOT ONLY YOUR EXERCISE ROUTINE BUT NEARLY EVERY ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE. IT'S TIME TO GIVE IT THE ATTENTION IT DESERVES.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS



IN THE FALL OF 2024,

self-confessed gym “meathead” Danny King was prepping for two demanding physical competitions at once: a 30-plus-mile trail run and a hybrid fitness event. But a few weeks into training, his fitness began moving in the wrong direction.

“I was overloading volume and breaking every principle,” confesses King, a master trainer and Life Time’s director of performance and recovery. “I was exhausted. I was in pain.”

Worried that he might have to drop out of one or both events, King made a last-ditch effort to stay on course. He doubled down on recovery, dialing in his sleep and nutrition.

And he made the game-changing decision to focus on his fascia — the flexible connective tissue that surrounds and interweaves the muscles, bones, joints, and organs.

As one of the creators of Life Time’s Dynamic Stretch program, King knows that fascial densification, a condition in which the body’s connective tissues become thick and sticky, can restrict mobility, impede range of motion, and cause excess soreness and pain. Over time, densification can lead to movement aberrations, nerve entrapment, circulatory restriction, and autonomic dysfunction.

Keeping fascial tissues well lubricated, on the other hand, is powerfully beneficial. Flexible fascia supports the smooth, synergistic operation of the body’s seemingly disparate parts.

And so, several times a week, King did some foam rolling — one of the most accessible and best-known treatments for supporting fascia. He positioned himself atop a dense foam cylinder and rolled his sore muscles across it.

A few sessions in, the tight tissues loosened and the pain subsided. “I

went from being miserable to feeling pretty good,” King says.

Before long, he was up on his feet again, and, in November, he finished his competitions — within a few weeks of each other — and was proud of both efforts.

Paying attention to his fascia spelled the difference between sitting on the sidelines and doing what he loved most: training, competing, and staying active.

“I tell my clients all the time about the importance of fascia in health and performance,” he says. “It was humbling to have forgotten about it myself!”

In the last dozen years, fascia has become a fitness buzzword. Articles, books, and workouts have mushroomed, with advice on lubricating, loosening, or stretching this mysterious tissue. Academic interest has surged too.

That’s a big change for a humble anatomical tissue that, until recently, much of the medical community dismissed as packing material.

“Anatomists for hundreds of years have been kind of just cutting away fascia when dissecting models, believing that it’s worthless tissue,” says Ryan Harvey, DC, DACNB, a chiropractor and functional neurologist who specializes in myofascial therapy. “In fact, it’s a body-wide tensional support system.”

Researchers are discovering that this ubiquitous tissue plays a key role in more than just your fitness activities. It’s involved in nearly everything you do: moving your body, fighting disease, and sensing (and making sense of) the world around you. Keeping your fascia healthy doesn’t just elevate your gym game, as it did for King. It elevates your life.

FASCIA'S MANY FUNCTIONS

As fascia research has accelerated in recent years, intriguing revelations about its role have come to light.

According to a 2024 review published in *Frontiers in Neurology*, fascia may be “the moderating interface between many tissue types in the musculoskeletal, endocrine, and autonomic nervous systems.” It is estimated to host more than 250 million nerve endings — 25 percent more than in skin, in fact, and 1,000 percent more than the collective innervation of muscle.

“Fascia could be the richest sensory organ in the body,” Harvey says.

As such, the study authors report, “fascial integrity is paramount to movement; bodily sense; hormonal, autonomic, and neurovascular regulation; and purposeful interaction with our environment.”

Fascia regulates posture, strength generation, proprioception, exteroception, and interoception, as well as lymphatic efficacy, thermoregulation, inflammatory and immune responses, wound healing, and hormonal production and secretion. It plays a role in controlling blood pressure and increasing blood flow to the heart and central nervous system during times of stress.

According to the study, fascia also contributes to the release and function of neurotransmitters. Namely, it is involved in the transmission of serotonin, which affects mood, sleep, appetite, digestion, and immune function; dopamine, which helps regulate muscular movement as well as motivation; gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), which supports relaxation and sleep; and acetylcholine, which plays a role in movement and memory.

The researchers examined the role that fascia plays in disease development: “Given its ubiquity, fascia may serve as a ‘watchman,’ receiving and processing information on whole-body health.”

Notably, the study reports, “fascia is constantly evolving.”

Why then, if it plays such a critical role in so many systems, was fascia overlooked for so long?

One reason may be that, unlike the heart or liver, fascia lacks discrete boundaries, a primary function, and a consistent form. A recent scientific report suggests that while researchers have yet to agree on a comprehensive definition of fascia, they do agree on its location. “Fascia covers every structure of the body, creating a structural continuity that gives form and function to every tissue and organ.”

That runs counter to the conventional anatomical understanding that views the body in separate parts. Indeed, many gym-goers look at fascia in relation to a specific area or limb.

Take, for instance, plantar fasciitis. An injury to the thick, fascial tissue that runs from our heels to our toes, PF is often treated by hyperfocusing on the feet or lower legs. But fascia is a multilayered system that is best understood — and treated — holistically. Pain in the feet can stem from stress further up the kinetic chain, such as in the knees, hips, or spine.

Fascia surrounds, supports, and protects every nerve, muscle, blood vessel, and organ in the body. It simultaneously depends on and affects the rest of the body’s systems. And it’s never too late to start taking better care of it.

MOVEMENT FACILITATOR

According to Thomas Myers, a bodyworker, biomechanist, and fascial expert who created the online learning platform Anatomy Trains, “understanding fascia is essential to the dance between stability and movement — crucial in high performance, central in recovery from injury and disability, and ever-present in our daily life from our embryological beginnings to the last breath we take.”

Fascial tissue is present inside and outside of every muscle, it links disparate muscles into groups, and it ultimately connects muscles across the body. Fascia is so critical to movement that researchers largely agree on a simple yet powerful idea: Anatomically and functionally, the division between muscles and fascia is an artificial one.

Muscles and fascia are interwoven, forming bungee-cord-like “chains” throughout the body, Harvey explains. These chains intersect and overlay one another, from your head to your toes. One runs from your scalp down your back and legs to the soles of your feet. Another crosses the front of your torso, connecting each shoulder to the opposite hip.

Researchers and trainers categorize and label these chains in subtly different ways — you might hear them referred to as myofascial chains, trains, lines, slings, or subsystems.

But more important than naming conventions is function. These chains stabilize, support, and amplify organic, whole-body movement. “Fascia helps equally distribute force throughout the body as you move,” says Harvey.

This is one reason why springy, reciprocal movements like walking, running, lunging, and throwing feel so natural and athletic: The fascial system is literally built for them.

Movement, in turn, exposes fascia to hyaluronic acid, a gooey, superhydrating polymer that facilitates a smooth, comfortable gliding action in and around your joints, muscles, and connective tissues.

The result, according to Harvey, is a “virtuous cycle” in which movement stimulates healthy fascia and fascia facilitates healthy movement.

SENSORY SUPERCONDUCTOR

Fascia is a supporter and amplifier of movement, but it also plays an important role in full-body sensation.

“The sensory side of fascia is really, really misunderstood,” says Harvey. Not only is fascia highly innervated, but it also houses muscle spindles — specialized receptors that detect changes in the length of muscles and impart crucial, moment-to-moment information to your brain about your body’s position in space.

Given this proliferation of sensory receptors, he explains, “muscular pain may not really be muscular pain. The sensation is probably coming from your fascia.”

This abundance of sensory receptors throughout fascia gives the tissue an outsize role in proprioception — your sense of where you are in space — a little-appreciated aspect of both day-to-day functioning and fitness.

Refined proprioception is what allows you to catch a Frisbee without falling, type an email without looking at your keyboard, and climb stairs without staring at your feet. People with limited or impaired proprioception have trouble manipulating everyday objects and are often at increased risk of tripping or falling.

If you improve the health of your fascia, Harvey continues, you can increase the clarity and accuracy of the sensory information flowing through your nervous system. This is why he believes treatment of the fascia should be foundational to treatment of neurological conditions: It’s the communications system through which your body talks to your brain.

“Fascia can be a neurological lever,” he says. “It’s a portal through which we can change your brain activity by improving your bodily awareness.”

IMMUNITY BOOSTER

Fascia’s part in your day-to-day health may be its least understood role at present. What we do know is that it provides a framework for the lymphatic system and supports the immune system.

“The lymphatic system is the garbage disposal system of the body,” explains Daniel Fenster, DC, clinic director of Complete Wellness in New York City and author of *Free Your Fascia*.

The lymphatic system is embedded within the fascia. It consists of a network of nodes and ducts that circulate protein-rich lymphatic fluid throughout your body.

Crucial to the effectiveness of this life-supporting system are specialized pro-resolving mediators, which fight inflammation and repair damaged tissue. Acting like a miniature cleaning crew, lymphatic fluid collects viruses, bacteria, and other harmful substances from your body tissues, neutralizes them, and shuttles their remnants to your circulatory system for removal.

Unlike the circulatory system, however, which is powered by the rhythmic contractions of your heart, the lymphatic system has no centralized pump. It relies instead on day-to-day movement — regular, vigorous squeezing and stretching of your fascia and interwoven muscles — to circulate lymphatic fluid and rid the system of invasive bodies. The more you move, the deeper and more thorough the cleaning. This is a literal reason why movement is medicine.

A study published in 2018 offered remarkable evidence for this mechanism in mice who were injected with breast-cancer cells; researchers found that a rudimentary stretching routine seemed to slow cancer growth. Such a program may not be as effective in humans, but it does point to a strong link between immunity and fascia-stimulating movement.

One way or another, says Fenster, “When the lymph system is well-hydrated and slides easily upon itself, then lymphatic drainage functions well and gets rid of infiltrators.”



“Fascia covers every structure of the body, creating a structural continuity that gives form and function to every tissue and organ.”

FASCIA IN ACTION

If our fascia is an overlooked regulator of so many foundational aspects of wellness, how do we take better care of it? What can we do to improve its pliability and resilience so that it can fill its many functions effectively?

At first glance, the answer appears to be simple: “Take a look at the list of activities that are said to improve fascial health,” King says. “Hydration, stretching, stress reduction, deep breathing. It sounds a lot like regular training.”

Still, he adds, the new science of fascia can help us home in on exactly the types of movement and self-care we should do regularly. What follows are six considerations to make your routine more fascia friendly.

1. Keep moving.

You’ve heard that sitting is hard on the body. Too much of it may increase your risk of developing chronic conditions like type 2 diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Sitting can also affect your fascia. When you’re seated for long periods, the tissues at the front of your hips, where the muscles are shortened, tighten excessively, while those in your midback, where the muscles are extended, thicken and lose elasticity.

Research suggests that, over a period of several minutes to several days, fascia doesn’t just stiffen passively but shortens and contracts actively, like muscle tissue moving in slow motion. Over time, it can feel as if you’re wearing a skintight suit with kinks in your hips, shoulders, ankles, and spine — the very places you want your body to move freely. Sit for a few hours on occasion and it’s no big deal; a few stretches can unkink you in a couple of minutes. Stay seated for hours a day for weeks on end, and your fascia becomes tougher to stretch out.

So don’t get stuck in a sitting position — or any position — for too long. If you work a desk job, move around: Use a standing desk or walking pad, toggle between a standing desk and a sitting desk, or take breaks to stand and move for a couple of minutes every hour.

TRY IT OUT

- 16 Ways to Move More: [ELmag.com/movemore](https://www.elmag.com/movemore)
- The Vital Role Standing — Versus Sitting — Plays in Your Health: [ELmag.com/standing](https://www.elmag.com/standing)
- Flexibility and Strength Drills You Can Do at Your Desk: [ELmag.com/flexitime](https://www.elmag.com/flexitime)



2. Mix it up.

Repeating the same movement over and over — even a beneficial one — can have many of the same effects as staying sedentary. “With repeated asymmetrical movement, you often see tightness from one shoulder to the opposite hip,” says Harvey.

Think of pickleball, tennis, and boxing: These activities force the torso to rotate primarily in one direction and much less in the other.

Even repetitive movements that are generally symmetrical — say, strength training — can cause the fascia to thicken and shorten in ways that can limit movement. Pushups, for example, can lead to stiffness of the fascia across the upper chest. So, if you do a lot of pushing movements, add some pulling to the mix. If you run, also swim. Yoga, tai chi, and primal workouts can encourage you to rotate, twist, and bend to the side. Variety irons out imbalances.

TRY IT OUT

- 6 Unilateral Exercises: [ELmag.com/unilateral](https://www.elmag.com/unilateral)
- The Push-Pull Workout: [ELmag.com/pushpull](https://www.elmag.com/pushpull)

3. Go global.

Single-joint isolation exercises — think dumbbell curls and lateral raises — build muscle and strength. But they don't take full advantage of the power and efficiency of your myofascial system. Make your gym workouts more fascia focused by adding an upper-body component to a lower-body move (a reach to a lunge, or a press to a squat) or a rotation to an upper-body move (turning your upper body while performing standing curls or presses).

TRY IT OUT

- Build Total-Body Strength With This Sling-System Workout: ELmag.com/slingworkout

4. Bounce.

You've likely been warned not to bounce when you stretch. When you're doing your deepest lunge in a yoga class, this is good advice: At their most extreme lengths, muscles and connective tissue are vulnerable.

But moving in and out of a gentle stretch — a technique known as dynamic stretching, which includes arm circles, forward kicks, and straight-leg walks, for example — could be one of the best things you can do for your fascia, says King. Up-and-down movements like jumping jacks, pogo hops, jumping rope, plyometrics, and bouncing on a mini trampoline have a similar effect: You'll warm and hydrate all the nooks and crannies along your fascial lines.

TRY IT OUT

- How to Use a Mini Trampoline: ELmag.com/minitrampworkout
- The Jump-Rope HIIT Workout: ELmag.com/jumprope
- Jump Around: A Plyometric Workout: ELmag.com/plyometric

5. Work your tissue.

We've long known that massage feels good. But what exactly it does to our tissues is an open question. One possibility is that compressing a muscle encourages the adhesions in your fascia to relax, explains Harvey.

It's also a simple way to circulate some key fluids, like hyaluronic acid and lymph, he adds. When you press on a muscle, you force fluid out of the tissue, much like squeezing a sponge. As the muscle resumes its normal shape, fresh fluids rush in, hydrating and loosening the tissues.

In addition to massage, consider trying other bodywork techniques, like Rolwing; healing modalities, like cupping and acupuncture; and self-myofascial release, using foam rollers, massage guns, or even a tennis ball.

TRY IT OUT

- DIY Myofascial Release: ELmag.com/myofascial
- How to Release Deep Muscle Knots Using Trigger Points: ELmag.com/deeprelease
- On a Roll: The Benefits of Foam Rolling: ELmag.com/foamrolling



6. Get creative.

Spend at least a few minutes of every workout doing something “unregulated,” advises King. So much of our workout time is spent “in the box” — perfect alignment, 90-degree angles, an activated core, and squeezed glutes — that we may forget our bodies can make an almost infinite number of shapes, with endless variations of speed and force. These may be light and slow while performing tai chi, strong and grinding during a max-effort deadlift, or powerful and explosive when jumping onto a box.

“Maybe the best thing you can do for your fascia is dance,” King suggests. Move improvisationally, in many directions, at different speeds and levels of effort. Even when you're a complete amateur, dancing encourages you to do what feels good — which is, quite often, exactly what your fascia needs. 🎶

TRY IT OUT

- The Health Benefits of Dancing: ELmag.com/dancing

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

stelo by Dexcom

A woman with a glucose sensor on her arm is stretching in a garden. She is wearing a white tank top and teal leggings. Her arms are raised, and she has a serene expression. A dotted line graphic is positioned above the main headline.

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REAL LIFE

IN MOMENTS OF ACUTE STRESS, it can be tempting to reach for a sedative for quick relief. Yet there are alternatives that can be just as effective — without the pharmaceutical side effects. On **page 75**, find some natural interventions to help you get grounded.



Family Jet Lag: A Recovery Plan

Even if you adore your family, spending the holidays with them can be emotionally draining. Try these tips to de-stress and recharge.

BY JESSIE SHOLL

HOLIDAYS ARE OFTEN

accompanied by mixed emotions. On one hand, it can be lovely to gather with family and share in traditions: enjoying your dad's famous fig stuffing at Thanksgiving, lighting the menorah at Hanukkah, decorating the tree at Christmas.

On the other hand, given the complexity of family dynamics, holiday gatherings can be stressful, disappointing, and sometimes downright triggering, leaving you feeling exhausted and depleted. Some of us need a holiday after the holidays, just to reset.

These feelings are sometimes known as family jet lag. Psychologist Kristin Neff, PhD, coauthor of *Mindful Self-Compassion for Burnout*, says many factors can contribute to it,

Some of us need a holiday after the holidays, just to reset. **These feelings are sometimes known as family jet lag.**

including a packed schedule of compulsory events. "If we're doing lots of things that we don't really want to do, but feel obligated to do, that can be really stressful," she notes.

The holidays often disrupt our normal schedules, derailing the small self-care practices built into our daily routines — that relaxing postwork yoga class or a brief lunch-hour walk.

We also have limited influence over the food options at family events. That lack of control (or the stress of the gathering itself) might lead to eating differently than we normally do. Perhaps we indulge in some extra cookies and sugary treats. Maybe we drink a bit more alcohol than usual.

Adding to the pressure is the fact that many of us revert to less-evolved

versions of ourselves around family. "We still have parts of us that are very young inside," Neff says. "And family gatherings can trigger those parts. We aren't always our most mature selves."

Grief therapist Heather Stang, author of *Navigating Loss: Wisdom and Self-Care for Times of Grief and the Challenges of Life*, concurs. "Because of our expectations around who we are in a family dynamic, we often regress," she explains. "That's universal. Because, to a parent, you will always be their child. And, to you, they will always be your parent."

We may leave these gatherings feeling ashamed of our behavior or berating ourselves for being unable to, say, tamp down our irritability. That can be especially difficult these days, when many families include people with conflicting political views.

But there are ways to alleviate the jet lag — in some cases, even before it begins. The following expert tips can help make your holidays happier.

BEFORE THE HOLIDAYS

A little strategic planning can go a long way toward easing holiday stress. Stang facilitates a grief group that starts practicing for the holidays in October. The members begin by listing their needs. “That’s going to be different for everybody,” she notes. “But there are some similar themes: genuine connection and presence on one hand, and then perhaps some alone time on the other.”

Once participants have defined their needs, they have to learn how to communicate them — which is not always easy. That’s why preparation is key. This could include listing people you tend to struggle with and even creating a mini script to consult if things get messy.

It could also include making a plan for getting out of the house — say, to meet up with old friends or go for a walk. You may want to role-play various scenarios with a friend or your therapist.

Or you may decide ahead of time not to engage with certain topics during the visit. However you prepare beforehand, it will help you feel less nervous when you arrive.



DURING THE HOLIDAYS

If you struggle with setting boundaries at first, or if your preparation doesn’t help as much as you’d hoped, be patient with yourself. “I call it practicing,” Stang explains, “because you’re probably not going to do a perfect job, and you have to have some self-compassion around that.”

While you’re at the gathering, note what works and what doesn’t. “Observe,” she suggests. “Sure, some people might throw a temper tantrum: ‘What do you mean, you need time alone to recharge? I thought I recharged you!’”

But you may find that challenging conversations can actually be illuminating. “Sometimes the person just needs to understand your *why*.”

Neff likens family jet lag to burnout. “Any time stress exceeds our ability to cope with it, we’re likely to become burned-out,” she explains. “It’s the body’s natural way of trying to cope — it shuts down.”

The good news, she adds, is that self-compassion can ease stress and burnout. It won’t eliminate the stress completely, but it can help us cope so we aren’t so overwhelmed.

One common obstacle to self-compassion, Neff warns, is the mistaken notion that it’s selfish. But if you can’t be forgiving and gracious

to yourself, it’s unlikely that you’ll be able to be compassionate toward others.

“If your care just goes outward to your family and doesn’t flow back inward, you’re going to get depleted,” she says. “Compassion has to flow in and out.”

One way to practice some self-compassion during stressful family visits is through the power of touch. We’ve evolved to interpret warm touch as a signal of care, Neff explains. “It actually changes our physiology, lowers our cortisol levels, and increases heart rate variability and heart rate coherence.” (Learn more about how your heart rhythms can communicate your stress levels at ELmag.com/heartcoherence.)

Self-touch actually offers some of the same benefits as a warm touch from someone else. You may want to go into the bathroom or another private area, says Neff, laughing. “Take a moment and put your hand on your heart, and say something like ‘This is really stressful.’”

In one study of 156 participants, researchers found that a 20-second micropractice of self-soothing touch helped reduce the effect of stress on cortisol levels.

AFTER THE HOLIDAYS

Many of us tend to jump back into work immediately after a holiday — we’ve just taken time off, after all — when we might actually need more time to recover. Whether it’s soaking in a bathtub or going for a walk, find activities that offer comfort and help restore your energy.

There’s no one correct way to do it; you get to decide what’s wrong or right for you. Ask yourself what you need, and then do it.

The least helpful thing to do after a family visit is to beat yourself up. “Maybe you’ll need to send a little apology email,” says Neff. “But remember, it’s human. My mother lives next door, and I still find myself reacting like a teenager to her sometimes.”

Instead of judging yourself, try to cultivate what Neff calls a learning mindset. So, rather than telling yourself, *I really blew it. I can’t believe I verbally sparred with my stepcousin*, switch to thinking, *What can I learn from the things that were challenging?*

After holidays, Stang formally assesses what went right and what went wrong by practicing what she calls integration. “Thanksgiving is usually the first major holiday of the year, and in my counseling groups, the class after that is always integration.”

People are often surprised by what they learn during integration. “Someone might say, ‘Oh my gosh, it was a total disaster,’” she explains. “But then they’ll say, ‘But I really enjoyed playing with my nephew.’”

“There’s a lot of impermanence in life,” Stang continues. “And I’ve been able to observe people who have had really difficult family dynamics, and to see that change. I’ve gotten to witness change in my own family. Learning, and holding onto that hope, is so important.” 🌱

JESSIE SHOLL is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.



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Simple Solutions for Acute Stress

Reset an activated nervous system with these natural interventions.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD

YOU'VE SEEN IT in nature documentaries: A herd of gazelles is grazing peacefully when a cheetah jumps from the brush and races toward them. They scatter in desperate flight, but the cheetah manages to catch a gazelle and bring it to the ground. The animal goes stiff. Then the cheetah, apparently uninterested in a stiffened corpse, simply walks off.

To the surprise of anyone watching, the gazelle then gets to its feet and vigorously shakes its entire body before running back to the herd. Soon it's grazing again, as if nothing had happened.

You might not often be chased by cheetahs, but a phone call with terrible news or a jarring fender-bender can be enough to trigger your own survival instincts. And, as happens with that gazelle, the moment you experience a serious threat, adrenaline pours into your bloodstream. Your mind is sharpened, your senses are heightened, and your heart races to move all available energy to your muscles. For a few moments, you are endowed with supernatural strength. It is fight-or-flight time.

Yet sometimes you can't fight or flee, so you freeze. The gazelle survived because of its freeze response, tricking the predator, before it literally shook off the experience. It's as if the gazelle rebooted its body's computer after it had frozen up.

Humans are animals too and likewise built to recover swiftly from an acute stress response. The next time you're facing acute stress, try one of these natural interventions to help reboot your own system.

MOVE

Whether danger is real or perceived, your body interprets it as a call to action. In nature, this usually means you fight or run. So, if you're able, do something vigorous: Go for a run, take a spin class, or get in some interval training on a rowing machine.

Adrenaline can power us for only 30 to 45 minutes at the most, so it doesn't take long to burn off that excess energy.

SHAKE IT OFF

Just like the gazelle, you can shake your body to dissipate the lingering effects of an acute stress reaction. Shaking your body can also help you release underlying stress in the aftermath of traumatic events. Try this exercise on your own or in a group:

- If you can stand, do so and begin bouncing up and down, lifting your heels.
- Gradually increase the speed and intensity so that your shoulders and arms start to bounce and your whole body eventually gets into the act. Try this for a minute or two, or for up to five to six minutes at a time.

If this shaking exercise doesn't appeal, just put on some great dance music and let your body move as it will. Or hop onto a whole-body vibration machine (such as a Power Plate) at the gym and let it do the shaking for you.

BREATHE

When the gazelle froze, it briefly stopped breathing. In acute stress situations, many of us have a similar response — if slightly less extreme. Our breathing often becomes shallow, rapid, or restricted. Here's a simple calming technique to help you return to baseline:

- Slowly breathe in through your nose to the count of four.
- Hold your breath for two seconds.
- Breathe out even more slowly through your mouth, to the count of seven. Try making an audible sigh with your outbreath to increase the calming effect.

USE PLANT SUPPORT

Acute stress is hard to manage, so the enduring popularity of prescription sedatives like Ativan and Klonopin makes sense, even with their considerable risks. Yet there are less-potent natural interventions that still work well — and with fewer side effects.

• **Aromatherapy:** There are two big advantages to using aromatherapy in acute stress situations. One is that your senses are already heightened, so its impact is more potent. The other is that by going through the respiratory system, aromatherapy can produce immediate effects.

Lavender or sweet orange essential oils can be especially calming. Try diffusing them, or put a couple of drops on a cotton ball and hold it under your nose.

• **GABA:** The same brain chemical affected by anti-anxiety drugs is available as a nutritional supplement. It's much milder than prescription drugs, but many people find it has an immediate impact. GABA is available in capsule form, but for quickest relief, use a liposomal mouth spray. A typical dose is 250 to 500 milligrams, three or four times a day.

• **L-theanine:** This amino acid has a mild medicinal effect that can help calm the entire nervous system, including the brain. Like GABA, with which it is often combined in liposomal sprays, it can be a fast-acting calming agent when taken by mouth. Many people report that L-theanine also supports their sleep. Try 100 to 200 mg once or twice a day.

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



Well, This Is Awkward

A communication consultant offers tips for transforming uncomfortable conversations.

BY JON SPAYDE

HUMANS ARE DRAWN to each other. As social beings, we find conversations to be one of the more enjoyable ways to connect, strengthen our relationships, and learn about the world. Yet conversations are not always fun. At one time or another, we've all found ourselves stuck in an awkward, difficult, or draining dialogue.

There are many reasons a conversation might go off track. You and your conversational partner might lack common interests. Maybe you've said something regrettable, or you're stuck in a chat where you can't get a word in edgewise.

Whatever the reason for the disconnect, awkward conversations can generate stress and discomfort.

Still, even the most stilted chats can become rewarding exchanges when you approach them in the right spirit, suggests Rob Kendall, a communication consultant, coach, and author of *Watch Your Language*. He recommends adjusting your expectations and being prepared with a few strategies for repairing (or exiting) an interaction when necessary.

STRESS SOURCES

You don't know what to say.

You're speaking with someone you just met or with whom you have little in common. You can't think of a single thing to talk about.

You feel uncomfortable with silence. When seconds pass without a word, your cortisol levels begin to rise. The more anxious you feel, the harder it can be to come up with a new topic.

You say something you regret. We all make conversational faux pas. Perhaps you inadvertently blurted something demeaning or derogatory. Or you disparaged something the other person values. You know you're in the wrong, and you don't know how to recover.

You discover that you and your conversational partner have opposing beliefs or perspectives. You express a view or opinion in a way that assumes the other person's agreement. But then, to your surprise, they counter with a take that's 180 degrees different. You freeze, unsure how to bridge the gap.

Your conversational partner keeps interrupting you. There's a cartoon storm cloud forming over your head as the other person talks over you at length, rolling over all your contributions. They refuse to let you finish a sentence.

You're misunderstanding each other. It's clear from the other person's responses that they aren't grasping the points you're trying to make — and your attempts to tune in to their perspective aren't working either.

Your conversational partner is nosy — or oversharing. Someone you don't know well asks about your family situation, childhood traumas, or religious or other deeply held beliefs. They might also be sharing more about their own story than you want to hear. Either way, it's making you uneasy.

You can't find a way to gracefully exit. You're trying to end the conversation, but the other person keeps talking — and you aren't sure how to exit without being rude.

SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Let go of expectations. Not all conversations will be free-flowing or stress-free, Kendall notes. That doesn't mean something is wrong.

"Conversation, by its very nature, is somewhat chaotic; it fluctuates," he says. "You can never predict or predetermine what the other person is going to say or where the talk is going to go."

Be curious. When we assume we know what someone is like or what they're going to say, we close ourselves off to what we could learn if we were to simply ask them about themselves.

"Our preconceived ideas about the other person are probably the greatest obstacle to effective conversation," says Kendall. "If we listen through the filter of our judgments and opinions, we are mostly confirming what we already know. This leaves little space for curiosity or discovery."

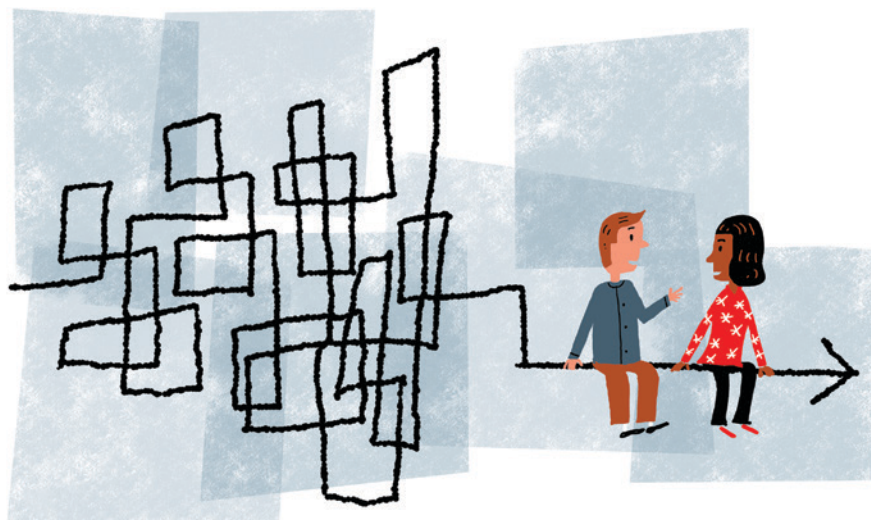
Listen closely. "If I want the conversation to flourish," Kendall says, "I give my full attention to what the other person is saying rather than thinking about what I'm going to say next. If I pay attention, then the chances are that whatever I say next is going to spontaneously be appropriate to the context."

He recommends practicing the skill of active listening by tuning in to the other person's words and nonverbal cues. (Find more tips for becoming a better listener at ELmag.com/howtolisten.)

Ask questions. When conversation falters, Kendall suggests asking open-ended questions. "[These] promote further conversation better than yes-or-no, binary ones. 'What brought you to this party?' or 'What did you love about growing up here?'"

Pay attention to what your conversational partner shares about their likes and dislikes; these clues can guide your questions. "Who doesn't appreciate somebody who takes an interest in their world?" Kendall asks.

Go with the flow, attentively. "The best conversation has a spontaneous



flow to it, and you and your conversational partner adapt to the flow," says Kendall. That means sensing how your interlocutor is reacting and then responding to the energy.

For example, maybe you see the other person's eyes fall when you ask about their job but light up when they mention the basketball game they just watched. Follow that energy: Ask how they're feeling about the next matchup, how they got into the sport, and which players they're watching closely this season.

Apologize without explanations or excuses. If you say something that could have offended the other person, apologize without explanation or self-justification, Kendall suggests.

"Often when people apologize, they don't really apologize; they give reasons for what they said. But if you just say, 'That was deeply inappropriate, and I'm very sorry,' you take the whole responsibility on yourself. People respect that." (Learn more about sincere apologies at ELmag.com/apology.)

Acknowledge a clash of values. If you and your conversational partner are at loggerheads because of differing views, don't simply plow on with the topic, Kendall says. Instead, you can say, "This is probably a conversation for another day." And that signals that you want to move on.

Address oversharing. The same goes for issues such as oversharing or invasive questions. Kendall recommends politely addressing the problem rather

than avoiding it in hopes the trouble will go away.

It can be easier to address these issues with someone you know. With someone you know less well, Kendall advises, take a calm approach and offer a concise statement. As a response to oversharing, you might say, "This is territory where I'm not too comfortable."

Change the subject. "I know that requires quick thinking, and [that's] somewhat clumsy to do midway through a conversation," Kendall says. "But better the slight awkwardness of changing the topic than getting into an argument that isn't going to go well."

You can always pivot to a good question, he adds.

Keep tone in mind. Kendall emphasizes that maintaining a polite tone is crucial when navigating awkward or uncomfortable moments. A good conversation can be passionate and animated, but it's important to remain respectful — even during heated discussions.

Say you've got to go. As a last resort, "it's always perfectly acceptable to remove yourself from the conversation without any elaborate justification," Kendall says. "It can be as simple as 'I'm sorry, I've got something else I need to deal with'; 'I need to speak to someone else'; or 'I need to excuse myself for a moment.'"

It's also OK to end with "Thanks for the chat — all the best to you." 📞

JON SPAYDE is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

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What Is Energy Clearing?

Simple techniques for shaking off sluggishness — in yourself and in your space.

BY COURTNEY HELGOE

IF YOU'VE EVER visited a place of worship and smelled incense or heard bells ringing, you've experienced energy clearing in action. Nearly every culture has its favored means: drums, rattles, salts, prayers, smoldering resins.

"The methods and tools have varied from one culture to another, but the intent has been the same — to create greater harmony and balance," explains energy practitioner

Denise Linn in her book *Secrets of Space Clearing*.

What's true for spaces is also true for your body. It's easy to unconsciously absorb other people's moods or carry around negative imprints from past experiences. Yet there are plenty of ways to clear out other people's energy and balance your own.

"Even wind, rain, or sunlight can move energy in our bodies, the same way they move energy in our

environment," notes integrative physician Ann Marie Chiasson, MD, in her book *Energy Healing: The Essentials of Self-Care*. She suggests standing in a strong wind and noticing how you feel afterward. Most likely, you'll feel refreshed and restored. Free energy work!

In short, you don't always have to visit a practitioner when you feel off-balance. Start with these DIY strategies to regain your equilibrium.

HOW TO CLEAR ENERGY

MOVE YOUR BODY

Taking a walk around the block is a time-tested way to clear your head — and your energy. So is lifting weights, doing a set of jumping jacks, or dancing in your kitchen.

"Rigorous exercise is a means of moving energy, but even small movements can have a profound impact," explains Chiasson. If you feel stuck, take a few minutes to move your body. Focus on the goal of shaking it off — whatever it is.

FOLLOW A SCRIPT

Many of us habitually absorb other people's moods. Therapist Jane McCampbell Stuart, MA, LMFT, CPCC, sees this as a boundary issue. You're more vulnerable to assuming other people's energy when you habitually try to occupy less space, she says. But when you fill up your own space (which she

describes as an energetic bubble extending several feet around your body), you create a "living edge" that helps you maintain your clarity. She suggests this script to help you reestablish your edge:

1. Focus on someone or something, such as a child or pet, that fills your heart with gratitude, appreciation, or uncomplicated loving feelings. This can help settle your heart rate and allow you to ground into your body.

2. Say your own full name aloud while spreading your arms out as far as you can reach. "I am [first name] [middle name] [last name]. And I take up my space!"

3. Visualize the edge of your energy field growing stronger and firmer.

4. Repeat the "I am" script using your full name, ending with "And anything that is not mine needs to leave my

space now." This can be friendly, but make it firm.

5. Visualize whatever isn't yours — someone else's mood, a critical remark, unwanted advice — leaving your sphere.

6. Repeat the "I am" script one more time, finishing with "And I am sovereign in my own space."

USE SOUND

Sound is vibration, so it's ideal for tuning up energy in a space. Although drums, bells, and gongs are the original tools for space clearing, clapping your hands, playing a musical instrument, and singing also work.

What matters is that you feel a connection to the instrument or tool you're using, Linn notes, and that you make a decision to clear energy before you begin.

"Effective space clearing happens only when your heart

is open and your intention is clear," she writes.

CLEAR SOME CLUTTER

A full-on decluttering session can be a major energy boost, especially "if you have been feeling sluggish, uninspired, or overwhelmed," writes Linn.

Yet even tidying your desk or throwing out a pair of threadbare socks can give you a lift if energy clearing is your goal. This can be as simple as taking a shower or lighting a candle, then saying a few words announcing your purpose. In her book, Linn suggests something like "May Higher Wisdom be with me as I clear this object with intention."

She adds: "Even the simplest act will have a positive effect on how you feel if it is done with the intent of transforming the energy in your life."

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



Decolonizing Beauty

How — and why — we need to shift the dominant beauty paradigm.

BY KATE NELSON

SASHA KUTABAH SARAGO distinctly remembers the moment she became self-conscious about her Yidinji, Jirrbal, and African American ancestry. Born in Australia, she was 11 years old and enjoying a friend's birthday party when she was told, "You're too pretty to be Aboriginal."

That sent her into a shame spiral that involved all but renouncing her mom's First Nations ancestry while leaning into her dad's Black heritage instead.

Inspired by Black supermodels in the beauty and fashion industry and by her mother's beauty salon, Sarago pursued a career as a fashion model and beauty assistant. But eventually she realized she was chasing unrealistic standards rooted in whiteness, so she redirected her attention to reclaiming her identity and reconnecting with her culture.

That has inspired her mission to decolonize beauty, a pursuit highlighted by her stirring 2020 TEDxSydney Talk; a documentary short she produced on the topic; and the launching of Ascension, Australia's first digital lifestyle platform celebrating women of color. Most recently, she shared her own inspiring story in her 2023 memoir, *Gigorou: It's Time to Reclaim Beauty; First Nations Wisdom and Womanhood*.

Sarago spoke with us about upending prejudiced ideals, shifting the beauty paradigm, and recognizing our own unique, inherent value.

Q & A

WITH SASHA KUTABAH SARAGO



EXPERIENCE LIFE | From your perspective, what does it mean to decolonize beauty?

SASHA KUTABAH SARAGO | It's about redefining beauty to better serve us, creating a value system that celebrates our authenticity, and delighting in our sovereignty. I'm still in the process of breaking free from some of the mindsets I've held because of my own internalized racism, but I have worked hard to reconnect with everything I shunned about my identity and culture earlier in life.

What you see in the beauty and fashion industry is all tied up in capitalism. It's built off these notions of how you should look and feel about yourself that are in such conflict with how we've been brought into this world, as sovereign beings with a purpose. So, am I meeting and nurturing that purpose? Not if I'm operating within Western beauty standards or the -isms, including colonialism, racism, colorism, and sexism.



EL | How have Eurocentric ideals affected people of color, particularly Indigenous women?

SKS | My time in the fashion and beauty industry was always about denying my identity and trying to alter my ethnic features, which is so common for women of color globally.

For me, it meant bleaching and straightening my hair, wearing contact lenses to alter my eye color, and contouring with makeup to give the appearance of finer features. I was trying to fit into this one-dimensional beauty ideal that I could never actually achieve.

Sadly, the first time I thought I was beautiful was when a white man found me attractive and I entered into my first interracial relationship. Now, 20 years on, I can see how warped that mentality was — that if white society can see me as beautiful, maybe I can believe I'm beautiful too. Because I had come to believe [that] everything about my Indigeneity was shameful and dirty.

Being told I was "too pretty to be Aboriginal" at a young age left me with a complex that I tried to reconcile in all the wrong ways.



EL | Please talk through your journey to reshape your understanding of beauty.

SKS | I spent part of my childhood living in the United States, so I saw all the Black supermodels, like Naomi Campbell, Tyra Banks, Veronica Webb, and Iman, dominating this industry [in which] their beauty hadn't previously been glorified. That planted the seed in my head that my Black is beautiful.

When I moved back to Australia, at the age of 9, meeting my [Aboriginal] extended family reinforced that I had two cultures to thrive in and made me feel really supported in my identity.

But then I stepped outside my community and into a world where whiteness was the benchmark of beauty. Throughout my teen years, I saw all these problematic stereotypes of Aboriginal people perpetuated by the media, and I was on the receiving end of racial slurs. That caused me to really abandon my Indigeneity as a young person.

I realized I couldn't stay on that path of shame, which is why I left the modeling industry in my late 20s. At every turn, I was being told I just wasn't good enough. So, I went on a journey to reclaim my identity, and I sat down with my elders to hear all the stories about what makes us beautiful.

Culture was my savior in many respects. How can you not stand tall with your head held high when you see reflections of yourself through these people who make you who you are?

That led to my TED Talk and my memoir, *Gigorou*, which means "beautiful" in Jirrbal. In talking about decolonizing beauty, it was important to me to use my grandmother's language, [which] we weren't allowed to speak because of colonialism. So, my journey has been about sitting with my matriarchs, learning our creation stories, and understanding our value within our community.



EL | How does our beauty paradigm need to shift to focus on culture, spirit, and story?

SKS | Beauty through a Western lens is meant to profit off our insecurities and perceived inadequacies. But there's so much to be gained from tapping into Indigenous wisdom, connecting with our culture, and nurturing that spirit.

For a long time, Aboriginal women haven't been viewed as important in Australian society, but we are the backbones of our communities. Some of us have been deemed less beautiful because we have facial hair or gray hair, whereas in reality, those are signs that you've lived a beauti-

ful life, that you are wise and have stories to tell.

Now as a woman in my early 40s, I have completely changed how I relate to my body. It might not have the elasticity or collagen it used to have, but I am so grateful I can wake up, move around with ease, and hike to see my traditional country. Some of the women in my family are just around the corner from 100 years old. For Indigenous people — given our shorter life expectancies and health issues — that's amazing.



EL | What advice do you have for those hoping to decolonize beauty in their own lives?

SKS | Decolonizing beauty is about coming back to yourself. How do you want to feel? What lifestyle do you want to live? If that brings up notions of enhancing yourself outside of who you already are, you need to ask if you're in tune with your authenticity.

It's also about having a community — that could be a gym community or a garden community — of people who reflect your values, which enhances every aspect of your well-being. I want people in my life who can see my beauty and whose beauty reflects onto me; then it manifests in

me setting out on new adventures.

These are the conversations I want to have about beauty — not about trying to get rid of my dark circles. That's not to say we don't live in a contemporary world where we're undertaking beauty and self-care practices. Let's be realistic.

But there has to be a balance of how we're valuing ourselves and how we're reflecting those principles onto the people we love. These things are inherent in us as human beings, but we've lost so much understanding of Indigenous ways of living and thinking. 🌱

KATE NELSON is an award-winning writer and editor in Minneapolis and an Alaska Native Tlingit tribal member.



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Imagine the Possibilities

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

EACH YEAR around this time, I take the opportunity to pause and reflect — to think about what has and has not worked in the months that have passed and to brainstorm how to move forward. I deliberately question everything, including my beliefs about success, happiness, and lasting fulfillment.

It's a practice I've done for many years. And though it can sometimes be uncomfortable, it's also necessary and often eye-opening.

I have many colleagues, friends, and family who embrace this annual inquiry, too. And this year, I've noticed that there seems to be a lot of focus on the concept of change itself.

This makes sense: We're not just living through change; we're experiencing a shift in how quickly change happens. For most of my life, it has felt possible to look five to 10 years ahead and map a reasonable path. Today, trying to predict how things will look even six months from now can be challenging.

The pace of transformation, particularly around artificial intelligence, is relentless. AI is reshaping how we live, work, and even understand ourselves. Some of its iterations are startling — companions that monitor our moods, eye trackers that register our emotions, algorithms that anticipate our needs. These aren't "some-day" technologies; they're here now.

AI's presence demands a recalibration of our mindset, which begins with asking questions like "What does it mean to be human in this new landscape?" and "How do I stay grounded and present while embracing powerful technologies?"

As I've reflected on this, it's become clearer to me that our

fundamental needs haven't changed. We still crave love, connection, purpose, and responsibility. We still need to cultivate a healthy mindset and stay true to our values.

This can be difficult when there are countless distractions competing for our attention and pulling us away from who and what matters most.

But in this age of rapid technological advancement, staying grounded in our values matters more than ever.

When we devote energy to relationships, experiences, and pursuits that fulfill us, we spend less time circling around limitations and more time building our capacity. Challenges don't disappear, but our ability to meet them grows. We operate from a place of strength and possibility instead of one of scarcity and fear.

The same principle applies at the societal level. Yes, we're losing certain familiar ways of working and being. But we're also gaining tools and capabilities. We can learn faster, connect more deeply, and extend our physical and mental potential in ways our grandparents could only have dreamed.

The opportunity is to embrace these gains rather than trying to hold on to what was.

This is why reflection with active inquiry matters — it can spark discovery and motivate us to take action. So I invite you to ask yourself some questions:

- What am I afraid of?
- What beliefs am I carrying that no longer serve me?
- What opportunities am I missing because I'm looking backward instead of forward?



- Who matters most to me, and how might these new technologies strengthen those relationships?

- Which aspects of my humanity do I want to protect and cultivate as the world transforms?

Individuals, communities, and organizations that will thrive in this new era will learn to find a balance between staying rooted in human values and being endlessly adaptable to new technologies. For them, change won't be a threat to resist but a catalyst for reinvention. They'll recognize that in the age of artificial intelligence, our humanness remains our greatest advantage.

As we prepare to wrap up another year, I encourage you to revolutionize your reflections. Question everything, but don't lose sight of what matters most. Be curious. Stay connected. Let yourself be amazed by what's possible.

The speed of change isn't slowing, but that doesn't mean we're powerless. We can choose to see this moment as an invitation to expand our capacity for learning, adaptation, and growth. We can broaden our sense of what's achievable — for our health, our relationships, and our contributions to the world.

This moment is about far more than survival. It's about the art of thriving in an age of possibility.



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



“In order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen.”

— BRENÉ BROWN

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