

November/December 2019

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Self-tracking
Optimization
Fitness



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Dealing with
Toxic Emotions

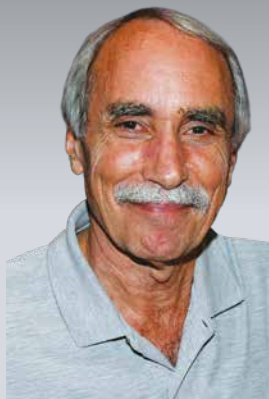
Vagus Nerve
Exercises

Mindfulness and
Yoga for Kids



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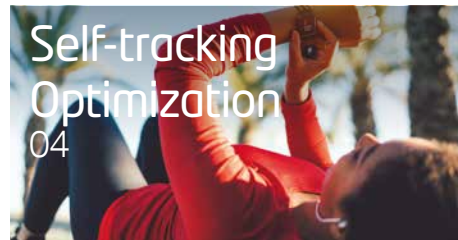
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Mindful Living

There's a lot of discussion going on these days about whether our attention spans are decreasing. It's possible that our attention spans are not getting worse, but instead we're just not focusing on the same things anymore.

For example, the next time you're at a restaurant, look around at the other people. How many are on their phones and how many are paying close attention to the people they are dining with? How many are focused on their food? Then think about your own habits and where you want your attention to be.

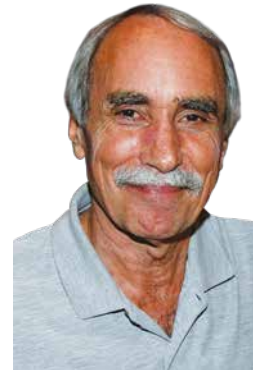
I tried this exercise not long ago, and I was startled by how many couples I saw who, instead of talking to each other, were both staring at their phones. This is not mindful living.

Mindful living means being present to what is happening in life around us. It means talking to our dinner partners, savoring the foods we eat, feeling our muscles work when we exercise, and so much more. Intentionally being mindful means not just leaving our phones in our pockets, but turning them off or leaving them at home! For a society that is so digitally connected, this can feel like a major life change. But I challenge us all to do it, at least for a little while, to experience the difference it can make.

You may notice that you are better able to pay attention to your spouse or children, that you notice more things around you, and you feel more connected to the experience of living. Mindful living is little more than learning to focus on the things in life that truly give you joy. What's more pleasurable: laughing with a friend or scrolling through social media posts?

When we are mindful and fully present, our relationships deepen and opportunities for more joyful experiences and wonderful memories will come into our lives. Paying attention to the people, sensations, and experiences we are in, and not closing them off with technology or other distractions, becomes its own reward.

Let's all try to put our phones down, close our books, and put away the newspaper a little more often so we can connect with each other. If we are all mindful, there is no limit to what we can accomplish together.



Dwight L. McKee M.D.

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Nutritional News



Obesity may be related to gut bacteria

New research shows there may be a complex link between gut bacteria, obesity, and the health of a person's immune system. Specifically, a study has found that when a person's immune system is impaired, it can change the composition of the gut microbiome, resulting in metabolic disease and obesity. The study also found that certain species of gut bacteria may be able to help prevent the gut from absorbing fat. This research shows how the health of our digestive system can have a profound effect on other systems in our bodies.²



Help protect your heart with vegetables

Eating a diet rich in plant-based foods may lower cardiovascular death risk by more than 30 percent, according to new research. This study of 12,168 people is just the latest in a mounting body of evidence that eating more vegetables, legumes, nuts, and whole grains, and fewer animal-based foods, contributes to a healthy heart and cardiovascular system.³



Your View Can Change Your Life

The first of its kind, a new study has demonstrated that simply being able to see green spaces from your home is linked to lower frequencies and strengths of craving for alcohol, cigarettes, and harmful foods. Previous studies have linked these healthy habits to being immersed in nature. However, it seems that even passive exposure to nature is enough to foster healthy eating habits.⁴

Nutritional Science Breakthrough Discovery

Scientists at Stanford University recently discovered thousands of tiny, previously unidentified proteins in the human microbiome. Because they are so small (less than 50 amino acids long), these newly found proteins (actually proteins in this size range are often referred to as peptides) are believed to fold into unique shapes to form previously unidentified biological building blocks.¹

Boost your brain with physical activity

Even a short bout of exercise is enough to enhance brain function, according to the latest research. Scientists saw that any activity equivalent to a weekly game of pickup basketball or 4,000 steps can help promote an increase in synapses in the hippocampus. While even more regular physical activity is better for your body, this new discovery underscores that fact, that when we're short on time, even a quick workout has many benefits for the body.⁵



¹ Hila Sberro, Brayon J. Fremin, Soumaya Zitni, Fredrik Edfors, Nicholas Greenfield, Michael P. Snyder, Georgios A. Pavlopoulos, Nikos C. Kyrpides, and Ami S. Bhat. "Large-Scale Analyses of Human Microbiomes Reveal Thousands of Small, Novel Genes." *Cell* 178, no. 5 (August 08, 2019): 1245-259. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cell.2019.07.016>.

² Charisse Petersen, Rickesha Bell, Kendra A. Klag, Soh-Hyun Lee, Raymond Soto, Arevik Ghazaryan, Kaitlin Buhrke, H. Atakan Ekiz, Kyla S. Ost, Sihem Boudina, Ryan M. O'Connell, James E. Cox, Claudio J. Villanueva, W. Zac Stephens,

and June L. Round. "Recommendation of T Cell-mediated Regulation of the Microbiota Protects against Obesity." *Science* 365, no. 6451 (July 26, 2019). doi:10.1126/science.aat9351.

³ Kim, Hyunju, Laura E. Caulfield, Vanessa Garcia-Larsen, Lyn M. Steffen, Josef Coresh, and Casey M. Rebholz. "Plant-Based Diets Are Associated With a Lower Risk of Incident Cardiovascular Disease, Cardiovascular Disease Mortality, and All-Cause Mortality in a General Population of Middle-Aged Adults." *Journal of the American Heart Association* 8, no. 16 (2019). doi:10.1161/jaha.119.012865.

⁴ University of Plymouth. "Seeing Greenery Linked to Less Intense and Frequent Cravings." News release, July 12, 2019. Eurek Alert.

⁵ Chatzi, Christina, Yingyu Zhang, William D. Hendricks, Yang Chen, Eric Schnell, Richard H. Goodman, and Gary L. Westbrook. "Exercise-induced Enhancement of Synaptic Function Triggered by the Inverse BAR Protein, Mtss1L." *Life*, June 24, 2019. doi:10.1101/545582.

Self-tracking Optimization

Decades ago, people could read their pulse by pressing their fingers on their wrist and counting the beats they felt during the span of a minute. People could estimate hours of sleep by peering at the clock right before closing their eyes, and seeing the time when they woke up to go to the bathroom, get a drink of water or wake up worrying about the next day.

People would keep a written log of how many miles they ran perhaps by driving their car along the same route and reading the car's odometer. Keeping a food diary meant weighing food out and writing it down in a paper booklet in order to review with a professional nutritionist or consult a book.



Much has changed in the past decade in terms of all of the information we have on ourselves.

We can use a free app on our phone to register the barcode on something we eat. Or our smart watches can read our heart rate and oxygen levels. We can buy scales that weigh us and then communicate with a fitness app. And fitness trackers and watches even track our sleep and determine the quality of it—deep or shallow. We may keep track of recipes we want to try in online spaces, and then we document the results with an Instagram photo posted for our community to see and comment on. We not only determine the distance of our long walk, but can see it mapped out with minute-by-minute speed averages or even topographical changes in hills or stairs we climbed.

Whether we fully engage with it or not, we are living in a self-tracking society. How we look at that data, interpret and understand it, and, perhaps, improve upon it is what followers of self-tracking optimization aim to achieve.

This is sometimes called the Quantified Self Movement, and the objective is to gain self-awareness through numbers. Participants use a number of different means to gather data on their sleep, water and other liquid intake, food eating habits, exercise, and even mental and emotional space. A key characteristic is that there is often a community of users who share their personal data with one another.

While it used to be a fringe movement, it is now fairly common with the widespread use of Garmin watches, Fitbits, and Apple watches. Even smartphones have automatic pedometer features that keep an ongoing summation of activity. Think of the ways people use smartphone apps like “My Fitness Pal” to post to social media the length of their long bike ride, with a map of the route included!

As you can imagine, there are critics of this trend. The obsession with data and numbers is one issue. Equating self-worth with these points of data can be a slippery slope. At a time when there is a push to see health and wellness holistically (not just how much a person weighs or calories in-calories out), this ubiquitous data extraction of the self can seem like the opposite of that.



The potential overuse of technology is another criticism. Questions involve how we are glued to our devices and how that affects our social interactions. People question the risks of cybersecurity slipups or companies having that data to target consumers for marketing campaigns. Another critique is the over-focus on the self. Is this too much information about ourselves? Being self-aware is an admirable quality, but when does navel-gazing become narcissistic?

But advocates insist it is helping people be more mindful of how to spend their time—both waking and sleeping. It leads to healthier communities and people talking more about wellness and fitness.



It improves personal accountability—partly by showing people the reality of exercise (“I only walked three kilometers? I thought it was at least five!”) and food intake (“Whoa. That cookie is 500 calories! I’ll only eat half.”). It helps discover patterns that can be key to eliminating health triggers (“Every time I stay up past 10 pm, I feel blue the next day.” or “When I drink red wine, I get a migraine.”). For some personality types, it helps create the sense of predictability in an otherwise uncontrollable world. Another benefit is that you can indeed use it to impress others—and that may not be a bad thing! External accountability is a powerful motivator.



So it is easy to understand that, like anything else, this subject has its positive and negative points as to how it can affect us. The most important thing to remember is to be aware of what you are doing, how you are spending your time throughout each day. Don’t become a slave to your devices and all the technology available to you, but use it to your advantage, not to your detriment.

Dealing with Toxic Emotions

Anger, guilt, shame, anxiety, fear, self-loathing, regret, bitterness, and resentment are toxic emotions that are harmful not just to us but to everyone around us, at home and at work. Toxic emotions, when left unchecked, can impact our mental and physical health. Fortunately, there are many ways to help distance yourself from toxic emotions and align your thoughts with positive patterns.



Protecting yourself and your loved ones from the consequences of too much negativity starts with an understanding of how your emotions influence the world and how the world influences your emotions. It's a two-way path—or better yet, a web of connections. No wonder it has been said that it's easier to catch an emotion than it is to catch a cold.

Research on a range of habits and feelings, both good and bad, reveals that they can be contagious. For example, a study of interpersonal chemistry through negativity found that sharing negative ideas about a third party is particularly effective in promoting closeness between people. In other words, it's bonding over a mutual dislike of someone else.¹ While this may create an initial bond, it is hardly a healthy basis for a friendship. This is likely a holdover from primitive times when there was survival benefit in small groups of humans bonding together and seeing other groups as “the enemy.” Today, such bonding patterns have become dysfunctional, and may have an “anti-survival” effect. In other words, what used to help us survive is now a force that attracts negative people and bad influences into our lives.

This is compounded by unrelated findings that show your chances of being unhappy are doubled after you come into contact with just one negative experience.²

Luckily, happiness and acts of kindness are contagious too. The effects of performing one good deed can spread outward through complex social connections affecting people you may never meet.³

Perhaps better still, for every “happy” friend you have, your chances of being happy yourself increase by almost 10 percent.⁴

We tend to attract into our lives the thoughts and emotions we focus on. On top of that, a primitive instinct to mimic our companions' expressions, body language, and speech makes us even more susceptible to “catching” emotions from the people we interact with the most.⁵

It's clear that our emotions affect the people around us AND that the people around us affect our emotions.⁶ Naturally, it follows that if you surround yourself with people who dwell on negative experiences and toxic emotions, you will begin to align yourself with the same thoughts and experiences.

Conversely, if you spend your time with people who focus on joy, gratitude, happiness, and other positive emotions, you will find your own thoughts and emotions to be aligned with positive things, people, experiences, ideas, and concepts.

This is easiest to do at home, where we have the most control over our lives. You choose who to let walk in your door, what music is played on the stereo, and what channel the television is on. It might seem trivial at first, but these environmental factors can have a major impact on your emotional state.

After a stressful day, coming home to your personal sanctuary and spending time with positive-minded friends, listening to uplifting music, watching a lighthearted show, reading a motivational book, or doing any other activity that helps you feel less stress will help you realign your thoughts with positive frequencies and will reduce the risk of toxic emotions taking hold.

At work, it can take a little more practice to avoid catching toxic emotions. This is because often we can't choose the people we have to spend time with. Whether it's a boss who shouts at subordinates or a coworker who gossips about people in the office, sometimes there is no avoiding negativity in the workplace.

When toxic emotions abound, the best way to avoid becoming infected is to bolster your positive thoughts by seeking out other people in the office who want to keep a positive outlook and find joy at the office. When you invest time and energy in these relationships, your own good deeds and positivity will ripple through the office and counteract negativity. The effect can snowball as more and more coworkers feel the difference made by not dwelling on toxic feelings, which can lead to not just less stress and better feelings, but also improved cooperation, decreased conflict, and increased work performance.⁷

¹ Bosson, Jennifer K., Amber B. Johnson, Kate Niederhoffer, and William B. Swann. “Interpersonal Chemistry through Negativity: Bonding by Sharing Negative Attitudes about Others.” *Personal Relationships* 13, no. 2 (2006): 135–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2006.00109.x>.

² Hill, Alison L. et al. “Emotions as Infectious Diseases in a Large Social Network: The SISa Model.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 277.1701 (2010): 3827–3835. PMC. Web. 3 May 2017.

³ James H. Fowler and Nicholas A. Christakis. “Cooperative behavior cascades in human social networks.” *PNAS* 2010 107 (12) 5334–5338; published ahead of print March 8, 2010, doi:10.1073/pnas.0913149107.

⁴ Christakis, Nicholas A, and James Fowler. “SOCIAL NETWORKS AND HAPPINESS.” *SOCIAL NETWORKS*

AND HAPPINESS | Edge.org, n.d. <https://www.edge.org/conversation/social-networks-and-happiness>.

⁵ Colino, Stacey. “Are You Catching Other People's Emotions?” U.S. News & World Report, n.d. <https://health.usnews.com/health-news/health-wellness/articles/2016-01-20/are-you-catching-other-peoples-emotions>.

⁶ Larson, Reed W., and David M. Almeida. “Emotional Transmission in the Daily Lives of Families: A New Paradigm for Studying Family Process.” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, no. 1 (1999): 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/353879>.

⁷ Barsade, Sigal G. “The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and Its Influence on Group Behavior.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2002): 644. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3094912>.



Whether you are at work, at home, out with friends, or meeting new people at a dinner party, always remember that you don't need to react to every negative influence you come across.

Negatively focused people often seek out others to join them. We've all been in conversations in which the other person tries to get us to complain about another person or situation. The next time this happens to you, remember that you don't have to react. You don't have to agree and let negative emotions take hold. You also don't have to confront the person, which can spark an argument.

The third option is to simply not let the negative comments influence you. Take a moment to examine your own inner thoughts and make sure that you are staying true to your desire to focus on positive thoughts and experiences.

Then remove yourself from the situation quickly but politely. At work, this can be as easy as saying you have a deadline to meet. At a dinner party, you can excuse yourself to refresh a drink.

Much like germs, emotions are contagious. And if we don't take some precautions, we can catch toxic emotions without realizing it. The absolute best way to bolster your immunity to toxic emotions is to surround yourself with other people who intentionally align their thoughts with positive frequencies.



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Food supplements should not be used as a substitute for a varied diet.

Coping During the Holidays

The Thanksgiving and Christmas season is one of joy and happiness. It's an occasion to spend time with loved ones and celebrate with our families. Throughout this time of year, "joy" and "peace" are plastered on decorations, greeting cards, and ad campaigns. But these sentiments are not felt by everyone.

In fact, many people feel deeper sadness around this time of year. For some, temporary situational circumstances may hinder the feelings of yuletide bliss. Some people may be getting divorced, have money worries, or be in the midst of combating illnesses.

For others, the issues may be ongoing such as struggling with mental health stability, surviving with the death of a loved one, or feeling relationship strife with a family member or friend.

And the societal expectation to be cheerful and social can make it even harder to cope. What are some of the triggers for sadness around the holiday season? And what are some specific ideas for coping with those feelings? What are some general coping mechanisms that can help us maintain our mental health?

One of the most profound feelings of sadness one can experience is grief—particularly if it involves the death of a loved one.

Whether the death was recent or happened years ago, the Christmas season in particular can cause the immense longing we may feel for someone who was and is important to us to resurface.

Grieving death is one of the hardest things one can go through. It is important to step into those deep feelings of despair and loss. It is also important to figure out when you need to step out of those feelings to be present in your current life. While you are the only who can navigate that balance between remembrance and presence, having a trusted person who can walk that with you can help—whether that person is a professional counselor, a spouse or family member, or a good friend who is strongly empathetic.

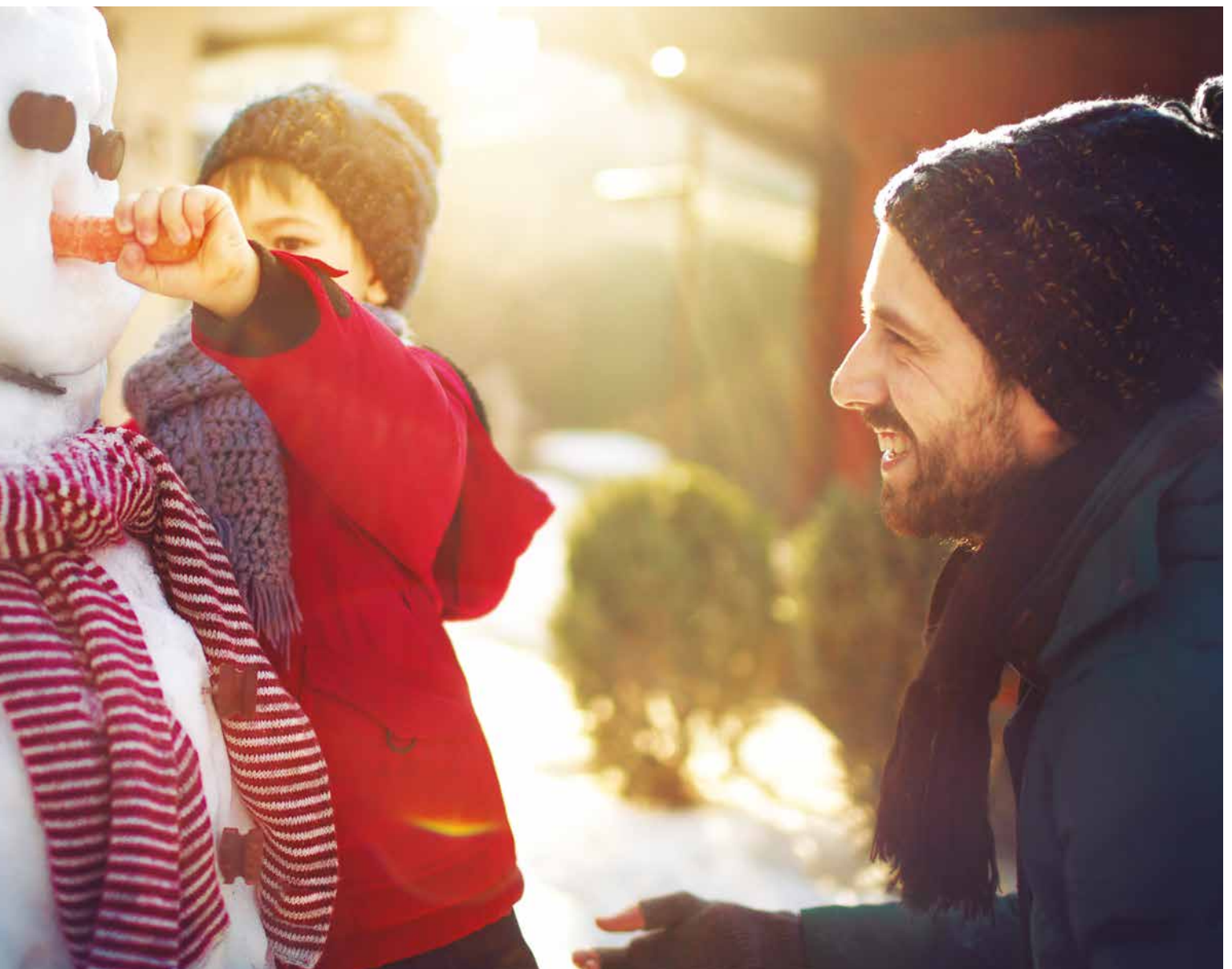
Another coping method is creating space to honor, talk about, and maybe even talk to your loved one.

You can create a small altar or space of tribute to your departed loved one. Place a photo that highlights them at their best, maybe light a candle every day to honor their spirit and help you be mindful, and maybe even try speaking out loud to them, saying the things you want them to know. Whether or not you believe in an afterlife, speaking out loud to your loved one can help you process those feelings.

Troubled relationships are another form of interpersonal grief that can be even more complicated. For those of us who are estranged from our families, the holidays can be very triggering. Not only are we mourning the loss of a relationship, we may also be dealing with resentment, angry thoughts of what happened, or despair over what could have been.



One way to cope with this is to create a three-columned chart in which you write about what you think happened (or describe a specific fight or argument), how you feel about it, and what you wish had happened.



This both honors your sadness and anger over the estrangement and lifts up the feelings of mourning what did not come to pass.

Aside from relationship difficulties, the winter holiday season can feel frenzied. This is due to a larger issue in society and also a personal issue of busying our lives—sometimes referred to as the disease of busyness. We overbook our lives and stretch ourselves very thin. Many of us live in countries where work is consumptive and society doesn't value slowing down. The response to this is to simplify. If you feel overwhelmed by all of the parties and activities, name for yourself three reasons you must go to a given function. If you can't come up with three, don't go. Spend your free time wisely. Truly assess what gives your life meaning and what energizes you. If more sleep is necessary, then prioritize that.



If you feel most calm and collected when you take a walk after dinner, then do it.

Allow yourself the freedom to not host a party this year. Or if you do, ask others to assist in organizing it.

Finances and money can be a significant stressor around the holidays. In many countries, Christmas has sadly become a holiday in which consumerism reigns supreme. You don't have to choose this. Talk with your family about what truly is important around this time of year. Advocate for traditions that emphasize peace and tranquility. Some families with small children purposefully practice limited gift giving—something you wear, something you need, something you want, and something you read.

In other words, be mindful in order to bring meaning to your life this holiday season. Know that your feelings and experiences are valued, and so is your time and energy.



Calcium

We have all heard that calcium is essential for bone and teeth health. In fact, public health campaigns have lauded calcium—and specifically milk consumption—for preventing osteoporosis. We know that it is an important mineral for muscular and cardiovascular health. And we know that calcium consumption is particularly important during childhood when bone is being formed, and particularly during the growth spurts of adolescence, when adult calcium stores in bone are being formed for the first time.

Out of all of the vitamins and minerals in our body, calcium ranks the highest for the most amount present. It's pretty incredible to think that with certain nutrients, like calcium, if the body doesn't have enough for its daily functions, then the body can provide! However, that comes at a cost.

When the body is lacking calcium, it will dip into its reserves, which happen to be in the bones and teeth. Over time, this can lead to health complications including the weakening of the bones.

The general recommendation for daily intake is at least 1,000 mg. But most health experts suggest at least 1,200 mg for older adults (fifty years old and above) and never more than 2,000 mg. Children should consume between 200 and 700 mg, and teenagers should take 1,300 mg.

There are also different kinds of calcium. The way the body absorbs calcium and utilizes it depends largely on the type of calcium you are taking. Calcium citrate is most easily absorbed, but also is usually more expensive in supplement form. Calcium carbonate is less expensive and is also well-absorbed.¹

Calcium works synergistically with vitamin D, folic acid, vitamin B-12, and vitamin B-6 in order to promote better bioavailability—helping the body make better use of it. Ipriflavone is another nutrient that helps calcium work optimally in the body by helping the body ensure adequate incorporation of calcium in the bones. Ipriflavone is a member of the isoflavone family that helps decrease bone wasting that leads to osteoporosis.

¹ Heaney RP, Dowell MS, Bierman J, Hale CA, Bendich A (2001). "Absorbability and cost effectiveness in calcium supplementation." *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, 20 (3): 239–46, doi:10.1080/07315724.2001.10719038.

² Rovenský, J, et al. "Eggshell Calcium in the Prevention and Treatment of Osteoporosis." *International Journal of Clinical Pharmacology Research*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2003, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15018022>.

Dairy products containing milk have the highest amounts of calcium per serving. Plain yogurt is particularly rich in the mineral.



In fact, yogurt ranks as number one for the most commonly consumed foods that contain the highest concentration of calcium.

For those who eliminate or limit their dairy consumption, there are other options. Sardines are high up on the calcium-containing list because their bones can be consumed. Canned salmon also is high in calcium because usually the preparation (salmon cakes, for example) includes the calcium-rich bones of the fish.

Eggshells are an uncommon yet inexpensive calcium option. To prepare at home, save the eggshells from your well-washed and organic eggs.

When you have amassed a dozen or so, wash them out well, add to boiling water, and boil for about 10 minutes. This helps to sterilize them. Then dry them for several hours and grind them in a coffee or spice grinder. Add half a teaspoon to your three daily meals in order to get your daily recommended amount of 1,000 mg.² You can also dissolve eggshells in apple cider vinegar, and take several tablespoons of this in hot or cold water, sipped over the course of a meal (this is particularly beneficial for people who are taking acid-reducing or blocking medications).

Vegetarians and vegans may be particularly at risk for calcium deficiency if they don't intentionally curate their diet to include it.

Turnip greens and kale contain a decent amount of calcium, but only about one-third the amount in the same serving of milk products.



Specifically, one cup of cooked kale contains just under 100 mg of calcium, compared with over 400 mg in a cup of plain yogurt and 300 mg in three ounces of canned sardines. A word of caution—spinach has very low rates of absorption. Other vegan food sources include sesame seeds or tahini (sesame seed paste), chia seeds, and kidney beans.

Vagus Nerve Exercises

The vagus nerve is one of the longest nerves in the body. It originates in the brain stem and extends through the torso. It invigorates the heart, the organs in the abdomen, and the digestive system. Mutually, these organs and body parts can communicate back up to the brain via the vagus nerve. It is like an internal highway that connects the brain to the organs throughout the chest and abdomen.





Vagus has its etymology in Latin, meaning “wander” or “stray.” It is named as such because it wanders all over the body.

The vagus nerve is the major component in the parasympathetic nervous system.

The parasympathetic nervous system controls the “rest and digest” functions of the body. The sympathetic nervous system is responsible for “fight or flight.”

If you had to run away from a stray dog on the street, the sympathetic nervous system would kick in to increase your pulse and heart rate, increase oxygenated blood flow to your muscles, and release adrenaline. The trouble for most of us is that the sympathetic nervous system is often in gear due to the stress of modern life. People are often stuck in sympathetic overdrive, which deteriorates digestion and immune function. The parasympathetic nervous system, and its “rest and digest” responsibility, tend to be neglected.

Imagine yourself running up the stairs. The sympathetic nervous system is functioning in this scenario.

As soon as you reach the top of the stairs, the parasympathetic nervous system should kick into gear. It will work to decrease your pulse and send your body into reprieve. Someone with a weakened parasympathetic nervous system will have difficulty with that recovery.

Weakness or insufficiency in your parasympathetic nervous system can play a significant role in your sleep and rest as well as your immunity and healing. Stimulating the vagus nerve is a way to activate the parasympathetic nervous system in order to help with this. Additionally, it can help with irritable bowel conditions, depression, chronic muscle pain (fibromyalgia), and severe headaches.

Here are some simple (and free) exercises you can do to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system via the vagus nerve.

Slow, deep breathing

Deep breathing with conscious effort is one of the most effective ways to stimulate the vagus nerve. Breathe into your diaphragm, which lies at the base of your lungs and ribcage.

When you are stressed, you often inhale deeply but exhale shallowly. Imagine when you are running. You may take in a deep breath during a sprint, but breathing out completely isn't as easy to achieve without concentrated intention.

Similarly, when you are feeling emotionally panicky or angry, if you notice your breathing, you'll see that you breathe in more deeply and breathe out more quickly.

Instead, slowly breathe in for four or five seconds. And then slowly breathe out while counting to four or five. This will help calm your nervous system.

Breathe into the lowest part of your ribcage and relax your belly during the inhale. Try to expand the lowest parts of your ribs out in all directions while intentionally not tightening your abdominal muscles. Smile softly, relax your eyes, and exhale through the mouth to also stimulate the facial, oculomotor, and glossopharyngeal nerves, respectively (also part of the parasympathetic nervous system). This is a good exercise to do prior to sleep.

Humming an “om”

The vocal cords are connected to the vagus nerve. Humming or deep-throat chanting is a way to activate it. In meditation or yoga, practitioners use the “om” sound as a way to connect to the body's ability to relax. It can sometimes feel a little silly to chant the “om” when you don't normally do it. But try using the sound while exhaling for five seconds. The “om” forces your voice to go down an octave or so and brings the more nervous energy down. It can also help steady the exhale so you don't exhale most of your breath out in the beginning and then push little puffs of air out toward the end of the exhalation. If you feel a little goofy chanting, simply singing (especially in your lowest voice tone range) helps stimulate the vagus nerve.

Gargling or cleaning your tongue

Oil pulling, or even water gargling, is another way to stimulate the vagus nerve via the mouth and throat. A bonus is that it also helps rinse the mouth.





Laughing heartily

Laughing yoga, as well as its silly variations such as goat yoga, is popular for the hormonal release. But laughter relaxes us partly due to how it activates the vagus nerve.

Walking

Long walks calm the nervous system. Walking is generally a low-stress form of exercise. It gets our bodies moving but doesn't kick the body into the "flight" mode of the sympathetic nervous system (the way a run will). We are breathing more deeply because of the increased demand for oxygen, but we can still take those nice, big cleansing breaths.

Eating for calm

The gut-brain connection is a hot topic of physiological research right now. This connection is why the bacteria in our gut can influence our brains.

An example of this is that when you are bloated or constipated, you often do not feel you can think well—you may have "brain fog."

As previously mentioned, the vagus nerve has a large distribution in the body because it connects the center of the brain to the depths of the gut. Magnesium, potassium, and sodium are minerals that help calm our bodies. These usually come from plant foods. On the contrary, minerals like phosphorus and calcium often come from animal sources. While these are important nutrients, they tend to stimulate the sympathetic nervous system. If you are eating too much meat or animal products, and not enough vegetables, the balance could be leaning toward the sympathetic nervous system.

Cold water face wash

This may seem like a bit of a jolt to the system, but washing your face with cold water helps to invigorate the vagus nerve.

Be wary of newly developed shocking devices that claim to stimulate your parasympathetic nervous system if they are not FDA approved and don't require a physician's prescription. There are vagus nerve stimulators that have proven beneficial in migraine headache prevention, but there are also many less well-developed devices on the market that may not be specific for the vagus nerve at all, and could result in electromagnetic confusion in the body.

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Food supplements should not be used as a substitute for a varied diet.



Chromium

Chromium is a mineral that helps our bodies metabolize carbohydrates and fats on a microcellular level. We get most of our chromium from a healthy diet of foods such as whole grains, fresh vegetables—particularly corn and potatoes, and fish; one of the richest sources is nutritional yeast. It is also showing up in protein powders and health supplements.

Part of the appeal is that chromium is effective in blood sugar balancing, and many report that it helps them kick their sugar cravings. As long as you are eating a plant-heavy diet of whole foods, chances are you don't have a deficiency.

Chromium is an important nutrient, particularly for those at risk of developing, or living with, diabetes.

It helps to reduce blood sugar levels by boosting the capacity of insulin receptors in the body.¹ In other words, it helps the body utilize insulin better.

In healthy individuals, insulin is a hormone that helps the body bring sugars into the cells to be utilized for energy. In the bodies of people with type 2 diabetes (the most common type), the cells lose their responsiveness to insulin—this is known as insulin resistance; in the less common form, no insulin is produced at all, as in the case of diabetes type 1, otherwise known as childhood or juvenile diabetes.

The absolute most important step to reducing the onset or progression of diabetes is a significant lifestyle change. Diet and exercise are imperative for mitigating the risks associated with uncontrolled blood glucose levels. But in reality, these lifestyle changes are often elusive goals.

Controlling diabetes (or reducing the advancement of prediabetes) by pharmacological means often has side effects. In some studies, over-the-counter chromium supplementation showed promising results in obese subjects and their body's response and utilization of insulin.¹

Scientists believe that chromium augments insulin's binding capabilities. There has been some association of type 2 diabetes with low chromium levels. And when study participants had their chromium levels increase to normal, they also saw a decrease in their blood glucose levels.

A large, multiyear study of 62,000 participants analyzed type 2 diabetes incidence and chromium supplementation (usually in the form of a multivitamin that contained it). The participants who took a supplement of chromium had a 27 percent lower chance of having diabetes.²

However, another study noted that chromium may have assisted in lowering study participants' fasting blood sugar (usually the blood glucose level upon waking in the morning after not having eaten for eight to twelve hours), but that didn't necessarily improve their A1C.³

The A1C is the laboratory blood test that helps determine a person's average blood sugar level over the past three months.

Generally speaking, the studies in which chromium may have a positive health effect on blood glucose levels were studies in which the participants already had diabetes (as opposed to healthy individuals).⁴

Again, this could be due to a healthy diet largely providing the necessary amounts of chromium to our bodies. Some evidence has suggested that chromium can help with food cravings and can suppress appetite.⁵

If you are eating a varied and healthy diet, chances are you are getting enough chromium. Broccoli and grape products (grape juice and red wine) are foods with higher levels of chromium.⁶ If you are prediabetic or have diabetes, talk with your health care professional about appropriate chromium supplementation as an addition to your lifestyle changes.

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Mindfulness and Yoga for Kids

When we think about yoga or mindfulness, chances are an image of an adult (most likely a female) comes to mind.

We may imagine this woman outside in a serene and natural environment in some sort of crossed-legged sitting position, with hands at the knees and her eyes closed. We envision her quiet, calmed, collected, and all by herself. The funny thing is that mindfulness would be easier if our lives were that peaceful!

Enter the slightly chaotic (by comparison) concept of mindfulness for children. If you've ever been to a toddler yoga class, you know it is pretty similar to goat yoga!



Daily yoga or meditative practices, specifically developed to meet their developmental needs and capabilities, help create more peace, concentration, and joyfulness in children.

A big word like mindfulness may not be the easiest word (or concept) for a four-year-old to understand. Instead, try using concepts and words like “noticing” or “awareness.” When you introduce the concept, it is a good self-practice for you to also let go of expectations. If your child isn't interested, let it go for the moment and try a different approach.

Peer pressure may be the way to give your resistant child a bit of coaxing. Bring them to a (brief and fun!) workshop or class on yoga or mindfulness specifically geared to their age group.

Try not to take the experience too seriously, since it may seem like you're herding cats! But the exposure begins the conversation on slowing down, getting in touch with your breath, and moving your body in new ways.

Aim to find a class that has less adult participation (i.e., not parents doing all the work) and instead works with just the children.



Find a “buddy.” Instead of another peer, give children a special stuffed animal. When it is time for meditation, have them get their special stuffed animal, lay down on their back, and hold the toy to their belly as they breathe.



Advocate for mindfulness and yoga at your child's school or daycare. These practices are increasingly being introduced into general education. Teachers say it helps children learn self-regulation, decreases aggression, and increases focus. Talk with other parents, your children's teachers, and school leadership to see if a five-minute practice would be possible.

Teach by example. Just as child development experts say in order to raise readers it is important for your children to see you reading, the same goes for mindfulness exercises. If your child sees you doing something, they will take notice.



Everyday practices and mantras help create a foundation for mindfulness. Take a mindfulness walk during which you “notice” new sights, sounds, and smells along the way. Do a three-minute body scan before bedtime. Practice deep breathing when washing your child’s hands when they come home from school or play.

Be present to them by listening or at least being available to listen. Accompany your child in their current emotional space. When you see your child starting to get frustrated, angry, or even aggressive, try this. Stop what you are doing, bend down to their eye level, and be present. Tell them that you notice they seem agitated (or frustrated, or angry, or mad)—one sentence and nothing more.

Don’t place added feelings on top of it. A simple, “It looks like you may be getting upset.” Period. End of sentence. Avoid run-on sentences or lectures. Don’t say, “You are frustrated because I won’t let you continue playing and instead you have to go get ready for bed.” While you can ask them what they feel or to talk to you, sometimes sitting next to them and simply being present allows them to become more aware of their feelings.



Storytelling

We live in an age of quick quips and snarky wit. When the social media platform Twitter increased its character limit from 140 to 280, the internet had a fit. Behavior scientists debate about the attention span of a given audience—ten seconds or ten minutes?

But regardless of what the current estimate is, it usually is quite low—seconds, minutes? An “elevator pitch” is something championed by people in the business and human resources world to describe whatever you’re selling or advocating for in the time it takes for an elevator to go from one floor to another.

But what happens when we slow down, truly listen, concentrate, and focus on what a person has to share with us and others? When we turn off our screens—the dings, rings, and distractions—what happens?

As one ages, particularly once children are out of the house or one retires from a career, it is normal to take account of one’s life. People wonder about their experiences, their achievements.

Older people ponder their failures and their hopes that didn’t come to pass. Whereas younger adults are trying to understand what the world means for them, seniors are trying to understand what they meant to the world. What is their legacy?

It turns out there are programs and organizations that work with seniors to encourage them to share their stories and even help them to reflect, organize, and document. Some programs are online with videoconferencing during which a cohort of elders work with a facilitator to process life experiences and share their stories with one another.

Other programs take place at nursing homes, assisted living communities, or senior community centers. Sometimes volunteers work with residents of nursing homes or even patients in hospice care to interview participants and help them develop their life story.

Volunteers report that it helps much older adults recall the days when they felt more capable. It helps build their self-esteem during a humbling time in their lives when they cannot do many of the things they once could. In other words, storytelling emphasizes their dignity.

Gerontologists have seen how this builds a stronger sense of self in older adults. It is a space where they can reminisce—reliving their days of glory and their moments of elation. It also creates space for seniors to grieve and heal—recall struggles and confess failures, but also find acceptance.

It can help them forgive themselves and feel greater peace. But storytelling is different from talk therapy.

A good story has drama, engagement, immersion. It’s relatable, but also outside our own experience or perspective to keep it interesting. There is a buildup to something bigger or a unique lesson learned.

Listening to the stories of elders is also beneficial to their adult children and other community members. When we listen to stories we relax, and dopamine is released. We may feel softness and kindness for the storyteller’s experience. We probably will appreciate them more and feel a deeper connection. Deeper than the feel-good connection, some pretty powerful brain processes are happening. Neural coupling occurs when a listener hears a story and their neurons fire similarly to those of the storytellers. This shows us that we have evolved to connect through these experiences. Storytelling and story listening also enhance memory. People are twenty-two times more likely to remember a personal story than a simple fact. And when listeners are engaged in a good story, their brains release the “love” hormone, oxytocin.





Male Fertility

The saying is that it takes two to tango, but that is not what we generally think of when it comes to fertility and pregnancy. But the truth of the matter is that when it comes to infertility between couples, the problem can lie with either or both partners. Estimates say that 30 to 40 percent of cases can be attributed to the man in the relationship.¹

With female infertility, the culprit could be any of a myriad of possibilities—including organ and structural abnormalities (or suboptimal differences), hormonal imbalances, and timing based on menstrual cycles or age of the woman. But for the most part, male fertility (or lack thereof) has almost everything to do with sperm. Specifically, sperm quality, motility, quantity, and stamina.

Weight can be a major hindrance to fertility.

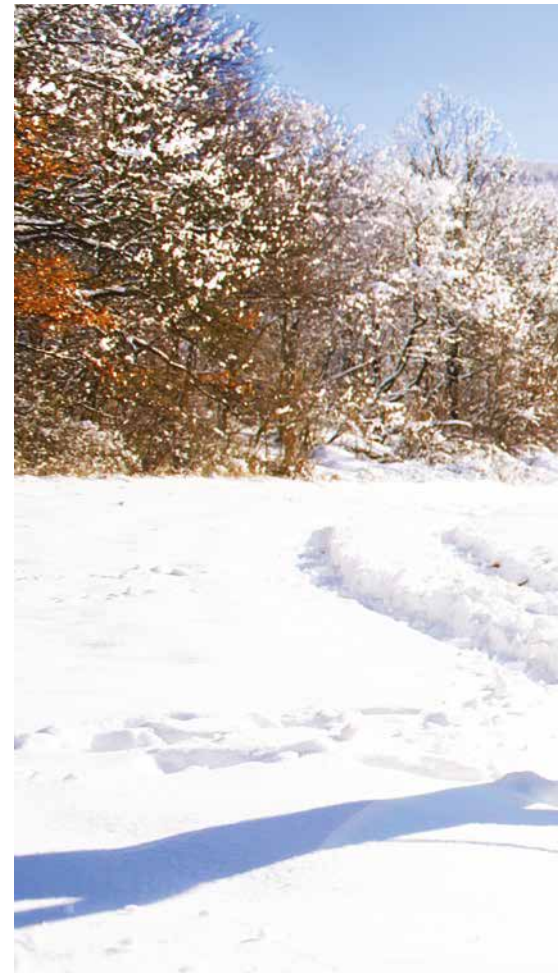
Obesity continues to be a major contributing factor to everything from hypertension and diabetes to even environmental concerns (increased food consumption leads to increased farming, transport, and waste). When a male is overweight, his fertility is negatively affected.² Being overweight does a number of things in our body, but specifically it has a codependent relationship with inflammation—each feeds on the other. The excess body fat also messes with the hormonal system, which is responsible for making sperm.

Lifestyle choices can also be linked to lower quality and quantity of sperm. The usual suspects—smoking, excessive drinking, lack of sleep—are also major contributors to poor male fertility.

Increasing blood flow is an important way of rejuvenating the body. Blood brings oxygen and nutrients to all areas of the body. And there are fewer better ways to increase blood flow than exercise. Men who partake in routine, moderate activity like jogging or swimming have better sperm quality and quantity than do their stationary counterparts.³

Let food be thy fertility! Sperm-boosting nutrients include zinc and vitamin D. Zinc aids in spermiogenesis (the body's creation of sperm), helps in reproductive hormonal balance, contributes to healthy linings of reproductive and urological organs, and has other benefits.^{4,5} Regarding vitamin D, in one study the couples had more difficulty getting pregnant when the male in the relationship had decreased blood serum vitamin D levels.⁶

Fortunately, zinc and vitamin D are also important for immunological health. Keeping your immune system in ideal order is key to your fertility, and antioxidants should be forefront in your food plans. When male participants in a study supplemented with antioxidants, researchers saw the quality of sperm improve.⁷ Male participants' sperm often showed greater abundance, better motility, increased replication, and optimal sperm structure.



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² Katib, Atif. "Mechanisms Linking Obesity with Male Infertility." *Central European Journal of Urology*, vol. 68, Mar. 2015, doi:10.5173/cej.2015.01.435.

³ Hajizadeh, B, et al. "The effects of three different exercise modalities on markers of male reproduction in healthy subjects: a randomized controlled trial." *Reproduction* (Cambridge, England), U.S. National Library of Medicine, Feb. 2017, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27920258.

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⁶ Tartagni, Massimo, et al. "Males with low serum levels of vitamin D have lower pregnancy rates when ovulation induction

and timed intercourse are used as a treatment for infertile couples: results from a pilot study." *Reproductive Biology and Endocrinology : RB&E, BioMed Central*, Nov. 2015, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4654914/.

⁷ Ahmadi, Sedigheh, et al. "Antioxidant supplements and semen parameters: An evidence based review." *International Journal of Reproductive Biomedicine, Research and Clinical Center for Infertility*, Dec. 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5203687/.

⁸ Safarinejad, Mohammad Reza, and Shiva Safarinejad. "The roles of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids in idiopathic male infertility." *Asian Journal of Andrology*, Nature Publishing Group, July 2012, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3720081/.

⁹ Kelland, Kate. "Sperm Count Dropping in Western World." *Scientific American*, 26 July 2017, www.scientificamerican.com/article/sperm-count-dropping-in-western-world/.

¹⁰ Y.H. Chiu, M.C. Afeiche, A.J. Gaskins, P.L. Williams, J.C. Petroska, C. Tanrikut, R. Hauser, J.E. Chavarro, Fruit and vegetable intake and their pesticide residues in relation to semen quality among men from a fertility clinic, *Human Reproduction*, Volume 30, Issue 6, June 2015, Pages 1342–1351, <https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dev064>.

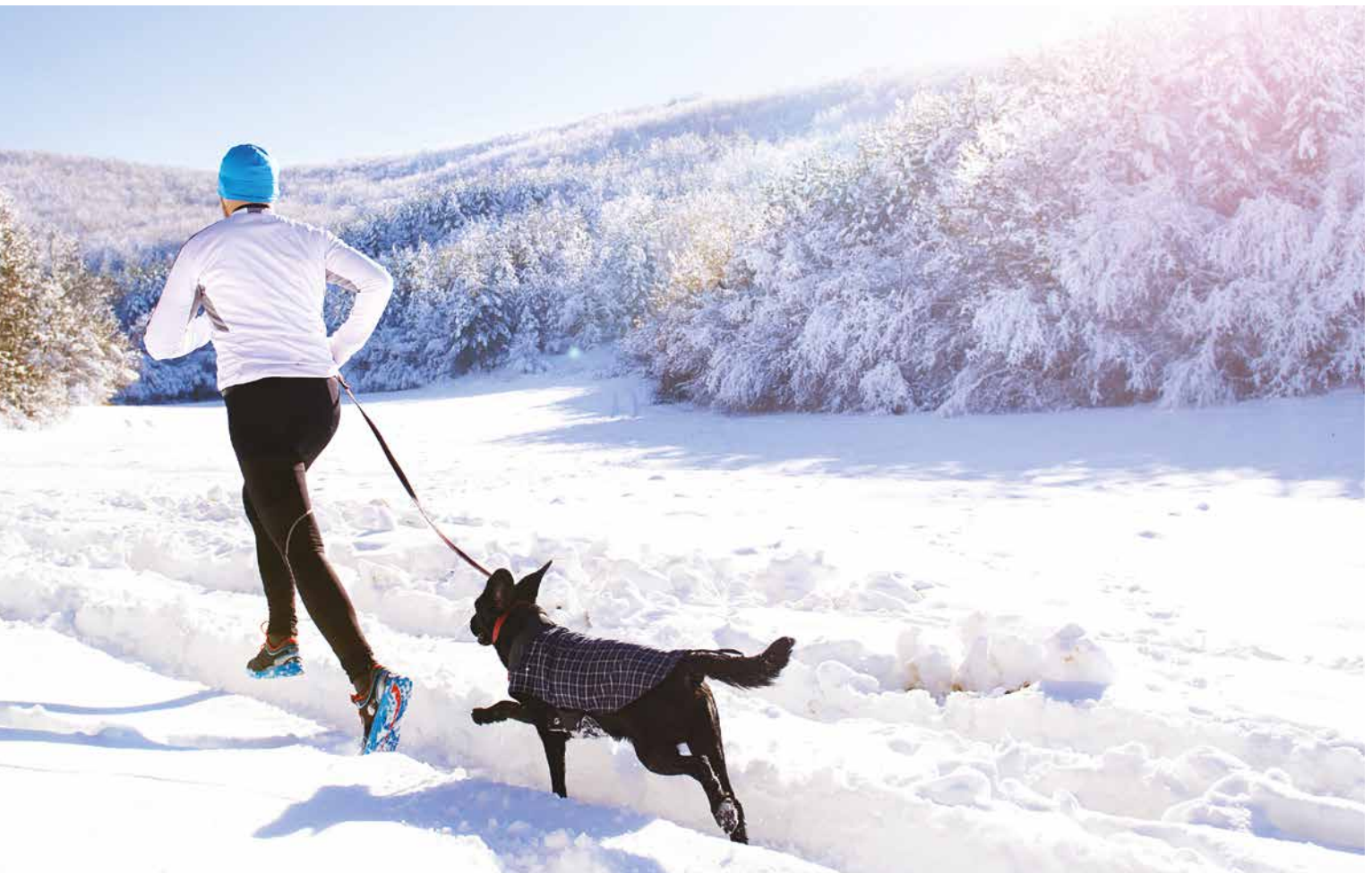


Vary your antioxidative food sources daily, both for health and to keep it interesting for you. Incorporate omega-3 fatty acids, found in foods like wild-caught salmon.⁸ Drink green tea, particularly matcha. In lieu of granola, try a seed and nut mixture of pulsed Brazil nuts, almonds, and walnuts. Eat high quality yogurt with blueberries and walnuts.

If you are having issues with fertility, some of it is likely beyond your daily and personal control.

Research has shown that in the Western world, sperm counts have decreased by nearly 50 percent in the past forty years!⁹ This important study did not name contributing factors in this epidemic decline in the developing world.

Some reviewers of the research did suggest the modern lifestyle is chock-full of pesticides pollution, and chronic stress.¹⁰ However, other reviewers point out the same concerns are present in the developing world as well. The researchers saw no notable decline in the sperm counts of men from Latin America, Africa, or Asia, but fewer studies have been conducted in these areas of the world.



Creativity

When we were children, art came naturally for us. Not only was it an integral part of our formal education, much of our time spent playing also involved creativity, art, and imagination.

Children have a natural ability to stay present and in the moment. But many of us feel uncomfortable in the arts as we get older. We judge our attempts or participation and we compare ourselves to others who we deem to have mastered it. We think of piano lessons or a dance class as something children do. We fear risk. We worry about ability. We don't prioritize it.

Music

When was the last time you sang in the shower? As children, teenagers, or maybe even as young adults, we often used shower time for stretching our lungs' capacities. As we get older, taking a shower becomes just another thing to check off the long list of things to do.

Music has the exceptional ability to influence our moods almost immediately. Sometimes we can use music to amplify a feeling—such as playing a sad song in the midst of a breakup.

Other times the song can dictate our mood—such as when we are in traffic and feeling frustrated and then a danceable song comes on the radio.

These days, when nearly any song and its lyrics are instantly accessible, you may already have a habit of listening to music. But if you reflect and realize that you listen to music considerably less, perhaps take time to update yourself on current hits and trends.

Dance

Move—literally and figuratively—beyond just listening to music more often. Dancing is a natural physical response to music—it's true! Have you seen the full body response of a baby to the sounds of a danceable drum beat?



Join a dance class or check out local events for community dance classes.

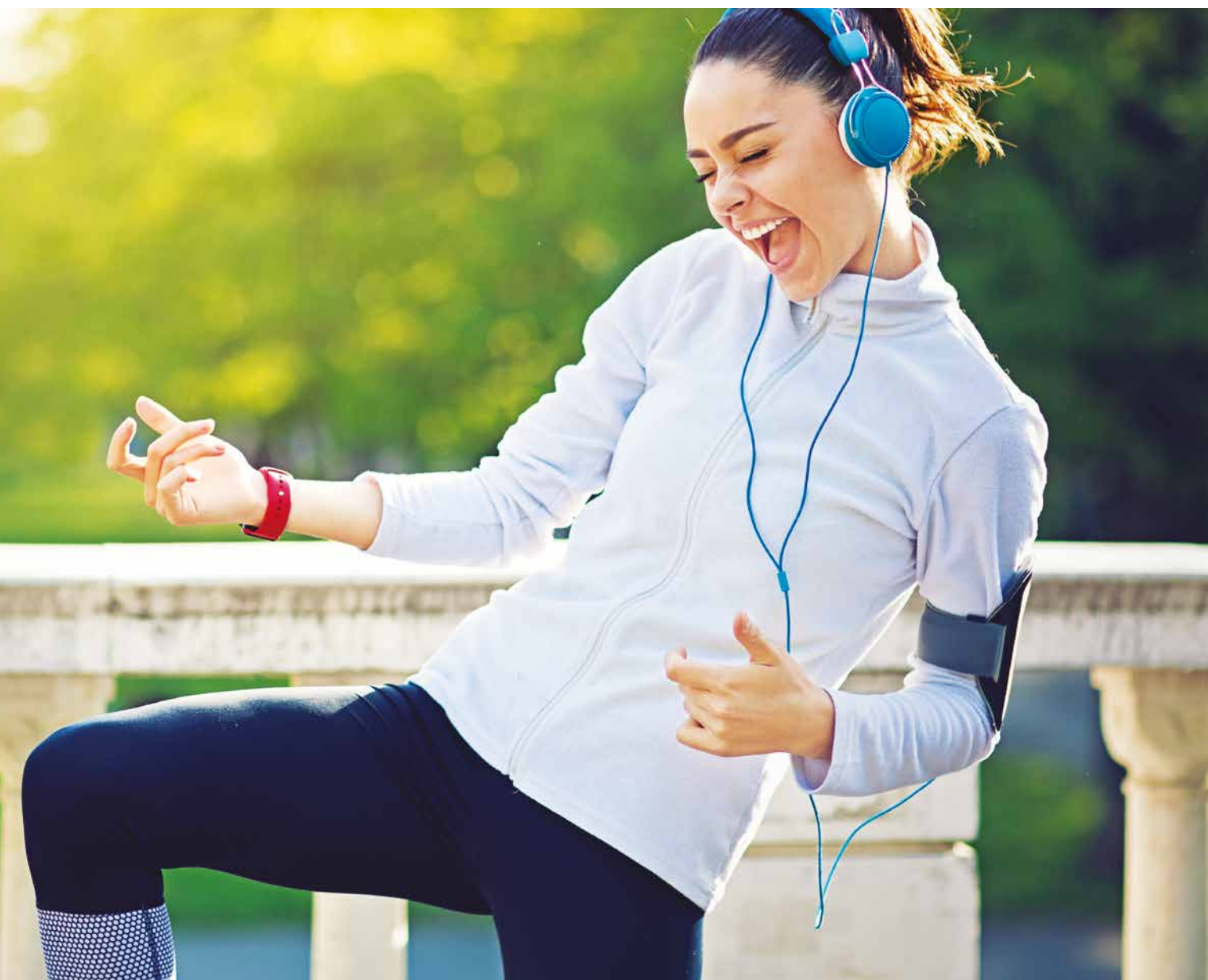
Or wait until you're the only one at home, put on your favorite pop music, and pretend you are in the music video. It may feel goofy, but it will be good for your soul and your body.



Visual arts

Make a monthly or quarterly date with friends or your spouse (or by yourself for some probably much-needed alone time) to visit a gallery, art museum, or art walk. Simply allow yourself to enjoy it without the pressure to understand it. Be present with your senses—which is all the more reason to go alone!

After a couple of observation dates, explore options for docent tours of special exhibitions. Or go to an artist-specific gallery on opening night. There you can simply be a student of sorts as someone teaches a group about the art in an accessible and unintimidating way.



From there you can decide if you'd like to take a course. Or if you aren't that committed to exploring a specific medium or technique of visual art, simply do mindful exercises like adult coloring books, a stained-glass kit, or a mosaic project. Perhaps you can just experiment with your smartphone's camera. Or gather together a friend or two and join a "sip and paint" class, where you drink wine and paint. Usually these are low-pressure and high-fun atmospheres where the instructor really puts people at ease with the process. It's a one-and-done class that requires no commitment.



Creative writing

Many of us read for pleasure. But how many of us write for pleasure? Some of us journal or write out our feelings in life. But who creates fictional stories? Again taking inspiration from the little ones in our lives who spend hours in imaginative play, we can use creative writing as a chance to explore daydream plotlines or fantastical stories. In many ways it can even be a form of escapism.

Exploring and expanding our creative side is often a brave act. As women, we can be both vulnerable and fearful with our inabilities. But it is important to leave self-judgement out of the act. Practice self-kindness and embracing the unknown. Be present in your joy and inquiry—just as children are.

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Ask the Expert

What are whole foods and why are they so important?

The healthiest diets are comprised largely of whole, fresh fruits and vegetables. In this case, the word whole does not mean you should eat an entire pineapple or crunch through the pit in a peach. Whole foods are unprocessed foods in their natural form. A good way to illustrate this is by comparing eating an apple to drinking apple juice. Many people assume both are healthy options. However, the apple has all the fiber and other nutrients that can get lost in processing. The apple juice likely has added sugars and little nutritional value.

Ultra-processed foods have practically taken over Western diets.

It's no coincidence that the populations that consume these foods the most are also seeing a surge in obesity. A study conducted at the National Institutes of Health broke up participants into two groups. One group ate a diet rich in whole foods while the other group ate ultra-processed foods. Participants on the whole food diet lost two pounds a week on average. The other group gained two pounds per week!¹ As startling as this information is, it's only part of what makes



whole foods so important. The processes that turn whole foods into processed foods strip out many nutrients and add in artificial chemicals, fats, and sugars.

Is anger actually bad for my health?

Yes, anger is bad for your health, and it affects both your emotional and physical health. Anger and other negative moods produce physiological changes in the body such as elevated blood pressure and increased respiration rate. Prolonged negative moods are also associated with higher levels of inflammatory biomarkers. Although it can be a natural part of your body's immune response, chronic inflammation has been shown to contribute to a number of diseases, most notably cardiovascular.

The more anger you experience, the more inflammation can occur.² The other major reason anger is bad for your health is that we tend to attract into our lives the emotions we focus on. The more time you spend dwelling on anger, the more negative thoughts, emotions, and circumstances you will experience. Ultimately, this can create a cyclical pattern in which the more you focus on your angry feelings, the more you will find to be angry about, thus creating even more chronic inflammation. Finding healthy ways to cope with negative emotions and focusing your energies on positive things, people, experiences, and thoughts will help you avoid the anger cycle and keep you feeling happy and healthy.

Should I avoid exercise before bedtime?

It has long been thought that exercising before bed can disrupt sleep, which is unfortunate because for many working adults with families, the only time left for regular physical activity is after the kids are put to bed in the evening. However, there is good news for evening exercisers—new research suggests that getting physical in the evening will not disrupt your sleep. A meta-analysis of 23 studies recently concluded that when people engage in physical activity in the evening, they can actually experience slightly better sleep. The researchers did say that this only works up to a point. Moderate intensity exercises can be done all the way up until bedtime. Vigorous exercises should be done one or two hours before you turn off the lights. Regular physical activity is critical to a healthy lifestyle. Now you can tuck the kids in bed and still exercise without losing sleep.



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² Miller, Marjorie. "Negative Mood Signals Body's Immune

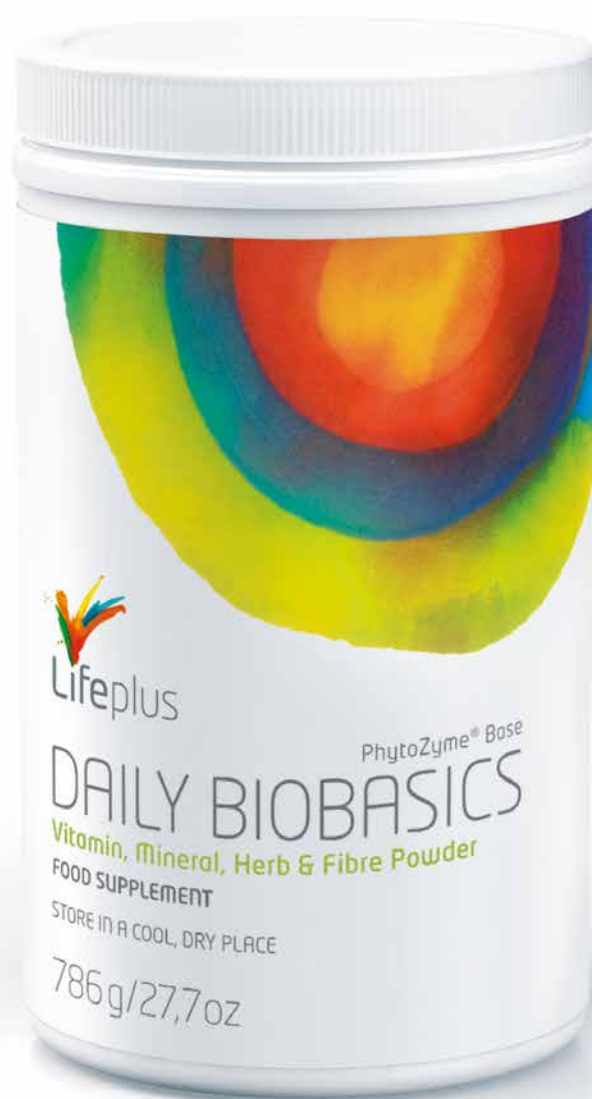
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