

# Experience Life

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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2025

LIFE TIME

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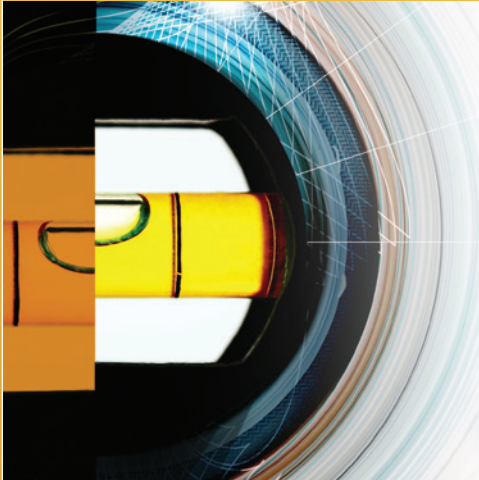
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## Experience Life

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# Experience Life DIGITAL



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

## AUTUMN PUMPKIN RECIPES

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

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Learn how connecting with your dosha can revitalize your workout routine.  
[ELmag.com/ayurvedicfitness](https://www.ELmag.com/ayurvedicfitness)



## Easy Healthy Habits

As fall ramps up and schedules fill in, it's an ideal time to reset and get health routines back on track. Our free guide features 14 habits — like waking up at the same time each day, eating protein at every meal, and moving your body regularly — to ease the stress of the

season and help you feel more grounded and energized.

Scan the QR code or go to [ELmag.com/healthyhabits](https://www.ELmag.com/healthyhabits) to download the guide.



## 5 HEARTY FALL SALADS

We all know the sad side salad: limp lettuce, some dry grated carrot, maybe a slice of out-of-season tomato. It's pale and flavorless and exudes no joy at all. A good salad, on the other hand, can offer a symphony of flavors and textures. We've put together five hearty salad recipes based on sturdy greens like radicchio, collards, and cabbage. To give them staying power, we use toppings like roasted veggies, cooked whole grains and legumes, and toasted nuts and seeds. To check out the recipes, scan the QR code or go to [ELmag.com/fallsalads](https://www.ELmag.com/fallsalads).



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Cover: Johner Images/Brand X/Getty Images.

Pages 2–3 (center), and p. 85: Terry Brennan; p. 4 (right): Andrea D'Agosto (photographer), Alicia Buelow (prop styling), Paul Jackman (food styling); p. 7: Sara Rubinstein. Stock images: Getty Images.

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EXPERIENCE LIFE Magazine (ISSN 1537-6656) is published six times a year — January/February, March/April, May/June, July/August, September/October, and November/December — by LIFE TIME, 2902 Corporate Place, Chanhassen, MN 55317. SUBSCRIPTION RATE: One year (6 issues) \$27.95; two years (12 issues) \$44.95. LIFE TIME MEMBERS: For member questions, cancellations, or change of address, call Account Services at 888-430-6432 or email [accounts@experiencelife.com](mailto:accounts@experiencelife.com).

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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.

# PRECIOUS TIME

**ONE OF MY FAVORITE** activities with my daughters during our long summer weekends in northern Minnesota is paddleboarding. It started when they were about 3 and 5 years old: We'd all pile onto one board, with Lizzy settled safely in front of Maddy, and I'd paddle us into the bay, usually just far enough so they could jump into the cool, clear lake.

In and out of the water they'd go, jumps and dives getting bolder as they grew. I'd get in with them from time to time, but mostly I'd just watch them, amazed at their confidence, deeply grateful to be present with my girls.

It's harder for the three of us to fit on one paddleboard these days. And they're no longer content sitting passively in front; they much prefer being on their own boards. But we still make a point of heading onto the water together whenever we can — and I continue to be in awe of them.

These experiences, and others like them, serve as invaluable reminders that it's important to slow down, to disconnect, and to simply enjoy being with my people. They're a welcome and much-needed pause from the breakneck speed that I'm too often maintaining in the day-to-day.

I know I'm not alone in doing daily life like this. According to survey results published in 2018 by the Pew Research Center, 60 percent of U.S. adults felt too busy to enjoy life “at least sometimes,” and 12 percent felt that way “all or most of the time.”

Additionally, nearly 75 percent of parents with kids under the age of 18 said that they “at least sometimes” felt too busy to enjoy life; for adults whose kids were older or who had no kids, that number was 55 percent.

Based on what I've witnessed and experienced personally, I imagine those numbers have only increased in the years since the survey was conducted. While some of us might have experienced a break in busyness during the height of the pandemic, we've largely returned to our old ways — and then some.

The seasonal transition from the carefree days of summer to the routines of fall is an ideal time to reflect on whether we want to continue in this way. It's an opportunity to reset the pace of our lives and prioritize our values, interests, and desires; to set boundaries so we can experience more joy.

It's a chance to reclaim the rhythms that best serve us — physically, mentally, and emotionally. To be intentional with how we spend our time and where and to whom we give our energy. And to embrace behaviors — like good sleep habits — that support better use of that time and energy (see “Optimize Your Circadian Rhythm” on page 16).

This fall, our oldest daughter starts high school, and the reality of having only four more years with her at home is starting to set in. It's all the more reason to take the time to thoughtfully plan how we spend our days.

Because no matter how much I might wish we could slow down or freeze time, it keeps ticking on. The best we can do is slow down ourselves, soak it all in, and enjoy the moments as they come along.



These experiences, and others like them, serve as invaluable reminders that **it's important to slow down, to disconnect, and to simply enjoy being with my people.**



**YOUR  
THOUGHTS?**

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# TALK TO US

## THE POWER OF BREATH

✉ I told my personal trainer that I have been diagnosed with severe asthma; it was always a struggle to breathe during workouts. When I discovered yoga, the practice provided a revelation about breathing. I learned inhalation and exhalation techniques that didn't put pressure on my lungs. This is why the "Find Your Peace" issue (May/June 2025) really resonated with me. Meditation truly doesn't just heal our souls but also heals our bodies, and these articles continue to prove that. **Sue S.**

## THE IODINE ANTIDOTE

f I was born before iodized salt ("Why Is Iodine Controversial?," May/June 2025). The schools gave out iodine pills. My father was totally anti-med for anything, but my mom gave us permission to take the pills. They tasted like chalky chocolate. **Vicky L.**

## THE CURIOUS CHOICE

f Too many people have slid into life habits that cause joy, curiosity, and tolerance to atrophy ("Curiosity and Its Consequences," May 2025). It's no easier than building physical strength and flexibility. You have to choose. **Susan S.**

## HER OWN AUTHORITY

f At 69, I now live by my own rules. I'm at least 20 pounds overweight, according to the current charts, but I ride my bicycle at least seven miles a day and did 20 the other day ("Redefining Obesity," May 2025). I have no chronic health problems, and I seldom get sick. I like greasy sandwiches on whole wheat and coffee with whipping cream and honey. **Jane E.**

## SAVVY FOOD SWAPS

🧠 Your article "6 Food Swaps to Try at the Grocery Store," in the March/April 2025 issue, offered some excellent substitute ideas. I have not



had a rutabaga in years because it is difficult to find in the New York City metro area. I did not know that it falls into the nonstarchy vegetable category, which makes it even more interesting.

**Peggy H.**

## SMALL STEPS

✉ I saw this quote from [editor in chief] Jamie Martin ("Reality Check," January/February 2024): "There are usually small actions or steps I can take over time that move me closer to where I'm aiming to go." I have

followed a similar mantra for the past 60 years, and it has made all the difference. My wife and I live a great life. Pursuing those small steps has made all the difference. You have touched a profound truth.

**Wayne G.**

## A PAINFUL JOURNEY

🧠 Thank you for posting this account of Debbie Friedlander's journey ("How One Woman Survived Breast Implant Illness," September/October 2023). I sobbed as I read it. I had my breast reconstructed with a silicone implant 20 years ago, after being diagnosed with invasive breast cancer at the age of 33. The symptoms she describes are exactly what I experienced, yet the surgeon I saw back in 2017 refused to acknowledge that my symptoms could be caused by the implant or that it was leaking. I began to get really ill about nine years ago, and it took six years before the health system here in New Zealand finally acknowledged that my implant was leaking and removed it.

It is unsurprising that a cancer counselor I saw last year said that I have PTSD. Thank you for being an inspiration.

**Jan**

## THE FUTURE OF PLASTIC

🧠 This is a great article ("Talking Trash," November 2019). I would love to read an updated version that explores where our recycled plastics are going. I ran our school recycling program for years but have now retired and could not find anyone to take over. We really need to promote awareness, create more recycling facilities, and be responsible stewards of the earth. It's our children's futures at stake.

**Sandy B.**

*For more on plastics and recycling, see "The Problem With Plastic — and What We Can Do About It" at [ELmag.com/plasticproblems](http://ELmag.com/plasticproblems).*

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

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# ARE AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES

## Becoming More Common?

**IF IT FEELS** as if a startling number of people in your life now struggle with at least one autoimmune disease, it's not your imagination.

"Autoimmunity" encompasses more than 100 conditions in which the immune system attacks the body's own tissues, and the incidence of these disorders is increasing by up to 12 percent each year in the United States, warns Molly Murray, CAE, president and CEO of the Autoimmune Association. These conditions include psoriasis, celiac disease, multiple sclerosis, type 1 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, and lupus.

Today, between 15 million and 50 million Americans have an autoimmune condition, with estimates varying widely due to the difficulty in assessing the scope of these diseases.

And because of the complexity of diagnosing autoimmunity itself, 50 million is likely to be an underestimate, Murray writes in a 2024 National Health Council guest blog post.

Women make up 80 percent of those with autoimmunity and are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed.

Susceptibility to autoimmune disorders appears to run in families. A particular disease may not be genetic, but if one family member has lupus, the likelihood that another may have Sjögren's disease and a third may have rheumatoid arthritis is much higher.

"The rise of autoimmune diseases in many parts of the world is an epidemic," says Frederick W. Miller, MD, PhD, former deputy chief of the Clinical Research Branch and retired chief of the Environmental Autoimmunity Group at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences at the National Institutes of Health. "We

do not know the specific causes, but given the rapid increase, it cannot be genetic changes."

Since genetics alone are not enough to explain the rapid rise in autoimmunity, many experts — including Miller — suspect environmental triggers.

"More evidence is becoming available that the evolution of autoimmune disease . . . results from multiple exposures that alter susceptible genomes and immune systems over time," Miller writes in a 2024 review. "We pay a price for altering our environment, changing our lifestyles, and ignoring climate change."

Then there's stress. "Chronic stress can challenge the immune system and trigger inflammation," explains neurologist David Perlmutter, MD, FACN, ABIHM. This can lead to immune dysfunction.

And these are especially stressful times, he adds. "Unlike historical stressors that were often immediate and survival based, modern stress tends to be chronic, stemming from work demands, financial insecurity, and, importantly, social comparisons."

We've also lost many of the things that softened the impact of everyday stress, such as strong community ties and time in nature.

"Stress increases cortisol levels, which can disrupt sleep and drive cravings for unhealthy foods, while toxins in the environment add to the body's inflammatory burden," Perlmutter says. "Together, these factors weaken resilience, impair detoxification, and accelerate the development of autoimmune diseases."

(For more on autoimmunity and how to cope, see [ELmag.com/autoimmunity](http://ELmag.com/autoimmunity).)

— EXPERIENCE LIFE STAFF





## THE RISE OF BROKEN HEART SYNDROME

**A broken heart** may be a metaphor, but acute emotional or physical stress can result in broken heart syndrome, a real medical condition that's growing in prevalence. Also called stress cardiomyopathy or Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, it can look and feel like a heart attack, but the causes and symptoms differ in important ways.

"Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is a condition in which cardiac function is transiently impaired, causing shortness of breath, chest pain, and/or abnormal rhythm," says cardiology researcher Antonio Abbate, MD, PhD, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. "It's not caused by a heart attack, an infection, or a toxic effect on the heart but rather from an abnormal brain-heart connection, often related to a psychological or physical stressor."

These stressors may include feelings of grief, fear, anger, or surprise, writes cardiologist Ilan Wittstein, MD, of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

Physical stressors may include high fever, a stroke or seizure, blood loss, difficulty breathing, such as with an asthma attack or emphysema, or extremely low blood-sugar levels.

Incidence of stress cardiomyopathy is on the rise due to increased awareness, recognition, and imaging, Abbate says. Still, he cautions in one study that "the condition is likely underdiagnosed," so "the true incidence is unknown."

Stress can cause your body to produce adrenaline and noradrenaline, and the flood of these hormones can overwhelm the heart muscle. It may also result in a "temporary decrease in blood flow to the heart," Wittstein writes. In other cases, adrenaline can bind to heart cells, preventing the heart from beating properly.

A genuine heart attack "is caused by a blockage in the flow in one of the arteries feeding the heart, which impairs heart function, can cause abnormal rhythm, and leaves a scar in the heart," explains Abbate.

"Takotsubo is not caused by blockages; it also impairs heart function and causes abnormal rhythm, but when it resolves it leaves no scar."

Broken heart syndrome is usually short-term and reversible,

Abbate and Wittstein note. Still, Abbate says

more research is needed to determine how one incident may affect patients in the long term and whether it leaves them more susceptible to another attack.

— MICHAEL DREGNI

Broken heart syndrome is usually short-term and reversible.

## FDA BANS RED DYE NO. 3

**Nearly 40 years** after the revelation that Red Dye No. 3 is associated with a risk of tumors in rats, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in January announced it will ban its use in food and medicines for humans.

The ruling, which takes effect in 2027 for food and in 2028 for drugs, references a 1987 study showing that male rats that consumed high doses of the dye had a significantly higher risk of developing abnormal cell growths in their thyroids.

Red Dye No. 3, also known as erythrosine or E127, is a synthetic dye used to color thousands of food products — including candy, baked goods, frosting, yogurt, and beverages, as well as ingestible drugs, such as cough syrups.

It's also been the target of a decadeslong campaign of consumer resistance. Advocacy groups have fought to ban the dye from food and medications, citing studies suggesting

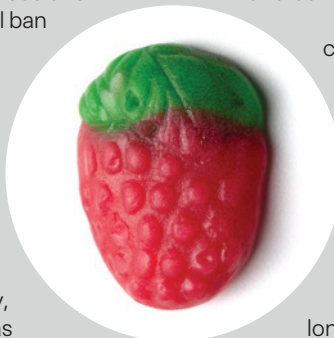
it may cause cancer, thyroid dysfunction, neuroinflammation, and behavior issues in kids.

In 1990, the FDA banned Red Dye No. 3 in cosmetics and topical medications based on the evidence that it caused tumors in rats, but it declined to ban the dye in food and oral medications.

The recent change in FDA policy was prompted by a 2022 petition from the Center for Science in the Public Interest and a consortium of co-petitioners, including the Life Time Foundation.

"We've been working on this initiative for a long time, and many others have been working on it for much longer," says Life Time Foundation director Sarah Emola. "This is a great success and an example of how we can all come together to make change."

— JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC





## FOR THE AGING BODY, PROTEIN IS PRICELESS

WELL INFORMED

**We tend to think** about protein solely as a muscle-building tool, and that's certainly a priority for the aging body. It's key to preventing sarcopenia — the loss of lean muscle mass as we grow older.

But proteins are more versatile than we think. "Proteins are the master regulators of all that is happening in your body, controlling function in all tissues and organs, including muscle," explains Gabrielle Lyon, DO, in her book *Forever Strong*. "They include enzymes — a class of proteins that catalyze all the chemical reactions within the body. Proteins also support energy production and cell-to-cell communication."

Yet most of us — especially seniors — don't consume nearly as much protein as we need for optimal health.

A 2020 study found that as many as 30 percent of older Americans don't meet the recommended dietary allowance of protein (0.36 grams per pound of body weight), and as many as 76 percent fall short of the more

optimal goal of 0.54 grams per pound of body weight.

Skimping on protein forces the body to protect its most vital organs at the expense of muscle.

"A body trying to make do with a low-protein diet will prioritize the survival of the liver, heart, brain, kidney, and gastrointestinal tract," Lyon explains. "Eating only enough protein to fuel these essential functions will leave your body lacking sufficient amino-acid supply to support skeletal-muscle growth and repair."

Animal products are the best source of protein, she argues, citing their balanced amino-acid profiles and nutrient density. "Moreover, their core nutri-

ents are more bioavailable relative to plant foods."

No matter how you choose to source your protein, Paul Kriegler, RD, CPT, director of nutritional product development at Life Time, recommends that you make sure it comes from high-quality foods. On the animal front, that means opting for grassfed beef, free-range chicken, and wild-caught fish while avoiding factory-farmed and highly processed animal products. For those enjoying plant-forward diets, choose organic, whole-ingredient foods such as tempeh and nuts rather than ultraprocessed imitation meats.

— CRAIG COX

"Proteins are the master regulators of all that is happening in your body, controlling function in all tissues and organs, including muscle."



## BEST PREDICTOR OF MORTALITY: PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

**New research** suggests that your daily step count might help predict how long you'll live.

As Erjia Cui, PhD, and his team report in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, physicians view smoking and various chronic diseases as the key contributors to a shortened lifespan. But after reviewing data compiled in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) between 2011 and 2014, they concluded that clinicians should look more carefully at the number of steps their patients are taking each day.

Throughout the survey, the 3,653 NHANES participants wore accelerometer devices on their wrists to measure their physical activity (PA). That data provided a more accurate prediction of the participants' mortality during a five- to eight-year follow-up period than any other indicator.

"These results suggest that PA monitoring may provide more sensitive insights into health status and mortality risk than traditional clinical assessments," notes Cui, an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

He acknowledges the study has some limitations: It focused on the predictive value of monitoring physical activity and omitted some variables that would have meaning in a clinical or scientific setting. As a result, the findings suggest a correlation, rather than causation, between more physical activity and greater longevity.

Still, Cui believes the message to people of all ages is a powerful one.

"Moving more will benefit your long-term health," he says. "Encourage yourself to increase daily activity, and if you have a wearable device like a Fitbit or Apple Watch, look at the numbers. They actually matter."

— CC

# How to Cope With a NARCISSIST

**“Mirror, mirror on the wall: Who’s the fairest of them all?”**

The Evil Queen in the fairy tale “Snow White” is a classic narcissist, so consumed by envy that she attempts to take her own stepdaughter’s life.

Not only do narcissists believe they’re the fairest (or most successful, intelligent, or powerful) one of all, but they’re also not afraid to flaunt it.

Grandiosity — an inflated sense of one’s own greatness — is a hallmark of narcissism. Narcissists often exaggerate their accomplishments, expecting recognition and admiration even when their achievements aren’t necessarily all that impressive. To a narcissist, those who don’t recognize how special they are must not be special enough to understand them.

**Grandiosity — an inflated sense of one’s own greatness — is a hallmark of narcissism.**

Unsurprisingly, narcissists are not easy people to be around. A preoccupation with power and prestige coupled with an absence of empathy compels many narcissists to manipulate others for their own purposes. They don’t take responsibility for their actions and are prone to deflecting, blaming, or lashing out at those who question them. Entitlement rules the day.

You might not notice these qualities when you first meet them: Narcissists know how to feign agreeableness when it serves them, and many are downright charming. Their confidence can be attractive, and their drive to succeed no matter the cost can propel them to positions of real power.

## NAVIGATING AROUND A NARCISSIST

If there’s a narcissist in your life, the following strategies can be useful when dealing with their difficult personality.

- **Avoid confrontation.** Narcissists typically don’t respond well to criticism, even when you try to deliver it as constructively and kindly as possible. This is especially true when it comes to feedback about their behavior and how it impacts others. No matter how carefully you explain the way they make you feel, a narcissist will likely get defensive and even retaliate. Don’t expect empathy from one concerning your feelings. Save your time and emotional energy — confrontation is rarely worth it.

- **Set firm boundaries.** Guardrails are essential when you maintain a relationship with a narcissist. Use specific language and declarative sentences (“I’ll drop the kids off at your parents’ house at noon”), and keep interactions to a minimum. Some experts

recommend engaging only in the bare minimum of communication, but this approach can trigger a backlash if the narcissist feels slighted. You may find that injecting a small amount of warmth into the interactions (“Hope you’re enjoying the holidays”) maintains civility without compromising your boundaries or well-being.

- **Beware of DARVO.** If you choose to stand your ground, watch out for what’s known as DARVO, an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender. This is how narcissists often flip the script on those who dare to question or challenge them. By casting doubt on your credibility and casting themselves as a victim, narcissists not only avoid taking responsibility but also may gain sympathy from others.

Pay attention to when you’re getting confused or overwhelmed. And try not to take the bait by arguing back.

- **Safely sort through your experience.** Negotiating with a narcissist may not get you anywhere, but it’s essential to find someone who will listen to you and validate your feelings. Being around a narcissist can feel crazy-making and disorienting: Their tendency to minimize, deflect, or deny

the impact of their behavior can make you question your reality. Find a safe person with whom you can process your experience and regain your bearings.

- **Cut ties.** If all else fails, you may end up having to cut off contact entirely with a narcissist. It’s normal to feel guilt or sadness even if you know that separation is the right call — especially if the narcissist is someone important in your life, like a family member. Remember that distance provides much-needed space to heal.

— ALEXANDRA SMITH, MA, LPCC



### DELVE DEEPER

For more on narcissistic personality traits, see [ELmag.com/narcissism](http://ELmag.com/narcissism).



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# Optimize Your Circadian Rhythm

Begin and end your day with these supportive strategies.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD

**A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP** actually starts in the morning.

Sleep is built upon our circadian rhythm, the 24-hour cycle that is influenced by the timing of sunrise and sunset. The human body functions best when it's aligned with this timing, which requires consistent daily habits.

I encourage patients of all ages to maintain regular bedtimes and to develop morning and before-bed routines that support better sleep. The brain's pineal gland, also known as the body's timekeeper, rewards these routines. It releases melatonin — the hormone that helps govern the timing of sleep onset as well as sleep depth and quality — when night falls.

The pineal gland also regulates metabolism, detoxification, and the rhythms of the endocrine system. One example is how our stress hormones, such as cortisol, are released in varying amounts throughout the day. These fluctuations help determine our degree of focus, energy, and productivity.

Because routines are so helpful for sleep, and sleep is the linchpin of mental health, following a regular schedule can also improve our moods. Still, sleep is not our only source of support.

Most people who have occasional anxiety are actually reacting to stress. Keeping good, consistent, even slightly dull routines can spare us from having to think so much about everything we do. This can relieve some pressure on our minds.

The bedrock of a sleep-supportive daily routine is a consistent bedtime and wake-up time that you can maintain with relative ease. Aim for seven to nine hours each night — and consider the following tips too.

## HABITS FOR BETTER SLEEP

### MORNING

**Wake up on time.** Rise at the same time — or close to it — every day. This is crucial to setting your circadian rhythm. Use an alarm if you must, but if you can, awaken with the light, either the natural sunrise or a dawn simulator. Sleeping in, even for an extra hour, can push back the timing of your melatonin release that night.

**Make your bed.** A National Sleep Foundation poll shows that making your bed each morning improves the chances of getting a good night's sleep by nearly 20 percent.

**Get outside for some sun.** Humans evolved to be attuned to light and dark cycles, so try to bathe yourself in bright light every morning, preferably within an hour or two of waking. This helps regulate your melatonin cycle, improving your chances of feeling sleepy at the right time of night. (Learn more at [ELmag.com/melatonin](http://ELmag.com/melatonin).) If you can't get sun first thing in the morning, or when it rises late in winter, use a bright-light device with plenty of blue-spectrum light.

**Eat breakfast.** Eating most of our calories early in the day is in alignment with both nature and our cortisol levels. Make breakfast and lunch your biggest meals. If you're a caffeine drinker, sip your coffee or tea in the morning; caffeine is like a plant version of adrenaline. (For more on caffeine, see [ELmag.com/caffeineandhealth](http://ELmag.com/caffeineandhealth).)

**Exercise early.** Work out in the morning, when energy levels are naturally at their highest. If you can't fit in exercise early, afternoon is fine, but try to finish three hours before bed. This will suppress stress hormones and keep your body cool at bedtime. (Morning is often the best time for strenuous mental work, as well.)

**Take a breathing break.** Spend a few moments focusing on your breath. Awareness of breathing can coax your autonomic nervous system to stand down and turn off your stress response. This is a great way to start your day.

### EVENING

**Stop work and turn off devices.** Finish work-related tasks and switch off electronics, including your phone, at least one hour before bed but preferably two. This allows your mind to wind down and protects your eyes from the stimulating effects of the blue light that digital devices emit. Blue light mimics morning sun and triggers wakefulness.

**Stay away from the bedroom.** Avoiding time in the bedroom during the hour before bed helps create a stronger association between that room and sleep. Try to maintain that room as a sanctuary reserved only for sleep and sex. Keep it simple, uncluttered, and free of televisions, other electronics, and anything work-related.

**Dim the lights.** During the final hours of the day, keep the lights as low as possible. You might even use candles. Darkness before bed can do amazing things for your natural sleepiness.

**Practice at least one soothing activity.** Read a book, do some journaling or coloring, listen to quiet music, or spend time in prayer or meditation. Take warm baths or showers at least one hour before bed so that your body is in the cooling-down phase at bedtime.

**Be on time but flexible.** Go to bed when you're sleepy — but not before. It's OK if that occasionally means you're retiring a bit later than usual. You want to associate bedtime with sleeping, not with lying there restlessly trying to get to sleep. ☪

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



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**REALOODS**

# How do you transition BACK INTO YOUR ROUTINE?

*EL* staffers share their favorite tips for a healthy reset after a busy time.

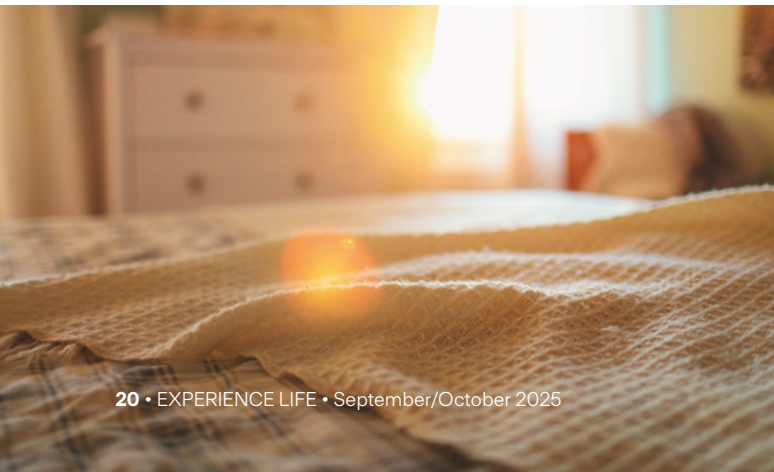


I recover from busy times (and everything else) during **my daily morning walk by the Mississippi River**. The big cottonwoods along the riverbank — together with the coyotes, eagles, chickadees, and woodpeckers — reliably bring me back to my senses, no matter how scattered I might have become.

— **Courtney Helgoe**, executive editor

Most weekdays I wake up early and exercise before work. But for the week following a busy time, I often **let myself sleep in for an extra hour or two**. I might get to my workout later in the day — or I might not. Either way, I know my body and mind are getting the extra rest they need.

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



Travel is usually my biggest (and most welcome) routine disrupter. **My reset ritual**: unpacking/starting laundry right away, brushing my teeth, doing an intuitive workout, taking an everything shower, and rehydrating with electrolytes.

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

I find that taking the time to **declutter and clean my home** helps me move more easefully into my other healthy routines.

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

**I grab whichever book or magazine article I've neglected** amid the busyness — and I tune out everything but the words in front of me until routine beckons.

— **Mike Oakes**, senior copy editor



**I organize my spice cabinet!**

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

After a particularly busy time, I always look forward to **grocery shopping**. Having a fridge full of healthy food makes me feel like I'm ready for whatever the coming week might bring.

— **Kaelyn Riley**, editorial director—food and nutrition

**Proactively updating our digital family calendar** with all the new activities and commitments makes a huge difference when our routines are transitioning. It helps all of us plan accordingly and avoid scrambling.

— **Jamie Martin**, editor in chief

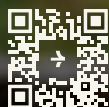
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## Rising to the Challenge

After dealing with migraine for years, I created a product that offers relief — and allows me to move forward in life.



BY DAVID FLEMING

David Fleming has acquired multiple patents for his pressure-point product; he's also twice competed on *American Ninja Warrior*.

**BY THE TIME** I applied to compete on NBC's *American Ninja Warrior* (ANW) in 2022, I'd faced health problems nearly my entire life. I'd dreamed of being on the show since I started watching it at 8 years old, but for a long time, no one could have believed I'd be able to realize this dream.

Significant health challenges prevented me from physically maturing and participating at school and in sports. Yet when I was 13, I discovered a simple treatment method that allowed me to break away from nearly constant pain and step into my strength.

It changed the course of my life.

### SEEING THE FUTURE

When I was 2 years old, doctors discovered I was legally blind in my left eye and at risk of retinal detachment. For the next eight years, I wore a patch over my right eye for four hours every day to force the weak eye to see. While remarkably effective — I now have 20/40 corrected vision — I spent those hours in almost complete blindness.

That was just the beginning of my health issues. Shortly after starting kindergarten, I began experiencing severe migraine attacks. Each one caused excruciating pain in my

temples, and I would vomit dozens of times. I visited doctors all over the country, but the medications they prescribed were usually ineffective and came with nasty side effects.

Because my symptoms kept me mostly at home, I wasn't developing in all the ways a "normal" kid would. I didn't have many chances to connect or build friendships with kids my age. I also couldn't commit to playing team sports because I'd have to miss too many games and practices.

So I became obsessed with ANW. When I felt well, I'd construct and navigate mini obstacle courses with my brother. On bad days, I'd try to watch the show from bed, gaining inspiration from the athletes conquering obstacles on and off the course.

### FINDING RELIEF

In fifth grade, my migraine attacks were so frequent and severe that I missed the last 55 days of school and had to be homeschooled the following year.

Medications made me feel awful, so I tried alternatives. I used ice packs, heat packs, and various types of pillows. I tried reforming my diet, avoiding artificial sweeteners, MSG, and red dye. Nothing seemed to work.

When I was 13, my parents took me to a chiropractor, who explained how

tension in the suboccipital muscles at the base of the skull often cause tension-induced headaches. He suggested my mom use her thumbs to apply pressure to these muscles the next time I felt symptoms. At the next sign of a headache, my mom did as he instructed — and I felt relief almost instantly!

Because my mom couldn't always be with me, I wanted to be able to do this for myself. I searched online for a self-serve trigger-point-release product but found nothing. So I decided to make my own.

For my first prototype, I attached two bicycle kickstands to a piece of metal and used the contraption to massage the muscles on my head and neck. It didn't really work, so I tried again, using a pool noodle as a base for neck support.

This model combined gravity and the weight of my head to put pressure on my suboccipital muscles. I used it at the onset of a migraine attack and felt immediate relief. When I started using it daily for prevention, the frequency and intensity of the attacks dropped dramatically.

Finding relief for myself was incredible, but I quickly turned to the possibility of helping others. In a couple of months, I found a designer

to help advance my prototype. Within a few years, I'd developed more than 100 prototypes, acquired four U.S. patents, and come up with a name: Releevum.

I've always had high aspirations, but with my health issues, I'd sometimes worry that I'd never be successful. The obstacles seemed insurmountable. But developing this product allowed me to pour my pent-up ambition into a project, and I finally felt like I could shape my future rather than be stymied by my health.

### UPWARD SWING

I was 14 when I returned to in-person schooling in 2018. I was only 4 feet, 11 inches tall and weighed 75 pounds. I wasn't athletic. But later that fall, a ninja warrior training gym opened near my home in Boca Raton, Fla. I started attending open gym sessions, where I could practice obstacle courses on my own.

I was terrible, but I loved the variety of obstacles and how people cheered for each other. With my *ANW* dream in mind, I kept going back.

The next spring, I competed in recreational leagues. I placed last in my first few competitions, but I progressed rapidly. By the following year, I was ready for more.

I pursued my school PE requirement through an independent study at the ninja warrior gym, and I started strength training with a friend. He showed me his lifting routine and shared his nutrition strategy. I began eating more whole foods, largely abstained from sugar, and ratcheted up my protein intake.

By my senior year of high school, I'd shot up to 5 feet, 9 inches, and I weighed nearly double what I had four years prior. I'd also developed from a social outlier into my school's student-body president and obtained admittance to Yale University. I was thrilled by my progress, but I wasn't going to stop there.

### DREAM COME TRUE

At the start of my freshman year of college, I applied to be on *ANW*. I was one of some 250 athletes — out of more than 100,000 applicants — selected to participate.

I flew to Hollywood the following spring for taping. The experience was brief: I fell during qualifying rounds. Although I was grateful for the opportunity, part of me felt like I'd ruined my one chance at living my dream.

Within 30 minutes of landing back in my hometown, I received a phone call. For the first time in its history, the show was filming two seasons at roughly the same time, and the producers wanted to offer me a second chance.

This time, I meant business. More determined than ever, I made it to the second-to-last obstacle. Even though I couldn't complete the course, I went far enough to advance to the semifinals. There, I raced against one of my childhood heroes, Joe "The Weatherman" Moravsky.

He beat me, but I left Hollywood enriched by the opportunity and honored to compete on the show that had inspired me in my darkest days. It was a full-circle moment — the best experience of my life.

I'm hopeful that I can go back and compete again soon.

### FUTURE GOALS

These days, I strive to do something physical each day. I also try to stay curious, maintain a positive attitude, and grow in my spirituality. I'm still attending Yale, majoring in economics and minoring in data science.

In addition to my personal pursuits, I always make sure to join friends for lunch or dinner. Having spent most of my childhood at home, I'm blessed to surround myself with inspiring people and engage in deep conversations.

When I graduate in 2026, I plan to work in management consulting and continue my pursuits with Releevum. I received a \$10,000 prize from *Entrepreneur Elevator Pitch* in November 2023, and I'm excited to release Releevum into the world.

I created a solution for my own problem years ago when I made my first successful prototype, but there's a long way to go. Millions of people with migraine continue to suffer, and I can't wait to make a difference in their lives too. 🌱

## David's Top Takeaways

1.

**Obstacles are inevitable in both ninja and life.** "Success is determined by how you handle them," David says.

2.

**Dream big.** Never let the fear of failure stop you from trying, he advises. We can accomplish a lot more than we think when we commit to making progress.

3.

**Life is a team sport.** "True success can't be achieved alone," David notes. "Surround yourself with others who encourage you to drive for greatness."



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A photograph of a man in a sauna, looking upwards at the wooden slats. The lighting is warm and golden, creating a soft glow. The man is shirtless and his face is partially in shadow. The background consists of horizontal wooden slats, typical of a sauna interior.

# REAL FITNESS

**TRAINING TO TOLERATE HIGH TEMPERATURES** not only prepares your body for heat stress but may also unlock endurance gains and higher levels of athletic performance. On **page 35**, discover the benefits of both passive and active heat training — and find tips for doing them safely.

# HEELS UP



Prevent injury and boost athleticism with these floating-heel exercises.

BY ANDREW HEFFERNAN, CSCS

**IF YOU LIFT WEIGHTS** regularly, you've probably heard the advice "Keep your heels down." Keeping your feet flat on the ground — with your weight evenly distributed between your heels and the balls of your feet — is considered by many to be the safest and most efficient stance. This form activates more muscle and allows you to lift more weight.

There are times when this rule is worth following. "When the load is up and strength and power demands are up, it makes sense to keep your feet flat," says John Rusin, DPT, a strength-and-conditioning coach, injury-prevention specialist, and founder of the Pain-Free Performance Specialist Certification program. In other words, when you're pulling or pushing big weights, keep both feet flat on the floor.

The rest of the time, however, consider another useful option: training with a "floating heel."

Trainers have recently begun to recognize the huge benefits of performing lower-body movements with your weight shifted onto the balls of your feet and your heels slightly lifted.

Practicing this position prepares you for similar challenges outside the gym, says Rusin. "Very rarely does anything happen with your heels on the ground."

Nearly all athletic movements — including jumping, running, and walking — require you to support your entire weight on the balls of your feet, and often the ball of just one foot, at least for brief periods. In theory, strength training with a floating heel can improve your stability in any activity requiring a heels-up

position, leading to greater power and speed on the court, track, or trail.

It'll also toughen the tissues of your feet and lower legs, reducing the likelihood of a twisted ankle, an Achilles tear, or another injury to your foot, shin, or knee.

"Your knee travels farther forward when you float your heel," Rusin points out. It's a change that emphasizes the quads — the muscles that straighten your knee and help protect the joint from injury.

Floating-heel training also offers variety — something that keeps your muscles growing and your mind engaged — without requiring you to learn an entirely new exercise. It's a simple tweak to moves you might already know.

Rusin recommends the following progression to incorporate a heels-up element into your routine.

# WEEKS 1 TO 3: PREPARE

Perform the following two moves two or three times per week for three weeks. Incorporate them into your warm-up or wherever it makes sense in your routine.

## 1. FLOATING-HEEL BALANCE WITH TOE SMASH

Perform two sets of 15 seconds per foot

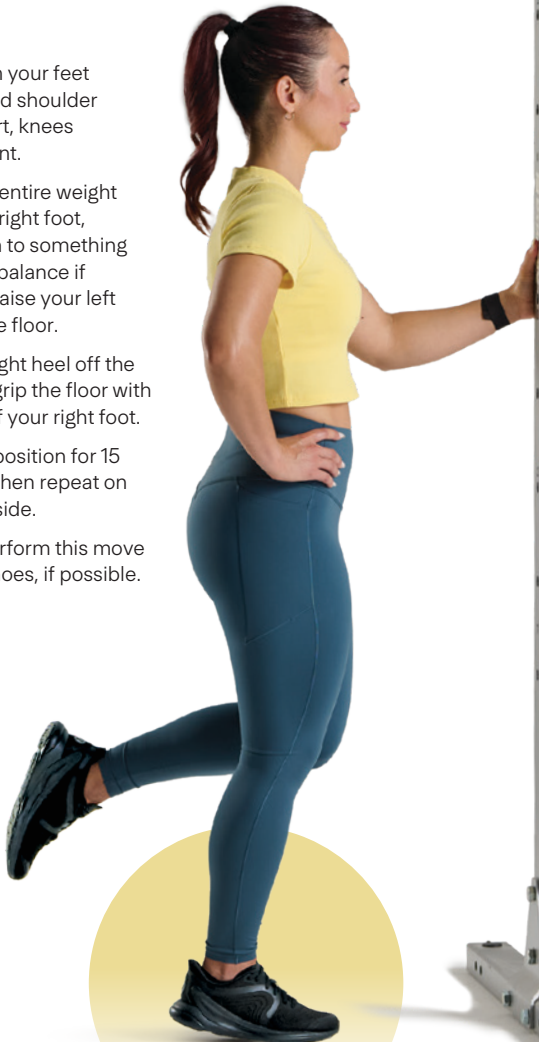
Stand with your feet parallel and shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent.

Shift your entire weight onto your right foot, holding on to something stable for balance if needed. Raise your left foot off the floor.

Lift your right heel off the floor and grip the floor with the toes of your right foot.

Hold this position for 15 seconds, then repeat on the other side.

Pro tip: Perform this move without shoes, if possible.



## 2. STANDING ONE-LEGGED CALF RAISE

Perform two or three sets of 15 to 20 reps per leg



Stand on a step or sturdy box with the balls of both feet planted and heels hanging off the edge. Hold on to something stable for balance.

Raise your left foot so you are balancing on the ball of your right foot only.

Slowly lower your right heel as far as possible. This is your starting position.

Keeping your body upright, push through the ball of your right foot and rise up as high as possible.

Reverse the move slowly. That's one rep. Perform 15 to 20 reps per leg.

# WEEKS 4 TO 20: PROGRESS & PRACTICE

**After the initial three weeks** of preparatory training, progress through the next four moves one at a time, spending four weeks — yes, four weeks — practicing each exercise. This is an intentionally gradual progression: Patiently building up your strength and balance over time will keep you safe and enhance your efforts.

For each movement, perform three sets of the exercise every time you train your lower body,

substituting the move for any conventional lower-body move you're already doing. (The exceptions are heavy squats and deadlifts; keep your heels on the floor for those moves.)

Each week, attempt to increase the weight, reps, or both without compromising form. Every four weeks, move to the next exercise on the list. Work your way through the progression in this manner.

## 3. LANDMINE FLOATING-HEEL GOBLET SQUAT

Perform three sets of 12 to 15 reps

Place a pair of 25-pound weight plates on the floor near the free end of a barbell in a landmine setup.

Lift the barbell's free end to chest height and take hold of it. Step the balls of your feet onto the barbell plates so your feet are parallel to the floor, shoulder width apart.

Slowly lower into a deep squat. If you can, drop your heels toward the floor but not so far that they touch the floor.

Reverse the move until you're fully upright and you've raised your heels as high as possible. Slowly lower your heels until the soles of your feet are parallel to the floor. Repeat the move for 12 to 15 reps.



## 4. FLOATING-HEEL SPLIT SQUAT

Perform three sets of 12 to 15 reps per leg

Holding a dumbbell in your left hand, assume the top position of a lunge, with the ball of your right foot planted on a 25-pound plate and your right heel hovering off the edge.

Keeping your torso upright and your right foot parallel to the floor, slowly bend at your knees and hips until your left

knee is close to the floor, or as far as it's possible to descend without pain.

Reverse the move until you're standing upright. Perform 12 to 15 reps, then repeat on the other side.

Too easy? Perform the move holding a pair of dumbbells.



# 5.

## FLOATING-HEEL STEP-UP WITH KNEE RAISE

Perform three sets of 12 to 15 reps per leg

Stand facing a sturdy box or bench.

Place the ball of your right foot on the box.

Slowly lean your weight onto the ball of your right foot and — with minimal assistance from your left foot — step up fully, raising your left knee as high as possible toward your chest.

Slowly return to the starting position, lowering your left foot to the floor.

Repeat for a total of 12 to 15 reps.

Switch legs and perform the exercise with your left foot on the box.

Too easy? Perform the move holding a pair of dumbbells.



### WATCH & LEARN

To see these exercises in action, visit [ELmag.com/heel Exercises](https://www.elmag.com/heel Exercises).



# 6.

## FLOATING-HEEL REAR-FOOT-ELEVATED SPLIT SQUAT

Perform three sets of 12 to 15 reps per leg

Perform the floating-heel split squats (No. 4, opposite page) with your back foot elevated on a knee-high bench, box, or step.

Repeat for a total of 12 to 15 reps per side.

Too easy? Perform the move holding a pair of dumbbells. 🏋️



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# The L-Sit

This acrobatic feat can help build full-body strength and rock-solid core stability. Work up to it with modifications that suit your fitness level.

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

**THE L-SIT** is a deceptively simple-looking feat of strength. Sit on the floor with your legs straight ahead and your arms straight down, then press through your hands to lift your hips, legs, and feet until your body hovers in an L shape.

This acrobatic move requires full-body strength, mobility, and control — and is out of reach for most people. Luckily, several modifications and progressions exist to help everyone who wants to harness the core-stabilizing powers of this foundational move.

To get started, work on getting comfortable with keeping your weight in your hands and engaging your core. Set up yoga blocks or parallette bars to elevate your hands, and practice pushing your hands down and

raising your hips while keeping your feet on the floor.

Next, use sliders under your feet to practice L-sit pull-throughs and L-sit walks to build strength and body awareness (visit [ELmag.com/l-sit](http://ELmag.com/l-sit) for guidance).

Over time, practice lifting one foot and then the other. Then lift both legs and bring your knees to your chest to practice holding a tuck position. From there, progress to extending one leg at a time until you can fully extend both legs with control.

For each position, begin with five-second holds and work up to 30 seconds (or longer) before leveling up.

Don't grit your teeth or muscle through the move for the sake of leveling up. With every variation, putting in the work with patience and control is what will allow you to truly progress your L-sit.

Actively point your toes away from your shins.

Draw your shoulders away from your ears.

Engage your abs and your thighs as you lift your legs.

Keep your arms straight and press through your hands.

Keep your hips directly under your shoulders.

PHOTO: KELLY LOVERUD; STYLING: PAMI BRAND; MODEL: NATHANIEL KOSBERG

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1.

Sit on the floor, with your legs extended straight in front of you and your palms on the floor (or on yoga blocks or parallette bars) outside of your hips.

### 2.

Press through your hands with straight arms until your hips rise from the floor.

### 3.

Engaging your core and actively pressing through your arms, lift both legs until they are hovering parallel to the floor.

### 4.

Hold for five to 30 seconds. Repeat for two or three sets.



## PREGRESS THE MOVE

Find details on modifying the L-sit at [ELmag.com/l-sit](http://ELmag.com/l-sit).

# Just Add Weight

Want stronger bones and muscles? Incorporate a weighted vest into your fitness routine.

BY HEIDI WACHTER

**STANDING ATOP** Mount Kilimanjaro, Lisa Albert took in a panorama of vast horizons and breathtaking Tanzanian landscapes, including layers of valleys, plains, sun-soaked glaciers, and distant mountains. Beyond the visual rewards, she felt a profound sense of accomplishment: Thousands of people each year attempt to climb the highest freestanding mountain in the world, but not everyone succeeds. Albert, 56, completed her eight-day scramble up steep igneous rock in January 2025.

“It was the hardest thing I ever did,” she says of her days enduring altitude sickness and exhaustion while climbing through blowing snow, sleet, and hail. The newbie mountaineer, who had never even camped before her trip, says she wanted to “shake up the snow globe and challenge myself.”

A former personal trainer and the owner of Twin Cities Fascial Stretch and Wellness, Albert understood the need for preparation. Also, after two back surgeries, she was keen to protect her body from overloading. In the months leading up to the climb, she donned a weighted vest that slipped over her head and buckled at the sides during her daily runs and walks. She progressively increased the challenge over four months by adding weight to the vest.

The effort paid off. While porters carried most of the supplies, Albert

climbed with several extra pounds of gear in her daypack and relished, without distraction, the emotional weight of her accomplishment.

“When I hit about 19,000 feet — or the fake summit known as Stella Point — I got pretty emotional,” she recalls. “It was then I understood what I was doing and there was no turning back.”

## THE BENEFITS OF WEIGHTED VESTS

Weighted vests are a relatively inexpensive and convenient tool to support athletic training and healthy aging. They can be worn while exercising as well as during daily activities like walking or doing chores.

You don't have to be prepping for an extreme adventure to profit from training with a weighted vest.

“Weighted vests are helpful in that they can make our muscles and metabolism work harder so they increase our heart rate,” explains Christopher Gaffney, a senior lecturer in integrative physiology at Lancaster University in England, who studies the fitness effects of weighted vests. “Therefore, doing the same exercise — but with the addition of a weighted vest — would improve your cardiovascular fitness, increase strength, and train the chemical reactions in your body to cope with physical stress better.”

Research suggests that weighted vests may also be a valuable tool for older adults. Studies have shown that wearing one during daily activities — even without additional exercise — can improve key markers of musculoskeletal health, according to Kristen Beavers, PhD, MPH, RD, professor of internal medicine, section of gerontology and geriatric medicine, at Wake Forest School of Medicine. The benefits include maintaining bone density, reducing fall risk, and improving overall physical function.

Many older adults experience muscle and bone loss, which increases the risk of fractures. In a pilot clinical trial, Beavers and her team observed the potential for older

adults who had lost weight to “trick” their bodies into maintaining bone density by wearing a weighted vest for eight to 10 hours a day, mimicking their previous body weight.



**“Weighted vests are helpful in that they can make our muscles and metabolism work harder so they increase our heart rate.”**

## THE RISKS OF WEIGHTED VESTS

To reap the rewards of exercising with a weighted vest, there are a few safety considerations to keep in mind.

One key to minimizing injury is making sure the amount you carry doesn't impact your biomechanics. Gaffney suggests using weighted vests during familiar exercises. In other words, don't start that new 5K training program while wearing a weighted vest. Get used to running first.

He also advises against wearing weighted vests during overhead pressing, deadlifting, and squatting. “The benefit of a weighted vest is likely to be minimal if you're lifting heavy, and the vest could throw off your balance, resulting in injury,” he says. “It also increases spinal compression that could pose an injury risk.”

Individuals coping with chronic back or shoulder pain, severe arthritis, or mobility limitations should use caution. Wearing a vest may not be practical in a hot or wet environment or for activities requiring frequent bending.

## HOW TO CHOOSE A WEIGHTED VEST

The best weighted vest is the one that works best for you, suiting your unique body shape, fitness level, and budget. Follow these tips for finding one that checks all the boxes.

### **Prioritize comfort and mobility.**

Choose a well-fitting vest that feels snug but not restrictive, doesn't hinder your mobility, and feels secure with minimal bouncing when you move. Numerous brands offer various sizes in a smattering of styles, with varying fits to accommodate anatomical differences like torso length, shoulder width, and breasts. Options with adjustable straps and buckles are useful for further customizing the vest to your body.

### **Don't go too heavy too fast.**

Weighted vests typically range from 5 to more than 100 pounds. Start with a lighter vest (5 to 10 percent of your body weight) and gradually increase resistance. Some vests offer adjustable-weight options, allowing you to add or remove weight in increments for progressive overload.

### **Consider your specific needs.**

Will you be using the vest for outdoor workouts in low-light conditions? Look for vests with light or bright colors and reflective detailing. Do you plan to carry your keys and a phone? Look for a vest with secure pockets to hold essentials. Will your vest get dirty or sweaty? Pay attention to cleaning instructions and washability.

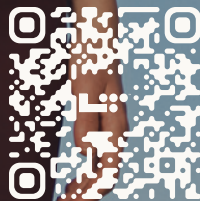
Don't feel pressured to break the bank. Weighted vests can be suitable for a variety of budgets, ranging from about \$30 for basic, lighter-weight versions to more than \$200 for models with high-end materials. 🌱

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

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# Turn Up the Heat

Training to tolerate high temps can level up your endurance and athletic performance no matter the conditions. This guidance can help you acclimate safely.

BY **DANNY KING**

**IN THE FALL OF 2024**, I stepped up to the start line of the Austin Rattler 50K, an ultramarathon across challenging singletrack and fire roads in the heart of Texas Hill Country. The landscape was rugged and the weather was hot — and getting hotter.

The temperature was set to top out in the low 80s — a notable difference from my home training grounds in Minnesota, where a wintry chill was already in the air. The 50-degree temperature swing had me more worried than the rolling hills and potential rattlesnake encounters.

As I set off on the 30-plus-mile race — including some 2,500 feet of climbing — I calmed my nerves by leaning into my training. For 12 weeks, I'd been preparing for exactly this moment through dedicated endurance and strength training as well as progressive exposure to heat.

Research has shown that heat-prep training — also called heat training or heat acclimatization — not only prepares the body for heat stress but can also unlock endurance gains and higher levels of athletic performance regardless of temperature.

As Life Time's director of performance and recovery, I love doing research and putting my findings to the test. Here's what I learned while preparing for the Rattler.

## HEAT TRAINING 101

Heat training comes in two forms: passive and active. Passive heat training is accomplished by spending time in a hot environment, typically a sauna or hot tub, directly after exercising. Active heat training is done by working out in a hot environment or, if that's not available, by layering clothing to simulate heat.

There are drawbacks to and cautions around heat training. Driving up core temperature in heat training creates more stress on the body than it gets with standard endurance workouts. If you have any history of heart problems or stress-related health issues, this likely isn't for you.

I can say from personal experience that heat conditioning can also be miserably difficult, even at lower intensities. Training in the heat drives up the rate of perceived exertion, so be sure you already have a strong routine before starting. As a rule, it's wise to speak with your doctor before integrating heat training into your regimen.

## SAFE PROTOCOLS

The simplest way to integrate heat training into your routine is to visit the sauna or hot tub directly after your workout. These passive heat sessions should be at least 20 minutes long; most studies recommend at least 30 minutes. Start with one or two sessions per week and ramp up to three or four as your tolerance improves.

For active heat training, start by replacing one current workout with a heat-stress workout. This is best done at lower to moderate intensities (50 to 70 percent of  $\text{VO}_2$  max) for 45 to 60 minutes. Some studies have suggested doing these workouts as many as five times per week, but one or two sessions is usually beneficial and safe for most people.

My preferred protocol combines the two. I spend 20 minutes in the sauna after my hardest run of the week and do two heat-stress workouts each week: one dedicated workout on a bike, plus one 20- to 30-minute

moderate-intensity finisher in my DIY heat suit — think extra layers — after a harder workout.

Make sure to increase your overall hydration and electrolyte intake to replace the extra fluids you'll lose. And always stop a session if you feel dizzy, nauseous, or overheated.

When it comes to heat training, higher temps are not better; overdoing it can end up hampering your training efforts. A new category of wearable technology measures body temperature, but most people don't need that level of precision. You are looking for an increased sweat rate, a slight increase in your heart rate above normal effort, and a feeling of being hot but not overheating.

The benefits may show up in as little as seven days, and the improvements seem to max out at around four weeks. This means it's important to be strategic about ramping up your heat work. Adding it to your last block of training before an event is a great way to get positive gains without too much stress.

That said, the positive adaptations begin to dissipate within a couple of weeks. One or two passive heat sessions per week can help most people maintain the benefits.

While I don't have lab data to prove that my heat training worked, I survived my Rattler race, and the Texas heat was no issue. My next race is taking place where the temp should be much lower, but I'm going to bring out the heat suit at least once a week during training to maximize my potential gains.

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**DANNY KING** is a Life Time master trainer and Life Time's director of performance and recovery.

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# The Teacher Within

What I've learned from more than a decade of moving intuitively.



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

**WHEN I WAS ABOUT** 15 years old, I became minorly obsessed with the saying “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” Though no one knows the quote’s true origin, I encountered it in some tome on Arthurian legend.

Neck-deep in teenage hormones and a swamp of uncomfortable emotions, I felt constantly adrift and on the verge of drowning. In the ‘90s, mental health issues weren’t as easy to discuss as they are now. Rather than ask for help, I plastered a smile to my face and instead wished for help.

I dedicated myself to being the kind of student who could attract my own personal Merlin. I wanted nothing more than to meet someone who could reveal my innate strengths for me. Someone who could help me step into my power and discover my true best self.

In the more than 25 years since, I have met many incredible teachers. But no singular wizard-like sage ever appeared to make my wish of self-actualization come true. As it turned out, that is something that is bestowed not from the outside in but from the inside out.

In 2013, I began practicing the tenets of intuitive movement: meeting myself where I am in the moment, applying intentional stress without ego or judgment, and implementing biofeedback tests to develop greater intuitive awareness.

Since then, I have discovered reserves of strength (literal and metaphorical) that I didn’t know existed. And I have built on that power,

becoming not my “best” self but simply more *myself*. There is an ease in existing as myself that I could not have imagined at 15.

Which is not to say there aren’t challenges. Life is hard. The outside world is full of tragedy and sorrow and pressure to look, act, think, and be a certain way. On the inside, hormones and emotions aren’t always harmonious.

The wisdom that comes through the body isn’t a panacea. Moving intuitively won’t cure all our ills or make our problems disappear.

For me, honoring my intuition through movement has made it possible to sit with, and move through, the hard stuff — in and out of the gym.

This past year included some *big* hard things: competing in a hybrid-fitness competition, traversing the Grand Canyon from the North Rim to the South Rim, writing a book, and saying goodbye to my father. It also included some little hard things, such as grappling with my distaste for getting sweaty outdoors (which is hilarious given my proclivity for outdoor adventuring and the incredible benefits of taking fitness outside, which you can learn more about on page 60).

Tuning in to my body, noticing the signals that come through, and letting them inform — but not necessarily dictate — my decisions and behaviors has been a life-changing skill.

If I could reassure my 15-year-old self of anything, it would be that when she is ready, she’ll find her best teacher within herself.

## 5 LESSONS OF INTUITIVE MOVEMENT

I’ve learned many life lessons through moving my body. These five rise to the surface today.

**1. Getting started is the hardest part.** I’m a master procrastinator, even concerning things I love. Committing to just taking the first step — doing “just 10 minutes” — is usually enough to either get over the hump of internal friction or confirm my hunch to do something else instead.

**2. Even when it’s hard, I can keep moving.** Doing the hard thing doesn’t have to be synonymous with suffering. Meeting my body where it’s at, rather than trapping my focus on where I want it to go, opens my eyes to opportunities for agency and growth and lightness in the moment.

**3. Progress isn’t linear.** At the start of my fitness journey, I wanted to see straight lines on my progress graphs. Now I view my experiences as spirals. Yes, sometimes I feel like I’m treading the same paths, revisiting the lessons I thought I’d already learned. But when I settle myself and look closely, I can see the path is never exactly the same — and neither am I.

**4. This, too, shall pass.** Everything is temporary — the good, the bad, the ugly, and everything in between. I remind myself to relish what feels good, not get too hung up on what’s challenging, and avoid getting too attached to anything.

**5. It’s supposed to be hard.** From our muscles to our brains, everything in the human body is built to adapt. Intuitive movement isn’t about taking the easy way out or avoiding discomfort; it’s about applying and integrating stress intentionally in doses that can be reconciled and integrated.

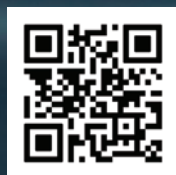


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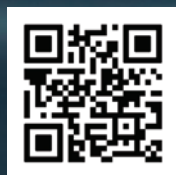


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# REAL FOOD

**AUTUMN'S COOLER WEATHER** is prime time for crucifers and head vegetables, such as broccoli, cabbage, bok choy, and romaine lettuce. Find recipes on **page 50** that bring this array of nutrient-dense produce to the center of your plate, and get the recipe for these Roasted Romaine Hearts at [ELmag.com/headvegetables](http://ELmag.com/headvegetables).

# A TOAST TO MODERATION

On the health effects of alcohol, for better or worse.

BY MO PERRY

**FEW PLEASURES RIVAL** the sharing of good food and drink with dear friends. From raising a toast at the outset of a meal to lingering over dessert with a digestif, alcohol can add fun, pleasure, and ceremony to social gatherings.

“Animals feed, but humans tend to eat and build a culture around it,” says nutrition-psychology educator Marc David, MA. “Lingering and socializing over a meal gives us a chance to celebrate food and drink, a chance to get to be human.”

Still, the health effects of drinking alcohol are hotly debated. A January

2025 advisory from then-U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy notes that consuming alcohol increases the risk for at least seven types of cancer.

Conversely, a 2024 meta-analysis from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded that moderate drinking (defined as two drinks or fewer in a day for men and no more than one drink in a day for women) is associated with lower all-cause mortality.

Alcohol-consumption guidelines reflect these contradictions: In the early 2000s, many health authorities suggested that moderate

consumption of red wine might offer certain health benefits, such as improved cardiovascular health. But in 2022, the World Heart Federation took the position that no level of alcohol consumption is safe for heart health.

It can all be a bit bewildering, to say the least.

While most of us know that drinking to excess isn't in anyone's best interest, and that addiction issues are a separate category, one might still wonder what's up with occasional social imbibing. So we talked to some experts, and this is what we learned.



## WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF MODERATE DRINKING?

**Many cultural traditions** feature moderate drinking. Four of the five Blue Zones — cultures around the world with the longest-lived populations — include modest social drinking as part of their routines. (The exception is Loma Linda, Calif., a Blue Zone with a large population of Seventh-day Adventists.)

The jury is out on whether alcohol itself contributes to longevity, but many experts believe modest drinking can facilitate stronger social networks. Those do sustain us.

“Research shows that people who drink socially . . . tend to have more friends and so more emotional support, a key source of mental health,” writes neuropsychopharmacologist David Nutt, DM, in *Drink? The New Science of Alcohol and Your Health*. “They also feel more contented and more involved in their local community.”

In a 2012 study, psychologists filmed groups of three people getting to know each other. Some groups drank alcohol, some a placebo, and some a control beverage. The members of the mildly intoxicated group reported more feelings of closeness in their interactions and displayed more genuine smiles than those in the other two groups.

Beer and wine may also offer some modest health benefits. Red wine contains resveratrol, a polyphenol in red grapes that’s beneficial for the heart. Functional nutritionist Jesse Haas, CNS, LN, notes that the silicon and hops in beer may protect brain cells and slow neurological disorders, such as Alzheimer’s.

“Beer can be a source of magnesium, calcium, and phytoestrogens that are beneficial for hormonal balance,” adds Haas.

Marc David notes that alcohol’s relaxing effects are also supportive. “Alcohol stimulates the mental and emotional but also the physiologic relaxation response,” he says. “That’s where we’re designed to do our most optimal digestion, assimilation, and natural appetite regulation.”

## HOW DOES THE BODY REACT TO ALCOHOL?

**Here’s what happens** under the hood after that cold beer or celebratory margarita. First, the alcohol is absorbed through the walls of the stomach and small intestine. The bloodstream carries it to the liver, where an enzyme called alcohol dehydrogenase starts to break it down, producing a byproduct called acetaldehyde. (An excess of this chemical compound is the culprit behind hangovers.)

The alcohol and acetaldehyde mixture travels from the liver to the heart and crosses the blood-brain barrier to enter the brain. This gives you a buzz, usually within 10 or 15 minutes of your first sip. Your blood vessels start to expand, possibly making you feel warmer and a little flushed.

Alcohol then activates the calming GABA (gamma aminobutyric acid) system in the brain, which relaxes you and lowers your inhibitions; it also stimulates the release of the feel-good neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine as well as endorphins, your body’s natural opioids. These chemical rewards all contribute to alcohol’s de-stressing effects — as well as to its addictive allure.

**“Lingering and socializing over a meal gives us a chance to celebrate food and drink, a chance to get to be human.”**

## WHY DO WE EACH HANDLE ALCOHOL DIFFERENTLY?

Have you ever wondered why you seem to tolerate alcohol so differently than your Uncle Bill, who spills all his secrets after two sips of beer? Or your Aunt Beth, who can drink the entire family under the table? Several factors influence how we process alcohol, including age, sex, genetics, body composition, and hormonal fluctuations.

“How we detoxify is different from person to person,” notes functional-medicine practitioner Marcelle Pick, OB-GYN, NP.

**“Alcohol doesn’t absorb into fat, so it ends up being in the blood longer and at higher concentrations.”**

In general, male bodies tend to tolerate alcohol better than female ones, due in part to their larger size but also because of differences in body composition, including water (which dilutes alcohol) and fat. “People with ovaries have higher body fat than people with testes,” explains Haas. “Alcohol doesn’t absorb into fat, so it ends up being in the blood longer and at higher concentrations.”

Women also have lower levels of alcohol dehydrogenase, the enzyme that breaks down alcohol in the liver. And roughly a third to half of people of Asian descent possess a genetic variant that lowers levels of this enzyme, which means they don’t break down alcohol as efficiently and may be more likely to become flushed and nauseated from drinking.

## HOW DOES TOLERANCE CHANGE AS WE AGE?

When we’re in our 20s, enthusiastic social drinking might fit seamlessly alongside fitness routines, jobs, and other obligations. A couple of decades later, the same approach to alcohol might tank our functioning.

That’s because as we age, we process alcohol less efficiently. “Some are surprised by it and find they feel intoxicated by the same amount of alcohol they used to drink [without a problem],” says Pick. But as we get older, we have less muscle mass and body water, she explains, which affects alcohol processing.

The liver’s capacity to break down alcohol decreases with time. Think of a bathtub. When the drain is open, the tub empties easily. As we move on in years, the liver’s drain tends to slow down. “One hypothesis is there’s less blood flow to the liver as we age,” says Haas. “If blood is flowing to the liver at a lower rate, then that drain is also slower.”

There’s also the simple fact that the longer we live, the greater our exposure to various toxins — and the greater their cumulative burden on the liver.

“The more you’re hanging on to those toxins, the more the drain is clogged and metabolism is slowed down,” cautions Haas. “It’s important for everyone to cultivate a detox-supportive diet and lifestyle, and keeping alcohol consumption moderate is important for that. The less effectively those detox pathways function, the more likely we are to experience disease as we age.”



## HOW DO HORMONES AFFECT TOLERANCE?

As with age, hormones can influence how we process alcohol. Higher estrogen levels, for example, slow alcohol metabolism. For women, that means tolerance is generally highest around menstruation, when estrogen levels drop, and lowest around ovulation, when estrogen is high. (Other factors can also play a role: Overall hydration, for instance, can dip during menstruation, decreasing tolerance.)

In general, excess alcohol consumption increases the production of estrogen and decreases the ways it's metabolized, says Pick. "There are different pathways where estrogen is metabolized, and some pathways increase the risk of breast cancer. That may be one reason there's an association between regular alcohol consumption and breast cancer."

People with uterine fibroids, endometriosis, or PMS symptoms may want to be especially careful to moderate their consumption, says Haas. "PMS symptoms like breast tenderness or night sweats are indicative of an estrogen imbalance."

Alcohol may exacerbate perimenopause symptoms, too, in part because it increases noradrenaline, which contributes to hot flashes. It can also lower testosterone by increasing levels of the enzyme that breaks it down.

## WHAT IS MODERATION?

Everyone's tolerance is different, so the question of moderation can be tricky.

Like the National Academies, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines moderate drinking as no more than two drinks in a day for men and one per day for women. Functional-

medicine physician Elizabeth Boham, MD, MS, RD, encourages men to aim for 10 or fewer drinks per week; women for five or fewer. "It's healthier not to concentrate those drinks into one or two days but to spread them out."

If you're regularly drinking more than this, she suggests, look for the underlying reason. Is it to relax? To socialize? Or has drinking simply become a habit?

"Once you figure out what's driving it, you can find other ways to meet those needs," she says. Going for a walk or hitting a yoga class can be a great way to relax and transition after work. If it's the ritual you miss, try swapping in sparkling water or a mocktail. (Looking for alcohol-free alternatives? Try one of the recipes at [ELmag.com/summermocktails](http://ELmag.com/summermocktails).)

Finally, if you pay closer attention to how drinking makes you feel, it may become easier to notice — and switch to water — when you're overdoing it.

"Alcohol, like caffeine and sugar, is a powerful substance," says David. "With any powerful substance, it's always about the dose. You want to come to that substance with a healthy respect and understand, *I can get a great benefit from this if I can hit the sweet spot, where I get what I'm looking for without stepping over the line.*"

**"Alcohol, like caffeine and sugar, is a powerful substance. With any powerful substance, it's always about the dose."**

## THE PROBLEM OF EXCESS

If you're not at risk for alcohol addiction and are able to drink socially, consuming alcohol occasionally and modestly may have real benefits. Consuming it in excess, however, can lead to multiple health problems.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, excessive alcohol use can put you at risk for high blood pressure,

heart disease, digestive problems, cancer, weakening of the immune system, dementia, depression, and alcohol dependence. These risks from drinking alcohol are not linear but exponential, meaning they don't just increase with more drinking — they worsen.

Still, scaling back can make a big impact. "If you drink a high amount, cutting

down will reduce your risk of harm much more than if you are reducing from a low level," explains David Nutt, DM, in his book *Drink? The New Science of Alcohol and Your Health*.

Reducing frequency and taking routine breaks from alcohol can also make a difference. Elizabeth Boham, MD, MS, RD, notes that 90 percent of people who have

two or more drinks a day are at risk for fatty liver, a condition in which sugars from alcohol are stored in the liver as fat. (Fatty liver has also been linked with insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes.)

But stopping alcohol consumption, even just for a couple of weeks, can start to reverse the condition. (For more on fatty liver, see [ELmag.com/liverhealth](http://ELmag.com/liverhealth).)

## CAN DRINKING AID DIGESTION?

It certainly can. Digestifs such as aquavit, amaro, and brandy are made with herbs and spices containing potent digestive benefits. “These can be quite intense in their taste and herbal profile,” says David. They help stimulate digestive enzymes after a big meal, ushering the contents of the stomach along the GI tract.

Historically, alcohol was sometimes used to protect the gut against parasites; fermenting grains was a way to create drinkable beverages in the absence of clean water. And Haas notes that vermouth is made with wormwood, which is antiparasitic.

Still, alcohol’s most important contribution to digestion is stimulating the relaxation response, critical for our ability to digest and assimilate nutrients from food.

“Anything that helps us move out of the stress response makes us more open to pleasure,” says David, noting that the stress hormone cortisol naturally blunts our pleasure receptors. “If you eat a dessert when you’re stressed, you’ll have to eat more cake or ice cream to get the same amount of pleasure.”

By catalyzing the relaxation response, enjoying a drink at the beginning of a meal can help attune us to the pleasure of eating, which helps enhance our digestion.

## HOW DO DIFFERENT ALCOHOLS AFFECT US?

Though many of us feel that certain alcohols affect us differently (it seems like red wine disturbs our sleep, or that tequila makes us euphoric), there’s little science to explain why this may be so. “From a chemical standpoint, there’s no difference from one alcohol to another — though there may be a difference in other compounds in the beverage,” says Haas.

Brown liquors, such as brandy and bourbon, as well as darker beer and red wine, do tend to have more congeners — complex alcohols formed in the aging process that are associated with worse hangovers and possibly greater intoxication.

And if gluten gives you trouble, so will gluten-containing beverages, such as beer or rye whiskey. As for tequila’s reputation as a “clean” spirit, it is grain-free and made from agave, and it doesn’t spike blood sugar as much as some other liquors. This may account for why some people feel less of a negative impact after drinking it.

The way alcohols are processed also has an effect. “There are toxins and pesticides in alcohol that can impact how much stress it puts on the body’s detox system,” notes Boham. Opting for organic or biodynamic wines can minimize the toxic load.

As with most things, you’ll have to experiment to find which alcoholic beverages, if any, feel right for you. “If you want to occasionally have a drink, experiment to see what’s less problematic for you,” advises Pick.

And then savor it — ideally in wonderful company. ☘

MO PERRY is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

## THE SHIFT TO THC DRINKS

Many people are turning to THC drinks as an alcohol alternative. These consumers often aren’t seeking to avoid intoxication so much as to find a way to relax without risking alcohol’s more unwelcome effects.

Dana Thompson, founder and CEO of Heti, a Minnesota-based THC beverage brand, is one of those people. She finds the relaxing effects of a low-dose THC and CBD beverage to be a welcome replacement for alcohol. While alcohol can be

stress relieving in the moment, it can also have a backlash effect, leading to “hangxiety” — heightened anxiety once alcohol leaves the system. (Ever wake up with a racing mind at 3 a.m. following a night of drinking?)

“We all love to celebrate,” says Thompson. “It’s nice to have something that we can enjoy at the end of the day or bring with us to a party that’s different from alcohol. It’s a way to take the edge off. It drops our shoulders and makes us feel good.”

Still, the effects of THC are highly individual. Some find it helps ease anxiety, while others find it provokes anxiety. For many, the effects depend on the dose. Doses on the lower end, particularly when combined with CBD, are more likely to promote relaxation without triggering paranoia.

If you haven’t seen THC beverages in your area yet, you may soon. The regulatory landscape is evolving. Some states allow THC beverages to be sold in retail outlets, while others still ban the sale of THC in all forms.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and state regulatory agencies are under growing pressure to establish guidelines for its sale and use, particularly concerning product safety, marketing, and age restrictions.

If you’re curious to try a THC beverage, it’s wise to start with a low-dose variety, containing no more than 3 milligrams of THC. And look for brands that avoid food dyes and excessive sugar.



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# Marinated Tomatoes

This no-cook recipe is a cinch to toss together and makes a yummy addition to salads, sandwiches, and more.

BY KAELYN RILEY

**I'M A NOVICE GARDENER** at best, and for each of the last five or so years, I've done the same uncertain dance with my backyard tomatoes.

I start seeds in late March, always on my mother's birthday, dutifully poking the tiny pods into the potting soil with the end of an ink pen. They then live in my basement in nursery pots until it's time to transfer them outside.

Although I tend them carefully every day for that first week — placing them on heating pads under grow lamps and sprinkling them with water — I always feel the same sort of hesitant skepticism. The little pots look as if they could hold dirt and nothing else. It's so cold in the basement, and the seeds are so small. What if nothing ever grows?

Each year when their little green hands finally break through the surface of the soil, I feel like I'm witnessing a magic trick.

Still, I continue to nurse doubts well into the month of June, even after I've transferred the plants to raised beds in my backyard and they've grown as tall as I am, their stalks thick as my index finger. Have I

pruned them enough? Have I pruned them too much? Are they getting enough sun? Will the fruit ever turn?

So far, my plants have always made a fool of me, such that I'm nearly drowning in tomatoes by the time September rolls around. I eat them at every meal. I give them away to the neighbors. I cook them into sauces and soups and slice them into salads and sometimes eat the little ones by the bowlful, like popcorn.

I freeze them whole or blanch and peel them to pack into canning jars for my December self, who will have forgotten the warmth of summer and will need a jar of something to remind her.

This is a recipe for that moment in September, when my freezer and canning shelves are full but the tomatoes are somehow still coming in faster than I can eat them. I love how simple it is. I can mix it up in the morning and, after little effort, have something to eat just a few hours later.

I also love the timing flexibility: I can be eating marinated tomatoes within an hour, or if I have more tasks to attend to or more ingredients to prep, I can let them hang out on my

counter for up to a few hours. You can stash your marinating tomatoes in the fridge if you like; just be sure to bring them to room temperature before you serve them, because they'll have a better texture and flavor without the chill.

This recipe is especially good for end-of-season or underripe fruit. Given a little olive-oil bath and infused with garlic and fresh herbs, even subpar tomatoes will turn juicy and flavorful.

Sometimes I'll add a bit of fresh basil and stir the marinated tomatoes into cooked pasta, farro, or barley. Or I'll toss them with spring greens, chickpeas, and crumbled feta cheese, using the tomato juices and olive oil as a kind of salad dressing. You could spread some ricotta or avocado on sourdough toast and make a pile of marinated tomatoes on top. Or eat them (as I'll eat nearly anything) with an over-easy egg or two.

Consider just spooning them straight from the bowl into your mouth, because it's still tomato season and the only rule is to not leave any behind.



Makes four servings  
 Prep time: 10 minutes  
 Marinating time: one to four hours



1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil



1 tbs. white-wine vinegar



2 cloves garlic, grated



2 tbs. minced fresh parsley



3/4 tsp. kosher salt



1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper



1/2 tsp. red-pepper flakes



2 pints grape or cherry tomatoes, halved



In a medium bowl, whisk the olive oil, white-wine vinegar, garlic, parsley, salt, pepper, and red-pepper flakes until combined. Add the tomatoes and stir to coat.

Cover the bowl loosely with a clean kitchen towel, and allow the tomatoes to marinate at room temperature for at least one hour or up to four hours.

Serve marinated tomatoes tossed with cooked pasta or beans, spooned over grilled chicken or fried eggs, spread on toast, or with anything else you like.

Marinated tomatoes will keep covered in the refrigerator for three to four days. Allow them to sit at room temperature for 20 minutes before serving. 🌱

# Liquid Assets

From beverages to brine, there's a wealth of flavor hiding in your kitchen.

BY SUSAN PAGANI

**LIQUIDS MAY BE** the hardest-working ingredients in the kitchen. They cook rice, poach fish, steam dumplings, and braise vegetables. They transform a random assortment of leftovers into a soup. They give texture and structure to some of our favorite foods, like fork-tender ribs and delicate layer cakes. Along the way, liquids pull a dish together by helping flavors bloom, develop, and mingle.

For the home cook, all of that utility adds up to a whole lot of opportunity for liquid creativity.

Think about the flavors of a nut brown ale unfurling across your palate, lightly fruity and full of malty cocoa and toasted hazelnut. Or the sophisticated floral sweetness of jasmine tea. Or consider the tangy notes of a classic dill-pickle brine: salty, puckery, and refreshing.

If you're not cooking with all that, you're missing out. Everyday liquids like beer, tea, wine, pickle juice, and coffee can lend a wealth of flavor and complexity to your dishes.

Here's how to put them to use in your favorite recipes.

## BEER

"Beer gives home cooks a lot to work with," explains Jackie Dodd-Mallory, a Seattle-based food writer and founder of The Beeronomist. She ought to know: She's written several books (as Jacquelyn Dodd) about cooking with beer.

Beer has a minimum of four base ingredients (most wines and spirits have only one or two), and each brings a lot of variety. "Take hops," Dodd-Mallory says. "They're bred to have very specific flavor notes: tropical, citrus, herbal. Not only that, but you have carbonation, which works really well in baking."

She uses flat leftover beer to tenderize meat. The beer's acids and tannins break down the meat, infusing it with moisture and flavor. Malty beers, like porter or brown ale, boast rich, toasty notes that can enhance the flavor of everything from pulled pork to a Thanksgiving turkey.

For lighter fare, try lighter beer. Dodd-Mallory uses a fruit-forward Belgian-style pale ale or a malty pilsner to make an elegant béarnaise, which she often serves with tender asparagus and a poached egg. (Try her recipe at [ELmag.com/liquidassets](http://ELmag.com/liquidassets).)

Bakers, here's a sourdough shortcut: Use sour beer to feed your starter. "[It has] the same wild yeast and bacteria that give sourdough its flavor," Dodd-Mallory says. "In bread, sours become this kind of baker superliquid for replacing water — you have the grains, the yeast, and the carbonation for leavening, and then all that great tang too."





## TEA

We drink tea for pleasure, for its health benefits, or simply to wake up. Why not cook with it? "Think of tea like a spice or a spice blend," says Gina Amador, former minister of creativity for The Republic of Tea in Larkspur, Calif., who often cooks with brewed tea to infuse her food with more flavor.

Black teas offer bold, malty flavors and plenty of tenderizing tannins. A smoky lapsang souchong can create a rich sauce: Combine it with an acid, like red-wine vinegar, and use it to deglaze a pan, then add butter and aromatics.

Amador also recommends cooking with chai, with its warming spices — think cinnamon, ginger, star anise, cloves, or black pepper. "Make a concentrate," she says. "It's amazing in barbecue sauce and anywhere you use vanilla, like shortbread." (Get our recipe for Chai Tea Concentrate at [ELmag.com/chai](http://ELmag.com/chai).)

Oolong's floral undertones are great for poaching fish and chicken — or adding savory depth to a veggie soup. Sweet, nutty African rooibos tea makes a fine cooking liquid for quick grains, like couscous and quinoa.

Tea can also give other liquids a boost. Amador suggests steeping bags of chai in chicken broth for soup; Earl Grey tea in gin for a citrusy bergamot-infused martini; or hibiscus tea in vinegar — those bold berry notes will be great anywhere you need some zing.



## TOP IT OFF

Find Jackie Dodd-Mallory's beer béarnaise recipe at [ELmag.com/liquidassets](http://ELmag.com/liquidassets).

## WINE

Andrew Lim, executive chef at Perilla Korean American Fare and Korean American Steakhouse in Chicago, chooses his cooking wines based on a variety of characteristics, including terroir, tasting notes, and their transformative powers.

He often turns to cheongju — the sweet, tangy byproduct of makgeolli, a Korean wine made with fermented grains. Its acidity and natural enzymes make it great for tenderizing meat. He uses it in marinades, to rinse fish after curing, and to deglaze a pan. "You'll want to use a small amount of it," he says. "But it adds a lot of umami that you don't get from any other ingredient."

Big, fruity red wines with middling tannins pair well with bold, complex flavors. Lim leans on reds for a twist on a Korean classic like galbi jjim — braised short ribs similar to a beef bourguignon — or to add complexity to a marinade. A crisp rosé or orange wine can offer tart citrus notes for lighter fare.

"I love cooking off aromatics, and then just as they're starting to brown, hitting them with white wine," he says. "That smell — it's just beautiful."

Fortified wines and sweet whites are better for poaching fruits, creating glazes, or macerating dried fruit. "Throw a raisin in a flavorful wine like sherry or port, and it plumps up into a super delicious fruit bomb," he notes. "I'll use them to garnish a cauliflower dish or make a gremolata."

## PICKLE JUICE

Lebanese chef and cookbook author Lina Saad hardly ever has leftover pickle brine. "I never use vinegar if I can use pickle juice because it has that bright intensity — the layers of flavor that come with fermentation," she explains.

The London-based chef uses pickle juice to balance sweet, hot, and creamy flavors. For example, in her habanero-mango wing sauce, the sour pucker balances the fruit and contrasts boldly with the requisite blue cheese dressing.

Pickle juice with olive oil, cumin, and a bit of citrus juice makes a wonderful vinaigrette. The salty, sweet, and sour combination is a great addition to any salad.

You can add a splash of brine to any recipe in which you'd ordinarily use vinegar. It balances out the fats in deviled eggs, gives bloody marys a salty punch, and makes lentil soup sing.

And if you have a full jar of pickle juice? Amador suggests combining it with olive oil and seasoning to create a marinade for juicy poultry, such as a pickle-brined fried chicken.



## COFFEE

Strong-brewed coffee is a natural for a low-and-slow braise, like with beef or lamb. Combined with spicy aromatics and red wine, it yields fork-tender meat with serious Sunday-supper vibes.

Amador throws a shot of espresso in her turkey chili for a robust depth of flavor. The espresso's toasty chocolate notes and bitter edge make all the warming spices in the chili a little bolder while rounding out the tomato's acidic edges.

Coffee also has plenty of uses beyond the savory. Saad's Lebanese foodways include French culinary influences — notably pastry. She dunks ladyfingers in dark coffee for tiramisu. Or better yet, her favorite use for coffee is folding it into pastry cream and piling it onto a layered walnut cake.

Whether it's sweet Kenyan or citrusy Costa Rican, light-to medium-roast coffees are less bitter and more acidic. That flavor profile complements the rich, tangy sweetness of balsamic vinegar, and you'll sometimes see coffee and vinegar combined in vinaigrettes, glazes, and even lattes.

"Always use fresh coffee for drinking or cooking," Saad advises. "It loses its goodness if it sits around, and you absolutely cannot reheat it." ☕



# HEAD OF THE TABLE

These versatile veggies are packed with vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients to support your health.

BY KATE MORGAN

## ANY FARMERS' MARKET

shopper knows that summertime is a prime season for excellent produce. And while I love tomatoes and stone fruits as much as anyone, I'm partial to the handful of cool-weather vegetables that crop up at my local market as summer turns to fall. Think crucifers and veggies that grow in heads — broccoli, cauliflower, bok choy, and cabbage.

Most of these vegetables are available year-round at many grocery stores. But because they thrive in cooler temperatures, fall is often a great time to find locally grown varieties.

Whatever the weather where you live, it's always a good time to consider building a meal around a head of one of these vegetables. They boast an impressive array of vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients. They're all good sources of vitamins C and K, which help support the immune system, bone health, blood-sugar regulation, and more. Another nutrient they have in common: folate, a B vitamin that's crucial for building blood cells and DNA.

Any way you slice them, these hearty vegetables offer a variety of health-supporting benefits. And these recipes will make you feel good from your head to your toes.



## Green Goddess Broccoli Salad

Makes four servings  
Prep time: 20 minutes

### FOR THE SALAD

- 2 cups broccoli florets, chopped small
- 1 cup grated carrot
- 1 cup diced red cabbage
- 1 tbs. dried cranberries, chopped
- ¼ cup roasted cashews, chopped
- ½ cup diced fresh mozzarella

Mix the broccoli, carrot, cabbage, cranberries, cashews, and mozzarella in a large bowl.

Add the dressing ingredients to a blender or food processor and blend until smooth (small flecks of herbs will remain). Toss the salad with the dressing and serve.

### FOR THE GREEN GODDESS DRESSING

- ¾ cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt
- 1 cup fresh parsley, loosely packed
- 1 tbs. fresh mint leaves
- 1 tbs. fresh basil leaves
- 1 tbs. fresh dill
- 3 tbs. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste



## Bok Choy Miso Soup

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

- 1 tbs. sesame oil
- ½ yellow onion, thinly sliced
- 8 oz. cremini mushrooms, sliced
- 1 tsp. minced fresh ginger
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- 2 tbs. white miso paste
- 6 cups vegetable broth
- 6 oz. rice noodles
- 2 heads baby bok choy, stalks diced and leaves thinly sliced
- ½ cup mung-bean sprouts
- 1 lime, cut into wedges
- Sriracha, to taste

In a heavy-bottomed pot, heat the sesame oil over medium heat. Sauté the onion and mushrooms until they begin to soften, approximately five minutes. Add the ginger and garlic and cook until fragrant, about two minutes more.

Stir in the salt and miso paste, then add the broth, scraping any browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Adjust the heat as needed

to bring the mixture to a simmer, then add the noodles and cook according to package directions. When the noodles are about halfway done, add the bok choy.

Once the noodles are tender and the bok choy is wilted, stir in the bean sprouts. Divide the soup among four bowls, and finish with a squeeze of fresh lime juice and sriracha to taste.



## Mediterranean Caramelized Cabbage With Tzatziki Sauce

Makes four servings • Prep time: 10 minutes • Cook time: one hour

### FOR THE CABBAGE

- 1 head savoy cabbage
- 2 tbs. plus 1 tsp. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 3 tbs. tahini
- ½ tsp. dried oregano
- ¼ tsp. dried thyme
- ¼ tsp. dried rosemary
- ¼ tsp. ground coriander
- ¼ tsp. ground cumin
- ¼ tsp. sea salt
- ⅓ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ¾ cup vegetable broth

### FOR THE TZATZIKI SAUCE

- 1 cup plain, full-fat Greek yogurt
- ¼ cup grated cucumber
- 1 tbs. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tsp. minced fresh dill
- ¼ tsp. sea salt

Preheat oven to 400 degrees F.

Cut the cabbage head in half and cut each half into four wedges. In a cast-iron pan (or other oven-safe vessel), warm 1 tablespoon of the oil over medium heat until shimmering. Cook the cabbage wedges in batches, flipping once and adding the second tablespoon of oil as necessary, until the cut sides are well browned, approximately four to six minutes per side.

While the cabbage is browning, mix the tahini, oregano, thyme, rosemary, coriander, cumin, salt, and pepper in a small bowl.

Remove the browned cabbage wedges from the pan. Add the remaining teaspoon of oil to the pan, then add

the garlic. Sauté for 30 seconds, then remove the pan from heat. Spread the tahini mixture over the bottom of the pan and arrange the cabbage wedges in the pan in a single layer (a bit of overlap is fine). Pour in the vegetable broth and place the pan in the oven.

Roast until the cabbage is fork-tender, 30 to 40 minutes.

While the cabbage is roasting, make the tzatziki sauce by mixing the yogurt, cucumber, lemon juice, dill, and salt in a small bowl.

Scoop the cabbage and the tahini mixture out of the pan, and serve with the tzatziki sauce alongside.



## Crispy Cauliflower Parmesan

**Makes four servings**

**Prep time: 15 minutes**

**Cook time: 30 minutes**

- 4 tbs. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ½ tsp. dried oregano
- ¼ tsp. dried rosemary
- ½ tsp. dried basil
- ½ tsp. sea salt
- 1 head cauliflower, cut into florets
- 1 tbs. butter
- ½ small white onion, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ cup canned tomato sauce
- 2 tbs. minced fresh parsley
- ½ cup panko or other breadcrumbs (or gluten-free alternative)
- ¼ cup shredded Parmesan cheese, plus more to taste

Preheat oven to 375 degrees F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a medium bowl, mix 3 tablespoons of the olive oil with the oregano, rosemary, basil, and salt. Add the cauliflower and toss until well coated, then place it on the baking sheet and roast for 25 minutes, until the cauliflower is fork-tender and beginning to crisp at the edges.

Meanwhile, melt the butter in a small saucepan over medium-low heat. Add the onion and cook until lightly golden, approximately five minutes, then add the garlic and cook for one minute more. Stir in the tomato sauce and fresh parsley, and remove from the heat.

In a small skillet, heat the remaining 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Mix in the breadcrumbs and cook over medium heat until crispy and toasted, two to four minutes.

Remove the cauliflower from the oven, pour the tomato-sauce mixture over the top, and toss to coat. Sprinkle the Parmesan evenly over the top, and finish with the breadcrumbs. Return the baking sheet to the oven for five minutes, and then serve. 🍴



### EAT UP!

Find the recipe for Roasted Romaine Hearts at [ELmag.com/headvegetables](http://ELmag.com/headvegetables).



**KATE MORGAN** is a Pennsylvania-based recipe developer.



**RESTORE  
YOUR  
BALANCE**

## WHAT MIGHT BE BEHIND CHRONIC, INEXPLICABLE DIZZINESS — AND HOW TO RECOVER.

BY JILL PATTON, NBC-HWC

### SUSAN GEARHART SAT UP IN BED

one morning and found the room spinning. “I thought I was having a stroke,” she recalls. Whenever she turned her head, she experienced overwhelming vertigo. “All I could do was cry.”

Gearhart’s doctor diagnosed her with benign paroxysmal positional vertigo, or BPPV, a condition in which crystals in the inner ear migrate to one of the ear’s semicircular canals and trigger a sensation of spinning. (Spinning is the hallmark of vertigo; dizziness is defined by feeling lightheaded or unsteady.) With the help of physical therapy, the BPPV gradually subsided, but an around-the-clock, wobbly sensation plagued her for two years.

“I couldn’t cook dinner or do dishes for more than five minutes before I’d have to sit down. I’d open the refrigerator and feel like I was going to faint. I went to the emergency room three, maybe four times,” she says.

Her symptoms didn’t make sense. Gearhart hadn’t had a stroke, nor did she have an infection or disease. Even though her BPPV had resolved by then, the disorientation persisted and was severe enough to put much of her life on hold.

In search of solutions, Gearhart came across a series of videos by vestibular audiologist Yonit Arthur, AuD. She learned that dizziness without a medical explanation can be a sign that the brain is in a state of hypervigilance — associating countless harmless triggers with danger.

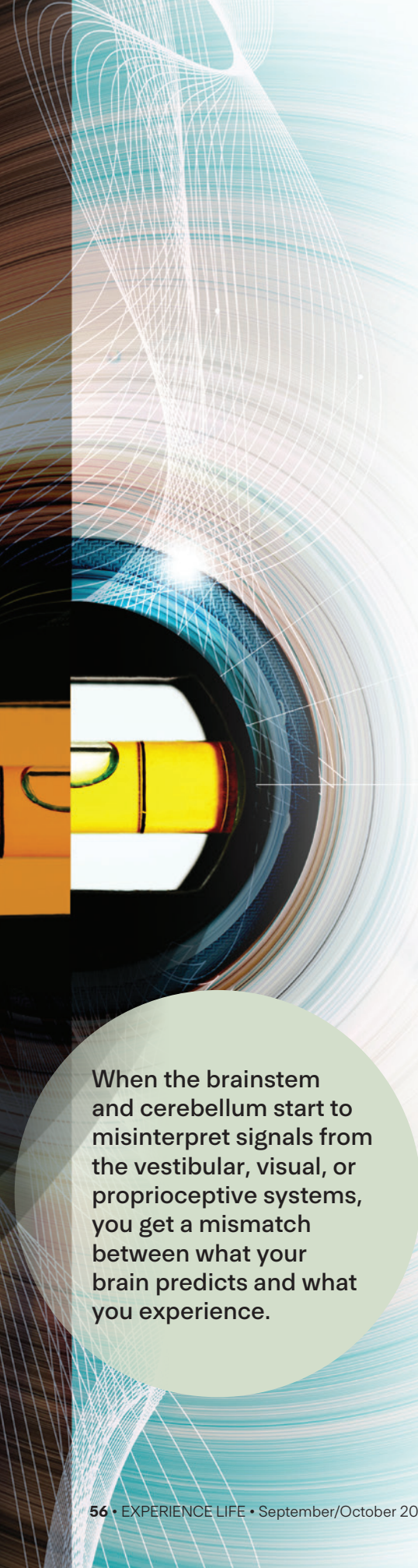
Arthur calls this phenomenon “neuroplastic dizziness” or “neural-circuit dizziness.” She describes it as a programming error affecting the brain’s ability to process information it receives from the body’s sensory systems. Symptoms may begin with a head injury, trauma, infection, or stress, but they persist after the original injury has resolved.

In Gearhart’s case, the trigger was her initial vertigo episode.

Injury, illness, and stress can cause neurological changes, explains functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoie, DC, DACNB. These can affect your brain’s ability to locate your body in space. The resulting dizziness, lightheadedness, motion sickness, or vertigo can, in turn, activate your sympathetic, fight-or-flight nervous system. Soon, your body has entered a self-perpetuating cycle of perceived threat, anxiety, and symptoms.

What Arthur calls neuroplastic dizziness is not a psychosomatic condition. Instead, it’s an indication that your brain’s neuroplasticity — its ability to learn and change — is temporarily working against you. It often means your brain is caught in a pattern of anticipating and experiencing dizziness after the original issue has been resolved.

Fortunately, this is a software, rather than a hardware, problem, says Arthur. That means you can harness your brain’s plasticity to work for you again. One primary way to break free of the cycle, she suggests, is to learn how to react to symptoms in a new way.



## YOUR BODY IN BALANCE

Under normal circumstances, your body's ability to achieve and maintain balance is the result of multiple systems working together to recognize your position in space.

One of these is the vestibular system. Housed in your inner ear, it comprises three semicircular canals that detect whether your head is turning or changing direction. It also includes two small chambers called otolith organs; these detect backward and forward movement, as well as gravitational pull. Incoming information is sent to your brainstem, where a group of nerve cells called vestibular nuclei coordinate reflexes in your eyes and muscles to help stabilize your vision to prevent falling.

Yet balance involves more than the inner ear, explains Schmoie. "The inner ear itself can't 100 percent detect all of the motion and movement that a complex human being can do."

The visual system also plays a role in balance. Your eyes send out signals about your environment to different areas of your brain, via the optic nerve, such as whether the ground is level or, if you're in motion, where you are relative to objects around you.

Finally, there's the body's proprioceptive system, composed of receptors in the muscles, joints, tendons, and skin. These provide sensory feedback about gravitational load, how your musculoskeletal system is handling that load, and your body's position in space. The cervical spine provides input that helps coordinate the movements of your head and body.

All three systems — vestibular, visual, and proprioceptive — are integrated in the brainstem and cerebellum. Together they act as your brain's command center for balance.

Chronic dizziness is a sensory-integration problem in this command center, says Schmoie. When the brainstem and cerebellum start to misinterpret signals from the vestibular, visual, or proprioceptive systems, you get a mismatch between what your brain predicts and what you experience.

We typically find ways to compensate. Someone might rely more on their visual system for balance if their inner ear is offline. Or they may instinctively keep their head still or unconsciously adopt postural or gait changes to find stability.

They may also consciously adapt their behavior, such as by steering clear of crowded places, escalators, or visually busy environments to avoid triggering symptoms. Arthur cautions that extreme avoidance can feed the perceived threat-anxiety-symptom loop. "People become hyperfocused on the symptoms. Their nervous system is sensitized to triggers. These perpetuate the mismatch."

## FINDING YOUR FEET

Dizziness and vertigo are among the most common reasons people in the United States visit a healthcare provider, but these visits can be exercises in frustration if providers can't find a structural explanation.

Chronic dizziness that can't be explained medically is a prime candidate for a mind-body approach. Depending on the original trigger and what's perpetuating it, this can involve physical, vestibular, or neurological rehabilitation, as well as coaching or cognitive behavioral approaches. The goal is to dial down the body's threat response.

"Your body and your mind and your brain are in constant contact, and what affects one is going to affect the other," Arthur emphasizes.

When Schmoie treats a case of chronic dizziness, he first looks for any potential physiological or neurological root of dysfunction, such as neuroinflammation, imbalances in the gut microbiome, or compensatory strategies that may be making symptoms worse.

Arthur's treatment approach focuses on vestibular rehabilitation, as well as addressing the psychological and social forces that perpetuate a dizziness cycle. She teaches an exercise called somatic tracking, training

**When the brainstem and cerebellum start to misinterpret signals from the vestibular, visual, or proprioceptive systems, you get a mismatch between what your brain predicts and what you experience.**

her patients to observe sensations with curiosity and without reacting. The goal of this technique is to retrain the brain to recognize safety. This can help reduce the reactivity that can trigger symptoms.

With the help of Arthur's coaching, Gearhart was able to connect the dots between past trauma, emotions, and dizziness. After about 18 months of work, she was free of dizziness and anxiety. Gearhart now helps others as a mentor in Arthur's program.

"Knowledge is power," says Arthur. "Once people understand this is just [their] brain making an error here, they can reduce their fear. Since fear is one of the foundational problems in these cases, that in and of itself can really help with symptoms."

## SUPPORTING YOURSELF

If you've seen a doctor and your chronic dizziness can't be explained medically, check out the American Institute of Balance and the Vestibular Disorders Association to find a vestibular therapist or functional neurologist either near you or who offers telehealth services.

Meanwhile, there are several ways you can support your own healing, including with these expert recommendations:

**Learn more.** "The No. 1 thing you can do once you've got medical clearance is educate yourself on why this is just a software issue in your brain," says Arthur. With some brain retraining, your neural circuitry can be rebooted.

**Engage in gentle movement.** Schmoie has designed a neurobic workout that helps activate your cerebellum and rewire neurons. It can also help with balance, coordination, and physical control. (Find Schmoie's neurobic workout at [ELmag.com/neurobic](http://ELmag.com/neurobic).)

**Try somatic tracking.** This mindfulness practice teaches your brain that your dizziness is not dangerous to you. Arthur offers guided practices on her YouTube channel, The Steady Coach.

**Tend to your stress.** Stress can trigger sustained chronic dizziness. To break the cycle, find a practice to ground yourself in the present and create emotional space from your stressors so you can respond more calmly. (For a helpful stress-relief technique, visit [ELmag.com/eft](http://ELmag.com/eft).)

**Reduce brain inflammation.** For many of his dizziness patients, Schmoie recommends nutritional supplements to help reduce brain inflammation and improve blood flow to the head. He suggests magnesium L-threonate, glutathione, vinpocetine, fatty acids, and ginkgo, as well as curcumin and resveratrol, which may support blood-brain barrier integrity.

**Manage your blood sugar.** Your inner ear responds to fluctuations in blood sugar, says Schmoie. Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), hyperglycemia (high blood sugar), and insulin resistance are among the most frequent causes of balance disorders.


**Get sufficient vitamin D.** Chronic dizziness is sometimes correlated with vitamin D deficiency. In one study, vitamin D-deficient patients with BPPV who received 50,000 IU of weekly supplemental vitamin D<sub>3</sub>, combined with physical therapy, experienced reduced symptoms that were sustained for at least six months.

**Give your eyes a break.** Completely avoiding visually stimulating environments can perpetuate the cycle of anxiety and symptoms, but taking occasional breaks from screens and other visually overwhelming stimuli can be helpful.

**Try the home Epley maneuver.** If you have been diagnosed with BPPV, your practitioner can teach you a method called the Epley maneuver to treat yourself at home. Both Arthur and Schmoie recommend against performing it without a diagnosis and training.

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



"Knowledge is power. Once people understand this is just [their] brain making an error here, they can reduce their fear."

# COMMON DIZZINESS DISORDERS

Several conditions can drive maladaptive changes in your brain's balance and sensory-processing systems. Specific causes, symptoms, and treatments may differ, but they all share a common thread: Your brain is struggling to recalibrate after a destabilizing event. These five conditions can all correspond to chronic dizziness.

## **PERSISTENT POSTURAL PERCEPTUAL DIZZINESS (PPPD OR TRIPLE-PD)**

PPPD typically develops after an illness or injury that affects balance. These include vestibular neuritis (inflammation of the vestibulocochlear nerve of the inner ear), concussion, and benign paroxysmal positional vertigo. It can also be triggered by acute stress, a panic or migraine attack, or a fainting episode.

Research suggests that patients with long COVID may be more susceptible. Functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoe, DC, DACNB, often sees patients with PPPD-like symptoms after they've experienced immune stressors, including mold exposure, Lyme disease, and chronic gut infections.

With PPPD, the brain is stuck in a heightened state of vigilance, misinterpreting normal movement and visual input as a threat. You may feel unsteadiness, motion sensitivity, lightheadedness, or nonspinning dizziness. Symptoms often get worse when standing or walking. Visually busy environments, like grocery stores or crowded places, can also be a trigger.

Treatment may include vestibular rehabilitation therapy, which is designed to help you regain control of gaze stability, physical stability, and balance. Cognitive behavioral therapy can retrain your brain and reduce symptoms. Medication may also be beneficial.

Schmoe often recommends an anti-inflammatory diet to support treatment. "If you're doing these things and you're still not feeling well, there could be something underlying going on that's causing inflammation in the nervous system," he says.

## **BENIGN PAROXYSMAL POSITIONAL VERTIGO (BPPV)**

BPPV occurs when calcium crystals called otoconia become dislodged from

their usual location in your inner ear and move into the semicircular canals that help control balance. When you move your head, the dislodged crystals shift, sending signals to your brain that trigger sudden, intense vertigo. You may also feel nausea, unsteadiness, or a sense that the room is spinning.

BPPV is more common in older adults, people with head injuries, and people with a history of inner-ear infections.

BPPV itself is not chronic: It can be treated using physical therapy techniques, including the Epley maneuver, to return the crystals to the otolith organs in your inner ear. Sometimes it even resolves on its own.

But because it can cause hypervigilance and a sensitization to triggers, BPPV can lead to PPPD. "In that case, it's not the physical problem that's making dizziness chronic. It's because the brain has taken over," says vestibular audiologist Yonit Arthur, AuD.


## **POST-CONCUSSION SYNDROME (PCS)**

Up to 80 percent of mild traumatic brain injuries lead to post-concussion syndrome, which can involve headaches, brain fog, fatigue, and dizziness. Persistent PCS is diagnosed when post-concussion symptoms persist for more than three months after an initial concussion.

People with PCS may rely more on their vision than their vestibular and proprioceptive systems. Such reliance can overstimulate their nervous system, says Schmoe. "You may also have a sensation calledvection, when you feel like you're moving but you're not."

Anyone can develop PCS after a concussion, but it's more common in those who have had multiple

**BPPV occurs when calcium crystals . . . become dislodged from their usual location in your inner ear and move into the semicircular canals that control balance.**



The mismatch between what you're seeing and your body's sense of movement and balance can make you feel dizzy, lightheaded, or unsteady.

concussions, a history of migraine, or previous neurological conditions. "The concussion research is clear that psychosocial factors, including preexisting anxiety, are major risk factors for people developing chronic symptoms," adds Arthur.

Recovery is typically nonlinear and takes time. Treatment may include physical therapy, vestibular therapy, cognitive therapy, or lifestyle adjustments.

### **VISUALLY INDUCED DIZZINESS (VID)**

Rather than a diagnosis itself, VID is a constellation of symptoms caused by dysfunction in the vestibular system and triggered when your brain struggles to process complex visual environments. Sometimes called visual vertigo, VID can be caused by a range of conditions, including head injury, BPPV, and vestibular migraine. It's often a symptom of PPPD.

The mismatch between what you're seeing and your body's sense of movement and balance can make you feel dizzy, lightheaded, or unsteady. It can also cause nausea, headaches, brain fog, and a feeling of being "off" even when you're sitting still. Common triggers include grocery-store aisles, busy or moving patterns, fluorescent lighting, and scrolling on your phone. Hypervigilance and anxiety perpetuate symptoms.

VID is more common in people with vestibular disorders, like vestibular migraine, or a history of concussions. If you are prone to motion sickness or spend extended time on digital screens, you may also be more vulnerable.

Treatment may include vestibular rehabilitation therapy and exposure training. Schmoie has found virtual reality can help desensitize some people.

### **VESTIBULAR MIGRAINE**

Vestibular migraine can cause dizziness symptoms with or without a headache. Rather than reflecting a problem with the vestibular system, it affects the vestibular-associated processing systems in the brain, says Arthur.

Symptoms may include sudden or prolonged dizziness, vertigo, an off-balance feeling, or unsteady walking. You may also have other migraine symptoms, including nausea and vomiting, light sensitivity, and sound sensitivity. Symptoms can last minutes to days and occur with or without pain.

Anyone can suffer vestibular migraine, though people with a history of migraine headaches, motion sensitivity, or inner-ear disorders are most susceptible, says Arthur. It often runs in families and can be triggered by hormonal shifts, bright lights, and disrupted sleep. Stress is a big factor, as well.

Treatment may include vestibular therapy, medication, and migraine-management strategies. "With vestibular migraine, there's a change in blood flow into the neurological circuitry of the brain as well as changes in inflammatory mediators, so people respond well to anti-inflammatory dietary approaches," says Schmoie.

Unlike many practitioners, Arthur doesn't recommend migraine diets and trigger diaries, which she has found cause people to focus too much on their symptoms.

"Having a healthy diet overall is important," she says, "but people don't need to be sitting around being vigilant. What they need is to stop being as afraid of their symptoms." 🗨️





# Take It OUTSIDE

Five reasons to move your body  
in the great outdoors.

BY NICOLE RADZISZEWSKI

**GROWING UP IN MAINE**, surrounded by forests, mountains, lakes, and the ocean, Colleen Verreault learned to embrace the gift of moving her body outdoors. She's never really considered herself a gym person.

But when she heard about a workout class that meets outside year-round, Verreault, 59, decided to give it a try. One chilly day in December 2024, she drove to WolfPack Fitness, an outdoor gym located on the woody shore of a river in Auburn, Maine.

After a friendly welcome from the gym's owner, Verreault was offered extra gloves and hand warmers, then paired with a partner. Before long, she was hitting tractor tires with a sledgehammer, shaking chains like battling ropes, and carrying buckets of sand up and down a hill. These workouts have since become a constant for Verreault, who attends classes weekly to connect with friends, get stronger, and recharge from hours spent indoors at her desk job.

"It's fun and it's different," she says. "You're doing the same kinds of exercises as you would in a gym, but outside and in a more creative way. To me, it's worth being out in the fresh air after being inside all day."

Working out in any setting is great, but moving your body outside in nature can be especially rewarding. Time spent outdoors

has been shown to lower anxiety, improve concentration and creativity, and bring about a deeper sense of connection to the natural world.

Physiologically, spending time in nature can lower your heart rate and blood pressure, support immune health, and promote better sleep. And the great outdoors provides an ever-changing landscape to capture your interest and get you moving in a wide variety of ways.

There are countless ways to take your workout outside. You can bring your strength training or yoga practice to a park, a beach, or your own backyard. You can walk, hike, trail run, mountain bike, paddle, swim, or climb. You can even make nature your gym — balancing on logs, hanging from branches, and scaling trees.

Worried you're not outdoorsy enough? Don't be. Even just a simple walk around the block can be beneficial, says Thomas Doherty, PsyD, a psychologist in Portland, Ore., who incorporates nature walks into client sessions. "Whether you're living in New York and walking to Central Park or going to the mountains in Colorado, you can spend time in nature."

What follows are five important benefits of taking your workout outside.

Time spent outdoors has been shown to lower anxiety, improve concentration and creativity, and bring about a deeper sense of connection to the natural world.



# 1 • Being outdoors boosts mental health and cognition.

**It's no secret** that spending time in nature can significantly boost your mental health. It activates your parasympathetic nervous system, which reduces anxiety and helps you think more clearly. Exposure and proximity to blue spaces is linked to positive mental health and well-being; visiting green spaces can improve life satisfaction and reduce stress.

"The research on the health benefits of nature for both our physical and mental health is super robust," says Doherty. "When we are in a safe natural setting, our heart rate and blood pressure decrease and our bodies are more relaxed. From a psychological standpoint, nature can restore our ability to focus." (Learn more about the powerful link between exercise and mental health at [ELmag.com/exercisementalhealth](https://www.elmag.com/exercisementalhealth).)

Forest bathing, or *shinrin-yoku*, is a Japanese practice of spending time in and consciously connecting with a natural environment. A 2019 study found that all 155 participants (including 37 percent with depressive tendencies) showed a significant decrease in blood pressure and an improved mood following a forest-bathing session. Those with depressive tendencies demonstrated

an even greater improvement in their mood. (Learn more at [ELmag.com/forestbathing](https://www.elmag.com/forestbathing).)

Simply being around greenery offers benefits. To enhance them, Doherty combines nature with conscious stress-reduction activities, including walking and meditation.

"Walking involves bilateral stimulation through swinging our arms and moving our legs, which gets us feeling differently in our minds," he says. "When we're outside with the sky overhead and hearing natural sounds, it's a different way of experiencing the world and being with ourselves."

Going for a walk outdoors has also been shown to boost cognitive function. A study published in *Scientific Reports* in 2023 found that after a 15-minute walk outside, participants' brains exhibited changes that indicate enhanced attention and working memory; the same was not true following a 15-minute walk inside.

Much of the research on nature's benefits focuses on walking and other low-intensity activities, but engaging in more physically and mentally demanding endeavors, such as trail running, hiking, and adventure sports, can inspire powerful changes in your mental state.

"When you're moving into more active pursuits, you can get into a flow state where you're immersed in an activity," Doherty explains. "You're getting a sense of flow that's coupling with the benefits of nature.

Some people report having transcendent experiences in nature where they get an expanded sense of identity and spirituality."

Even the smallest dose of nature can yield benefits, but the amount of time does matter, he says. "A five-minute walk around the block will help clear your head and calm your body, but the benefits are greater if you can spend 30 minutes or an hour outside, or spend a week hiking the Appalachian Trail."

"When we're outside with the sky overhead and hearing natural sounds, it's a different way of experiencing the world and being with ourselves."

## 2. Exercising in nature supports your physical health.

**Taking your workout outside** means that not only are you getting the intended physical benefits of exercise — strengthening your heart and lungs, building muscle, improving mobility — but you're also likely enjoying some physiological perks just from being in nature.

Exposure to sunlight boosts vitamin D production and can help regulate your circadian rhythm, promoting better sleep. Fresh air with phytoncides from plants can increase your number of natural killer cells, which improves immunity. And spending time in green spaces is associated with reduced blood pressure and lower prevalence of hypertension. (Find 50 tips for taking your workout outside at [ELmag.com/outdoorfitness](http://ELmag.com/outdoorfitness).)

“Going outside has radical returns because nature basically tells your cells what they already know,” says Cliff Morris, MD, a cardiologist and founder of Morris Cardiovascular and Risk Reduction Center. “Cortisol levels go down, blood pressure goes down, and heart rate variability is restored.”

Morris has made outdoor exercise a significant part of his personal life, medical practice, and community. He starts his day outside, practicing qigong in his backyard, which he says “helps me calibrate before getting wrapped up into a busy, hectic day.”

Morris uses an app called ParkRx to prescribe nature walks for his patients. It's part of his mission to make the town of Hopewell, Va., an official Blue Zone, helping residents develop positive lifestyle habits that support healthier and longer lives.

Morris has found that prescribing a stroll in the park to his patients also benefits their family, friends, and community.

“If I ask a patient, ‘How have your days been since you've started to walk?’ I'll get a response like, ‘Oh my God, the day seems lighter; I've been able to get through my problems much more quickly. Oh, by the way,

I got my neighbor out walking now, and my church group, and my pastor,’” he explains.

“There's a ripple effect, like dropping a stone in water.”



# 3. Moving your body outdoors builds functional strength and adaptability.

**There's no question** that strength training is great for you, but the physical and mental challenges of lifting an unruly object in nature can help spur unique adaptations and shore up vulnerabilities that regular training doesn't always address.

Consider the difference between lifting dumbbells — implements that are even, symmetrical, and designed to fit in your hands — and maneuvering an awkwardly shaped rock.

"If you're using a rock for deadlifting, the grip isn't going to be perfect, and sometimes you need to explore it a bit," says Luke Robinson, personal trainer and owner of WolfPack Fitness. "You might have to turn it over, twist it, and then go, 'Ah, here's a little nook that my fingers can dig into.'"

The variety and unpredictability of moving in and with nature encourage creativity and problem-solving. Being outside promotes varied movements, helping you become a more versatile,

adaptable human. Hang from tree branches instead of a pull-up bar. Do lunges in the backyard rather than on an even floor. Small tweaks can change how your body adapts.

"I love freeing people from symmetry," says Robinson. "If you're outside, the ground might not be perfectly even, and you'd better release your brain from that. Because, in most situations, that's how it's going to be in real life."

The benefits of working out with odd objects and on uneven terrain aren't limited to strength training. Walking or running on a trail has also been shown to boost various fitness markers.

One 2023 study found that trail running improves balance and leg

strength slightly more than road running does. The uneven terrain can force your legs and core to work harder, building strength and stability. And navigating obstacles — rocks, tree roots, muddy patches — can improve your balance and coordination.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to move your body in nature is that it prepares you to enjoy more profound experiences in the real world, says James Edward Mills,

founder of The Joy Trip Project and author of *The Adventure Gap: Changing the Face of the Outdoors*. "I don't think there's any substitute for having an actual experience in a real-world environment."

"If you're outside, the ground might not be perfectly even, and you'd better release your brain from that. **Because, in most situations, that's how it's going to be in real life.**"

# 4. A natural setting can make exercise feel more engaging and rewarding.

**Some studies** have suggested that exercising in a natural environment is linked to increased feelings of enjoyment, energy, and positive engagement, as well as to a reduction in tension and anger. This enhanced satisfaction may lead you to repeat the activity.

It's easy to see how fresh air and sunshine could have these effects. But even toughing it out during unpleasant weather conditions can be a rewarding experience, says Mills.

"On those rainy, cold days, you can compare it to adding an extra 5 pounds to the bar just to test your fortitude," he says. "And then when you do it, you realize, *Oh, I'm actually stronger and more capable than I thought.*"

Nature also has the power to boost your gratitude for creature comforts. Scandinavians, many of whom live by the adage "There's no such thing as bad

weather, only bad clothing," are famously good at embracing the cold. The Danish word *hygge* and the Swedish word *mysig* loosely translate to "cozy" or "snug" to describe a feeling of warmth, comfort, and happiness.

To appreciate warmth, you need to first be out in the cold, says Robinson. "That's more built into northern European cultures like Iceland and Norway. Without that sensation of getting cold in the feet and hands, you can't go back inside and get the awesome sensation of getting cozy and cuddly under your warm blanket with hot cocoa."

One benefit of exercising outdoors year-round is that your body acclimates gradually to extreme temperatures, he says. "It's amazing: The first day it's back up in the teens, a lot of people are down to tank tops."

And the same is true of exercising in the heat of summer. "You have to go through discomfort to arrive on the other side."



# 5.

## Time in nature rebalances our natural rhythms.



**Spending time outdoors** connects us to our roots. It also provides balance in a technology-filled world.

“Human beings are like any other species. We need to be outside,” says Mills. “We need to have a relationship with the natural world because that is where our livelihood comes. We need fresh air, we need open space, we need water, sunshine — we need the ability to be and move comfortably in the outdoors.”

Several theories have tried to explain why humans benefit from being in nature, including the biophilia hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that humans are instinctively drawn to natural environments because our ancestors evolved in wild settings.

“The main argument is that this is how our bodies evolved, as beings in nature,” explains Doherty. “If I’m climbing a tree and it feels natural for me to grasp a branch, it’s because it is natural, because my hand evolved to grasp the branch. We’ve evolved to be a part of the natural world. We’ve evolved to breathe in the air. We’ve evolved to walk long distances. These are the things that human bodies are made for.”

“But much of the modern world — the technological human world — is not supportive of that,” he continues. “In some ways, getting outside and exercising is kind of like a tonic for us. It’s a healing experience because a lot of our daily lives can be sedentary, indoors, and screen-based. Outdoor exercise allows us to unplug temporarily from what we call the normal heavy stress of life.”

On another level, studies have shown that spending time in nature may lead to stronger proenvironmental attitudes and behaviors. As screen dependency leads us to spend more time indoors and climate change continues to adversely impact the environment, it is urgent that we value our planet — and feel motivated to take care of it.

“Being out in nature provides us with a direct connection with the natural world and the rhythm of life on our planet. It provides us with a relationship with other beings in the world, whether birds, plants, animals, or anything else,” says Mills. “Being able to be part of the ecosystem not only drives our appreciation for nature, but it also makes us better, happier, more balanced people.”

## OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO THE OUTDOORS

Mother Nature can be intimidating, between the unpredictability of weather; the uncertainty around insects, poison ivy, and other wildlife; and the challenge of finding a safe, accessible space to exercise. Consider the following tips for overcoming such barriers and maximizing your time outdoors.

### **Wear appropriate clothing for the temperature and elements.**

If you live in a cold climate, investing in some key winter gear, such as warm clothing, can be a game-changer for maximizing time in nature. Important items for other seasons include wide-brim hats and protective clothing for sunny conditions, moisture-wicking materials to stay dry in all temperatures, and waterproof shoes and layers for rainy days.

### **Train your body to acclimate to hotter or colder weather.**

“Cold” is relative. “If you never stop being outside all year long, you have a natural progression — so by the time winter comes, it’s not a big deal,” says Robinson.

As for coping with warm weather, research shows that we can acclimate to heat within one to two weeks. Heat exposure trains our bodies to increase sweat production, which helps us cool down more effectively. (Get guidance for safely building your heat tolerance on page 35.)

### **Be prepared for bugs.**

Educate yourself about what kinds of pests you may encounter in nature, and protect yourself by wearing mosquito repellent and checking for ticks. (Learn what to do if you find a tick at [ELmag.com/ticksmarts](http://ELmag.com/ticksmarts).)

### **Know your plants.**

Be able to recognize poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac so you can avoid them. If you think you’ve come in contact with a poisonous plant, wash your hands with soap and water as soon as possible.

### **Try not to go alone.**

Heading out with a friend or group can be an important safety measure. It can also provide a powerful combination of camaraderie, support, accountability, and motivation. (Discover the benefits of moving your body in the company of others at [ELmag.com/teamspirit](http://ELmag.com/teamspirit).)

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AND  
OUR

# HEALTH

Health and fitness experts share their insights, concerns, and hopes for artificial intelligence.





BY MO PERRY

## IN JUST A FEW SHORT

years, artificial intelligence has become an inextricable part of modern life. AI has also introduced something new: a nonbiological form of cognition that can analyze, predict, and even help shape human health.

As Minneapolis-based futurist Cecily Sommers notes, AI represents “the first time that we have intelligence that lives outside of our skull.” And this disembodied intelligence is starting to influence our embodied experience. It’s nudging our behavior, designing new drugs, and altering how doctors care for patients — most of these with the stated goal of making us healthier.

Yet the full scale of the effects of AI aren’t yet known, and skeptics have concerns. As with any transformative technology, it comes with both promise and peril.

We asked experts to weigh in on the important ways AI is changing medicine, fitness, and mental healthcare.

# Better Medical Diagnostics

**One of the most promising** applications of AI is its potential to improve disease diagnosis. A study in the *American Journal of Roentgenology* suggests that, on average, radiologists misinterpret roughly 4 percent of the scans they see each day.

AI models trained on vast datasets can reduce errors by identifying patterns that might escape even experienced specialists. A 2023 study published in *Radiology* found that an autonomous AI system exhibited greater sensitivity than radiologists in identifying critical abnormalities on chest x-rays (99.8 percent versus 93.5 percent).

An AI tool can alert a radiologist to look at a specific part of the lung where it locates an anomaly. It can also compare a patient’s new scan with an older one to look for subtle changes. “It doesn’t supplant the radiologist from making the final decision, but it helps to prevent an error,” notes Lloyd Minor, MD, dean of the Stanford University School of Medicine, on *The Rich Roll Podcast*.

Taofic Mounajjed, MD, a pathologist with Hospital Pathology Associates, says AI can also provide clearer prognoses. Whereas human diagnosis relies on predefined classifications, such as tumor histology and stage, AI can analyze vast amounts of data to uncover subtle image characteristics that offer clues

about a disease’s likely course. Those characteristics might include spatial relationships between cells or other statistical features of tumor cells, such as size, variability, and shape.

“There’s so much on a slide that we as human pathologists don’t see or report,” explains Mounajjed. “AI can look at hundreds of metrics and variables and say, ‘Based on our model, you have an 80 percent chance of recurrence in 10 years,’ which is a completely new way of looking at pathology.”

Treatment plans can also be refined with the assistance of AI tools. While doctors have long used biomarkers, like hormone receptor status, to individualize a patient’s treatment, AI can integrate multiple

**The best-case scenario is one in which AI enhances, rather than replaces, human expertise.**

factors, such as tumor microenvironment and DNA mutations, to identify the most viable and effective treatment options for a particular patient.

Challenges remain. AI-based diagnostics can suffer from biases in the data used to train it, making it inaccurate and potentially harmful for underrepresented populations. Overreliance on AI might lead doctors to overlook their own clinical judgments or dismiss rare, complex cases that don’t align with algorithmic predictions.

The best-case scenario is one in which AI enhances, rather than replaces, human expertise and its benefits are accessible — and applicable — to all.



# Streamlined Notetaking for Physicians

**Sunjya Schweig, MD**, used to spend his visits with patients trying to listen while he typed. Now, the San Francisco Bay Area-based functional-medicine doctor is free to focus fully on the person in front of him, thanks to an AI “scribe” that takes notes for him.

More health systems and clinics are turning to ambient AI scribes to document the content of patient visits, liberating doctors and patients to talk more freely and connect more fully. Multiple HIPAA-compliant scribe systems are now in use across the country. They listen in on patient visits and automatically generate detailed clinical notes, summarizing symptoms, concerns, and treatment plans in real time.

“I use it all day long,” Schweig says of his AI scribe. “It writes my notes for me, and I can then customize them, whether for a referral letter to a specialist or to summarize a particular part of the conversation, like their hormone history.”

Functional neurologist Jeremy Schmoie, DC, DACNB, also appreciates the support of an AI scribe.

“It allows me to be able to just work with people and not spend as much time on paperwork,” he says. “I can focus on actually getting them better.”

Schmoie used to hesitate when patients asked him to share his notes from their visit: They were often dense, technical, and scattered, and he worried that his patients, many of whom struggle with brain injuries, wouldn’t be able to make sense of them or translate them for their loved ones.

“Now I have a way of saying, ‘Write these notes in a way a patient will understand.’ It’s been a game-changer,” he says. “Now I can confidently say, ‘I’d love to give you my notes: How detailed do you want them?’” This is the AI factor.

Schweig’s hope is that AI can serve as a physician’s copilot in this way. “A doctor can go about their business with this . . . system that’s listening to and transcrib-

ing your visits, [that’s] deeply embedded in a patient’s chart, and [that] can look for patterns and put everything together to say, ‘You might want to think about this diagnosis or that set of tests or interventions.’”

Although AI scribes are a supportive tool for healthcare professionals, the technology does have drawbacks. “I think that any time you are provid-

ing an app access to your health data, you are introducing risk,” says Drew Tracing, engi-

neering manager for technology at Life Time.

One study published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* in 2025 observed “frequent errors” in the generated notes, with errors of omission being the most common.

And while the data is typically protected by layers of encryption, data breaches are always possible.

**“Now I have a way of saying, ‘Write these notes in a way a patient will understand.’ It’s been a game-changer.”**





## New Options for Mental Health Support

**With one in five American** adults experiencing a mental health issue in a given year, demand for care far exceeds available human resources.

“Even if we could funnel every single dollar we have for health-care to mental health, we just don’t have enough providers to see the people who need it,” notes Stevie Chancellor, PhD, in a TEDx Talk. She’s an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota who develops human-centered AI tools for mental health.

Nicholas Jacobson, PhD, is an associate professor in the departments of Biomedical Data Science, Psychiatry, and Computer Science at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. He helped develop Therabot, a mental health platform that uses generative AI to engage in dynamic conversations based on cognitive behavioral therapy and other evidence-based approaches.

“The goal is to provide things in a way that emulates what therapists provide in their day-to-day settings,

**“The goal is to provide things in a way that emulates what therapists provide in their day-to-day settings, but in a digital means.”**

but in a digital means,” Jacobson says. He notes that Therabot’s continuous availability is an advantage over human therapists, who may only be able to connect weekly.

“With tools like this, you can interact with it anytime, as long as you have an internet connection,” he says. “That makes it available in

folks’ moments of greatest need.”

Crucially, Therabot has safeguards in place to prevent some of the harmful outcomes that are possible


when people look to resources like ChatGPT for mental health support. (A tragic example involved a man in Belgium who died by suicide after engaging with an AI chatbot that encouraged him to end his life.) Therabot has been tested to eliminate potentially harmful responses and equipped to respond to crisis situations.

General-use “companion” bots lack any such safeguards, Jacobson notes, so be cautious in turning to them for mental health support.

Considering the privacy concerns and the potential for manipulation, engaging with AI with too much trust or vulnerability comes with substantial risk. In at least one case, a nonprofit AI-driven suicide-crisis text hotline shared anonymized customer data with its for-profit spinoff to train customer service bots. If company policies don’t expressly prohibit it, information shared with mental health chatbots can be used in targeted advertising.

These types of mental health supports are best used as a complement to a human therapist or therapeutic group, not least because, as scholars of the loneliness epidemic have shown, human-to-human connection is vital for social and emotional health.

“What worries me is that young people grow up being online so much of the time anyway,” notes Jodi Halpern, MD, PhD, a professor of bioethics at the University of California, Berkeley. “Mutually curious, empathetic relationships are the richness of life. If they grow up with bots being the main forms of communication about emotions, this could slip away without people necessarily noticing it.”



## Personalized Health and Fitness Support

**AI is increasingly** tailoring health interventions to the individual. “Personalization is the name of the game with AI,” says Pilar Gerasimo, the founding editor of *Experience Life* and author of *The Healthy Deviant: A Rule Breaker’s Guide to Being Healthy in an Unhealthy World*. “It can give real-time, personalized feedback, suggestions, and nudges to help you create and fine-tune your nutrition and fitness programs.”

Gerasimo has been watching fitness and healthcare trends come and go for decades, and — with a few caveats — she sees the overall movement toward personalized health supports like this as a net gain.

Trabing points out that personalized fitness AI tools can make it easier to sift through a world of complicated health advice. “Learning how to work out, eat right, balance stress, and more is a lot of work,” he notes. “There is so much content, much of which is contradictory.”

An AI fitness app might help you log your workout information and track your progress over time. It can give you workout recommendations based on your goals and individual capacity, push you to progress, and remind you to

rest. An app can also customize workouts based on your preferences, making you more likely to pursue movement that you enjoy.

Still, Trabing doesn’t think that fitness apps, useful as they are, will replace personal trainers or fitness classes any time soon.

“Personal trainers are there to motivate, inspire, and bring an energy to the training experience,” he says. “AI can help to personalize plans for more people, but that doesn’t negate the value of a personal trainer.”

Many wearable fitness devices use AI as well. These tools can monitor heart rate variability (HRV), sleep cycles, blood sugar, hydration, and recovery,

among other metrics. More advanced wearables are currently in the works, including some that will track lactate and cholesterol levels or inflammation.

When this biometric data is combined with generative AI tools, like fitness apps that consider your motivations, goals, and preferences, the result might be akin to having a “personal trainer in your pocket,” Gerasimo says. “But AI still can’t replace the empathy and intuition of a human being. At present, it can’t read your face or feelings in the same way a caring person can.”

Additionally, wearable data isn’t always reliable, emphasizes fitness and nutrition educator Mike T. Nelson, PhD. This becomes obvious when you use more than one biometric device at a time: “My Oura Ring doesn’t match my Garmin, which doesn’t match my iThlete,” he says. These all capture data on different parts of the body, he explains, and likely rely on different algorithms.

An individual device is useful for tracking general trends (such as stress or activity levels), but trying to cross-reference multiple wearables can lead to confusion. “God forbid I have a client who has three wearable devices,” Nelson says. “What a disaster.”

He finds that data is most helpful when it helps drive habit change — such as the Oura Ring’s sleep score inspiring an earlier, more consistent bedtime. “Data is good,” he says. “But it’s not going to replace how you feel. I don’t want my clients to entirely outsource their decisions to a device, because sometimes its recommendations don’t line up with how you feel or what you want to do.”

Adds Gerasimo: “What has helped humans be healthy for millions of years is more or less the same thing. Eat mostly whole foods, move your body, rest, get out in nature, and connect with a supportive community. I don’t think AI is going to change those things anytime soon.”

**“It can give real-time, personalized feedback, suggestions, and nudges to help you create and fine-tune your nutrition and fitness programs.”**

# Support for Healthy Behaviors

**Our environments** drive our behavior in ways big and small. Some AI advocates believe we can use it to design our environments to steer us toward healthy choices.

“I think AI will fuel an intersection of industries that create healthier homes, work environments, and health-motivating spaces,” Gerasimo says.

Some of this is already under way. Smart-lighting systems can adjust throughout the day to support circadian rhythms, improve sleep quality, and enhance focus and productivity. Apps may offer recipes based on your health goals or even the contents of your AI-connected fridge. Wearables set daily activity goals and ping you to suggest a stretch break.

In the future, these nudges could become even more adaptive, integrating with AI-powered home systems to adjust temperature, lighting, and soundscapes using real-time biometric feedback. AI tools could even suggest preventive actions before a migraine or anxiety attack escalates, based on subtle physiological cues. Algorithms might match people who share similar hobbies or interests, facilitating social connection and reducing loneliness.

Meanwhile, all this integration of AI into our environments raises questions about the balance between external guidance and personal agency. Although it can be appealing to outsource some decision-making, the convenience of AI-driven health nudges may come at a cost. “We don’t want to be completely manipulated by external agents,” Sommers says. “We want to cultivate our own inner agency for the choices we make.”

Self-direction is like a muscle: It weakens without regular use. Recent research from Carnegie Mellon University and Microsoft found that the more confidence people feel in AI, the less likely they are to engage their critical thinking skills as they use AI programs. This is especially concerning given that AI can make mistakes, mislead, and manufacture incorrect information that it presents as fact, known as “hallucinating.”

“We still want human wisdom to rise in the age of information — perhaps more information than we know what to do with,” Sommers says. “If we’re not discerning, we won’t know the difference between what’s valuable and what’s not.”

**MO PERRY** is an *Experience Life* contributing editor.

# RISKS OF AI

The growing availability of health-supportive AI technologies offers much to appreciate, but the developments are not without hidden costs or challenges, like these:

**IT’S A NEW TECH TO REGULATE.** The rapid application of AI in healthcare is already outpacing the regulations meant to ensure its safety and fairness. Federal agencies were designed to regulate static developments (the U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulates drugs and medical devices, for example), but they may not have the expertise or processes in place to evaluate dynamic technologies like the algorithms that are central to AI.

Algorithms are validated on certain training datasets, but many adapt to new inputs after they’ve been deployed, notes pathologist Taofic Mounajjed, MD. In other words, they’re constantly shape-shifting. “How nimble are the regulatory bodies going to be in evaluating them if they’re continuously evolving?” he asks.

**DATA CAN BE BIASED.** AI models are often trained on datasets that represent limited, homogeneous populations. In an article in the journal *Science*, researchers describe how an AI system widely used in U.S. healthcare underesti-

mated the health needs of Black patients compared with white patients who had similar conditions. The training data was based on healthcare spending rather than actual health status, so it reflected systemic racial disparities in access to care.

**DATA PRIVACY IS DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN.** AI systems collect vast amounts of personal health data, often from wearables, medical records, and even social media interactions. Users may not fully understand how their data is being used, who has access to it, or whether it’s being shared with third parties.

**AI HAS A SUBSTANTIAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT.** Large-scale AI models require massive computational power, contributing to high energy consumption. And data centers that power AI systems require lots of water for cooling: According to one study, a single ChatGPT prompt for a 100-word email uses the approximate equivalent of a standard bottle of water.

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# REAL LIFE

**A TRADITIONAL BURIAL OR CREMATION** has often-unrecognized environmental impacts. Alternatives like green burials and water cremation are ways to align your postmortem choices with the values you live by. On **page 80**, learn about more eco-friendly options for burial and cremation.

# The Upside of Gossip



It may not have the best reputation, but gossip can yield surprising benefits.



BY QUINTON SKINNER

## GOSSIP IS NOTHING NEW.

There's evidence of gossiping in all human cultures, from ancient Mesopotamia to the present day. And no less an authority than Shakespeare cautions, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "how much an ill word may poison liking."

Despite its dubious reputation, gossip can be tough to avoid in our own lives — especially if we're unaware of what we're doing. Michele Gelfand, PhD, a psychologist and professor of organizational behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, offers this description: "Gossiping, broadly defined, is when people exchange personal information about absent third parties."

It sounds neutral enough, and yet most of us have encountered damag-

ing gossip — harmful anecdotes, personal secrets, or rumors that smear someone's reputation.

Gelfand's research offers another perspective. She suggests gossip also has the potential to promote collaboration and build reputations through positive communications about third-party behavior.

That is to say, it can be a force for social good.

"Gossip serves a critical social-control function in groups to help foster cooperation," she explains. "The gist

is this: Gossip serves to disseminate information about other people's reputations as cooperative or selfish. . . . As such, it helps people identify the bad apples out there in order to avoid them."

Naturally, people grow concerned about their own reputations too. In this way, gossip can serve as a kind of

social warning. "No one wants to be the subject of future gossip," Gelfand adds. "Like strong social norms that help control bad behavior, so does gossip."

Whether for good or ill, the impulse to gab about absent third parties may well be one of our defining characteristics as a species. "We gossip not only because we can but because we have to," writes journalist Kelsey McKinney in *You Didn't Hear This From Me: (Mostly) True Notes on Gossip*. "Without the self-awareness gained by gossiping, we would become husks of ourselves, so uninterested in the world around us that we become separated from it entirely."

Gossip has the potential to knit together our social fabric rather than tear it apart. It can strengthen relationships and build trust. It can even help us identify and positively frame shared problems — if we're willing to engage responsibly. Try the following advice for keeping chatter constructive.

Whether for good or ill, the impulse to gab about absent third parties may well be **one of our defining characteristics as a species.**

# How to Gossip Graciously

**Stick to the facts.** Much of gossip's harmful potential comes from spreading falsehoods, innuendo, and unkind interpretations of events and motivations. "We should be aware that the positive function of gossip is predicated on the idea that the information being disseminated is accurate," says Gelfand. "If gossip is about spreading misinformation, that is a big problem."

(Having trouble separating fact from fiction? Get some advice for spotting misinformation at [ELmag.com/factorfiction](http://ELmag.com/factorfiction).)

## Understand stereotypes about gossip.

There's a common assumption that women are more prolific gossips than men, but this is more a matter of gender-role perception than fact. Indeed, a 2019 study that sampled daily sound files from conversations across a wide demographic suggests that men and women participate in positive and negative gossip at relatively similar rates, with women sharing more "neutral" gossip than men.

Still, gossip is often considered "women's idle chitchat," and it's also associated with shame and immorality. It's good to be mindful of those stereotypes when questioning whether an instance of gossip is actually suspect — or whether it's simply a form of connection and shared experience.

**Know thyself.** Many spiritual traditions have ethical standards for how to talk about others. In Buddhism, for instance, Right Speech — part of the Noble Eightfold Path — directs those seeking enlightenment to abstain from divisive or harsh words.

A good rule of thumb when talking about someone else is to pause, take a moment, and ask: *Do I need to say this about this person, and would I stand by saying it a day, a month, or a year from today? What are my motivations for sharing this information?*

Responsibly sharing information can promote solidarity in a commu-

nity, but knowing when not to gossip is an equally important skill. We can always choose to keep our knowledge to ourselves — even if just for now. (Not sure whether you should hold a secret for someone else? See our advice at [ELmag.com/secretstress](http://ELmag.com/secretstress).)

**Stay positive.** "When talking about other people, I think benevolence is the most important thing," says Erin Vogel, PhD, a social psychologist at the University of Oklahoma.

Although even the most well-intentioned among us may occasionally talk about others in a way that



lacks compassion and grace, we can resist that tendency by focusing on what we admire in others. Share a story about someone going above and beyond to help a colleague, an example of exceptional parenting, or an anecdote about resilience or perseverance.

We can also frame potential criticisms as issues the community might be able to solve together. For example, you might take an opportunity to dispense information about how a mutual friend needs support.

**Keep the circle small.** Ultimately, we're all social creatures who are going to talk about one another to one another. This takes on an added dimension on social media, where shared posts can put sensitive information into the public square, inviting interaction and judgment.

"Browsing social media is like listening to gossip," Vogel says. "There are things people put out themselves and also things people say about others."

Technology isn't always our friend here. Social media chats and text chains can tempt us to say things to big groups that we might otherwise keep to an immediate circle. "If you have good intentions and, for instance, want to help this third person, you might not want to broadcast their issues to everyone," says Vogel. (Seeking more advice about online etiquette? Check out [ELmag.com/onlinesharing](http://ELmag.com/onlinesharing).)

## Be aware of the consequences.

Gelfand's research group described the significant reputational effects of gossip in communities of many sizes, concluding that "gossipers proliferate as well as sustain the reputation system." In other words, people decide who to trust, befriend, and support based on what they hear from others.

Talking about someone, then, is a bigger responsibility than we might realize, she says. "It's all about promoting information about reputations and whether people are likely to be trustworthy."

McKinney, too, suggests that identifying the trustworthy people in a community is one of gossip's principal goals. "Whisper networks, prosocial gossip, and gossiping in general about people directly connected to us enable us to create a web of information that can keep us safe," she writes. "Gossip can't always save us from harm, but it can teach us whom to trust."

**Be real.** Truthfulness and authenticity are our greatest guideposts when we're talking about others. Keeping these values at the fore can help us promote the greater good over entertainment or personal gain.

"The best direction is developing that strong sense of authenticity," Vogel advises, "and then using it in service to other people's well-being." 🗣️



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# An Ayurvedic View of Mental Health

How understanding your dosha can make it easier to manage your mood.

BY HENRY EMMONS, MD

**IT MAY SEEM OBVIOUS,** but we all deal with stress differently.

According to Ayurveda, the traditional medicine of India, this is partly because our physical constitutions are shaped by the natural elements. These are our doshas: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, which loosely correspond to air, fire, and earth.

In the Ayurvedic model, we can help restore ourselves by rebalancing our doshas when we feel off.

While almost no one falls exclusively into just one, we do tend to have a primary dosha, and it's especially visible in how we process stress. Consider these examples:

- Lidia has always trended toward worry, but since her son told her he'd been bullied, she's become overwhelmed with anxiety and sleeps only about four hours a night. Her intense worry is classic for an airy Vata.

- Jeff is a successful business owner, but after a recent spate of workplace conflicts, he's become irritable, moody, and distracted. He wakes most nights between 3 and 4 a.m., restless and ruminating. Such "heated" qualities are typical Pitta.

- Janelle is dealing with ailing parents, a distant partner, and work that feels depleting. She drags herself out of bed, gains unwanted weight, and can't find the motivation to get to the gym. These behaviors are often linked to an earthy Kapha constitution.

Through an Ayurvedic lens, each of these emotional challenges could be predicted, and possibly prevented, by understanding and caring for that unique mind-body type. The key to balance is to maintain daily habits that support your dosha.



## VATA (AIR) IMBALANCE: THE MIND RUNS RAMPANT

Air types like Lidia can be creative, enthusiastic, spontaneous, and fun, but they're prone to fear, anxiety, and insomnia under stress. They can easily become ungrounded by overwork, irregular sleep, skipped meals, or an erratic or too-busy schedule.

**Act:** To rebalance, create a predictable daily rhythm: Take breaks at work, eat three meals a day, and sleep at regular hours.

**Eat:** Diet can bring overly airy types down to earth. Choose foods that are grounding, such as warm, hearty soups and stews. Aim to avoid too much sugar and other refined carbs, which can hamper blood-sugar regulation and affect mood.

**Support:** Passionflower is a gently calming herb that can soothe dysregulated Vata types. It may be used as needed or, if anxiety is persistent, taken daily for up to several weeks. Dose: one or two capsules (200–300 milligrams each) up to three or four times per day for anxiety.



## PITTA (FIRE) IMBALANCE: THE PASSIONS TAKE OVER

A fire type like Jeff can be confident, passionate, determined, and successful. But under pressure, Pitta types can get overheated, angry, impatient, ruminative, and judgmental. They're also likely to push too hard for too long and to overdo it on caffeine and other stimulants.

**Act:** To counter the Pitta tendency toward overdrive, get some distance from your current pursuits. Take time to unplug from work. Do something purely for fun, ideally something not too competitive.

**Eat:** Foods can cool the extra fire of unbalanced Pitta energy. The diet should be light — relatively low in protein but with a high water content. Think summer foods such as big salads, fresh fruits, and pumpkin or sunflower seeds for snacks. Hot, spicy, or fried foods add fuel to the fire, so try to avoid them.

**Support:** The amino acid L-theanine can calm the brain and soothe agitation. Dose: 100–200 mg twice daily. (If you find it sedating, take it just once at bedtime.)



## KAPHA (EARTH) IMBALANCE: MOTIVATION DISAPPEARS

Earth types like Janelle are usually steady, grounded, reliable, and easygoing. Everybody loves having a supportive Kapha on their team. But when earth types are imbalanced, they can fall into lethargy, with a heavy, flat mood and loss of motivation.

**Act:** Earth types require stimulation, diversity, and a little excitement. When heaviness descends, try something new and a little challenging. Take an exercise or dance class, watch a thriller, or listen to some fast, loud music — anything that gets the heart rate up.

**Eat:** Kaphas need activation, so seek foods with spice, tartness, or unusual flavors. Aim for a food plan low in fat and carbs and high in protein. Think spring with bitter greens, lean meat and fish, and plenty of nonstarchy vegetables.

**Support:** Rhodiola is a gently energizing herb that can counter sluggishness and lack of motivation. Dose: 500 mg daily of an extract standardized to 3 percent rosvavins.

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

# The Good-Enough Parent

Many parents feel guilty when they can't excel in all areas of their lives. A marriage and career counselor offers a more forgiving approach.

BY JON SPAYDE

**AS IF RAISING KIDS** weren't difficult and demanding enough, many parents feel pressure to do it perfectly. But we also have lives beyond the child-rearing sphere: We're partners, friends, colleagues, and more.

Trying to excel at all these things at once is almost guaranteed to create what's called "parent guilt": When we go to work and leave the kids in someone else's care, we feel guilty. When we leave work early for our kid's soccer game — another twinge. When we miss happy hour with college pals because our kid needs help with a school project, we feel contrite because we fear we're turning into a no-show friend.

To make things worse, this pervasive sense of falling short makes it hard for us to be present when we're with our children, at work, or with friends. It's a self-reinforcing negative cycle.

Marriage and career counselor Rachel Glik, EdD, LPC, author of *A Soulful Marriage*, has some suggestions for breaking out of the cycle and escaping parent guilt. She says the key to juggling these relationships is tending to your relationship with yourself.

## STRESS SOURCES

**You feel inadequate.** Struggling to balance kids, work, and a social life can make you feel like a failure in all three spheres. It's a particularly modern dilemma because responsibilities were once divided, Glik says: One parent, usually the mother, would take care of the kids while the father went off to work. "Today, moms are bearing a lot of financial burdens as well, and there are also working fathers accepting more household responsibilities."

**People in your life offer unsolicited advice.** "Parents and in-laws may suggest what they think you should do about parenting or your other responsibilities, and it's easy to take this unsolicited advice as criticism, even if that's not its intention," she says.

**You believe you should be able to do it all.** According to Glik, the biggest culprit in creating parent guilt is the illusion that our reservoir of energy and capacity is unlimited. "That sets us up for thinking we're always missing the mark."

**Kids don't care.** You might wish that your kids could understand the pressure you're facing and cut you some slack. But infants, toddlers, and adolescents can't see everything you're trying to do — because their needs take priority.

**You compare yourself with others.** Opportunities for comparison are everywhere — from acquaintances who seem to be thriving to social media images of "superparents" who are popular and prosperous.

"Social media can create a kind of groupthink in which we return to some of the self-conscious anxieties we had in middle school," Glik says.

**Setting boundaries is hard.** The temptation to think we can do it all is connected to the difficulty of saying no when necessary.

"It takes so much more effort to set a boundary than it does to get mad or just give in," says Glik. "It can be particularly hard to set boundaries with ourselves — to give ourselves permission to take care of ourselves."

## SUCCESS STRATEGIES

**Give yourself a break.** Successfully handling the pressures of parenting starts with realizing and respecting that you're trying, Glik asserts. Acknowledge that you're doing your best to balance all elements of your life. Then, she advises, repeat a mantra to yourself: "My best is more than enough."

**Reconsider how you establish your self-image and self-worth.** "Why do we feel guilty for not being able to do it all?" Glik asks. "Often, we form our sense of self based on how well we succeed at making everybody happy."

But we can't make everybody happy all the time, she argues. We're going to let down the people in our lives at some point, which is OK. "People can handle disappointment."

**Know your triggers.** Glik recommends building awareness around the situations and stimuli that evoke strong emotional reactions. "I notice that when people want a lot from me, I can get angry," she says.

Other people may be triggered by happy-family posts on social media, parenting advice from family members, or excessive physical touch at the end of a long day.

Becoming aware of your triggers can help you address the underlying need or issue. Glik notes that when she feels annoyed at people's requests, "I mostly catch myself and realize it's only because I put so much pressure on myself, thinking that if somebody asks me to do something, I have to do it."

**Use reassuring statements.** You can acknowledge the other person's need or concern when you decline invitations, Glik points out.

"With friends, it can be 'I know that you miss being with me, and I miss us



too. But it's clear to me that this is where I need to be right now.' At work: 'I really want to join you on that project, but I just need a minute to collect my thoughts before I commit.' If you have to miss a meeting, you can reassure people that you'll get notes from a colleague."

**Pursue self-care.** Compassionate boundary setting provides space for you to care for yourself, which Glik believes is essential. Caring for your health, pursuing hobbies and other interests, and seeking support from friends or professional counselors are all ways to make sure you're able to put good energy into your roles of parent, friend, and colleague.

**Get the kids to help.**

Your children may not empathize with your struggles, but they can help in other ways, Glik says.

"One thing that helps to alleviate the overwhelm is to not see your role as to always give your children your energy, but to help them contribute their own."

If they're old enough, you can give them responsibilities, like doing their own laundry or helping with meals.

**Be careful with comparisons.** Glik thinks we're hardwired to compare ourselves with others — "we're social by nature, and it's natural for us to be aware of others." But we can learn to

identify healthy comparison, in which we simply aspire to emulate someone we admire, and unhealthy comparison, in which we elevate another person in a way that ensures we will always fall short.

If you notice that your tendency to compare or compete with others has reached an unhealthy level, this may be a sign that you need to engage in more self-care practices or take a break from social media and other similar triggers.

**Stay present.** It's best not to dwell on what's next, Glik says. "It's important to stay in the present moment as much as you possibly can so that you can listen within for where you're needed now and not get ahead of yourself."

Her primary tool for doing this is PBR — pause, breathe, relax. "It's a micromindfulness tool easy to take with you throughout your day," she says. "This tells your brain that all is well."

**Cultivate gratitude.** "Being a parent, a worker, a partner, and a friend at the same time can be stressful," Glik acknowledges. "But if you can see these roles as representing a full, rich life, that attitude can help you meet that life's demands."

Making a gratitude list can help you appreciate what you have. Or you could try Glik's approach: "I like to pretend that I have just discovered that I have a family, a job, a circle of friends, as if I never had them or they were taken away from me and restored. Then I get to see them as amazing blessings." 🧡

"Why do we feel guilty for not being able to do it all? Often, we form our sense of self based on how well we succeed at making everybody happy."



# A Greener Disposition

Your guide to eco-friendly burial and cremation options.

BY MAGGIE FAZELI FARD

**DEATH IS** a forgone conclusion of life. What remains to be decided is what comes after the last breath. Natural deathcare alternatives, like green burials and water cremation, are one way to align your postmortem choices with the values you live by.

“Natural deathcare, at its heart, offers disposition options that are gentler on the earth,” says mortician Angela Woosley, MA, the founder of Inspired Journeys, a full-service, woman-owned deathcare provider.

Disposition options — that is, the final arrangements for a body after death — exist on a spectrum. On one end is the modern, conventional burial: embalming through a process that uses a formaldehyde-based chemical solution to slow decomposition, followed by burial in a lacquered wood or metal casket placed within a concrete outer burial container or vault and topped off with a granite or bronze grave marker. This combination can preserve the body and ward off full decomposition for many years.

On the other end of the spectrum, “the gentlest disposition on the earth is to open a hole in the ground in a cemetery by hand and place the person’s naked body in the hole,” Woosley says. “That would make Mother Nature’s job easiest.”

The options between these postmortem extremes are nearly endless and highly customizable according

to personal preferences and familial, cultural, or religious expectations.

For Sarah Kerr, PhD, the founder of the Centre for Sacred Deathcare, the logistics of greening a death stem from a central question: “How green do you want to be?”

“Navigating death well is about tending the needs of the soul — spirit, consciousness, that which is more than the physical — as well as the body,” says Kerr. “The soul is healed by beauty. It resonates with relationship. It is fed by meaning.”

Being open to the possibilities within the realm of green burials requires a willingness to question what you think you know about death and dying.

“The dominant materialist approach to the world says we pop into existence, live in a straight line, and pop out,” Kerr notes. “But our bodies and souls are part of nature. We exist in cycles just like everything else in the cosmos. Our bodies are formed, we live in them, and they return to the earth. Recognizing this cyclical existence in how we attend to the disposition of our bodies is a way to put ourselves back into alignment with nature.”

Just as there is no perfect way to live a green life, there is no perfectly green death. The following guide explores how you can make the final disposition of yourself or a loved one more aligned with the values you live by.

## NATURAL BURIAL

For most of human history, what we now call green, or natural, burial was simply considered “burial.” When someone died, the family, community, or other custodians of the dead would dig a shallow hole in the earth and place the shrouded, unembalmed body inside. The process was simple, eco-friendly, and meaningful — an integral religious and cultural practice.

Today, green burials are an alternative to their conventional counterparts. Each year, conventional funerals in the United States require an estimated 20 million board feet of casket wood, 64,500 tons of steel, 1.6 million tons of concrete for burial vaults, and 4 million gallons of embalming fluid, a carcinogen.

By eliminating the need for these materials, natural burials are often more eco-friendly and less expensive than conventional ones.

Green burials tend to be shallower than most conventional burials, at 3 to 4 feet rather than 5 to 6 feet: The soil closer to the surface is more amenable to decomposition. Depending on soil type and bacterial and moisture content, it can take two to 20 years for the body and bones to fully decompose.

Green burials are legal in every state and can be performed at green cemeteries, legally designated family burial plots, and conservation burial grounds.

## WATER CREMATION

Water cremation — also known as aquamation or alkaline hydrolysis — is an alternative to flame, or fire, cremation.

Like flame cremation, water cremation reduces human remains to bone fragments. But instead of flame, it uses water and an alkali solution of potassium hydroxide that, when heated, dissolves the body, leaving behind bone fragments and a sterile liquid. Alkaline hydrolysis accelerates the natural decomposition process from the decades required of a conventional casket burial to hours.

During the process, the remains are placed in an airtight capsule with alkalized water, and through gentle

water flow, all organic material is broken down. When complete, the bone remains are collected, dried, and processed before being returned to the family. The effluent is returned to wastewater for processing, so the water is not wasted.

It’s estimated that water cremation can cut energy use by 90 percent and greenhouse-gas emissions by 35 percent. Flame cremation in the United States produces about 1.04 billion pounds of carbon dioxide each year. It’s worth noting that water cremation is the greener cremation option, but fire cremation is considered more eco-friendly than conventional burial. Again, “green” exists on a spectrum.

From a financial perspective, water cremation costs about the same or slightly more than flame cremation. The aquamation process yields about 20 to 30 percent more ashes.

Water cremation is legal in about half of U.S. states; even where it is legal, few facilities offer the service, making access an ongoing issue.

## HUMAN COMPOSTING

Natural organic reduction (NOR), also known as human composting, supercharges the process of going from human to dirt. It uses a system similar to backyard composting, relying on microbes, oxygen, and plant matter to transform human remains into soil that can support new life.

During NOR, a body is laid in a large, individual vessel with straw, wood chips, and other natural materials. The decomposing process generates heat exceeding 131 degrees F, which kills viruses, bacteria, and pathogens. It also stabilizes heavy metals rather than releasing them into the atmosphere. Testing has shown that the compost resulting from NOR is well below Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) limits for heavy metals.

Microorganisms involved in the decomposition process break down the gases into water and carbon dioxide. In addition, biofilters and mechanical ventilation are used to

aerate the process and ensure there is no strong odor.

The process to transform the whole body into soil, including bones and teeth, takes approximately eight to 12 weeks.

When that’s complete, you’re left with about one cubic yard of rich compost — almost enough to fill a compact pickup truck bed — that is indistinguishable from other compost. It can be divided among family members



and used to nurture plants, trees, and home gardens. It can also be donated to conservation spaces for rehabilitation of natural habitats. Because NOR produces such a large amount of compost, the carbon offset is significant.

Still, notes Woosley, human composting was designed not to be a substitute for natural burial but an alternative in densely populated areas without green-burial grounds. “Imagine dying in Manhattan — you would have to [travel for] hours to get to a place where green burial is

possible. NOR is, at its best, an urban green-burial option.”

Human composting is currently available in 11 states, with legalization in a 12th — California — slated to go into effect in 2027. In the states where NOR is legal, human composting facilities are licensed, highly regulated, and run by professionals, just like a crematorium or funeral home.

### BURIAL AT SEA

For as long as humans have been sailing, people have been buried at sea. Today, this ancient practice is legal and available in the United States. While it's most often associated with naval branches of the military, anyone can be “buried” in federally approved waters as long as the burial follows the guidelines set out by the EPA under the Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act (MPRSA) general permit.

Water burials of noncremated remains must take place at least three nautical miles from shore, in water at least 600 feet deep. The body is either placed in a weighted metal casket or shrouded in natural, biodegradable fabric weighted with stones — and then released from a boat to sink to the ocean floor. Cremated remains can be scattered with or without a biodegradable vessel in waters of any depth, as long as they're discarded three nautical miles or more from shore.

The MPRSA does not permit burial in rivers, lakes, or bays; if you want to legally scatter ashes in any of these bodies of water, check with local officials. Additionally, the act does not permit floating pyres, so do not set a boat or other craft carrying a body on fire.

Burial at sea is considered an eco-friendly option if you don't have to travel far to reach federally approved waters and you forgo embalming. It can also cost less than a conventional burial, especially if you have access to your own boat. 🌱

### GREENWASHING IN DEATHCARE

As with any industry, greenwashing — the use of feel-good phrases or imagery that implies a product is good for the earth — is a legitimate concern in deathcare. Death tech, in particular, is a fascinating blend of promising innovation and clever marketing.

Mushroom burial suits and coffins, freeze-drying, burial pods, tree urns, reef-ball burials, ash-infused tattoo ink, lab-grown ash diamonds, and space burials are just some examples of new, strange, technologically driven disposition options. Many are still theoretical technologies and not yet available to consumers.

“Different and unusual does not mean it's green,” warns mortician Angela Woosley, MA. “If you are concerned about greenwashing in your funeral options, I would simply ask: ‘Who benefits from this? Does this get me closer to the earth than putting a body in a hole in the ground?’”

If ecological soundness is fundamental to your decision-making process, “start with a hole in the ground and work your way back from that,” Woosley says. “You don't need a tree capsule to become a tree. You don't need a mushroom suit to become dirt. There are few products you need to purchase to get closer to Mother Earth. There are very few people you need to pay to get closer to being green.”

According to the Order of the Good Death, a death-positive information clearinghouse, even the most green-sounding options are suspect: “Don't buy funeral products that insist they are going to make a tree out of the ashes. For one thing, the tree doesn't grow from the ashes because [the ashes] basically turn to cement when they get wet.”

Moreover, Woosley adds that cremated remains are quite alkaline and have a high sodium content; adding cremains directly to the

soil can stress the roots of your plant and hinder growth. (Burying cremains in a biodegradable urn or shroud and adding a neutralizing soil mix can help mitigate the environmental impact.)

Beyond greenwashing is the phenomenon of soul washing. “As new options come into the market, they are often driven by capitalism rather than by soul,” says sacred deathcare guide Sarah Kerr, PhD.

“Just because a funeral home offers you something doesn't necessarily mean it's a good fit,” Kerr continues. “If you are going to have someone's ashes shot as fireworks into space, or compressed into diamonds, or even saved in a locket, know that all of those things have spiritual significance. It's really important to consider if that's the spiritual impact you want. Don't choose something just because it's on the menu and appeals to some kind of quick knee-jerk response. ‘Wouldn't that be cool?’ is not a reason to do it. Seek out a deep knowing that this is the right choice.”



#### FIND GUIDANCE

For more advice — including a resource list and what to do with cremated remains — visit [ELmag.com/greenburial](https://ELmag.com/greenburial).





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# Reinvention in Action

BY **BAHRAM AKRADI**

## TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE —

in the health and wellness industry as in life — is to adapt.

It's why innovation is a core tenet at Life Time and one of the things we've been most committed to over the past 30-plus years. Whether it's optimizing our club layouts for improved flow, reinvigorating our fitness offerings with custom formats, or expanding beyond fitness to become a healthy-lifestyle brand, we have countless examples of reinvention in action.

These adaptations have been key to our growth and progress. They've helped us weather challenges and thrive when opportunity knocks.

Without this mindset, we risk becoming irrelevant or nonexistent. So when we see the potential for something to be more or better, we do something about it.

Take pickleball: When it began to grow in popularity a few years ago, we saw an opportunity to lead, so we quickly transitioned existing spaces into courts to meet the growing demand. We now have nearly 800 courts and an ever-expanding pickleball community that's both recreational and competitive.

I've spent a lot of time playing on those courts, and about two years ago, I found myself getting frustrated with the pickleballs themselves. The balls bounced randomly when placed in the same spot and seemed to crack or wear out quickly. It was maddening.

So I took a closer look through an engineering lens — and I saw a clear opportunity for improvement.

Most of the pickleballs had holes that were inconsistently sized or spaced out. And because some of the edges of the holes weren't smooth,

they would catch on the court's surface, causing the ball to bounce unpredictably.

These weren't minor design flaws — they were design disasters. Yet we were tolerating a mediocre ball because “that's just how pickleballs are made.”

So, we decided to do something about it. With a concept and the directive to design a ball that plays true and consistent every time, Life Time's engineers began recreating it from the inside out.

While every other ball on the market has 40 holes or fewer, our ball would have 48 small holes of equal size and spacing. We chamfered the holes' edges to improve bounce predictability; this solves for durability, too.

We then sent the redesigned ball to our clubs, where the feedback from members and pros was resoundingly positive. We shared it with professional pickleball players, who touted its consistent bounce and sturdiness.

We hosted major pickleball competitions at a handful of Life Time locations, where our pickleball was *the ball* for professional play.

And as of late this summer, the patent-pending LT Pro 48 pickleball is now the official ball for the Professional Pickleball Association (PPA). It will be used at the inaugural LT Open — a professional tournament for singles pickleball — in October.

But this isn't just about the ball. It's about our ability as humans to innovate and reinvent. It's about having the courage to question the status quo.

Every breakthrough starts by refusing to accept what is. The telephone was invented to improve upon telegraph communication. The



development of video streaming made movies and shows more accessible and readily available.

So, ask yourself: What do you accept as an inconvenience or problem that you might actually be able to do something about? What do you tolerate because “that's just the way things are”?

With those questions as catalysts, irritations can become opportunities. Consider the following framework for turning your own frustrations into reinvention:

**Reflect daily.** Take the time to consider what's working in your life — and what isn't. Think about how you are uniquely positioned to change the things that are falling short.

**Find solutions.** If something is broken, figure out a way to fix it. Seek out partners with the knowledge, skills, and abilities you need to create change.

**Test — and test again.** Put your solution to the test, then iterate as you identify problems or gaps. Repeat testing as necessary.

**Protect your innovation.** Defend it, patent it, trademark it (if needed).

What problem are you uniquely positioned to solve? The world has plenty of people who settle for things as they are. It needs more of us who are willing to look at what is and envision what could be.



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

**“Life is like an ever-shifting  
kaleidoscope — a slight  
change, and all patterns and  
configurations alter.”**

**— SHARON SALZBERG**

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