

SPECIAL

REALSIMPLE

EDITION

The Power of Time

Making the Moments Matter

Swift
Solutions
for Daily
Life

Home, Health, Work:
The Right Time
for Everything

Why Time
(Sometimes) Flies

Seize the Day



The Power of Time





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Find your best streamlining style and save time later.

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Own Your Time

Sometimes you want to live in the moment,
and sometimes you'd rather skip ahead.
To use your precious days well, be a bit selfish—
and consider your best operating speed.









MAKE YOUR HOURS MATTER MORE

Your time is your most precious resource. So why not hoard it, just a little?

BY AMY MACLIN

FOR JUST ABOUT EVERY MOMENT of our adult lives, we're acutely aware of time—how we can maximize it, savor it, finagle more of it by multitasking. But during the pandemic, time got . . . weird. It stretched into eternity, like one Groundhog Day looped into another. It sped forward, and we forgot what life was like in the Great Before. It flattened as our lives turned into scheduleless, sometimes showerless limbo.

And once time stopped meaning anything, we realized it meant everything. Even now, postpandemic, many of us feel that there are parts of our pre-Covid lives we want to give up forever: crazy commutes, PTA meetings held at the most inconvenient times, the endless checklists that once made us feel “productive.”

The fact that our time is limited can be both daunting and freeing. Oliver Burkeman, a former better-living columnist for the *Guardian* who's tried every time-management technique in the book, decided to call his own book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*. That 4,000 weeks translates to 76.9 years, close to the average human life span. “When I'd ask

friends to guess how many weeks we get, one put it in the six figures. But 310,000 weeks is basically all of human history, from the ancient Sumerians in Mesopotamia,” Burkeman says. Though the idea of a paltry 4,000 weeks made him “queasy” at first, he now says, “I like that number because it shows how short our time is.”

Time no longer seems like a thing to be managed (as if we were ever really in charge) but a precious resource. Here, experts share wisdom on how to make your hours feel more like your own.

Eschew the Old To-Do List

Lists can be powerful tools, but instead of reducing your priorities to a set of bullet-pointed actions, Elaine Kiziah, PhD, a life coach in Richmond, Virginia, who teaches workshops on soulful time management, recommends the opposite: Stop taking action. Instead, sit down with a journal and create what she calls a “mind map.” Ask yourself what’s no longer serving you and why. What brings you real joy? She says, “One of my favorite journaling exercises is to pause at the end of the day and ask, ‘What is today teaching me about how to live tomorrow?’”

If you balk at adding another obligation to the daily roster, Kiziah gently notes that even a five-minute writing session can make a big difference, and that part of the power of journaling lies in the pause itself. “It’s so easy to get pulled in the direction of whatever is on fire at the moment,” she says. “But when we look at the bigger picture, we can make wiser choices. There’s a quote attributed to the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl: ‘Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.’ Journaling can give us that space.”

Though a bucket list may seem like a gather-ye-rosebuds distillation of life goals, Burkeman points out that it tends to generate dissatisfaction. “You run into

Bucket lists tend to generate dissatisfaction: “You run into what I call ‘existential overwhelm.’ It fuels this ridiculous modern affliction of the fear of missing out.”

what I call ‘existential overwhelm,’” he says. “It fuels this ridiculous modern affliction of the fear of missing out—that you’re not going to do all the things you want to, and that there’s probably something going on right now that could be better than what you’re doing.”

Plan to Fail

The silver lining to our 4,000 weeks: In that limited time, it’s going to be impossible to do everything we need, want, and feel obliged to do—so there’s no need to try. “In Jon Acuff’s book *Finish*, he recommends deciding in advance what we’ll bomb,” Burkeman says. “That removes what he calls ‘the sting of shame’ surrounding it.” Obviously, there are some things you can’t completely bomb, Burkeman admits, like putting dinner on the table for your kids. However, he says, “I believe in strategic underachievement—nominating areas of our life in which we won’t expect excellence of ourselves, at least for a while. There is scope to fail on a cyclical basis.” So maybe while you’re working on your big nonprofit project, the kids can eat microwaved fish sticks several times a week.

Pay Yourself First

Another way to resist the pull of that hypothetical fantastical future in which every shelf is organized, every family event planned, every expired mascara thrown in the trash—leaving you finally free to do what you really want—is to block out time for yourself on your own schedule. “The graphic novelist and creativity coach Jessica Abel, borrowing from personal finance advice, came up with ‘pay yourself first’ when it comes to creative work,” Burkeman says. “If you put money in savings as soon as your check comes in, you’ll probably never feel its absence. But if you buy what you need and





hope there will be money remaining at the end, you'll usually find that there isn't any. When she realized she wasn't making time for her drawing, she started setting aside time for it daily and accepting the consequences of anything that didn't get done."

Take a Small-Bites Approach

The last thing you want to do is turn your quality time into another grim obligation. Say you want to create a definitive family genealogy, but one week into your newly scheduled morning research hour, you realize the digging is hard day in and day out, and you begin itching

to unload the dishwasher or do anything else that will give you a little rush of accomplishment. To keep yourself engaged, try small bites: Just do 10 minutes a day, Kiziah suggests, and offer yourself little rewards. "It's the Mary Poppins spoonful-of-sugar approach—motivate yourself with pleasure and joy," she says. "How can you make this ritual as delightful as possible? A cup of tea, some lovely music?"

Be Disappointing

The downside of saying yes to ourselves is that we wind up saying no to other people—a challenge for competent caretakers who pride themselves on meeting others' needs (see also: microwaved fish sticks). "To say no, we

need to be grounded in a sense of worthiness,” Kiziah says. Every moment spent on another person’s priorities, however noble, is a moment subtracted from your own goals. If it’s difficult to prioritize, consider this, she suggests: “How might it be a gift to the other person if you said no?” You might be tempted to reluctantly agree to yet another volunteer project—but will you be truly present? Doesn’t it deserve someone whose heart is truly in it? Make space for that person by saying no.

This doesn’t mean cultivating selfishness. “I’m working on the habit proposed by meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein: Whenever a generous impulse arises—to donate money, check on a friend, send an email praising someone’s work—do it right away,” Burkeman says. “Don’t wait to research the ideal charity or compose a perfect note. If you put it off, you’ll likely never get around to it, and once you’ve invested that time, you’ll reliably feel happier.” ■



BEST INTENTIONS

Ready to say *carpe diem*? Life coach Elaine Kiziah offers a journal exercise to help you pause and reflect.

PART 1: Make two lists in response to these two questions: Over the past year, which investments of your time, energy, and attention offered the biggest returns for you?

Which investments didn’t serve you? Consider things like roles and relationships, projects and tasks, self-development, self-care, recreation, and even small recurring activities or distractions. Focus on returns that feel authentically meaningful to you, regardless of what others might think.

PART 2: Review your lists. What are you discovering as you look at them? Do you want to make any adjustments going forward? Imagine a future version of yourself who’s wise and compassionate, and invite them to write a short message to you in response to these questions.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

What's the perfect moment to work out? Eat for energy? Go to bed? The clues are in your body clock.

BY JENNIFER TZESES

YOU'RE HITTING the gym like clockwork, fueling up with nutritious foods on the regular, and getting a good seven hours of sleep on repeat—proudly ticking off every box on a mental checklist of things to do for a sound mind and body. But in the quest to be your personal best, have you considered *when* you're getting those healthy habits done? Going through the motions for optimal well-being may only be part of the equation. It turns out that the time of day you do them could make a difference.

Here's what the pros (and science) have to say about scheduling your life for maximum benefits—from when to exercise and go to bed to when to breathe for stress relief. Doing your body even more good may be a matter of time.

Stick to your exercise slot

There's no denying exercise has big-time benefits for reducing the risks of everything from obesity, hypertension, and heart disease to cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and even premature death, says Warren G. Thompson, MD, director of physical activity for the Mayo Clinic Healthy Living Program in Rochester, Minnesota. But when it comes to pinpointing the best time of day to get moving, Thompson says the research isn't unanimous. For example, some studies suggest exercising in the afternoon or evening lowers insulin resistance more than working out in the morning. Others show exercising in the a.m. hours is better for losing weight and keeping it off.

While there is no hard and fast rule on the perfect time

to work up a sweat, what is very clear is that consistent physical activity (ideally aerobic exercise five days a week and resistance training twice a week) gives you a leg up on the benefits. And the most effective way to make the habit stick, says Thompson, is to do it at the same time every day.

Eat protein early

Protein lays the groundwork for a healthy body, full stop. Not only is it in our every cell, but we need it to repair and make new ones and help support growth and development. Carmen Roberts, RD, nutrition supervisor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, says that while it's important to consume protein with all meals and snacks to satisfy hunger, research published in



Cell Reports shows that people who eat a larger portion of protein at breakfast have more muscle growth, function, and strength than those who eat a bigger helping at dinner. “We are more metabolically active in the morning [than in the evening], so the body can grow and build muscle more effectively,” Roberts says.

How much protein do you need at each meal? Studies show the body absorbs a max of about 25 grams, roughly the size of a 3-ounce portion of meat or poultry. Keep in mind that this amount can vary depending on your weight, gender, age, and activity level, Roberts points out.

Here’s more food for thought: The source of the protein plays a part. “Animal proteins, known as complete proteins, and their byproducts contain all the essential amino acids for our body’s functions,” Roberts says. But don’t panic if you’re vegan or vegetarian. While individually, plant-based proteins (grains, veggies, legumes) are considered incomplete because they lack some of the amino acids your body needs, by eating a variety, you are likely getting enough, she says. For instance, beans contain some amino acids and rice contains others, so combining the two foods will give you a complete protein.



Apply SPF early and often

You’ve heard the advice like an echo chamber in your head: Apply sunscreen daily. If it still hasn’t hit home, let this fact sink in: “Even on cloudy or rainy days, UV is strong enough to penetrate the skin—especially if you’re spending longer periods of time outdoors,” says dermatologist Ellen Marmur, MD, founder of Marmur Medical in New York. “A broad-spectrum SPF of at least 30 protects against UVA and UVB rays, prevents signs of premature aging, and helps reduce the appearance of wrinkles and fine lines.”

As long as you’re using sunscreen daily, the time you apply it doesn’t matter. What does make a difference, however, is how long you let it absorb before heading outside. “Wait between 10 and 20 minutes. This way, the

application can properly dry and penetrate the skin,” Marmur says.

As a general rule, she recommends using SPF in the morning as an added step in your skincare routine—not because it’s more effective then, but just because it will get you into the routine of doing it. “Treat sunscreen application as a daily necessity similar to brushing your teeth when you wake up,” Marmur says. Equally important is reapplying throughout the day—every two hours if you’re outdoors. “The sun peaks anytime from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., so be extra diligent then, and seek shade when you can.”

Breathe away stress when you're calm

Breathing is an essential, unconscious process we need for, well, obvious reasons. Inhaling brings oxygen into your lungs and on to your blood, and your body gets rid of carbon dioxide with your exhales. But when used consciously as a therapeutic tool, breathing offers stress relief. “Breathing is intimately connected with your nervous system,” says Ari Barkan, a breathwork and conscious connected facilitator at Center City Breathe in Philadelphia. “When you take slow, deep, intentional breaths—in through your nose and out through your mouth—you are directly engaging your parasympathetic nervous system, a network of fibers that run from your brain to your organs designed to slow down your heart rate, turn off adrenaline production, and bring you back to center.”

Instead of intentionally inhaling and exhaling only during a stressful situation, Barkan recommends using this technique as often as possible. “The greater your attention to your breath, the more awareness you have regulating your reaction,” he says. Studies show daily breathing exercises can lower resting blood pressure and

reduce stress and anxiety. That’s important, because it means you’ll start off on a more even keel when you get hit with a frustration or worry.

If you know you are about to enter an angsty situation, prep by taking slow, deep, intentional breaths for three to five minutes. “Conscious breathing allows your body to self-regulate and builds elasticity of the body-mind connection so that when you enter a stressful situation, you are more prepared to manage it, and let it go,” Barkan says.

Be strict about your bedtime

Your day-to-day M.O. is Netflix until midnight with a leisurely 8 a.m. wakeup, while your best friend tucks in at least three hours before late-night TV and rises at a sharp 5 a.m. You may think she’s the better rested of the two of you. But one person’s 9 p.m. is another’s midnight, because there’s no one-snooze-fits-all approach to sleep, says Karina Jordan, MD, a sleep medicine physician at Capital Neurology and Sleep Medicine in McLean, Virginia. “The optimal bedtime depends on your desired wake time,” she says. On average, adults need a little over seven hours to feel rejuvenated. “Sufficient sleep is crucial for mitigating disease risk, maintaining energy levels, improving mood, and enhancing alertness, memory, focus, and concentration,” Jordan explains. But when you get those z’s is up to you.

What counts is consistency. That’s because of circadian

rhythm, the body’s internal clock responsible for regulating the sleep-wake cycle and other physiological processes over 24 hours. “Almost every cell in our body has its own circadian clock, relying on signals from the external environment,” Jordan says. Light and darkness are the cues for sleeping and waking. So if you don’t go to bed when your body tells you it’s time (or if you sleep too long), your circadian rhythm can be disrupted. This increases your risk for conditions like depression, anxiety, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, gastrointestinal issues, and certain cancers.

But when you sync your sleep schedule with your body’s natural flow, the stars align. “At the end of the day, sleep is a natural process, and the way to optimize it is to lean into its biological drivers,” Jordan says. This also includes being consistent about when you get into bed. And if you do have a restless night, don’t sleep on the power of a nap. A 20- to 30-minute siesta during the day can work wonders. “A nap allows the body to experience the benefits of sleep without the grogginess associated with awakening from the deeper stages,” Jordan says. ■

WHY TIME (SOMETIMES) FLIES

The hours can whoosh by, crawl, or come to a standstill based on what you're doing—or even just thinking about.

BY DEANNA PAI

TIME SEEMS TO PLAY tricks on us. A happy afternoon doing something enjoyable—going on a hike, meeting a friend for coffee, getting a spa treatment—feels like it's over in a blink, while spending 10 minutes on hold with the cable company takes eons. It turns out our perception of time is constantly changing, influenced by what we're doing, who we're with, and even what we see.

But let's back up for a second. While time can be measured by the hands on the clock (or the numbers on our smartphone), our perception of it is something else entirely. "Everybody's sense of time compresses and dilates like a rubber band throughout the day," says Martin Wiener, PhD, a cognitive and behavioral neuroscientist and an associate professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. "It's stretching and

compressing from moment to moment."

Our perception of time concerns a matter of seconds and maybe one to two minutes—after which it gets into the realm of planning ahead or daydreaming about the future. It's different from our circadian rhythm, the 24-hour system that dictates things that happen sub- or unconsciously, like feeling sleepy at the end of the day.

What shifts your sense of time

One thing that can seriously skew your sense of time is if you're focused on it. "If you have people doing a task and you ask them to pay attention to the passage of time, the passage of time seems to last longer," says Wiener. "It stretches out before you." (Grandma was right that "a watched pot never boils.") On

the other hand, if a distraction pulls your attention away so you're not actively thinking about the present moment, time seems to compress, or pass by more quickly.

You can use this elasticity to your advantage. "We can choose to think about time or not think about time—and in so doing, that's one way in which we very easily can manipulate our sense of time," Wiener says. Consider it a powerful tool to shape how you experience life, whether you want to make the most of a free afternoon exploring a new town (when you want time to slow down) or fast-forward through a TSA line at the airport (when you want time to speed the heck up).

That "distraction" is often engagement—as in the "flow state" you've probably heard about. When we get deep into an activity, whether that's writing in a journal, reading a page-turner, or even something like working through a puzzle with our kid,



we are in a flow state. This is what is officially known as a high-approach motivated state, which a study published in *Psychological Science* found could compress our sense of time, making it feel as if it's moving faster. A high-approach motivated state means that you're very compelled to move or work toward something, such as a particular goal or end point.

When you're in a flow state, "you are absorbed in your task," says Philip Gable, PhD, a professor of psychological and

brain sciences at the University of Delaware and the lead author of that study. "It's interesting, it's challenging, and it takes resources. A flow state can't occur with something that's easy or mind-numbing." It's the optimal ability-to-motivation ratio, meaning not only do you have the drive to do something, but you're also succeeding (to some degree)

just by acting on it.

Meanwhile, things that are new, interesting, or stop-you-in-your-tracks inspiring can slow down, or dilate, time—in a good way. A study published in 2024 in *Acta Psychologica* found that people who viewed images of awe (think outer space and wide-open landscapes in nature) felt that time had moved faster than those looking at something mundane. "If being in nature gives you that sense of awe, that could lead to a kind of

time dilation that is more enjoyable,” says Wiener. “You could go on a nature walk or put yourself in one of these nice, relaxing situations, and you’d find the experience in the moment would seem to last longer than if you were doing your everyday routine, say, or your commute to work.”

Novelty also makes our experience more memorable, and memorability—which literally means how memorable an image is—can make time slow down, according to a 2024 study that Wiener coauthored. The sticking point here: There’s no one quality that determines how memorable something is. “It’s not that intuitive,” says Wilma Bainbridge, PhD, who studies memorability and time perception. “We can pick these images that to you might look very similar—like two pictures of a farmhouse—but we know that one is memorable and one is forgettable.”

As with so many things, this phenomenon seems to have roots in evolution. “When we focus on something that’s important, we also dilate time,” Wiener says. “It allows us to gather more information about the thing that we’re attending to than if we were distracted away from it.”

Unlike novelty and awe, routines tend to speed time up. That morning get-out-the-door routine you do on autopilot isn’t new or exciting, so you don’t have to be as engaged with it. That allows

you to perceive everyday activities like your commute as going by more quickly, according to Wiener. And while this also has an evolutionary point (you’re not going to spend a lot of brainpower when you already know how to shower and get out the door), it has the added bonus of making the boring day-to-day stuff fly by.

How your mood factors in

Emotions also have significant power over your sense of time. That’s because all emotions are motivating on some level. Whether your day dragged or flew may depend on whether you were happy or angry or sad. “Emotions that are highly motivating make us want to move toward something—excitement, enthusiasm, desire—and these cause time to go by faster,” Gable says.

On the less-pleasant end of the spectrum, emotions that cause you to withdraw make time dilate. “Aversive states like fear and disgust drive us to move away from those states,” says Gable. “And so, in those situations, it’s adaptive to feel like time is dragging.” Because of that slowdown, your response is to get away or make changes ASAP. For example, if deserted parking garages make you anxious, it might feel like it takes forever for the attendant to get your car—and that may nudge you to avoid that potentially dangerous situation again.

The minutes expand with

pain, too—but for a different reason. “When we are in pain, we need to dilate time because we’re in a situation that requires all of our focus and mental energy,” says Wiener. Think fight or flight. As a result, “we have to slow things down a bit to be able to react and plan accordingly—because if you didn’t react accordingly in those situations, you’d probably be injured or die.” Take a throbbing tooth, for example. It’s not just the pain but the fact that the pain seems to go on and on that prompts you to get to the dentist.

The one big exception among hard emotions? Being ticked off. “Anger causes you to want to approach,” so it speeds up time, says Gable. “Oftentimes, that looks like aggression”—for example, laying on the horn when you’re stuck in traffic, or telling someone to get out of your way when you’re upset. In that way, it is approach-motivating, but it’s not pleasant. “Even people who have anger problems don’t see anger as being pleasant,” Gable says. “It’s an unpleasant state.” The good news is that because time seems to move faster, we move on more quickly (or so it seems).

Finally, your age can skew your sense of time. A study in *Scientific Reports* found that children—specifically, kids under the age of 7—perceive time to be longer than adults do. That may be because they don’t yet have a sense of



absolute time—that is, a sense of time as dictated by the clock. Plus, says Wiener, everything feels new to toddlers and young kids. That novelty has a way of stretching out the minutes and hours.

At the same time, people with children tend to feel that time moves more quickly than their child-free counterparts do, according to a different study in *Timing & Time Perception*. Parents may feel they're sending their baby off to kindergarten in what feels like the blink of an eye, for example.

Time seems to speed up with age, too. "As we get past middle adulthood, people tend to experience more positive emotions," Gable says. "Negative events can have less of a negative impact." He points to a kind of positive resiliency that we develop as we get older. One theory is it's because older adults have a sense that time is running out, which effectively shortens the sense

of time. And, "when time is shorter to us, we tend to see things as being more positive," he says. It creates an upward spiral of sorts, underlining that joy and fun can beget even more joy and fun.

Why good moments feel so recent

So, besides helping you feel less bored at the DMV, what's the importance of all this? Time perception can play with your memory and actually help boost your self-esteem. For instance, "people tend to remember perceived-as-positive events as closer to the current moment," says Qi Wang, PhD, a professor at Cornell University who studies time and memory. "So if you're thinking about the current moment, positive events—especially those that have implications to who you are as a person—tend to be perceived as closer to our

current self than, for example, embarrassing events which reflect poorly on ourselves." That explains why that one dreamy vacation with your college friends feels like it just happened, whereas the work event last week where you forgot to silence your phone thankfully already seems like a distant memory.

The good news is that being aware of time ticking away makes a difference no matter your age. Because he studies time for a living, Wiener says, "I've become more mindful of moments and my experience of them—and I have found that has been beneficial in situations where I really want to enjoy the moment. When that happens, it does seem like I enter a state where time slows down, and I get a bit more enjoyment out of it."

The beauty of time is that while you have zero control over it, really, it is entirely possible to change how you experience it. Want an hour or two to fly by? Get lost in a flow activity, whether that's playing pickleball, digging into a knitting project, or working away at a crossword. Or slow things down with a walk in the woods or through an art gallery and etch those awesome minutes into your memory. "Instead of getting swept up in the excitement and the enthusiasm that's causing time to fly by, take a step back and be like, 'Wow, I'm going to remember this in 10 years,'" Gable advises. Whatever you choose, you can appreciate each moment that much more. ■





THE HIGHLY HAPHAZARD WOMAN

We all feel pressure to be cool, calm, and in control. But sometimes a little chaos gets things done.

BY TAFFY BRODESSER-AKNER

M

Y YOGA TEACHER, WHO IS 23 and beautiful like a song and who told me one day that she had gone into the yoga arts because the acting business made her feel like she was “being eaten alive,”

stands over our inert bodies, and this is what she says: “We are slaves to the noise in our heads.” Then she says, “Leave your thoughts at the door. You can pick them up on your way out.”

She says this twice over a full 10 minutes of a 60-minute class that could be spent exercising but is instead spent lying on the floor. She says it in addition to the six-minute speech she gave before class and the three-minute period of rest she’ll give us after class, at which point we’ll get another 90 seconds for her to remind us of these values and then invoke spiritual themes to thank us for having shown up.

In the middle, she’ll comment on the fact that, by now, our thoughts, which were left at the door for us to pick up on the way out, may have crept back into the studio. She says to regard them like clouds passing by in the chyon of my brain, nothing to be addressed or absorbed.

We make eye contact when she says this. I narrow my eyes slightly and purse my lips and nod thoughtfully, and I wonder what she would do if she knew what was going on in my cloudy-sky mind right now. I wonder what she would do if she knew I had no intention of stopping my thoughts. I wonder what she would do if she knew about my thoughts about my thoughts—how I was thinking these thoughts about thoughts when they were supposed to be drifting away like clouds. I think if she knew, the roof would blow off this entire purple studio.

THE YOGA TEACHER WANTS me to clear my mind. She wants me to just do my yoga (though not that much yoga, if you count up her accumulated speeches). The wellness podcast I listen to wants me to have a routine. My dietitian thinks I should plan better to make better choices. The teachers at my kids' school think I should slow down. My friends want to go on a meditation retreat. They all want me to become this peaceful thing, this mindful thing. They want me to be free from intrusive thoughts; they want me to streamline my life for maximal predictability with minimal stress. They are trying to make me into a new breed of woman: the Highly Regimented Woman.

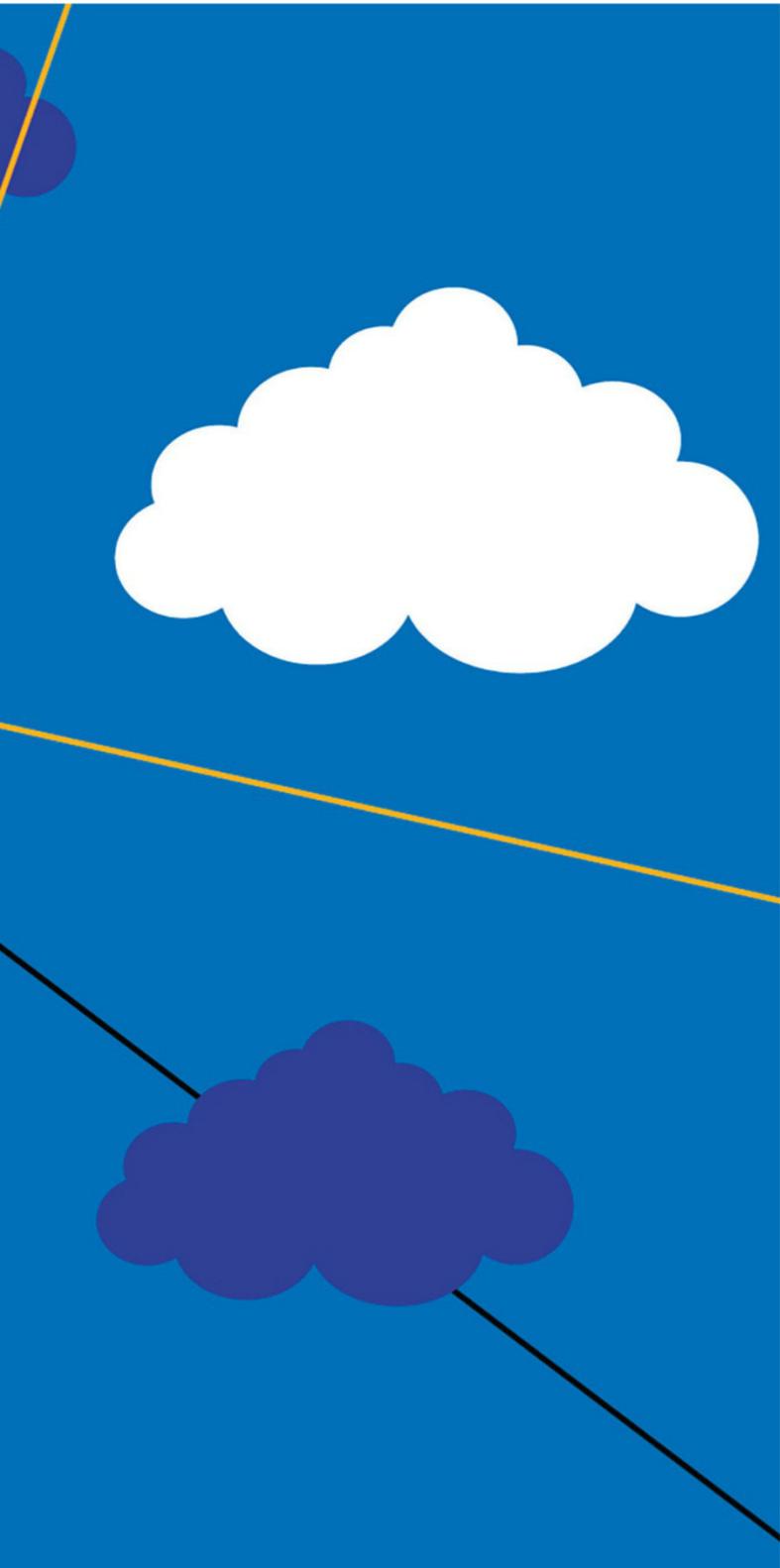
The Highly Regimented Woman is today's ideal. She does one thing at a time. She doesn't stray from her routine. She practices mindfulness. She doesn't miss the 8 a.m. Thursday Pilates class. She leaves her phone in the other room. She is who we are supposed to strive to be, even if some of us are so far away from this ideal that we hear about women like this and think people are kidding. Meaning, I know some Highly Regimented Women. They are killing it out there. They are happy and focused and getting it done. I imagine being one of them sometimes. I imagine being someone who doesn't, say, forget it's band practice day or that book club was tonight, no, wait, last night? Who doesn't—of course, all this is theoretical—show up at a different movie theater from her husband despite being told several times and having it noted in the calendar that we were going to the



one near the mall? Being a Highly Regimented Woman would mean I could rid myself of my ability to multitask. She would have me finish the phone call and then cook the dinner and then really be in the moment.

She would make my life great. So why does just the idea of her fill me with dread?

CONSIDER: IN THE LAST YEAR, I wrote 12 magazine stories—90,000 words that actually got printed—for my job at the *New York Times*. For each one, I interviewed dozens of people. I did an investigative piece that required twice the number of interviews as usual. I revised my novel, which came out in June. I wrote 40,000 words of another novel and sold that too. I missed no more than two soccer games (younger son)



Being a Highly Regimented Woman would help me really be in the moment and make my life great. So why does the idea of her fill me with dread?

teacher conferences. (I did not buy or cook food, but my husband did, and I managed to mostly feed myself when I wasn't home.) I was a good daughter. I was an OK sister. I was a parody of prolificness.

My colleagues were in awe of me; friends asked me how I did it; people online made fun of me. I was honest with them all: I half-assed it. I did it by being a, let's call it, Highly Haphazard Woman. I was scrappy and disorganized. I had 10,000 tabs up on my computer screen. I didn't always shower. I sat next to my children on the couch pretending to watch a movie while actually working. I entered soccer practices incorrectly into my calendar. I did this with games as well, and would have to weather the iciness of a car ride in which a shinguarded 8-year-old who was promised he could play goalie had been driven an hour in the wrong direction only to find that the game was four towns away . . . three hours ago. Once or twice, I forgot to drive the carpool. Just think about that for a minute. Once or twice, I left children waiting for me to pick them up, and I sat, unaware they were waiting. I'm not proud of any of this.

And then there were the things that were in my control: I left a dinner to go to the bathroom because suddenly, over the salad course, I realized how to solve a structural problem in my novel. Most of all, I told the people who asked, I took inspiration when it struck. When the right answer sat in front of me, I didn't swat it away. I didn't let it be a cloud that drifted. I didn't have much in the way of what a Highly Regimented Woman would call peace, but I had accomplishment, which was my own form of peace via a longer game.

Nobody liked these answers. They wanted to know that I was being successful and leading a balanced life. They couldn't bear the chaos. They wanted to know how to do it, but only if it meant slowing down, doing one thing at a time, thinking one thought at a time (but sometimes none). They wanted predictability and to never know pain in the offing. That's fair, I would say, but then you won't accomplish that much. This was very upsetting to the people I spoke with. They said that I

and two basketball games (older). They play year-round. I threw parties. I organized meals for another mom who hurt her wrist. I listened carefully to my children and tried to suss out what they'd eaten at lunch and who they were friends with. I got a dog. I trained a dog. I resented a dog. I came to love a dog. I appeared on TV and podcasts. I put my kids on a bus to camp and then went on a book tour a few hours later. I watched all of *The Americans* with my husband, because it is important to have a show together. I attended my book club twice, and I read the books. I attended parent-



wasn't living a good life, that I was too scattered to have any meaning in it, that I wouldn't remember my time as a parent because I was never really in the room when I was in the room. That presence is a gift.

I am told that routine and structure are good for the nerves. I'm told predictability and mindfulness will give me strength and peace. I believe them, but consider this, too: What if my goals have nothing to do with peace and calm? What if peace and calm are the last things I want?

I SPENT MY CHILDHOOD in the future, watching a Seth Thomas clock on a gray wall of the maximum-security prison of my religious all-girls school.

High school is one of those systems that are set up to destroy a certain kind of person. From the minute you start ninth grade, you are strapped to a dart headed straight toward a bull's-eye, and no amount of thought and contrition can undo even the slightest stumbling as you begin your throw. Which is not to say I was ruined by ninth grade. It's to say I didn't think, after screwing up ninth grade, that any kind of cleanup job would have an effect.

Many of my classmates thrived. They took AP classes and made speeches and tucked in their shirts and were singled out. They were the recipients of warm smiles from the teachers. I started each academic year with optimism and purpose, and then something would happen. My focus would shift. I would miss a step, or more likely, I would never have become oriented to what we were doing in the first place. I had such a deep yearning to feel success. But by October, I brought my backpack home and let it stay, a blur, another thing I didn't focus on, in the corner of my room.

And so I watched the wall. Twenty-four minutes before this class is over. Two hours till lunch. Three and a half hours till the day is over. Four days till the week is over. Three weeks till the semester is over. Four days till I never have to be in ninth grade, 10th grade, 11th grade again.

I failed at school—unequivocally. Not low grades. Failure. I was put into classes and forced to think about math when I wanted to think about English. I was forced to play volleyball when I wanted to read or write. I was

forced to read and write when I wanted to play basketball.

Outside of school wasn't that different. There was dinner at 6:30 and bedtime at 9. There was swimming on Sundays and a calendar of Jewish holidays. I'd sit in synagogue on Yom Kippur, which was endless. Until one day I realized I could turn pages along with everyone else. I could stand and sit and bow. But I could also think. I could make plans. I could dream up stories I wanted to write and had places I wanted to go. In the quiet, I could still move forward. You could hold my body in place and obligate it to show up to all kinds of places. But if the moment sucked, I could live in the past or the future. I could live wherever I wanted to.

Now, nobody can tell me when I'm done making up for lost time. Nobody can tell me how to spend my time. Nobody can tell me what I'm allowed to do inside my own skull.

AFTER COLLEGE, LIFE CAME at me quickly: a first job, a first layoff, a next job, a boyfriend, a husband, a child. On my son's first birthday, I got him a stuffed rhino and a babysitter. She came three times a week, for three hours each time. My friend Lisa, who had a baby the same week I did, had gone back to work months before. She asked if I was going to take a yoga class or get a manicure.

I told her no. I told her I was going to get back to writing. I was going to go to the nearest quiet place and sit down and not look up until the three hours were up. I was going to produce. After all this time, I was going to produce.

I had felt dead for such a long time. Working for other people, working at an internet startup, which I knew wasn't my calling but I worried was the best I could do. I was worried I was someone with just a few ideas, and when those ran out, I'd have nothing left to write. But I sat down to do it, so great was the fear of ever working at something soulless again, and the ideas came. And then they kept coming.

The thing I don't do is try to control when and where the ideas come. What would happen if I was in a yoga class and allowed the idea for my next novel to pass like a cloud? Or if I ignored the pang when I was supposed to be on my morning walk that told me the answers to the ending of a story were coming, if only I would sit and receive them?

Here is the thing about mindfulness and routine and slowness: They are great in theory, but when they become more important than the things they were supposed to provide you, they are a danger. They can drown out the voices that are telling you how to live, and that's what I'm afraid of. These thoughts that everyone is spending so much time trying to chase away—they're gifts. They are blessings. They are the thing that makes us alive.

There are full magazines devoted to mindfulness at Whole Foods. There are mindfulness jars; my son brought one home from first grade, a plastic bottle with glitter that works like a snow globe. You shake it and watch the glitter fall and it's supposed to calm you down. There are goal journals and routine diaries that let you give yourself a star—Give! Yourself! A! Star!—for knowing how your day is going to go. You can now reward yourself for being predictable! The children are being taught meditation so they can bring the lessons of our folly home to us.

I understand why this happened. I am even happy it happened, so now the people who suffer from overwhelm can have tools to calm themselves and a language to communicate in. But it didn't happen just to the people who needed it. When the regimented life went mainstream, it somehow became insurrectionist to have a mind like mine: one that's always running, one that doesn't relent, one that races and commands my hands to do a million things at once. Somehow it has become objectionable to be someone who is winging it. It's become subversive to be scattered.

In my head, I run until I fly. In my head, the words are made out of colors, and while I am flying, the sentences allow me to land gently. This is how I became a writer. The page is simply an organized manifestation of my

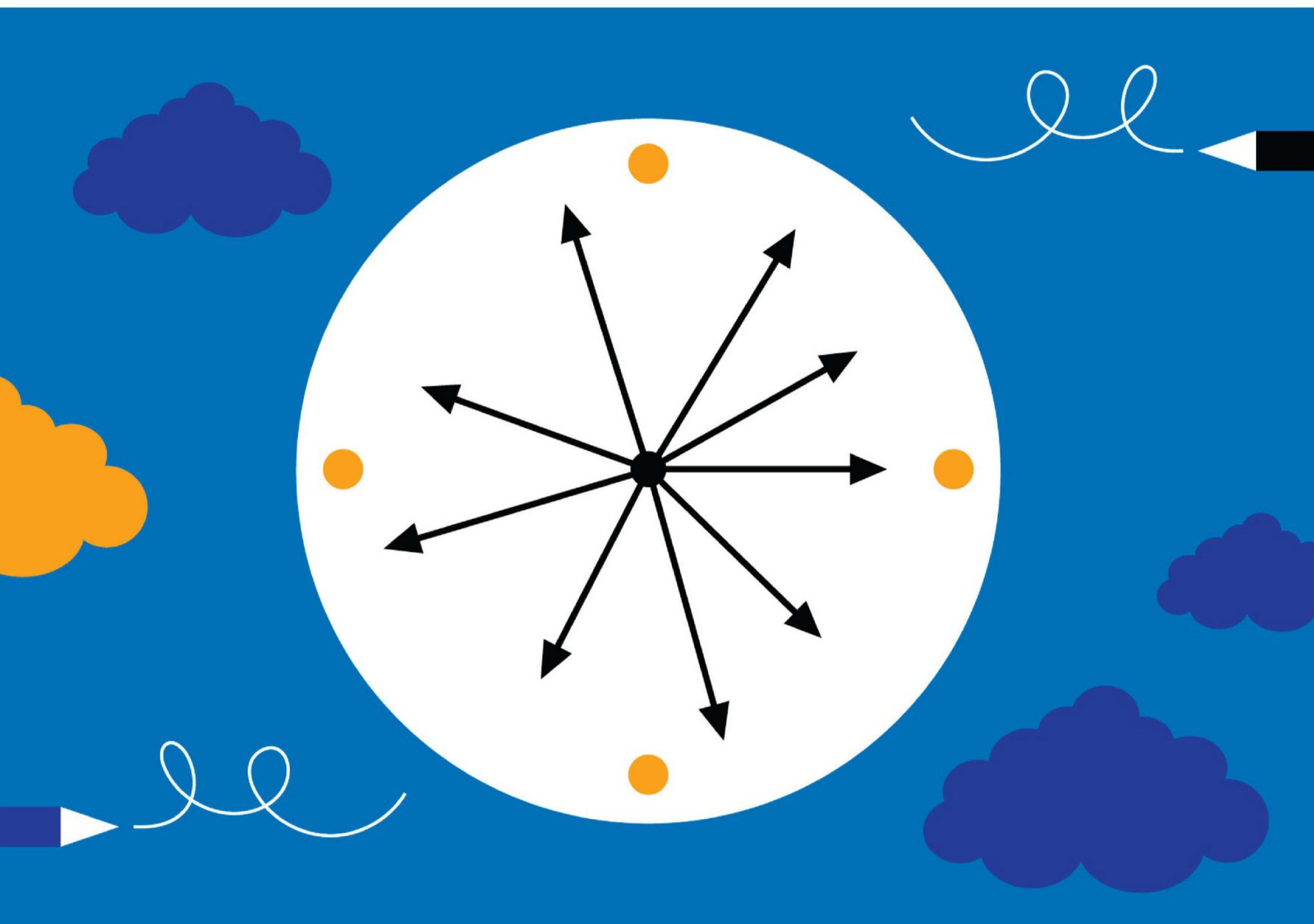
These thoughts that everyone
is spending so much time
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us alive.

head. I am lauded for my pages. Despite this, I am still criticized for my head. But come at it from the other side just for a minute. Consider that the thinking is what the whole enterprise is built on—that a body is a thing that holds up a brain, that all this exists so that the thoughts can come whenever and however they like.

THERE IS A PRICE I pay for living this way. Lest I sound too confident, lest I sound like I have found a magic formula, here it is, in the interest of full disclosure: My life is a mess. My mind is a mess. But nobody has been able to convince me that the value of a mind that isn't a mess is greater.

Sometimes I can't stop the words at night, and I have to do a special kind of visualization for a minute or two to make them stop. Sometimes I hold my younger child's hand up to my face while he's watching TV and I note that the baby pudginess of it is nearly gone, and I wonder if I was truly there for all of it—if I was truly there for any of it. (I also wonder if the benefit accrues to people who were, or if it doesn't really matter at all.) When it boils over, I will do what I need to do. I'll cry. I'll watch TV in the middle of the day. I'll buy a pack of cigarettes and smoke just one. I endorse none of this. Maybe by now you can see that I am not trying to live an admirable life—just mine.

But sometimes I feel sun on my face for the first time in the spring. Or I notice that the dogwood tree has bloomed. Sometimes I watch my older kid read, his eyes blinking every few minutes. I do this on my schedule. I do not preempt anything else for it. Sometimes, if a moment is great, I will stay in it. At other times, I will plan for better moments. I insist on the point of view that I'm not broken. That the thoughts are there to tell me how to live my life. That I can't tame them. That I can't be tamed.



What if I don't need more than that? What if I don't need a lifestyle? I have made the same bet everyone has, which is that they are living the best way they know how, and one day I will have to answer for it. I will have to answer to my kids for my distraction. I will learn that something went wrong because of my focus. But I can't live my life because I'm going to have to answer for it. I am hoping instead that I'm raising my kids to see that the pursuit of fulfillment is a better life than the pursuit of a value you don't share.

Maybe we're both right: me and the Highly Regimented Woman. (And whoever is putting together that mindfulness magazine.) We are both staring down an abyss, trying to figure out how to live. That's what we all want to know. And none of us knows it for sure. I begrudge nobody the right to try to figure that out, because it's the big question. There are studies that show

that meditation works, that people thrive in routine. That there is no such thing as multitasking.

They never study me, though. They never ask me questions about what the cost-benefit analysis of all this living is. If they did, I'd tell them that it is none of their business. That how we live is for each of us to contend with; we have to live with our choices forever; it's for us to try to game the future and try not to regret too much.

Sometimes I come across my son's mindfulness jar. I stop what I'm doing, and I shake it. For a minute I understand. For a minute I am in the here and now. And then I wonder if I should write a story about mindfulness jars, and, well—here that is. ■

Taffy Brodesser-Akner is a staff writer for the New York Times Magazine. Her most recent novel is Long Island Compromise. She is also the author of Fleishman Is in Trouble and was the creator, executive producer, and writer of its limited-series adaptation for FX/Hulu. This essay was originally published in Real Simple in 2019.



WHEN YOU'RE A PRODUCTIVE PROCRASTINATOR

Learn why your home is never cleaner than when you're on deadline. Plus: How to break the "I'll-do-it-later" habit.

BY NAOMI BARR

DESPITE OUR to-do lists and good intentions, it can happen to the best of us: We scroll through Instagram instead of writing that work memo, dash to the drugstore on the way to the party to get a birthday card, spend April 14 swimming in tax forms we're going to finish, we swear . . . as soon as we scrub down the stove, and maybe clean the oven while we're at it.

If you're repeating this pattern habitually—avoiding the thing you really need to do and keeping busy while you don't do it—then you may be among the estimated 1 in 4 adults experts call “chronic procrastinators.” The habit has nothing to do with laziness, poor time management, or incompetence. (Leonardo da Vinci may have taken 16 years to paint it, but when he was finished, it was the *Mona Lisa*.) Psychologists and researchers have some theories about why we may be prone to this often self-defeating behavior, as well as actionable advice on how to handle it. Seize the moment and read on.

Why We Procrastinate

One leading theory is fairly straightforward: We put off tasks because we're not sufficiently motivated. Human motivation is a complicated equation that involves four factors, says Alexander Rozental, PhD, who researches procrastination at the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm. They are (1) the amount of deadline pressure we're under, (2) the value we place on the task—that is, the reward we'll get when we complete it, (3) our confidence that we can accomplish it, and (4) how impulsive and distractible we are, meaning how likely we are to fall down rabbit holes of rabbit videos.

Another school of thought blames feelings—specifically, unpleasant ones—and our desire to avoid them. “Procrastination is rooted in the difficulty one has in regulating the negative emotions related to a task, like fear or worry,” says Fuschia Sirois, PhD, a professor of psychology at Durham University in England and a leading researcher on procrastination. Maybe you feel resentful (This project should have been assigned to someone junior to you!), frustrated (These directions

don't make sense!), or bored (You'd rather walk on hot coals than sit on hold with customer service!). Or, back to the taxes scenario, maybe you're freaked out about how much money you might owe. We avoid negative feelings by delaying the task or replacing it with one that feels less emotionally loaded—organizing the sock drawer, for instance.

When we complete an easier task, we get the satisfaction of crossing off a to-do and a hit of the feel-good neurotransmitter dopamine. “I call this emotional misregulation, because you really believe that by doing these other things you'll feel better, and for a time, you do,” says psychologist Tim Pynchyl, PhD, author of *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*. “But we all know how specious that is when the real task still looms.”

The false-accomplishment high is often trailed by guilt. And when procrastination becomes chronic, Pynchyl says, “guilt transforms into shame. Then it's not just about that single task. It becomes about you. You think, ‘I'm broken.’”

How to Stop

You are not broken! Evidence suggests that the tendency may be hardwired into the brain. In a 2018 study, German researchers took brain scans of 264 adults and found that those who exhibited procrastinator behavior had a larger amygdala, the almond-shaped structure that plays a key role in processing emotions. “The amygdala is where our fight-or-flight response is activated, and it’s where we start worrying about a task,” Sirois says. In a neurobiological double whammy, the researchers also discovered that in the brains of procrastinators, there’s less connectivity between the amygdala and the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, which handles motivation and decision-making. Meaning not only are procrastinators more naturally susceptible to stress, but their brains are less able to override their emotions and take action.

So while human beings are generally not very good at letting future consequences dictate present actions (as you know if you’ve ever giddily ordered one more glass of wine the night before an early meeting), procrastinators may find it particularly challenging. Luckily, our brains can learn new tricks (thanks, neuroplasticity!). And just as

Not only are procrastinators more naturally susceptible to stress, but their brains are less likely to override their emotions and take action.

the amygdala can grow with stress, it can shrink via calming practices. Here, a few ideas to get you off the procrastination bus and back to doing what matters.

PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

When you’re fretting about getting something done, the last thing you may want to do is be still and focus on your breath. But mindfulness teaches us to watch our painful feelings—such as fear and anxiety—come and go, like a storm passing by. “We recently did a randomized controlled trial with students and found that mindfulness training significantly reduced procrastination,” Sirois says. “Mindfulness teaches you how to sit with your emotions and accept them rather than avoid them.” Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help: A 2023 study published in *Cell Reports Medicine* showed that five-minute mindful-breathing breaks, taken daily for about a month, could improve mood and reduce anxiety.

CONTROL INTERRUPTIONS

So simple, yet so effective: “Identify the stimuli that frequently distract you, then remove them, or put yourself in a new setting,” Rozental says. If your surroundings—chatty coworkers, a kitchen full of snacks—cause you to lose focus, take yourself away from temptation by heading to another location, whether it’s a public library or a deserted conference room.

ADD VALUE TO YOUR TASK

If the satisfaction of getting it done isn’t enough of a reward, you may need an extra carrot. “Sometimes you can overcome negative emotions about a task by associating it with something that gives you a higher sense of purpose,” Rozental says. Let’s say you’re always putting off dealing with your retirement savings. Remind yourself that you’re easing your family’s future financial burdens. Or give yourself a treat: Work for 45 minutes, then take a five-minute break. Set an alarm to alert you when it’s time to get back on task—and no hitting snooze!



SCHEDULE YOUR FOCUSED WORK

Many a well-meaning procrastinator has been felled by the old “I’ll get up early and do it in the morning,” only to not get up early in the morning. (Interesting fact: According to a poll from the market research firm YouGov, 60 percent of the people who reported that they procrastinate “all the time” or “a lot” were night owls.) Instead, schedule a

procrastinated task for a time when you’re typically most productive. If you’re usually super alert at 8 or 9 p.m., then block off some evening time to get the ball rolling. “Starting is everything,” Pychyl says. But remember: It’s important to give yourself time to wind down after hustling and before bed so you can get the good night’s rest you need.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Sirois’s research has found that procrastinators are not only more stressed but also have lower levels of self-

compassion. Once they start practicing it, she says, both stress and procrastination diminish. If you’re struggling, be as gentle toward yourself as you would be with a friend. “Self-compassion short-circuits the loop of critical thoughts,” Sirois says, “and studies have found it can increase motivation.” The best part? You can start right this minute. ■

WEEKLY P

MONDAY

TUESDAY

CHAPTER

2

Hack the Clock

Want to crank through it all? Feel less stressed, even when in deadline mode? These efficiency strategies will help streamline work, home—everything.

PLANNER

WEDNESDAY

TH

YY

F

GET IT DONE!

If you're itching to tackle those "someday" projects that have been on your to-do list for ages, we can help!





Boost Your Home's Curb Appeal

Because the outside should reflect how lovely it is inside!
Start with these quick-ish tasks.

PAINT THE FRONT DOOR

PICK YOUR COLOR “The front door is a great spot for something bold because it’s easy and inexpensive to update,” says Mika Kleinschmidt, a real estate agent and cohost of HGTV’s *100 Day Dream Home*. Look to your landscaping for inspiration—the nearby foliage might give you some ideas. Also think about the architecture: Midcentury homes can pull off a bright turquoise or yellow, pastels look great on cottages, and reds or blues are classic on a Victorian. (Hannah Yeo, senior manager of color marketing and development at Benjamin Moore, shares her favorite shades for any kind of house at right.) Once you’ve narrowed it down, buy sample cans to test out on your door. The color will look different throughout the day, so make sure you like the winner at all hours.



Save time on the back end: Start with a clean, dry surface so the paint adheres properly.

PREP Before you bust out the brushes, remove or tape over the hardware and clean the door with a damp, soapy microfiber cloth. For fiberglass and wood doors, do a light sanding with very fine-grit sandpaper, then clean the door again. If your door has glass panes, frame them with painter’s tape.

PAINT As always, start with primer. For wood doors, use Benjamin Moore’s High-Hiding All-Purpose Primer (at hardware stores). For metal and fiberglass doors, use Ultra Spec HP Acrylic Metal Primer (at hardware stores). Let it dry for 24 hours before rolling on your chosen exterior paint. Grab a thin brush to go around the door’s hardware, then an angled brush to get into the corners. Wait another 24 hours and give the door a second coat. Translation: Use the side door for a few days!



Under the Sea 693



Marblehead Gold HC-11



Polo Blue 2062-10

SCHEDULE A QUICK FACELIFT

For your house, of course! If you have a stucco facade, you can rent a pressure washer from a local hardware store to spray away algae, dirt, and mildew. If you have a brick exterior, consider painting it. Black and charcoal brick homes are trending.

Give Your Counters Some Love

The best way to make your counters gleam: Take precautions with porous counters. Here's what you need to know if you have...



MARBLE OR GRANITE

Natural stone should be resealed periodically so stains can't settle. Marble needs resealing every six months; granite is a once-a-year job, says Meredith Barclay, merchant of countertops for the Home Depot. She recommends Miracle Sealants 511 Impregnator Penetrating Sealer (homedepot.com). "It

resists oil and water and won't yellow," she says. Clean every inch with warm, soapy water, then follow the directions on the container and plan on ordering takeout that night.

BUTCHER BLOCK

Every six months or so, wipe down wood your butcher block counters with soapy water and

spritz them with distilled white vinegar. "Then use sandpaper to smooth away scratches, and finally, moisturize," Barclay advises. She recommends Hampton Bay Mineral Oil (homedepot.com). This maintenance move will help prevent warping and splintering.

ADD EXTRA LIGHTING

Under-cabinet LEDs can illuminate your workspace and create a whole mood. Plus, you can install them without having to go to electrician school, because most options plug into an outlet or run off batteries. Get one with a self-adhesive sticker, like the GE LED Undercabinet Light Bar (amazon.com) or the Energizer LED Tap Light (target.com).



Instant upgrade:
Switch out dated
cabinet knobs for
designer pulls.



GET FANCY WITH A WINE FRIDGE

You're probably not building a wine cellar anytime soon. Instead, treat yourself to the next best thing: a wine fridge in your kitchen.

Aaron Thompson, a sommelier and co-owner of Osteria Stella in Knoxville, Tennessee, stocks hundreds of bottles at once and recommends picking a wine fridge with dual-zone temperature settings so you have options. (Store reds and whites at the same time!

Or whites and champagne! Or lots and lots of reds!) His current favorite: the Frigidaire 45 Bottle Two-Zone Wine Cooler (frigidaire.com for info). If you get one, please invite us over. We'll bring snacks.

Update Your Cabinet Doors

There's no reason to rip out perfectly good cabinets. Just give the fronts a little makeover.

MAKE THEM SHAKER-STYLE

Turn flat-faced doors into trendy but timeless ones. How? Add four pieces of plywood around the edges to create a frame. (More quality time with your nail gun!) Once they're framed, you'll have to sand, prime, and paint each door, so it's a high-effort project, but the results will be worth it.

MAKE THEM MOODY

Drew and Jonathan Scott, aka the Property Brothers (catch them on HGTV), tell us painting doors a dark color makes a big impact. "It's a simple change that can add lots of personality, elegance, and warmth," they say. A couple of their favorite shades: After Hours by Backdrop and Current Mood by Clare. Find more inspo at drewandjonathan.com.

MAKE THEM BOUGIE

Cabinet hardware is like jewelry for your kitchen. Swap those builder-grade knobs for more stylish, sculptural pulls from a source like Emtek, Anthropologie, or Schoolhouse.



Practical Pull
Bar Cabinet Knob;
emtek.com for info



Floral Accent
Handcarved Gulliver
Knobs;
anthropologie.com



Golden Touch
Hive Knob;
similar style at Wayfair

“Build” a Banquette

Attention, small-space dwellers: A cozy breakfast nook can fit just about anywhere, provide extra storage, double as WFH headquarters, offer a spot for game nights, and so much more. If you have lots of space, ditto! Scott Vargo, cofounder of the blog Yellow Brick Home, shares how to DIY one.



DECIDE ON YOUR SEATING

“Building a banquette can be as complicated or as simple as you want,” Vargo says. If you’re comfortable with power tools, create your perch from scratch using online tutorials as a guide. (Vargo has a great one on his blog.) Otherwise, go semi-custom by using—wait for it—a bookcase turned on its side. First check that it can

hold your weight, of course, and try to find one that’s 18 inches when laid on its side. If you want L-shaped seating, get two and put them at a 90-degree angle.

MEASURE, MAP, AND ASSEMBLE

Before you buy anything, map out the design with painter’s tape. Block out the bench as well as the table and chairs you’re considering.

Or, if you’re using a table and chairs you already have, slide them into place. The tabletop should overlap the bench by about three inches. If everything checks out (you’re so good at this!), buy the bookcase(s) and assemble.

MAKE OR BUY A CUSHION

Cut a piece of plywood to the size of your seat. Do the same with a piece of furni-

ture foam. Wrap fabric—vinyl or an indoor-outdoor textile that will hold up to spills—around the foam and plywood, then staple it to the plywood. Or search Etsy for a vendor that will make a cushion for you (like the Hearth and Home Store, NCPatio-Cushions, or LinenSpace). Then take a seat and have a cuppa. How nice is this?!



Fake Built-In Shelving

In a dream world, every home would come with stunning floor-to-ceiling storage. In reality, you can imitate the look using an iconic Ikea bookcase and a little out-of-the-box thinking. Here, Gwen Hefner gives us the how-to behind one of the most popular projects on her blog, *The Makerista*.

START WITH THE SHELVES

Like so many DIY projects, this one begins with Ikea's Billy bookcases (beloved by Hefner and others because they're relatively inexpensive and come in all sorts of dimensions and configurations). Measure to see what size bookcase best fills your space—the key is to get as close to wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling as possible. For a standard eight-foot ceiling, go with a Billy that's 93¼ inches tall, which will leave a few inches of wall space on top for the next step.

ADD MOLDING

You want to make everything look like one large bookcase, so it's time for some fun with embellishments. Bridge the gap between the top of the shelves and the ceiling with strips of crown molding. And attach half-inch wood planks between the shelving units to cover up the seams.

PREP FOR PAINTING

Billy bookcases have a smooth veneer, but for this project, it's gotta get roughed up. Sand the shelves with 120-grit paper and vacuum up the dust,

then wipe the shelves with a damp cloth. Use a brush and roller to cover the shelves and molding with a layer of primer (Extreme Bond Primer; sherwin-williams.com). Let that set for at least 24 hours.

PAINT

For a seamless look, paint the "built-ins" the same color as the walls in the room (in a semigloss finish), Hefner suggests. To make a statement, consider going with a bold color or a dark neutral.

One-hour fix: Use an app to update framed family pics.



SWITCH OUT OLD FAMILY PHOTOS

If looking at your gallery wall feels like an exercise in time travel, scour your phone or Instagram for a few modern-day pics. To have them printed, try the Print Studio app, Artifact Uprising, or Nations Photo Lab. These places can ship high-quality prints (framed or unframed) within a week.



Hang Some Wallpaper

PICK YOUR PAPER

This may be the hardest part, with so many great options to choose from. Mike DiGilio, immediate past president of the Wall-covering Installers Association, says most pros prefer the traditional kind because it can be easily slid into place. (Get one that's prepasted to cut out a step!) "But a good-quality peel-and-stick will let you reposition it as you work," he adds. As for the pattern, DiGilio suggests a smaller one: "If you have a pattern that repeats, say, every eight inches, you'll have many opportunities to line it up on the wall." The more chances, the better!

PREP THE WALLS

Though it's tedious, says Elizabeth Rees, cofounder of the trendy wallpaper brand Chasing Paper, prepping can keep your wallpaper from peeling off over time. "Walls should be washed with a damp cloth and left to dry completely (around 48 hours) before you paper them," she says. If you're papering raw dry-wall, you'll get the best results if you prime and paint first. "Use a premium eggshell, satin, or semi-gloss paint," Rees says. Paint can take up to four weeks to fully cure, so adjust your papering plans accordingly.

DO THE HANGING

Here we go! Read the directions first. Then, if you're wallpapering a whole room, start in a corner. If you're covering a bump-out or focal point, start in the middle so the seams don't end up front and center. Take your time with that first piece, says Paula Taylor, head stylist at Graham & Brown, a luxury wallpaper maker: "The first length, or drop, of wallpaper is vital. Get it right and the rest should line up without too much trouble." As you finish each section, trim extra paper using a wide putty knife and a sharp, high-quality breakaway razor blade.

DIY A "CUSTOM" CLOSET

With three easy-to-find items, you can DIY a closet that has a place for everything. The best part? It'll cost less than \$500.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Floating shelf
- Low dresser
- Heavy-duty tension rod

First, measure the width of your closet. You may be able to find a floating shelf at that exact size, or you can cut a plank to fit.

(Your local home improvement store can help.) Install this shelf about 12 inches from your closet ceiling, using the mounting hardware it came with or store-bought brackets. This is the new home for things like hats and purses. Next, look for a dresser that can comfortably nest inside. Fill it with tees, undies, and the usual drawer items. Finally, install a heavy-duty tension rod four inches below your shelf for tops, sweaters, etc. Tuck long dresses around the dresser if space allows. Oh, one last step: Stand back and marvel at your handiwork.



Make Over Your Powder Room

Pick a project, any project! Even just one of them is enough to zhuzh up the space.



The fastest design trick: Swap stark bulbs for warm white.

FAUCET

Paint to the rescue! Again! This time, use spray paint to revive your existing fixtures. Start with the prep: Remove the faucet and knobs from their posts and clean them with soap and water, then with straight vinegar to remove hard-water buildup. Next, rub them down with coarse sandpaper, wipe off the dust, and place them on a tarp outdoors. Spray on a coat of Rust-Oleum Automotive Primer, then a few coats of Rust-Oleum Universal Metallic Spray Paint, which comes in bronze, gold, and more. Top it off with a coat of Rust-Oleum Gloss

Clear Lacquer Spray Paint. Let dry and reinstall.

MIRROR

Tired of looking at that basic bathroom mirror? The online shop MirrorMate will make a custom frame that's ridiculously easy to install. Send in your dimensions and they'll ship you a frame that clips onto your existing medicine cabinet or mirror. It's budget- and eco-friendly. Already have a frame? You know what we're going to say: more paint! Brush on a different color for a quick and fun update.

LIGHTS

When you get up to pee between your pre-bedtime nap on the couch and your bedtime, the last thing you want is Times Square-level lighting in your eyes. Swap in sconces with shades or even frosted bulbs to soften the brightness. Choose bulbs that run a little warm (something around 3,000 Kelvin) for a soft and flattering glow.

VANITY

Carrie Waller, blogger at Dream Green DIY, has repainted her bathroom vanity multiple times and has two key recommendations:

Use a small *foam* paint roller (not the fuzzy kind) to get the smoothest possible finish, and pick up Sherwin-Williams Emerald Urethane Trim Enamel (sherwin-williams.com) in satin finish. She swears this stuff dries rock-hard—that's important for high-traffic areas, where surfaces tend to get put through the wringer. Again, there's some prep work involved (cleaning, sanding, and priming), and don't forget that second coat!

Instant oasis: Add a firepit to make your yard a vibe.



PLAN FOR A FIREPIT

Sure, you can roast marshmallows over a grill. But you shouldn't have to! Justin Elkins, director of merchandising, kitchens at Home Depot, has ideas to help you step up the cozy. First, check with your town to make sure firepits are allowed. Yes? Great! Find a spot in your yard at least 15 feet from trees and 10 feet from your home or other structures. (Make sure the ground is flat and your hose can easily reach it in an emergency.) Next, block out your area with fire-safe materials, such as crushed stone or pea gravel. Put your firepit in the center, checking your kit for special instructions. It's almost s'more o'clock!



Clean Your Patio Table

Is your table getting so much use this season it could use a glow-up? Follow this advice for speed-cleaning a backyard dining set from Terry Lin, cofounder and chief design officer at Outer, an outdoor furniture company.

TEAK

Use Star Brite Teak Cleaner (acehardware.com), Lin says. Then apply a polish, like Minwax Clear Teak Oil (lowes.com), to hydrate the wood and keep the grain from cracking.

PLASTIC AND METAL

Hose it down to remove grime (but never with a pressure washer!). Tackle tough stains with mild dish soap, a nonabrasive sponge or a soft-bristle brush, and warm water.

GLASS-TOP

Pour a mix of hot water and dish soap over cruddy spots and let it sit for 20 minutes, then wipe with a nonabrasive sponge. (We like to use glass cleaner or vinegar along the entire surface for a streak-free finish.)

TUNE UP THE DECK

Blast away dirt with a pressure washer (on the lightest setting) or sand and restain the boards. If they're beyond repair, replace them with long-lasting composite decking, like the Reserve Collection in Reclaimed Chestnut (timbertech.com for info).

Add a Mudroom

Kicking off your shoes is hard if you don't have a place to sit while you do it! Erin Gerlach, founder of the DIY blog Hamilton Park Home, turned a section of her garage into a comfy little entry area. These are her step-by-step instructions.



CARVE OUT MORE PARKING SPACE

Despite their convenience and effect on curb appeal, driveways are often overlooked, says Melanie Rekola, a landscape designer in Toronto. To create space (for guests or your newly licensed teenager), Rekola suggests carving a parking pad from the adjacent lawn (or asking a landscaper to do it). A ribbon driveway—two parallel tracks separated by gravel or grass—is ideal for smaller spaces and budgets. Gravel, asphalt, and concrete are also cost-effective options, while pavers and stone are pricier, classically stylish investments. Before breaking ground, contact your city or town to make sure your plans meet code. Permit needs vary by municipality.

MARK YOUR TERRITORY

Ideally, this is right off the door leading from the garage into your home, Gerlach says. Tape out the area, making sure that there's enough room remaining to fit your cars if you park them inside (and that you can open the door and get out once you park!).

ADD SEATING AND STORAGE

You need a bench. Opt for one with cubbies or a top that flips up so you can stash stuff inside. For even more storage, Gerlach installed a board-and-batten wall and attached dozens of pegs to it to hold backpacks and jackets. She hung baskets for smaller items, like hats and gloves. Alternatively, add hooks, hooks, and more hooks.

WARM IT UP

No one wants to put their feet on a cold, hard garage floor, so roll out a rug. "Jute is very durable, and you can wipe your shoes on it," Gerlach says. Bonus points for sconces (battery-powered ones don't need hardwiring!), wallpaper, and other touches to make it feel homey.



GIVE YOUR DOOR A QUICK HIGH-TECH UPGRADE

Your old PIN pad has likely seen better days (and please update the code!). The myQ Smart Garage Video Keypad has a built-in camera so you can monitor who comes in and out via the app (myq.com/rs). Even the least handy of us can set it up in less than 30 minutes.

THE ART OF SURVIVING A TIME CRUNCH

It's no fun to face a deadline, whether it's a work presentation or a party you're hosting. But you can cross the finish line without a single (new) gray hair.

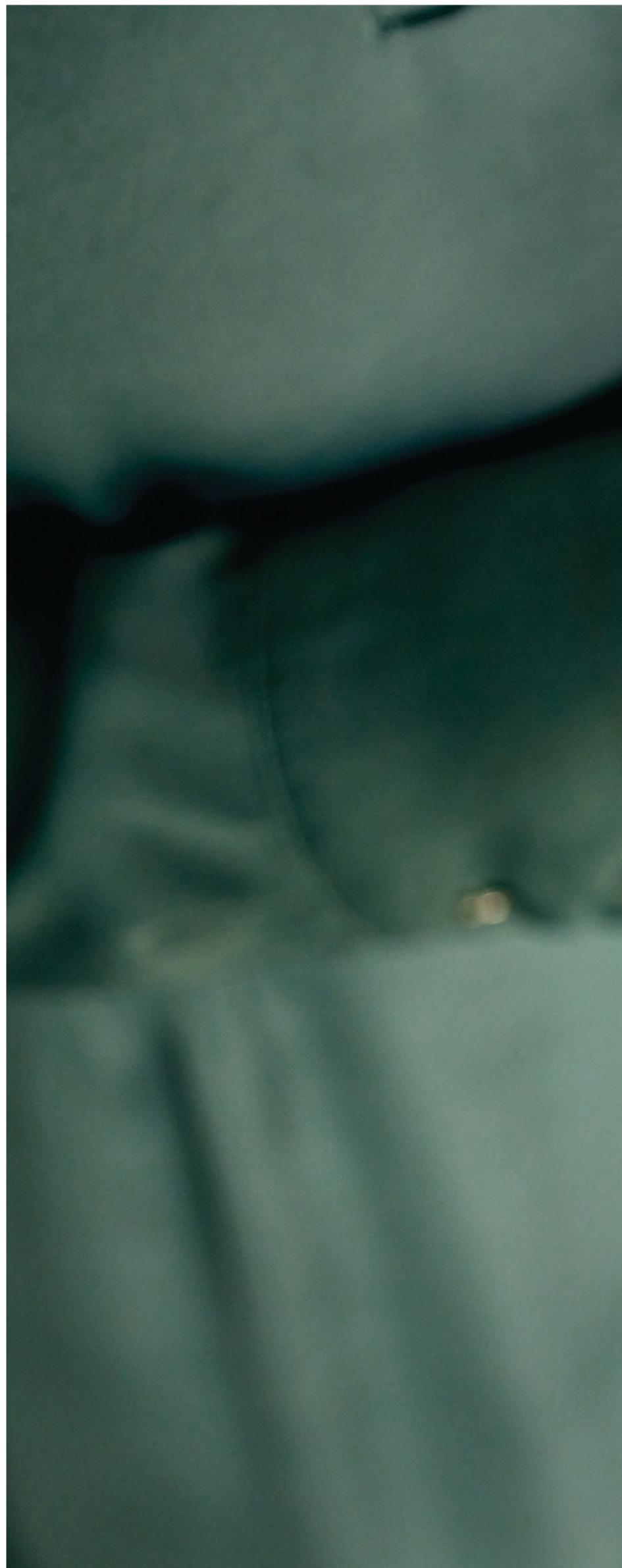
BY DAN BOVA

IS IT ANY WONDER that deadlines fill us with anxiety and panic? “Dead” is right there in the word.

Maybe you're prepping for an important client presentation or planning a 3-year-old's birthday party—the stakes may be wildly different, but the stress is all the same.

Inevitably you're going to hear that ticking clock in your head, along with a familiar, unwelcome refrain: “There's no way I'm going to get this done on time!” Deadlines are locked arm in arm with fear of failure, twirling about in the worst mental-health two-step dance ever choreographed.

And here's the really diabolical part: Even when on paper we do actually have plenty of time to complete a project, our brains trick us into thinking we don't. In a study published in *Psychological Science*, participants were given the same deadline for a variety of tasks that ranged from “effortless” to “effortful.” They were then asked to describe how far away that deadline seemed. Those with the easy-peasy projects perceived the due date as being way off in the distance, while those given tougher tasks described the time frame as looming and







coming up quickly. An assignment that requires lots of work, the study found, distorts our perception of time, which in turn creates even more stress.

This cycle of flop sweat and hopelessness can lead to physical and mental overload, including headaches, digestive problems, lack of focus, fatigue, memory loss, and sleeplessness. None of those things are going to be very helpful when you need to put your head down and get stuff done, right?

Well, it doesn't have to be that way, according to time management experts. "Unfortunately, there isn't a way to completely eliminate deadline stress, but there are strategies you can use to dial down the anxiety and be as efficient as possible," says Terry Rice, a business consultant, speaker, and director of growth at Good People Digital.

Read on to discover some expert-tested approaches that will help you quiet that ticking clock and put you on track to nail your deadline without having to pull any all-nighters.

Start by Zooming Out

When it comes to completing a massive assignment that feels like it's got a million facets to it, the devil is in those details—meaning if you start by focusing on all the tiny to-do's, your focus is going to be shot before you even get going. "Identify your big need first," advises Laura Vanderkam, author of *Tranquility by Tuesday: 9 Ways to Calm the Chaos and Make Time for What Matters*. "Let's use hosting a Thanksgiving dinner as an example. Sure, maybe you'd love to mimic some beautiful place setting you saw in a magazine, but if you spend too much time thinking about that and forget to defrost the turkey? That's a problem. No one is really going to notice how the napkins are folded, but everyone is going to notice that there's nothing to eat."

Rice says that same approach works in the business world. "When I take on a project, I think to myself, 'What absolutely must be done in order for me to effectively deliver?'" So if it's a webinar, I know I need to have the framework for what I'm going to talk about. After that, I add nice-to-haves. It would be great to add visuals, maybe a PDF people can take home." No matter what your project is, consider those bells and whistles as add-ons you'll hopefully get to once you're in good shape overall. "It has to start with the thing that must be done," he says.

Create a Timeline

Once you've defined the big goal, the next thing to do is to break it down into all the micro steps you'll need to take to get to the finish line. "Develop a detailed project plan at the start of your planning process," advises Annemarie Schumacher, founder of Make Every Day an Event. "Taking the time to think through the entire event and walk through its logistics is essential." This will help you make sure the amount of work is doable and in what order it should happen. "Assign tasks to others if needed," says Schumacher. "You can't be in two places at once!" Maybe that means you ask a good friend to come to your party half an hour early and pick up some ice on the way over. Or you enlist an eager intern at work to take a first pass at formatting your deck.

In order to complete all of these mini steps, you may have to employ a tactic Rice learned while working at Facebook: ruthless prioritization. "It's not going to feel great—it's going to hurt—but this is about eliminating any side distractions keeping you from your primary objective." On the personal side, this could mean forcing yourself to wait an extra week to binge the new season of *Bridgerton* or try that new paella recipe you bookmarked. On the work side, it might be about temporarily altering your typical day-to-day. "Talk to your manager and ask, 'For me to complete this on time, what would you like me to deprioritize?'" says Rice. "That way you don't have all these little things that are getting in the way of making progress."

Having the steps written out removes the burden of keeping it all in your head and lets you see it's doable, Vanderkam points out. But don't wear rose-colored glasses when you suss out that timeline, she advises. Leave room for hiccups. As we all know too well, you can plan to put your head down and work for the next few hours, but then the phone rings and your kid is sick and needs to be picked up from school, or your boss's boss needs something, and there goes your afternoon. Even if updating a spreadsheet should take 30 minutes, Vanderkam suggests scheduling an hour. "Most people are pretty bad at estimating how long things actually take," she notes. "No matter how simple the task may be, nothing takes zero minutes to complete."

Suss out your timeline, but
leave room for hiccups.
Most people are actually pretty
bad at estimating how long
things will take, and nothing
takes zero minutes.

Give Yourself a Fake Deadline

While you're at the pre-planning stage, build a buffer for your deadlines. "If something is due in a week, plan to have it done a day in advance. A week in advance if it is due in a month, a month for a year," Vanderkam says. "Those are loose guidelines, but they've helped me hit deadlines even when I spent the night in the ER the day before a project was due. People will understand that it might not be perfect in that kind of situation. But you shouldn't have nothing to show at that point. If you're well enough to hit 'send,' you should be able to deliver something decent on time."

That goes for a personal deadline, too. Prepping your family for a big trip? Pick up the prescriptions you'll need and pack the essential clothes ahead of time so if you have an unexpected event the day before, you'll still be ready to jet off.

Take a Hike

All that great work you're doing? Remember to walk away from it from time to time. No matter how many cups of coffee we pound, humans have limited energy resources. "When we get tired, it takes us longer and longer to do things, and we become inefficient," says Vanderkam. "Everyone needs a break."

Get up, stretch, and whenever possible, go outside. Researchers at the University of Melbourne found that exposure to nature—even in very short bursts—makes people more productive. Getting active outside also helps you dial down the pressure you're feeling and should make it easier to not have your deadline-pressure mess with your sleep.

Another reason a stroll beats flopping on the couch and scrolling Instagram for 10 minutes: It's a self-limited activity. "Most people don't set out for a 10-minute walk and then accidentally walk for an hour," Vanderkam says. "You can't say the same for checking your social media feeds! And apart from seeing updates from friends and family, social media

does not typically result in happiness. You don't tend to feel better about life and the universe after you're finally done scrolling."

Be (a Little) Sloppy

You've likely heard it before, but it bears repeating: Perfectionism is the enemy of progress. So if you find yourself writing and rewriting the same opening paragraph of a report that is supposed to be 30 pages long, remember this tip from Vanderkam: "Done is always better than perfect." Perfectionism, she says, is a misnomer. "If it doesn't exist, then by definition, it can't be perfect!"

There are many ways to track your progress. Some people like writing lists by hand in a notebook so that they can draw an oh-so-satisfying X through a completed task; others use productivity apps, software platforms like Asana and Trello, or the Notes app on their smartphone. Which works best? Whatever system you'll use. Vanderkam thinks it's a good idea to experiment and play around with different management methods, but she cautions, "I wouldn't try something new when the stakes are huge." The last thing you need is some tech problem that has you up all night trying to figure out how to log in.

Rice is a big fan of an app called Time Doctor that helps predict how long certain tasks will take and blocks out his workday using his calendar app. But it goes beyond just taking into account hours and minutes. "I'm very aware of when I do my best work, and I try to base my schedule on my energy levels throughout the day," he explains. So if you find you're creative and do better with critical thinking in the morning, do that first and save administrative kinds of work for the afternoon.

Along the same lines, Vanderkam advises batching similar types of work as opposed to multitasking. At work, that could mean concentrating on knocking out a bunch of grunt work in one go and then moving on to more big-picture creative thinking, rather than bouncing back and forth. "You can lose a fair amount of time and energy switching between different kinds of tasks," she says. "And when you start to lose time and feel mentally tired, you start feeling frantic."

Batch similar tasks, don't multitask.
That might mean knocking out
lots of grunt work, then moving
on to big-picture thinking.

Same goes for family vacation planning—if you're at the drugstore getting travel toiletries and booking dinner reservations and making a mental list of all the outfits you want to bring, not only are you going to be mentally taxed, chances are that something is going to slip through the cracks. And that'll be a big bummer when you're heading to the beach and realize you forgot to pack a swimsuit or sandals.

Give Yourself a Pep Talk

No matter how organized we are, that ticking clock likes to dial up the volume and remind us that doom is approaching. To help silence it, Rice says he takes a beat to get his mindset right before embarking on a potentially overwhelming project. "I use a technique I learned from high-performance psychologist Dr. Michael Gervais. He encourages you to write down three challenging things you've accomplished in your life and then think about what those accomplishments say about you as a person: 'This shows that I am exemplary, that I can do hard things, that I can accomplish challenging tasks even if I'm not quite sure how to do it initially.' It helps give me confidence that I can handle whatever comes next."

Another huge stumbling block many of us face on the way to meeting deadlines is catastrophizing—that is, thinking and thinking and thinking some more about all of the things that could go wrong rather than pushing forward. Again, Vanderkam suggests looking at the big picture versus obsessing about all the tiny things that could go haywire. "Imagine the worst possible outcome," she suggests. This might sound less than comforting, but she says, "You will realize that for the vast majority of mess ups, the earth is going to keep spinning around the sun." Botched a planned dinner party? "You'll order pizza and everyone will have a good laugh about it." Didn't nail a work project despite your best efforts? "Your boss might be annoyed, but are you really going to get fired? Most likely not."

What this demonstrates is that "there are very few mishaps that can actually destroy an event," adds



Schumacher. “So keeping everything in perspective is really the key.”

And for the most part, whatever it is you’re dreading is probably not going to happen—a realization that ends unnecessary stress and drains on your energy. Plus, Rice notes, people will typically forgive you if things don’t go perfectly, as long as you’re proactive with updates: “The more transparent you are with any problems, the more your partners, your clients, or your boss will appreciate it.” That means if your next-year budget is due Friday at 5, you’ll want to let them know you need more time well before Friday at 4:59.

When All Else Fails—Wing It

Another tack entirely: “There is something to be said for winging it,” says Vanderkam. She relates how she trained for months and months for a big running race, vigilantly adhering to a training regime. While waiting at the starting line among anxious runners, she started chatting with a woman who cheerfully explained that she’d basically never run more than a few miles before in her life. “It was fascinating to me,” says Vanderkam. “I don’t know if she actually finished the race, but she

sure didn’t seem stressed out about it.”

Rice tells the story of a paid speaking engagement where, for a variety of reasons, he walked out on stage with no idea what he was going to say. On the spot, he decided that rather than try to talk to his audience, he would talk *with* them. “I started asking the audience questions and then facilitated conversations between audience members,” he says. “Afterward, the organizer came up to me and said, ‘That was the best keynote we’ve ever had. You got everyone so engaged!’” This is a comforting reminder that when our best plans fall apart, our collective life skills and experiences will kick in and guide us to a way to salvage the moment.

And while there’s little chance we’re all going to fall in love with crunch periods, it doesn’t hurt to remember that they do have their benefits. “They are motivational,” says Vanderkam. “The moving trucks are showing up tomorrow, so now you have to finally toss all the junk packed in your closets that you don’t want. Without that deadline, it’s hard to get yourself to do stuff like that.”

Plus, as John Mulaney noted when his weeklong Netflix talk show *Everybody’s in L.A.* debuted in 2024, deadlines mean that, for better or for worse, there is an end in sight. “Whatever happens this week, we’re done,” he said. “Which is awesome, because there is nothing I like being more than done.” ■

THE FASTEST WAY TO GET (AND STAY) ORGANIZED

Hint: It's knowing your clutter-control personality. Find out what type you are and then streamline your stuff in the way that comes most easily to you.

BY TEDDY WILLSON





The Overwhelmed Clutter Bug

IF YOUR HOUSE is full of so much stuff you just want to cry, hear this: (1) It's OK! And (2) you *can* find your way to order. Decluttering entails more than purging what you don't need—you also have to decide what you don't *want*, says Carolyn Caldwell, a certified professional organizer in Toronto who specializes in chronic disorganization. "Organizing is an emotional experience. It's about evaluating priorities," she says.

Making choices about sentimental items and facing down your organizational tendencies, or lack thereof, is tough business. How we sort our belongings is personal and can be influenced by things like mental health, traumatic experiences (loss is a big one), and upbringing. Deep stuff.

Clara Schoen, owner of the

Home Organized in Birmingham, Alabama, offers a way forward: Start somewhere that takes little emotional bandwidth. "If you try to tackle photos first, you're setting yourself up for failure," she points out. "Try a space that's more manageable, such as your fridge, where you can get used to the ebb and flow of organizing. Then you can move to the emotionally taxing spaces."

Once you've decided where to start, pull everything out, one section at a time, says Tara Stewart, an organizer in Lexington, Kentucky. Then sort it into "keep," "trash," and "donate" piles. "When deciding what to keep, ask yourself how you live right now," Stewart says. Are you going to use those flannel sheets in Southern California? Do you really think

you'll start throwing fondue parties?

If you're stressed about a looming reorganization project, make a list of *steps*, not goals, says KC Davis, author of *How to Keep House While Drowning*. Instead of writing "organize pantry," for example, jot down "toss expired food," "clean sticky bottles," etc. "Breaking a task into small steps gives you a road map and the satisfaction of checking off a list," Davis says.

To maintain the space, set tidying appointments so Future You can continue enjoying your handiwork. And give yourself a clear end point, Caldwell says. Work just for the length of a peppy podcast or playlist, say. Also, being organized about your organizing saves time: Keep a short list of tasks by room so you know where to start.

SOME HELPERS



Use this as a catchall while you tidy. Then sort the contents and fold flat to store. *Hold-All Collapsible Laundry Basket*; us.josephjoseph.com



You don't have to get rid of your paper piles. Just file them into no-fuss sections, like "for later." *Acrylic File Organizer*; potterybarn.com



Stash odds and ends in opaque bins to quickly handle unsightly areas. Try to work in categories, but don't worry about making it look nice. *Plastic Storage Bin*; containerstore.com

The Distracted Organizer

LOTS OF PEOPLE live in this middle ground: You generally know where things are, but you wouldn't call the shelf they're on "orderly." You don't have junk everywhere, but you do have multiple junk drawers, and you bought canisters for the pantry that are just taking up space. You've got the right idea! You only need help with the execution.

First, take note (literally) of your home when it's in disarray. "Don't clean anything; don't tidy up," says Katherine Picott, founder of the home organizing firm Tidy Milso in Columbia, Maryland. "We need to see what's working and what's not." Dog toys spread across the floor? Linens slumped over in the closet? Dog toys in the linen closet?! Jot it all down.

While you're at it, add com-

mon frustrations, says Marissa Hagemeyer, cofounder of Neat Method, an organizing company with operations in the U.S. and Canada. Think the scramble before work or the mad search for your passport before a flight. "It's about knowing what's tripping you up but also what your priorities and goals are," Caldwell says. "The more aware you are of your headaches, meaning, the actual messes, and your heartaches—your emotional responses to them—the more you can focus on each one specifically, as opposed to trying to fix everything at once." You can't expect life-changing solutions without first identifying the problems.

Now it's time to get rid of some stuff. Because chaotic organizers tend to hang on to

items—meh lipsticks, old mugs—a proper purge will make it easier to organize what you keep. Rule: If you haven't used it in the past year, it's time to let it go.

You will need some organizers. Just remember that the purpose of organizing isn't to buy pretty things but to make your home function well. So if you're not a decanted-flour kind of person, all good! Go back to that list you wrote and consider solutions. A bin for plushies? A shelf divider to hold towels in place?

The key for you: Think of these organizers as boundaries, Hagemeyer says. If a basket is overflowing, it's time for an edit. "Stay within the boundary, and you'll have a win, both visually and mentally," she adds.

SOME HELPERS



No more avalanches of cookware! This nonslip number makes for tidy cabinets and easy access. *StoreMore Expandable Cookware Rack; youcopia.com*



Not only do these rubberized hangers look great, their grip also keeps clothes from falling on the floor. *Everyday Hangers; neatmethod.com*



This five-piece set comes with different-size bins, so you can Tetris them into any drawer. *Luxe Acrylic Stacking Drawer Organizers; containerstore.com*





The Type-A Type

DO THE PHRASES “rainbow bookshelves” and “alphabetical order” make your heart sing? Then this one’s for you. You have it all (mostly!) under control. Still, you face a few challenges.

For starters: perfectionism. It’s a natural impulse, but it can hinder us, says Katherine Morgan Schafler, a psychotherapist and the author of *The Perfectionist’s Guide to Losing Control*. “We see the difference between our reality and an imagined, *better* reality, and we strive to bridge the gap,” she says. When we can’t, we can be hard on ourselves. We get frustrated when the coat closet isn’t Insta-worthy, for example. Let yourself off the hook: Having the perfect pantry doesn’t make you a better person!

Let’s talk action items. Ready? “Our type A person is likely super prepared,” Stew-

art says, so we know you have a stockpile. (We mean that collection of 83 rolls of toilet paper and 10 cans of corn.) To make your organized system more functional, Stewart advises, try to cut down on the back stock. (You might be fine with just 38 rolls and five cans!) Use an accessible spot, like a utility shelf, so your family can see and use and not mistakenly restock everything.

That brings us to your family! Odds are they’re not as organized as you. “We all interact with the world using different processing modalities,” Caldwell says. “We can be visual, kinesthetic, auditory, or verbal.” Each type perceives environments differently and has different organizing standards. Rather than forcing everyone in your house to be hyperorganized (uphill battle!), help them help you. “I’m a big fan of

labeling, because everybody has to buy into the system,” Schoen says. The trick? Keep categories broad—“snacks” and “canned goods” instead of “chips” and “tuna.” This gives everyone just enough guidance.

Another tip: Don’t get rid of everyone’s stuff. Hide it! Schoen likes woven hampers that look way nicer than scattered toys. For Stewart, it’s a row of kitchen drawers. “Each family member has one drawer,” she says. “It’s dump-and-go, but their stuff isn’t on the counter, so it’s an overall win.”

Finally, your systems should evolve with your life. “There are constant transitions that push you to rearrange,” Hagemeyer says. No matter the reason (seasons, hobbies), give yourself the grace to update a once-optimal space. Change can be good.

SOME HELPERS



Toss in whatever (toys, laundry, shoes, blankets), close the lid, and carry on. *La Jolla Basket; serenaandlily.com*



Download the app to print custom labels for anything and everything. *Dymo LetraTag Label Maker; amazon.com*



Adding extra surfaces, like these 32-inch-long shelves, can be a simple solution for your family’s clutter. *Index Wall Shelf; burrow.com*

QUICK MOVES FOR BETTER HEALTH

Making big gains in your well-being can happen in just minutes each day.

BY AMY PATUREL

INVESTING IN YOUR health takes time. That's true. But there are still plenty of things you can do to enhance your overall health—or even just your mood—when you only have minutes to spare.

“People often think they have to do this dramatic overhaul overnight and tug the rug underneath themselves,” says LJ Amaral, RD, a clinical research registered dietician in oncology at Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles. “But the small, simple approach is actually the best way to make a dramatic change in your life.”

Ready to give it a whirl? Here are six simple strategies to squeeze into your day.

Start your morning with box breathing

Most of us breathe in and out all day without even thinking about it. But paying attention to your breath—and extending your inhales and exhales—has important mind-body benefits.

People often don't realize they're taking fast, shallow breaths, which activates the stress response, explains







Neha Vyas, MD, a family medicine physician with Cleveland Clinic. But taking slow, deep breaths tells our nervous system it's safe to relax, and "box breathing" does the trick.

Box breathing (also called four-square breathing) involves four basic steps: Inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds, and pause for four seconds, then repeat. Ideally, you should practice box breathing for three to five minutes at a time, or until you feel calm. If counting to four is challenging, drop down to three. After consistent practice, you may be able to swap out four-second breaths for five or six.

A 2021 study reported that twice-daily box breathing enhances lung function, which is a key predictor of health and longevity.

According to Maggie Gama, MD, a functional medicine practitioner at the Center for New Medicine in Irvine, California, there's nothing magical about box breathing. Focused breathing of any type helps lower blood pressure, regulate heart rate, and enhance mood. Research also links breathwork with higher energy levels and reduced pain. Studies suggest it may even rival drugs in treating anxiety.

Box breathing is simple to do, easy to remember, and highly effective in stressful situations. Before you begin your day, place your feet on the floor and spend a few minutes with your breath.



Do a HIIT workout

Ask anyone who is inactive why they don't exercise, and you'll frequently hear, "I don't have time!" Unlike many workout programs, which run 45 minutes to 1 hour, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) provides a full-body workout in about half the time.

The hitch: HIIT regimens are intense, combining short bursts of high-powered movements like sprinting or jumping jacks that hike your heart rate to 80 to 90 percent of its maximum with short periods of lower-intensity exercise.

HIIT workouts not only burn the same amount of calories as longer moderate routines, but they also promote greater aerobic capacity.

Research shows that HIIT workouts not only burn the same amount of calories as longer moderate-intensity routines, but they also promote greater aerobic capacity. In a 2023 study, researchers reported that the effect of HIIT on fat loss was similar to or greater than moderate-intensity training. Even people with type 1 diabetes experience better sleep, increased motivation, and greater enjoyment with HIIT than with no training at all.

HIIT doesn't require much space or equipment, making it ideal for at-home workouts. You can time your intervals with one- to five-minute music tracks.

Can't carve out 30 minutes? Vyas recommends integrating resistance and balance moves into your daily activities. "Stand on one leg while you're brushing your teeth, and get up from sitting on the ground to standing," she suggests. "You can even dance around the kitchen during meal prep."

Take a cold shower

Cold-water immersion has been making waves across social media in recent years, with celebrities from Chris Hemsworth to Madonna boasting about their cold-plunge practices. As it turns out, history and emerging research suggest these stars may be on to something.

Healers dating back to Hippocrates recognized the benefits of cold water for medicinal purposes. The ancient Greeks used it to cure lethargy and ease pain. And beginning in the 1960s, researchers began investigating cold-water immersion as a form of post-exercise recovery.

More recently, research suggests that cold water immersion (cold showers, ice baths, and other immersion tactics) produces mind and body benefits. A 2024 review study published in the *Journal of Thermal Biology* reported that cold water exposure enhances the relaxation response. A second study, published in 2023 in *Biology*, linked a five-minute cold-water plunge with feeling more alert, attentive, proud, and inspired.

There's even evidence that cold water releases feel-good hormones. In one study, people who took cold showers daily for several months reported a reduction in depression symptoms. Other research suggests that

cold-water immersion may enhance mood and reduce anxiety.

While most of these studies are small, Gama says that taking cold showers and ice baths can improve circulation and may give the immune system a boost—and they’re good for your hair, too (cold water protects the hair shaft).

But you don’t have to spend 30 minutes in an ice bath to reap the benefits. “Start by ending your showers with just a few seconds of cold water,” Gama suggests. “Then work up to 30 seconds or a minute each week, until you reach five minutes.”

For the average healthy person, the only real risk of cold-water immersion is the pins-and-needles sensation of 50-degree water. But if you have certain health conditions, such as heart disease or Raynaud’s syndrome, it’s probably best to skip the cold shower.

Get outside

The smell of the trees, the sounds of birds chirping in the breeze, and the feel of your toes buried in the sand can produce tremendous health benefits. A growing body of research links time in nature with lower blood pressure, less stress, and even reduced risk of heart disease. Other research reports that connecting with nature can help curb anxiety and depression. The benefits are so pronounced that some practitioners are writing “nature prescriptions.”

While scientists don’t completely understand how stepping out into nature produces these effects, the idea of turning to the earth for healing dates back centuries. In Japan, it’s called forest bathing, and the practice plays a key role in the country’s health program.

The optimal dose of outside time isn’t clear, but a study from the U.K. found that people who ventured outdoors for two hours or more each week reported greater health perks than those who remained inside. According to Maryam Abdullah, PhD, parenting program director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, noticing nature also promotes experiences of awe, which helps us feel connected to something larger than ourselves.

Want to kick the benefits up a notch? “Ground” yourself by physically connecting with the earth—plant your feet into the sand, dirt, or grass, or submerge yourself in water. Gama says the practice not only feels

good, but it also helps support your immune system.

The direct current that flows through everything on our planet is the same type of energy our bodies use to function, she says. And studies actually show that becoming part of the earth’s direct current enhances the health of nearly every organ system.

Take a vitamin D supplement—but only if you’re deficient

Vitamin D has become the “it” nutrient in recent years, in part because it acts more like a hormone than a vitamin. Just like it produces hormones, your body makes vitamin D from sunlight. And like hormones, vitamin D is involved in several biological processes.

“Vitamin D is best known for protecting your bones from fracture and enhancing calcium absorption,” Gama says. “But it also plays a role in protecting overall health and well-being.” In fact, research links Vitamin D deficiency with a host of ailments, ranging from depression and low-grade inflammation to autoimmune disease and reduced immunity. There’s even evidence linking lower levels of vitamin D with a higher risk of death from all causes.

How much D do you need? The current recommended dietary allowance is 600 IU for adults under age 70 and 800 IU for those over 70. But the real “need” for vitamin D depends on your age, medical history, and how much (or how little) sun exposure you get daily.

Unfortunately, getting enough vitamin D is difficult through food alone, even if you load up on D-rich foods like salmon, fortified milk, and cereal. And studies show that half of the global population is getting insufficient vitamin D.

Your best bet: Ask your doctor to test your blood level of vitamin D, and supplement accordingly. “Look for brands that contain vitamin D3, which is more biologically active than its D2 counterpart,” Amaral says.

Just keep in mind that while sufficient vitamin D is good, more is not better. “Too much vitamin D can interfere with calcium absorption, which could lead to bone loss,” Amaral says. And in extreme levels, vitamin D toxicity can raise blood levels of calcium, leading to confusion and heart rhythm abnormalities.



Scan nutrition labels

Obviously, it's best to eat whole foods (meaning foods that don't have nutrition facts labels), but if you need to purchase convenience foods or whole packaged products like oatmeal and beans, scanning food labels can help you avoid excess sugar, sodium, and fat.

Instead of focusing on front-of-the-box claims like "healthy," "natural," and "low fat," flip to the side or back of the box for the nutrition facts panel and ingredient list. Both provide important information that can guide you about which products to slip into your cart and which to leave at the store.

The first order of business: Check the serving size. Everything on the panel is based on the serving size—and many food labels boast two or even three servings in

one small package. Once you identify the serving size, Amaral recommends looking for products that are high in fiber (5 grams or more) and low in fat (less than 4 grams), added sugar (less than 4 grams), and sodium (less than 500 mg).

Then scan the ingredient list. Manufacturers list ingredients in descending order by weight. So if whole wheat appears as the first ingredient in your favorite brand of bread, it's safe to say there's more whole wheat in the package than anything else. Unfortunately, many ingredient lists include multiple variations of the same thing, and dietary minefields like sugar, sodium, and saturated fat have many monikers.

In the absence of absolute information, Amaral suggests seeking out products with short ingredient lists. If a product has more than a dozen ingredients, including many you can't pronounce, chances are good you've got an ultra-processed (aka unhealthy) food on your hands that is better left on the shelf. ■

REHAB YOUR SKIN WHILE YOU SLEEP

You can manage dryness, fine lines, acne, or other issues at home. These pre-bed steps take zero additional time and help your skin overnight.

BY WENDY ROSE GOULD
MEDICALLY REVIEWED BY HADLEY KING, MD

YOU MAY NOT REALIZE this, but you are surprisingly productive while you sleep. As you catch z's, your brain flushes out metabolic waste linked to neurological diseases like Alzheimer's. And your skin is in repair mode too. "While you're sleeping, skin undergoes a process of repair and rejuvenation," says Anna Chacon, MD, FAAD, a board-certified dermatologist in Miami. "Having a nighttime skincare routine gives you the opportunity to provide your skin with the nourishment and care it needs before going into the repair process."

Your evening skincare routine helps maintain your skin's health, slow down the aging process, and combat the effects of daily exposure to environmental stressors,

including the most common one (that'd be the sun), she adds. So your skin will thank you for adopting this pre-bed regimen.

A Simple Four-Step Skincare Routine

The best evening skincare routine is actually quite simple—it covers the non-negotiable basics while allowing room for some personalization. This ensures your skin gets the treatment it needs and some extra TLC, depending on your specific concerns.

Step 1: Wash Your Face with a Gentle Cleanser

No matter your skin type, reach for a gentle cleanser and make sure to spend a good minute (or two!) lathering it and gently working it onto your skin. "Cleansers remove the

impurities of the day, including makeup, dirt and other environmental factors," Chacon says.

If you have dry skin, select a moisturizing, oil-based cleanser such as Farmacy Green Clean Makeup Removing Cleansing Balm (Sephora). For oily or combination types, opt for a gentle foam or gel cleanser, such as Saturday Skin Brightening Cleansing Gel (Nordstrom).

Step 2: Follow Up with a Toner

Toner helps rebalance your skin's pH level and replenish moisture that's been washed away during the cleansing process. "Our skin's acid mantle is a protective barrier that wards off pathogens and regulates moisture," explains Justine Kahn, an esthetician



and founder of Botnia Skincare in Sausalito, California. “Throughout the day, various factors disrupt this balance, making pH-adjusted products essential for restoring equilibrium.”

Stick to a thin, lightweight option that nourishes and hydrates, like Versed Skin Soothe Hydrating Milky Toner (Target) or Sulwhasoo Essential Comfort Balancing Water (Sephora).

Step 3: Apply a Treatment

Product (Pick Your Path!)

Allow your toner to set for about 60 seconds, then apply a treatment product that targets your specific skincare goals, whether that is anti-aging, brightening, acne reduction, or dark-spot minimizing. Keep in mind you should only apply one treatment product a night, because each one contains an active ingredient, and they might cause issues in combination. However, if you have more than one aim—for instance, anti-aging and dark-spot minimizing—you can swap treatment products every other night or every few nights to hit both needs.

For anti-aging: Opt for a retinoid, such as Matter of Fact Wrinkle + Texture Concentrate with .2% Encapsulated Retinol, Vitamin

C, & Azelaic Acid (Sephora).

For brightening: Apply an alpha hydroxy acid (AHA)-based or enzyme-based product that gently exfoliates so skin looks smoother and more vibrant. A good option is Good Molecules Overnight Exfoliating Treatment (Ulta).

For acne: Target flare-ups with either a beta-hydroxy acid (BHA) product (also known as salicylic acid) or benzoyl peroxide. Check out Innbeauty Project Acne Serum Medicated Treatment for Acne & Blackheads (Sephora).

For dark spots: If sun spots or hyperpigmentation has you down, add a product that helps minimize them, such as Topicals Faded Brightening Serum for Dark Spots & Discoloration (Sephora).





Step 4: Slather On a Good Moisturizer

After your leave-on treatment has some time to settle in, finish your regimen by applying a moisturizer. “This step hydrates the skin and locks your serums and skincare products into place,” Chacon says. What’s the best one? That depends on your skin type.

Dry or combination skin types will get the most benefits from thicker, emollient moisturizers with

ingredients like shea butter, ceramides, and botanical oils. Sunday Riley ICE Ceramide Moisturizer with Vitamin F (Sephora) is a recommended pick, as is SkinCeuticals Hydra Balm Moisturizer Ointment (SkinCeuticals).

Meanwhile, those with acne-prone or oily skin—which absolutely need moisture, too—should opt for a water-based gel moisturizer. Try Bubble Level Up Balancing Moisturizer (Ulta) or Laneige Water Bank Blue Hyaluronic Gel Moisturizer (Sephora).

Show Your Skin Some Love

A key part of sticking with a pre-bed skincare routine is looking forward to the process. That means using products you’re excited to slather on and incorporating relaxing rituals that make it more enjoyable.

First, carve out time. Be intentional about your routine by giving yourself time to work through the steps. Noreen Galaria, MD, FAAD, a board-certified dermatologist in Chantilly, Virginia, says she starts 20 to 30 minutes before going to bed. “This allows me to apply my products before I’m exhausted but also gives them time to soak in before my head hits the pillow,” she

says. “Exhaustion is the most common reason my patients cite for falling asleep without doing their night time routine.”

Remember, this is your mini spa moment. Make it more enjoyable by listening to some tunes, jumping into a favorite podcast, or listening to an audiobook. Dim the lights and light a candle for some soothing ambient light.

If your skincare routine doesn’t seem to be working, ask your dermatologist or an esthetician for guidance. The goal is to love the products you use and the results you see. “This makes the process something you look forward to rather than a chore,” Kahn points out.

If time allows, add an extra ritual that soothes both your mind and body. “Consider deep breathing exercises, a warm bath or a gentle facial massage to relax and unwind, preparing both your skin and mind for bedtime,” Chacon suggests. ■

15-MINUTE DINNERS

Swift, simple recipes mean time to savor your meals.





Miso Noodle Soup

ACTIVE TIME **15 MINUTES**
TOTAL TIME **15 MINUTES** SERVES **4**

Quick Cooking One Pot Vegan

- 8 cups water or vegetable stock (or dashi, preferably, if you have it)
- ½ cup white miso paste
- 2 Tbsp. soy sauce
- 2 cups spinach
- 14 oz. firm tofu
- 8 oz. ramen noodles (rice, egg, or wheat noodles also work)
- Kosher salt (optional)
- 5 grams dried seaweed snacks, sliced (about ½ cup)
- Thinly sliced scallions, for topping (optional)

PLACE water, stock, or dashi in a pot over high. Whisk in miso paste and soy sauce. While waiting for broth to come up to a boil, chop spinach and cut tofu into small cubes.

WHEN broth is at a boil, turn heat down slightly and add noodles. Cook for around 3 minutes or according to package directions. Stir in tofu and spinach until wilted, about 30 seconds. Stir, then taste to see if any salt is needed. Top with seaweed and, if desired, scallions.

PER SERVING: 394 Calories, 7g Fat (1g Saturated), 0mg Cholesterol, 3g Fiber, 17g Protein, 65g Carbs, 1,841mg Sodium, 0g Added Sugar

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Green Shakshuka

ACTIVE TIME **15 MINUTES** TOTAL TIME **15 MINUTES** SERVES **4**

Quick Cooking One Pot Vegetarian Gluten Free



1 14-oz. can quartered artichokes

Extra-virgin olive oil

10 oz. frozen spinach, defrosted

Kosher salt

2 cups (16 oz.) salsa verde

1 tsp. garlic powder

1 small bunch cilantro or
1 Tbsp. ground coriander

8 eggs

1 avocado

4 oz. feta

PLACE a large pan or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Drain artichokes. Add a heavy drizzle of oil, spinach, artichokes, and a dash of salt to pan; cook down for 1 minute. Add salsa verde and garlic powder. Bring up to a heavy simmer.

LIGHTLY chop cilantro, then stir it (or ground coriander) in, reserving a bit for garnish. Create little wells for the eggs. Crack eggs into pan, add another dash of salt on top of each egg, and cover until whites have almost set but yolks are still runny, 6 to 8 minutes.

WHILE eggs are cooking, slice or chop avocado and crumble feta. Add to pan and cover for 1 more minute. Serve hot, topped with reserved cilantro.

PER SERVING: 376 Calories, 30g Fat (7g Saturated), 72mg Cholesterol, 11g Fiber, 11g Protein, 24g Carbs, 1,579mg Sodium, 0g Added Sugar

Italian Sausage Burgers with Quick Pickled Red Onions

ACTIVE TIME **15 MINUTES** TOTAL TIME **15 MINUTES** SERVES **4**

Quick Cooking One Pot



Olive oil

1½ lb. Italian sausage (hot, sweet, or mild)

1 small red onion

1 cup apple cider vinegar, plus more if needed

Kosher salt

4 to 8 slices provolone cheese (about 6 oz.)

4 burger buns, toasted if desired

Bibb lettuce leaves, for serving (optional)

½ cup (2.6 oz.) jarred roasted red peppers (preferably in liquid)

HEAT a grill or large grill pan (you can use a regular pan in a pinch) to medium-high with a light layer of oil. Form 4 to 6 patties from the meat. You can make them as large or as small as you want—just make them thinner than your average beef patty (flat like a smashed burger, even!) so they cook through quickly.

PLACE patties on grill or grill pan. Cook for 4 to 5 minutes on each side, depending on how large your patties are.

WHILE patties are cooking, slice onion into rings. You want them to be fairly thin, but don't stress over it. Break onion rings apart and put them in a bowl with vinegar and a dash of salt. Make sure rings are fully submerged (add more vinegar if needed). Let the rings sit for at least 5 minutes, then remove them from vinegar.

WHEN patties are about 1 minute from being done, flip them again so hot side is facing up. Top with 1 or 2 slices of cheese. Place on buns with lettuce, if desired. Top with onions and peppers.

PER SERVING: 366 Calories, 18g Fat (8g Saturated), 42mg Cholesterol, 1g Fiber, 24g Protein, 26g Carbs, 1,075mg Sodium, 0g Added Sugar



Green Olive & Rosemary Lamb Chop

ACTIVE TIME **15 MINUTES**
TOTAL TIME **15 MINUTES** SERVES **4**

Quick Cooking Whole Grain
Dairy Free

- 1 cup bulgur (medium or fine grain)
- 1 lemon
- 2 tsp. kosher salt, divided
- 1 cup (6 oz.) pitted green olives (preferably Castelvetrano)
- 2 large sprigs rosemary
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup mayonnaise
- 8 lamb chops (loin or rib)
- 4 Persian cucumbers

BRING 2 cups of water to a boil. Place an oven rack close to your broiler. Turn on broiler. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil. Add

bulgur to water (whether it's boiling or not) along with the juice of the lemon and 1 teaspoon salt. Cover pot. When water starts to boil, turn heat down to a simmer.

CHOP olives and rosemary until both are fairly small. Add roughly two-thirds of olives and about half of rosemary to bulgur.

COMBINE the rest of the rosemary and olives, mayonnaise, and remaining 1 teaspoon salt in a bowl. Spread mixture across both sides of lamb chops and place chops on baking sheet. Put baking sheet in oven under broiler for 3 to

4 minutes, then flip chops. Cook for another 3 to 4 minutes.

WHILE chops and bulgur are cooking, smash cucumbers with the back of a knife, then roughly chop them. When you are a minute out from getting the chops, fold cucumbers in with bulgur. Serve with lamb chops.

PER SERVING: 490 Calories, 25g Fat (5g Saturated), 93mg Cholesterol, 6g Fiber, 32g Protein, 32g Carbs, 1,812mg Sodium, 0g Added Sugar



Black-Eyed Pea Salad

ACTIVE TIME **15 MINUTES**
TOTAL TIME **15 MINUTES** SERVES **4**

Quick Cooking Make Ahead
Gluten Free Dairy Free

- 12 oz. cauliflower rice, fresh or frozen and defrosted
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt
- 1 bunch collard greens
- ¼ cup apple cider vinegar, plus more if needed
- 1 large lemon
- 1½ cups (12 oz.) cherry or grape tomatoes
- 6 oz. Canadian bacon (about 6 thick slices)
- 2 15-oz. cans black-eyed peas

PLACE a wide saucepan over medium-high heat. Add cauliflower rice, along with a drizzle of oil and a heavy dash of salt. Cook until rice has softened but still has a bite to it, about 3 minutes. When it's done, set it to the side to cool.

WHILE rice is cooking, chop collards—you want them to be heavily chopped. Put them in a large bowl with another dash of salt, ¼ cup vinegar, and the juice of the lemon. Halve tomatoes and slice bacon into bite-size pieces. Add both to the bowl.

DRAIN and rinse black-eyed peas. Add them to the bowl along with cauliflower rice (if rice is still a bit warm, it's OK). Stir to combine, and taste to see if any additional oil, salt, or vinegar is needed.

PER SERVING: 343 Calories, 14g Fat (2g Saturated), 21mg Cholesterol, 11g Fiber, 20g Protein, 35g Carbs, 1,356mg Sodium, 0g Added Sugar



MAKE-AHEAD MORNINGS

Try one of these easy, tasty breakfasts for a nourishing meal that's speedy when it counts (i.e., 7:09 a.m. on a Wednesday).

BY JENNA HELWIG

IF YOUR MORNINGS are mayhem, and “breakfast” is often a grabbed granola bar, steal a dinner strategy and do some meal prep. Just a few minutes on the weekend will give you a head start for healthy breakfasts all week.

“Breakfasts are often all carbs and no fat or protein,” says Marisa Moore, RDN, author of the cookbook *The Plant Love Kitchen*. “While I love a good carby meal, without a balance of nutrients, you might be hungry before you get through your first meeting.”

Each of these options takes less than five minutes of prep in the morning and will carry you to lunchtime.

Smoothie Packs

While a smoothie may seem fast, you lose precious time riffling through the freezer for fruit, the pantry for healthy seeds, and the fridge for your liquid. Instead, put everything except the liquid in a freezer-safe bag or jar and freeze it. When you're ready to eat, dump the ingredients into the blender, add liquid, and blend.

As for what goes in that bag or jar, focus on making the smoothie satiating. Your



protein can come from nuts, seeds, yogurt, or the liquid you use, such as dairy milk or soy milk. Healthy fats, from nut butters or avocado, will keep you full longer. Throw in leafy greens for extra vitamins and antioxidants.

For each smoothie pack, use 1 to 1½ cups of fresh or frozen fruit and/or vegetables, plus one or two ingredients

rich in fat and protein. “If you're going with fresh fruit, opt for bags that allow you to freeze the pack flat,” Moore says. “Or freeze chopped fruit in a single layer on a parchment-lined baking sheet before combining it with the other ingredients. This will help you avoid a lump of

frozen fruit in your smoothie pack that won't easily blend."

When it's breakfast time, toss the ingredients into the blender with an equal amount of liquid, but be prepared to add more. "You often need more liquid than you might expect," Moore says.



Morning Tacos or Burritos

For a savory start, a stash of frozen breakfast tacos or burritos is money in the bank. Marcia Smart, a culinary instructor and the creator of the website Smart in the Kitchen, makes them both on the regular. Her favorite filling is an egg scramble with sautéed onion and chorizo (either soy or pork).

To assemble the tacos or burritos, let the filling cool before placing it on a tortilla, then top with some shredded cheese. "Flour tortillas work best since they're the most pliable. I use 10- to 12-inch ones for burritos and 5-inch ones for tacos," Smart says.

For tacos, place the filling on one half of the tortilla and fold the other half over it. For burritos, place the filling in a rectangular shape on the lower third of a tortilla. Fold in the sides, then roll up from the bottom. "Be careful not to overfill," Smart says, "or they'll be hard to wrap, and the filling may break through."

To freeze, wrap the prepared tacos or burritos in foil and stack them in a storage container.

For the speediest meal, transfer tacos or burritos to the fridge the night before, then unwrap and microwave

for about 90 seconds. If you forget to put them in the fridge, no worries—just remove the foil and wrap in a damp paper towel. Microwave at half power until hot, about three to four minutes, turning it over once.

Mini Frittatas

"Egg 'muffins' are a blank canvas and an open invitation to include vegetables at breakfast," Moore says. "Plus, they can be easily customized for different family members."

Spray the wells of a muffin tin with cooking spray. Fill each well halfway with chopped cooked vegetables, such as broccoli, spinach, or asparagus, and/or chopped cooked meat, like bacon or sausage. In a large measuring cup, whisk a dozen eggs with salt and pepper. Pour the egg mixture into the muffin wells; you should have just enough to fill each three-quarters of the way up. Top with cheese if you'd like and bake until set, about 25 minutes.

Let cool, then store in the fridge for up to four days or in

the freezer, in a freezer bag or other airtight container, for up to three months. Unwrap and microwave directly from frozen until hot, 60 to 90 seconds. Shake on some hot sauce for extra flavor.

Overnight Oats

Overnight oats can be creamy and tasty—or gloppy and bland. The key: adding texture and an extra splash of liquid.

Start your prep by combining half a cup of rolled oats with a cup of milk, a teaspoon or two of honey or maple syrup, and a pinch of salt. Refrigerate overnight. In the morning, stir in grated apple or pear, smashed raspberries, or other fresh or dried fruit. Chopped nuts, cacao nibs, sesame seeds, or granola can give your oats an added boost. Finish by adding a splash of milk.

If cold oatmeal isn't your jam, heat your overnight oats in the microwave and then add your extras. Or make a big batch of classic oats over the weekend and refrigerate. Reheat each serving and add whatever you have on hand—blueberries, toasted pecans, diced mango, or toasted unsweetened coconut. ■



A photograph of a wooden table with a plant and a tray. The table is made of light-colored wood and has a wooden tray on it. A glass is on the tray. In the background, there is a large green plant with broad leaves. The lighting is warm and natural.

CHAPTER
3

Savor the Moments

Relax like you mean it thanks to everyday slices of joy, feel-good escapes, and nourishing rituals.



ONE-MINUTE MANTRAS

Improve your outlook in an instant with the perspective-changing words mental health experts tell their clients (and themselves).

BY AMY MACLIN AND KEYDRA MANNS

A great question for worriers and perfectionists: “What do I actually have control over?” It’s not much. That can be very freeing.

“Courage Is the Choice to Leap”

When you’re taking a big leap into the life you desire, you’re allowed to be scared. Courage is about being afraid and choosing to leap anyway, nerves and all. In moments of fear, psych yourself up with soothing self-talk: “I am doing a good job. Tiny steps add up, and one day at a time, I face what I need to face.”

CHRISTINE GUTIERREZ,
PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND AUTHOR OF
*I AM DIOSA: A JOURNEY TO HEALING
DEEP, LOVING YOURSELF, AND COMING
BACK HOME TO SOUL*

“Give It Five Minutes”

Doing something is almost always better than doing nothing. If it seems impossible to take action, follow the five-minute rule: Set a timer and do a task for just five minutes, whether it’s weeding the garden, washing the dishes, or getting through your emails. When the five minutes are up, you can stop—or carry on if you want to. You might be surprised. Regardless, give yourself permission to feel that accomplishment. Most clients find that those five minutes often help them feel better.

CHRISTINE PADESKY, PHD, COAUTHOR
OF *MIND OVER MOOD: CHANGE HOW YOU
FEEL BY CHANGING THE WAY YOU THINK*

“I’m Always Free to Choose”

Anytime I start to feel oppressed or doubted by others regarding my leadership abilities or professional skill, I extend myself patient, loving kindness. I also remind myself, “In every moment, I am liberated to choose.” As a Black woman, I am liberated to choose every aspect of my life and work. My ancestors did not have those freedoms. I am liberated to choose how I lead, what activities I say yes or no to, whom I engage with, and who is deserving of my time. And I am free to exhibit kind and inclusive leadership.

ALFIEE BRELAND-NOBLE, PHD,
PSYCHOLOGIST AND COAUTHOR OF
I WANT TO SEE YOU SHINING

“I Can’t Control Everything”

When you hear the critical voice you’ve heard a million times reminding you of some mistake you made long ago, stop and say out loud, “Margaret, is this really helpful?” (Of course, you’d use your name.) The answer is

almost always no. Then move on. Practice and you’ll get really good at shutting down unhealthy self-criticism. Another great question for worriers and perfectionists: “What do I actually have control over?” Not what you wish you could control, but what you actually control. It’s not much. That can be very freeing.

MARGARET RUTHERFORD, PHD,
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST AND HOST OF
THE SELFWORK PODCAST

“I Deserve Three Core Things”

First, we deserve to be nourished. I often think, “How can I nourish myself in this moment?” Sometimes it’s just taking a minute to stand up and stretch between clients, or giving myself permission to go on a break.

Second, we deserve to grow. One small degree of change today, multiplied by months and years, will change the trajectory of your life. What small, tangible action can you take today to get closer to your values and goals? Maybe it’s having an introductory conversation that might start

a friendship, or doodling to add creativity to your life. Often we believe that change needs to be sweeping and dramatic. The true changes in our lives happen in small degrees, in sustainable and consistent ways.

Third, we deserve to live with intention. Ask yourself, “What implicit rules or assumptions are informing my actions?” Maybe you make assumptions based on your identity, thinking, “This is something someone like me could never do.” Reframe that thought: “This is something I haven’t figured out yet.” We experience so much suffering because we operate according to expectations we didn’t set ourselves. I encourage you to challenge those rules daily.

JENNY WANG, PHD, PSYCHOLOGIST AND AUTHOR OF *PERMISSION TO COME HOME: RECLAIMING MENTAL HEALTH AS ASIAN AMERICANS*

“Be Kind, Not Harsh”

Here’s something I’ve learned the hard way: There is no redeeming value in harshness. Whether you’re being harsh to yourself or to others, or allowing others to be harsh to you, there is nothing harshness can do that loving firmness doesn’t do better. Now that I’m in my 70s, I’ve made a deal with the universe: If it’s unkind, I’m not interested. Say to your inner critic, your spouse, yourself as you’re about to

speak to someone else, even if you need to express some tough truths: “We are on each other’s side.” I call this “remembering love.” Remember that the person you’re speaking to—including you!—is someone you care about and that the point of the conversation is to make things better.

TERRY REAL, COUPLES THERAPIST AND AUTHOR OF *US: GETTING PAST YOU AND ME TO BUILD A MORE LOVING RELATIONSHIP*

“Slow Down for the Good Stuff”

Everybody deals with stress and sorrow. But when we have good moments along the way, it’s important to slow down and let them land. They can be little, like when you exhale and your body calms down, or someone shows they care for you, or you finish a task. Focus on what’s happening in your body, and notice what feels good about it. These steps can gradually hardwire happiness and other inner strengths into your nervous system.

RICK HANSON, PHD, PSYCHOLOGIST AND AUTHOR OF *MAKING GREAT RELATIONSHIPS: SIMPLE PRACTICES FOR SOLVING CONFLICTS, BUILDING CONNECTION, AND FOSTERING LOVE*

“I Love My Whole, Embarrassing Self”

We all have a rejected shadow self we don’t want the rest of the world to see. Mine is 10 years old with frizzy hair and braces. She’s clumsy, the last to get picked for teams at school. We tell our shadow self to stay back, that we don’t want anyone to see them. We believe that in order to be accepted—whether we’re at an interview, in an important meeting, or on a first date—we need to show only the best of who we are and hide the worst. But in reality, the way to feel confident is to be present with our full selves. Tell that 10-year-old, “I love you. It’s you and me, kid. If anything scary happens, we’re out of here.” Form an unbreakable bond between you and your shadow self. Imagine silently commanding that audience you’re trying to impress, “Listen!” Feel the authority that comes when you and your shadow speak with one voice. You now have an unshakable confidence because you realize you don’t need the approval of another person—the potential boss, the date, whoever—to make your life whole. You are whole.

JAMIE ROSE, A LIFE COACH WHO TEACHES *THE TOOLS: 5 TOOLS TO HELP YOU FIND COURAGE, CREATIVITY, AND WILLPOWER—AND INSPIRE YOU TO LIVE LIFE IN FORWARD MOTION* BY PHIL STUTZ AND BARRY MICHELS



“It’s OK”

When I’m having a hard moment, my go-to move is to put my right hand over my heart and repeat, “It’s OK, sweetheart.” It’s exactly what I need to hear, and I don’t need anyone else to say it. And if a negative emotion or critical thought overwhelms me, I imagine I have a big storage container. Whatever is overpowering me, I visualize tying a lead weight to it, placing it in the box, and closing the lid. I’ll come back to it later, when I’m ready.

TARA SCHUSTER, MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATE AND AUTHOR OF *GLOW IN THE F*CKING DARK: SIMPLE PRACTICES TO HEAL YOUR SOUL, FROM SOMEONE WHO LEARNED THE HARD WAY*

“I Must Protect My Spirit”

When I teach my graduate-level college classes, we always start by finding something we can offer ourselves to protect our spirits. It might be a song, a poem, a mantra, cupcakes with banana-cream filling. Whatever it is, it represents what you really want and reminds you that you can’t let

anyone set you on a negative path and steal your joy. Also, though it became somewhat cliché during the pandemic, I tell people to forgive themselves. To give themselves grace—the kind Aretha Franklin sings about. That grace could be absolutely amazing.

ANGELA NEAL-BARNETT, PHD, PSYCHOLOGIST AND AUTHOR OF *SOOTHE YOUR NERVES: THE BLACK WOMAN’S GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AND OVERCOMING ANXIETY, PANIC, AND FEAR*

THE POWER OF SMALL RITUALS

A special playlist in the morning. A weekly visit to the farmers market. A feel-good stretch during work. Little things help you make the most of every day.

BY JENNIFER KING LINDLEY



ALMOST EVERY WEEK, Maryam Ajayi goes to her local farmers market to buy flowers. “I walk around, smelling the different types, touching their petals, seeing what emotions they spark,” she says. “I let my intuition guide me.” When she gets home, she arranges her flowers with care, making the process into, well, a bit of a thing. “It always leaves me feeling more grounded and joyful,” says Ajayi, founder and CEO of Dive in Well, an organization that promotes inclusivity in mental health and wellness. And the flowers’ impact is long-lasting: “When I look at them during the week, they remind me of nature, the good energy I’ve brought into my home.”

The word “ritual” may make you think of pomp and circumstance, like coronations and christenings, or mysterious ceremonies involving musky herbs and chanting. But rituals can also come in the form of smaller moments, like Ajayi’s. They can be as simple as spritzing on a favorite perfume every morning and channeling positive vibes for the day, or reading a go-to poem before bed every night and wishing yourself sweet dreams.

If that sounds a bit woo-woo, trust the science: Researchers are finding that simple rituals have measurable benefits, such as enhancing pleasure in activities, reducing anxiety, and strengthening relationships. And with a little mental energy, anyone can conjure this everyday magic.

What Makes Something a Ritual and Not Just a Habit

Our urge to create rituals is ancient, spanning cultures, religions, and time periods, says Michael Norton, PhD, a business administration professor at Harvard Business School and the author of the *The Ritual Effect: From Habit to Ritual, Harness the Surprising Power of Everyday Actions*. Ritualistic events like weddings, holiday feasts, and funerals let us honor milestones, celebrate our joys, and acknowledge our losses. They give us a sense of continuity and community. And performing specific actions, such as blowing out birthday candles or turning the tassel on our mortarboard after accepting a diploma, is a way to symbolize our achievements, hopes, and beliefs, to pause and honor them. “Rituals help us make the invisible visible,” says Casper ter Kuile, author of *The Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices*. “They take an abstract value—gratitude, love, courage—and put it into a physical form.”

But rituals don’t have to be major events. Any practice that focuses your attention, stirs your emotions, elevates the ordinary, and imbues everyday life with meaning counts as a ritual. What separates these small rituals from habits is the power of our conscious intention, says Juliana Schroeder, PhD,

associate professor in the Management of Organizations group at the University of California, Berkeley’s Haas School of Business, who researches the topic. Habits, such as brushing your teeth, are done automatically, she explains. “Rituals are goal directed and have symbolic meaning for the performer.” You might do exactly three jumping jacks in the bathroom before every big presentation to pump up your confidence, or always ring in the start of the school year with a group trip to the ice-cream shop for double scoops of mint chocolate chip. Amid life’s hurly-burly, a ritual can signal to the brain: “Hold up! This moment matters!”

The Science-Backed Benefits of Rituals

Studies reveal that rituals can help us enjoy our experiences more deeply. Norton and his colleagues have devised some ways to demonstrate this effect. In one experiment, they doled out lemonade packets to half the participants, instructing them to conduct the following small ritual before drinking: “Pour half a packet of lemonade powder into a glass. Pour in enough water to fill half the glass. Stir the mixture, then wait 30 seconds. Next, pour the remainder of the powder into the glass. Add enough water to top it off, stir, and wait another 30 seconds.” The other group just watched someone make lemonade for them. The

result? Those who performed the ritual rated the flavor of the lemonade as sweeter and more balanced. Yes, even the simple act of following directions to make lemonade had an effect on people's perceptions, presumably because it focused their attention and brought more meaning to the experience. Even though the ritual wasn't part of a tradition or something the subjects came up with on their own, it helped them take in the literal and figurative sweetness. Anything can be a ritual if done with the right intention.

In another study, subjects were asked to sing Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" to an audience of strangers. One group just sat quietly before their moment in the spotlight, while the other was told to conduct a ritual: They drew a picture, sprinkled salt on it, counted to five, and crumpled up the paper. The salt sprinklers reported less anxiety and even gave better performances, according to software that recorded their volume and pitch and how long they held notes. "Rituals can calm you by giving you something to focus on so your anxious thoughts don't spiral," Norton says.

Another potential benefit is that rituals can give us a sense of control, which may be why so many writers, athletes, and performers rely on them. Maya Angelou said she prepared for her writing day by going to a hotel room by 6:30 a.m., surrounding herself with little

more than a thesaurus, a bible, and bottle of sherry. Former Major League Baseball player Nomar Garciaparra famously did an extended routine of toe taps and glove adjustments before batting. Beyoncé once revealed that before a performance, she says a prayer and stretches with everyone in her band; she then listens to a specific playlist while she's in the makeup chair.

Shared rituals can also strengthen our relationships, including our romantic partnerships—even if the ritual is just doing a crossword puzzle together every morning or eating at a favorite sushi place on Tuesdays. In a 2019 study, Norton and his colleagues found that couples who did these kinds of activities reported more positive emotions and greater satisfaction than those who didn't. "The rituals get embedded in your life together—you can depend on them," Norton says. "They're an external way to show your internal commitment."

How to Create Your Own

The great thing about designing your own ritual is that it can be whatever you want. "What's important is that it feels meaningful to you," Norton says. While a ritual can be a one-off to mark a special occasion (ringing a gong after completing chemo), repetition (treating yourself to

blueberry pancakes every Saturday to close out the workweek) can make it even more significant. "We attach more meaning to our actions when we repeat them over time," Norton says. "They gain resonance as we remember all our past experiences." Here are some ideas and tips to inspire you.

START WHERE YOU ARE The easiest way to begin a regular ritual is to make it part of your current routine. Consider something you're already doing: Eating your daily apple can become a ritual, says Mara Branscombe, a yoga and meditation teacher and the author of *Ritual as Remedy: Embodied Practices for Soul Care*. "Smell its crisp aroma. What does it taste like on your tongue? Use the act as a tangible way to practice gratitude. Silently thank the farmer. Think of it as a gift of nature, started from a tiny seed." An evening shower can become a small ceremony if you stop to really appreciate it. Add a few drops of lavender essential oil around the perimeter of your shower stall to make it special. Bonus: That calming aroma will become an instant cue that it's time to wind down.

ALIGN IT WITH AN INTENTION

Jan Stanley, a Denver-based positive psychology coach and officiant at weddings and other occasions, helps clients design personalized rituals.



She suggests using an “I AM” model, which stands for “intention,” “action,” and “meaning.” Ask yourself three questions: What is my intention? What action can I take that will reflect my intention? What personal meaning will I ascribe to this action?

Let’s say your intention is to exercise more often. “Get a beautiful jar, and every time you return from the gym, place a stone inside,” Stanley suggests. “As you drop it in, take a moment to reflect on what you’ve accomplished for your health. With repetition, the jar will become a visible symbol of your progress.” Like magic (sort of), your new ritual helps your new habit take hold.

CONSIDER TRANSITIONS

Beginnings and endings are prime times for rituals. Lighting tapers before a meal

is one option, Branscombe says. Stanley always starts her day by pausing at the three big east-facing windows in her living room. “There’s a gorgeous glow even on foggy mornings,” she says. “I make a point to stop and really soak in the light and think about what I look forward to that day.” If you work from home and feel like you’re never really off the clock, a small ritual at the end of the day can help redefine those boundaries. Try stretching and closing your laptop. The ritual will signify that the business part of the day is over. And as many of us know, there’s something oh-so-satisfying about the click of a laptop lid. ■

READER RITUALS

We asked our Instagram followers to share their go-tos. These are some of our favorites.

Walking through the garden with that first cup of coffee of the day.
@AMIRALLOOLI

A glass of wine on Sunday evening to close out the weekend.
@LINDAUNFILTERED

No cooking on Fridays! We eat out!
@ASCOTTYEG

Sunday soaks. A hot Epsom-salt detox bath with a magazine or good book and candles. The ideal reset!
@HEYYARNOLD13

My best friends and I meet up every summer for a girls’ weekend.
@TRAVELCHILD12

Updating my calendar on Sundays. It helps me feel prepared for the week.
@GINGER6685

Going for a walk alone and having my afternoon coffee at home all by myself.
@GIANNAJOANNE68

Bite-Size Pleasures

Looking for books and streams that pack a big punch without a major time investment? We asked critics, authors, and other tastemakers for their favorite pop-culture briefs.

BY LISA LOMBARDI



Three Great Short Story Collections and One Searing Novella

Selected by Julia Dahl, author of five novels, including the recent thriller *I Dreamed of Falling*.

Close Range: Wyoming Stories by Annie Proulx “Proulx is best known for the novel *Brokeback Mountain*, which became an Oscar-winning film. This collection is full of characters and places that embody the same themes: longing, loneliness, and the redemptive power of love.”

Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri “I was completely transported by this richly

observed book of stories that spans the globe, touching on domesticity, the immigrant experience, and family ties.”

Best American Mystery and Suspense Stories edited by Steph Cha “If you’re a fan of the dark stuff like I am, the annual *Best American Mystery and Suspense Stories* series is essential reading—especially since series editor Steph Cha took over.”

Jesus’ Son by Denis Johnson “This novella is a brutal, beautiful classic about a young man struggling with drugs and work and love and death.”

Five Underrated Sitcoms to Dip Into

Selected by Walt Hickey, author of *You Are What You Watch*.

The Comeback “Starring Lisa Kudrow as actress Valerie Cherish attempting to revitalize her career on a sitcom in an industry that has moved on from her entirely, the show is hysterical. Its main error was being released a decade ahead of its time, in 2005. With a similar found-footage style to shows that later came to dominate the genre and an eye toward the eventual ascent of reality television, the 13-episode show quickly developed a cult following, and a decade later, a second season was aired, in 2014.” (AVAILABLE ON MAX)

Peep Show “This is a brilliantly funny comedy about a group of friends, with a unique filming style. It is chock-full of people who became some of the most recognizable faces in the U.K. comedy scene. It’s a classic odd couple-style program created by Jesse Armstrong, who wrote on both *Veep* and *The Thick of It* and went on to create *Succession*.” (AVAILABLE ON TUBI)

Moonlighting “This private detective show starring Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis ran from 1985 to 1989, and when you watch it, it’s like seeing Bigfoot. This is the missing link between

sitcoms of the 1970s and 1980s and its descendants in the 2000s. With innovative genre shifts, fourth-wall breaks, and the innovation of 'dramedy,' this show would also be great for fans of *Community*. The reason it's underrated is in no small part because the show narrowly missed the number of episodes necessary to get a syndication deal." (AVAILABLE ON HULU)

This Time with Alan Partridge

"There is a certain lane of celebrity that the U.K. has with little analogue in the United States: the chat show and light entertainment host. Steve Coogan has performed as the character Alan Partridge for over three decades, taking a conceited, foolish man through decades of British television. If you're Partridge-curious, the most recent BBC One production, *This Time with Alan Partridge*, plugs the character on a nationally televised morning show—part workplace comedy, part pastiche of the whole format." (AVAILABLE ON BRITBOX)

Vice Principals "Few saw it coming when Danny McBride emerged as one of the format's great auteurs, but his company of actors has been steadily producing some of the most compelling and ambitious work in sitcoms on HBO for years, starting with *Eastbound and Down* through today, with the staggeringly funny *Righteous Gemstones*. All are worth a watch, but *Vice Principals*, which is led by McBride and national treasure Walton Goggins, fits the bill for underrated sitcom." (AVAILABLE ON MAX)

Five 90ish-Minute Films That Bring Big Pleasure

Selected by John DeVore, author of *Theatre Kids: A True Tale of Off-Off Broadway* and the creator of

150 Word Reviews, a free newsletter for folks who love movies.

***I Saw the TV Glow* (2024)**

"This is a hypnotic, creepy, and heartfelt coming-of-age drama set in the '90s about two teen outcasts who bond over a TV show—a fantasy drama about teen outcasts. Director Jane Schoenbrun's second feature is strange and moving, familiar and utterly unique." (RUN TIME: 100 MINUTES)

***The Limey* (1999)** "This melancholy revenge thriller is director Steven Soderbergh at his best—stylish, lean, and partnered with an uncommonly talented cast. Terence Stamp stars as a cockney fish out of water, a stoic but quick-witted ex-con who travels to L.A. to find those who killed his runaway daughter." (RUN TIME: 89 MINUTES)

***The Princess and the Frog* (2009)** "Disney's second to last 2D animated movie retells the story of the princess and the frog and sets it in colorful 1920s New Orleans. Say what you want about Pixar and computer animation, there really isn't anything quite as magical as an inspired Disney hand-drawn musical comedy, and this is one of their best." (RUN TIME: 97 MINUTES)

***Frances Ha* (2012)** "Before she was Hollywood's hottest and most creative director, Greta Gerwig was a formidable actor, and a painfully funny one, too. Directed by Noah Baumbach, this black-and-white cringe comedy is like a Woody Allen movie without the Woody Allen. Gerwig stars as a lost, slightly obnoxious bohemian trying to navigate New York City." (RUN TIME: 86 MINUTES)

***Night of the Hunter* (1955)**

"This is actor Charles Laughton's only directorial effort—a box-office flop derided by critics. It's now regarded as a classic. Robert Mitchum is unforgettable as a pious psychopath stalking a pair of children who know a secret. This movie is all shadows and light, a nightmare with flashes of hope." (RUN TIME: 92 MINUTES)

Four Fun Follows for Daily Laughs

Selected by Julie Vick, humor writer, creator of the Humor Me Substack and the author of *Babies Don't Make Small Talk (So Why Should I?)*.

Cats Being Weird Little Guys

@catsbeingweirdlittleguys on Instagram
"Humorous cat content always brightens my day, and this account celebrating the weird things cats do is always a good go-to for a laugh."

Derrick Downey Jr.

@derrickdowneyjr on Instagram and TikTok
"Do you need more videos of squirrels enjoying a carefully crafted tiny house and a nice conversation with a human friend? Then this is the account for you."

Adrienne Hedger

@adriennehedger on Instagram
"I've been following Adrienne's comics for many years and appreciate the relatable parenting and everyday humor she depicts in the drawings."

Ely Kreimendahl

@elykreimendahl on Instagram
"Comedian Ely Kreimendahl can make even laundry funny, so the jokes and video bits on her account are worth devoting some of your scrolling time to." ■





CARPE DIEM

Adventures small and large can lift your life. The time for them is now.

W

HEN WE THINK OF adventure, we probably imagine daring feats, faraway places, and fearless people who aren't saddled with desk jobs. Maybe someone like Isabella Bird, the Victorian-era

explorer who climbed the Mauna Loa volcano in Hawaii and slept in a tent in Tibet on a carpet made of yak hair. But in fact, every one of us is wired to seek new experiences—even those of us with lower back pain ill-suited for tent living.

It started with our ancestors, who used novelty for survival—scanning the horizon enabled them to spot snarling beasts and other threats. To this day, discovery rewards us with a burst of the feel-good chemical dopamine. (Even lab rats will linger in unfamiliar tunnels.) And research has found that novelty can enhance our memory, increase our motivation, and boost our mood.

Because all these benefits are too good to miss, we've assembled this handy collection of ideas for more adventurous living. You can make the stakes as high or as low as you want: Try a new sandwich, drive to the edge of the Grand Canyon, or suspend yourself on the business end of a bungee cord. Your appetite for risk is less important than your capacity to be curious. So get out there and adventure.

Fly Solo

Spend high-quality time with yourself.

Our relationship with ourselves is like any other relationship—to nurture it, we need quality time together, says Netta Weinstein, PhD, professor of clinical and social psychology at the University of Reading in England and coauthor of the recent book *Solitude: The Science and Power of Being Alone*. “When we spend time alone, we’re not shifting away from others,” Weinstein says. “We’re shifting toward ourselves.” People who prioritize self-reflection find more meaning in life, she says. Suggestions for your next one-on-one with You:

GO TO A RESTAURANT

Chances are, you won’t be the only lone diner. According to the reservation platform OpenTable, solo bookings have increased more than any other party size in the past two years. At a table (or barstool) for one, we can fully immerse ourselves in the sensory experience. “When we’re talking to other people, we might realize the food tastes amazing, but we’re also a little distracted,” Weinstein says. Enjoy the flavors, sights, smells—and the fact that no one is going to ask for a bite.

HIT UP A MUSEUM

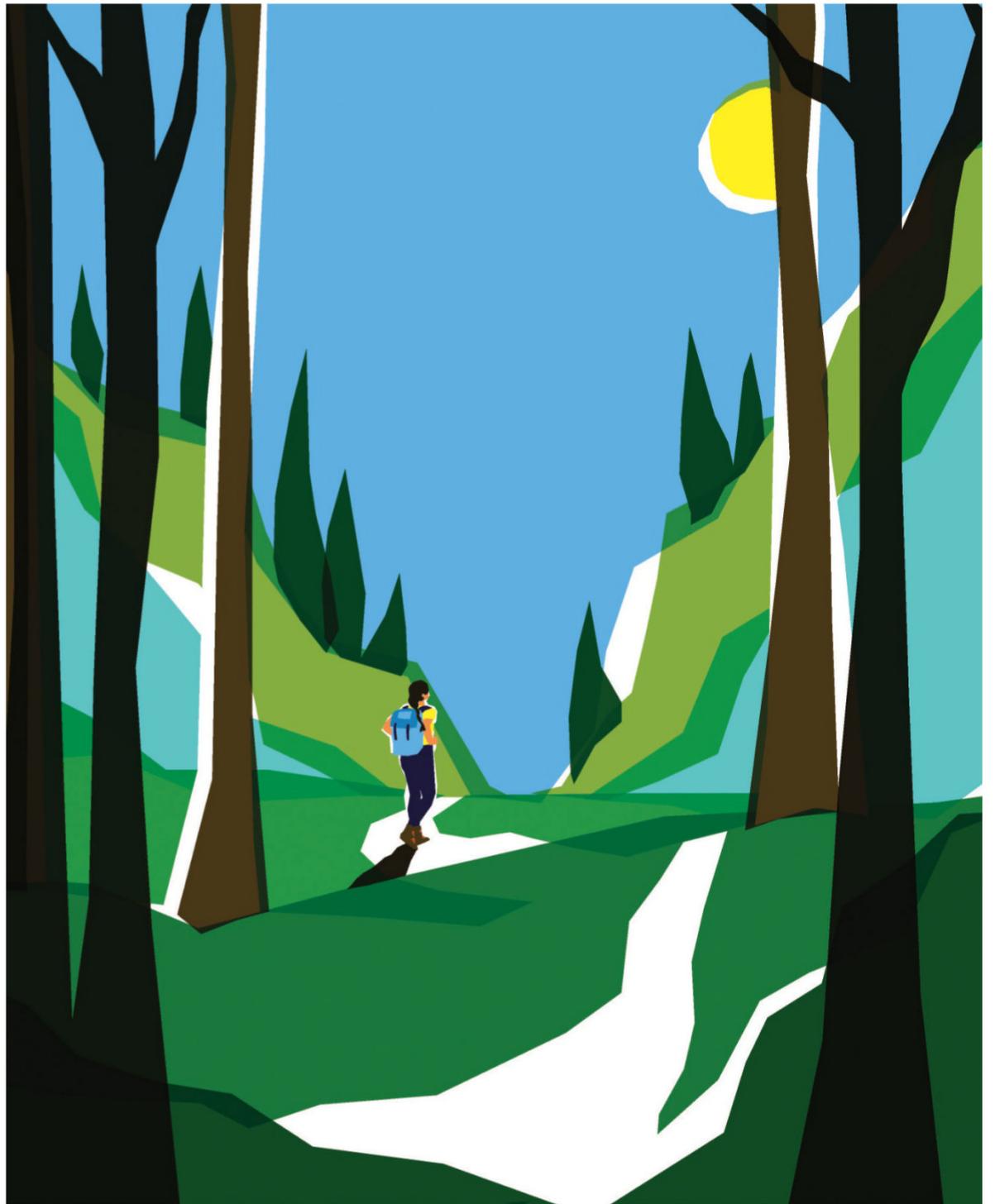
Exploring without a companion lets you discover what really ignites your interest, Weinstein says. You can spend an hour zoning out in front of the Jackson Pollocks with no one to hurry you along. Another plus: “You can focus on your thoughts and let them build on each other,” Weinstein says. “Solitary time is when I have my deepest ideas.”

TAKE A NATURE WALK

Nature is a common trigger for what researchers call peak experiences—moments when we’re caught up in wonder

and awe—and we can find them whether we’re climbing a distant mountain or simply admiring a stunning tree in our neighborhood. We can’t force peak experiences, but the tranquility of solitude may leave us more open to them, Weinstein says. “The joy we feel isn’t the active, energetic kind—it’s a sense of peace. We can have tremendous moments when we feel in touch with ourselves but also part of something bigger.”

—Amy Maclin





Have a Heart-to-Heart

Find out how your familiar partner can still surprise you.

When your long-term relationship starts to feel old hat, you could sign up for, say, couples skydiving. According to happiness researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, author of *The How of Happiness*, physical challenges can elicit a chemical rush that feels like falling in love. Or you could try emotional risk-taking with psychotherapist Esther Perel's card game, *Where Should We Begin?* (amazon.com).

The idea is to reignite the spark by fostering curiosity through conversational prompts, such as "Something I believe but haven't said aloud" and "A story I tell about myself that isn't entirely true." It feels a bit dangerous, but you can do it while sitting on the couch eating hot wings. (You can also play with family, friends, and even close colleagues.) —A.M.

Take a Dare

Cultivate some bravery by crushing a physical challenge.

Anyone who's ever gone to summer camp and finally worked up the courage to jump off the high dive knows what adventure can do for your confidence—a feeling that lasts long after summer ends, says Rachel O'Neil, former associate director of Adventure Treks, adventure camps for teens. "These experiences build mental and emotional strength that can translate to life back home."

You can foster that type of growth by pushing your limits. "We encounter a variety of challenges throughout life, physically and emotionally," says Paige Davis, president of AdventureWomen, a company that plans active trips for women. "Adventure travel lets you confront fears and insecurities and emerge feeling a sense of triumph." You can do it! Here's how.

REBRAND FEAR AS FUN

If your youthful derring-do has turned into derring-don't, that's normal. "As we age, many of us experience increased fear and hesitancy. But you can shift that fear to excitement by redirecting your focus from the risks to the rewards," Davis says. The reward could be geographical (an adventure in a new locale), spiritual (the calm on a mountaintop), or a thrill (the wind rushing by your face as you ride a zip line).

TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF

"It's not necessarily about reaching an end goal. It's about the journey, doing the things we thought we couldn't do or have been told we couldn't do," O'Neil says. "We're all so much stronger mentally and physically than we give ourselves credit for." —Eleni Gage





Count Your Microjoys

They're everywhere, just waiting for you to notice them.

FIND JOY IN the everyday. Maybe you've read those words printed on a coffee mug in some curlicued font and thought (guiltily) that it sounds exhausting, like lassoing a unicorn with a rainbow. If living, laughing, and loving seems like a tall order, Cyn-

die Spiegel, author of the essay collection *Microjoys: Finding Hope (Especially) When Life Is Not Okay*, wants you to know that (1) you don't have to live up to

inspirational Instagram quotes and (2) no matter what else is happening, joy may be hovering right there within your reach. We asked Spiegel how to capture it.

First things first: What are microjoys?

They might sound like tiny joys—and sometimes they are—but the idea is more that they're easily accessible. It



could be a memory of someone you love or a latte made just to your liking. Finding microjoys means making a practice out of noticing and appreciating them.

You began thinking about the subject of microjoys during a period in your life that was not at all joyful.

In 2020, I lost my mom and my 32-year-old nephew. One of my brothers had a health crisis, and I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I'd always been an optimist. My last book was *A Year of Positive Thinking*. But I could not positive-think my way out of where I was.

Did that make you even lonelier?

Yes. I felt guilty because I couldn't practice what I'd preached. I could only concentrate on what was in front of me. As I focused solely on what was happening in the moment, I discovered that pain can coexist with joy. I was grieving my nephew, but I could see a childhood photo of him and feel the laughter of that day. By acknowledging those moments, we remind ourselves that we deserve them.

Microjoys aren't just ways to pull yourself out of grief, right?

Right. You can find them on an ordinary day. Like today, two women told me they loved my sweater, and instead of just saying thanks, I stopped to chat for a bit. You're engaging with what's around you.

Do we become better at noticing these microjoys?

Yes. The more you pay attention to them, the more they reveal themselves. In the book, I wrote about a piggy bank I bought just because I liked it. Once we started adding odd coins and bills to it, we seemed to find money everywhere. This wasn't magic. It was us paying closer attention to what's around us. And there happens to be a lot of random money on the ground! —A.M.

Hit the Road

When everyone piles into an RV, the journey and the destination are one and the same.

Imagine combining the freedom of a road trip with the comforts of home—you're sitting at a sunny kitchen table in your pj's, sipping coffee, while someone a few feet away is in the driver's seat. Sound good? Well, buckle up, because this magical hybrid vacation can be yours, and it's spelled R-V.

RVing is on a roll. The industry's economic impact (including dealers, rental companies, campgrounds, and other related businesses) increased by almost 25 percent between 2019 and 2022. And it's not just for retirees: The median age of first-time buyers is 32. RV-curious? Here's what experts recommend.

EXPLORE THE RENTAL MARKET

If you're a novice, ease into RV living with a rental, available through dealerships, companies like Cruise America and Indie Campers, and peer-to-peer platforms like Outdoorsy and RVezy (think Airbnb but for RVs). You have a range of options: a collapsible pop-up camper you can tow behind your car and then expand into a little home, complete with a toilet and running water; a Class C (the iconic bed-over-driver's-seat camper); a Class B (compact, but with kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom); or the big-daddy Class A (land yachts worthy of the Eras Tour). Prices vary depending on the model, the duration of your trip, and the time of year (summer is peak season, when prices tend to be highest), so it's worth it to comparison shop.

PRACTICE AND PLAN THE ROUTE

In general, you don't need a special license to drive most RVs (check with your local department of motor vehicles for requirements), but you do need some practice. "You have to get used to driving a heavier vehicle that takes longer to speed up and slow down," says Tracey Forde, founder of the organization Black Women Who RV. When you're renting, ask if you can take your vehicle for an accompanied test drive, which "will make a world of difference for your confidence," says Jen Young, cofounder of Outdoorsy.

When planning your route, make sure bridges or overpasses offer enough clearance for your chariot. Forde swears by an RV GPS from Garmin, which plots routes specifically for a vehicle's size and weight.

BOOK YOUR SITE

For peace of mind, it's smart to reserve your campsite well in advance (and if you're traveling to a popular spot, you may need to reserve at least six months ahead). Search for campgrounds and RV parks by state at the handy site Go RVing.

LEARN THE HOOKUPS

You may need to hook your vehicle's utilities (electricity, water, sewage, TV) to your campsite's connections. Monika Geraci, senior director of public relations and communications for the RV Industry Association, recommends watching how-to videos (also at Go RVing) to learn the ropes—and cables, and tanks for gray water (wastewater from sinks and showers) and black water (effluvia from toilets). This might not be your favorite job, but it definitely beats 2 a.m. pee breaks in the woods.

PACE YOURSELF

Before you head out for a cross-country jaunt, try a test run to a destination that's an hour or so from home. Forde suggests leaving late in the morning so you can avoid rush hour and arriving at your campsite at least a few hours before dark so you can take care of hookups while there's still daylight. When you're ready for a longer trip, limit your driving to a few hundred miles a day, for the sake of your lower back, your alertness level, and your well-being. And build in rest days to give the driver(s) a break.

CONSIDER CURB SERVICE

Too nervous to take the wheel? You may be able to have your rental delivered and set up at the campsite, Young says. Or head to a vintage trailer or Airstream resort, like AutoCamp, to enjoy camper vibes without having to drive. —Rory Evans



Go to the Birds

Bird-watching is trending! Discover the newly cool way to get back to nature.

BIRDING WAS ONCE pigeonholed as a kind of geeky pastime, enjoyed by the safari-vested few who knew the difference between a downy woodpecker and a hairy one. Lately, though, it's become a hot hobby, says Christian Cooper, author of *Better Living Through Birding* and host of the National Geographic TV series *Extraordinary Birder*. "People who were stuck inside during the pandemic started looking out their windows, putting up feeders—and it generated a crop of birders," he explains.

As those new enthusiasts learned, hanging with our feathered friends can be therapeutic. In a recent study out of King's College London, people reported that seeing or hearing birds gave them a mental health boost that lasted up to eight hours. Maybe that's because we often associate birds with happiness, hope, and Disney princesses—and because birding attunes us to our surroundings while reminding us of the wider

world. "Every spring, you can go to Central Park and spot black-poll warblers who have come all the way from South America and will travel to Alaska and Canada," Cooper says. "It gives you a whole new sense of the planet." While birding is as easy as stepping outside, a few things will give your experience wings.

A FIELD GUIDE Pick up *The Sibley Guide to Birds* or National Geographic's *Field Guide to the Birds of North*



America, recommends Jenna Curtis, a project leader at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's eBird program. Or go with an app like Cornell's (free!) Merlin Bird ID, which lets you identify your avian finds by uploading photos or recording their chirps.

BINOCULARS Nice for next-level birding. Look on the box or the binoculars for 7 x 42 or 8 x 42. The first number refers to the magnification power, the second to the diameter in millimeters of the objective lens, which captures light. (For reviews of Cornell's top binocular picks, visit allaboutbirds.org.)

FELLOW BIRDERS Other enthusiasts can help you figure out when and where the birding is best. Check out audubon.org to search more than 500 local chapters, or become a member of the American Birding Association.

PATIENCE Birding takes time, because wild, winged creatures show up when they feel like it. "But even on a day when you don't have many sightings, you're still connecting with nature," Cooper says. "And when you finally find a bird you've been looking for, you feel this explosion of joy." —A.M.

Come to Your Senses

Cultivating a richer world is a matter of taste—and touch, and feel.

UNTIL HUMANS CAN build a teleporter or time machine, our senses may be the next best way to instantly drop ourselves into other places, times, and states of mind. We eat a slice of impossibly fresh pineapple, and it takes us to a beach in Hawaii. We hear an ice cream truck and are suddenly 6 years old again. We catch a whiff of our mother's go-to body lotion and feel comforted.

Yet many of us who are blessed with these immense sensory powers don't harness them, as Gretchen Rubin—the author of books on how to live a more fulfilling life, including *The Happiness Project*—realized when her eye doctor warned her she was at risk of a detached retina. Stunned by the thought of losing her sight, she resolved to more fully appreciate all her senses. "I'd been thinking so much about good habits and human nature, but I was missing something," she says.

In her 2023 book, *Life in Five Senses*, she chronicles her experience of tuning in to physical sensations—sniffing her way through a perfumery course, attending a dinner where guests wore blindfolds to savor the taste of their pasta. She discovered a new "energy and excitement," as well as new things about herself: "I never realized how

much texture means to me. I love velvety fabrics. I don't buy scratchy clothes now, no matter how much I love the color. I can choose more wisely and get more pleasure out of things." Here are a few of Rubin's suggestions for conducting your own sensory exploration.

VISIT THE SAME PLACE EVERY DAY You might take the same neighborhood walk or even go to the same grocery store, noting any new sights, sounds, or smells. "There's something special about how a place changes, however gradually, over time," Rubin says.

TURN UP THE QUIET Carve out an hour or an afternoon for silence—no talking, podcasts, movies, or TV. If you find the silence restorative, look for ways to bring more of it into your life.



WRITE A "TASTES TIMELINE" OF YOUR LIFE What foods do you most associate with different periods? Rubin's list included foods from her childhood (strawberry Pop-Tarts), her college years (rice pudding from a favorite hang-out), and her daughters' childhood (Cheerios). Think about the flavors on your own list and the memories they evoke.

CREATE A FIVE-SENSES PORTRAIT OF SOMEONE YOU LOVE Make a list of the sights, sounds, smells, flavors, and textures you associate with your favorite person: the sight of a beloved sweater, the smell of their shampoo. Notice how the portrait helps you better understand that person. You might even share it with them. "Mentioning these small details makes someone feel seen," Rubin says, which can increase both their happiness and yours. —A.M.



Chuck It All to Live Your European Fantasy

And heed these words of wisdom from an American who did just that.

Who among us has not imagined living in Provence/London/Tuscany and running a boutique/bookstore/donkey sanctuary? Chicago native Jane Bertch, restless in the finance job that had brought her to Paris, dreamed of a cooking school where foreigners could learn the secrets of croissant baking in English. In 2009—despite *beaucoup de red tape* and French friends who gave her plans the “smell face” you’d give a stinky cheese—she opened *La Cuisine Paris*, a journey chronicled in her memoir, *The French Ingredient*. We asked for her advice on living the expat dream.

REAL SIMPLE: You met many challenges, like Paris real estate, tourism downturns, chefs who refused to teach French onion soup in July because it was “not the season.” How did you keep your cool?

JANE BERTCH: I tried to approach problems with a child’s curiosity—that nugget of inquisitiveness we all still have or had. I told myself, I don’t have to have all the answers right away. It’s OK to pick something up, play with it, and learn.

RS: What’s your advice for navigating other cultures?

JB: Sit back, observe, and resist the temptation to rush things. In my experience, the French are often called unfriendly, but in fact, they simply take time to grow relationships. They’re like feathers. If you try too

hard to grasp them, they float away. But once they trust you, they’re like extended family.

RS: Is it lonely to be an outsider?

JB: Sometimes, but you can get away with things most people wouldn’t. Recently, at a wine fair, I asked every basic question about the grapes, regions, and food pairings. Most French people wouldn’t dare ask because they wouldn’t dare to appear any anything less than an expert, especially on a subject like wine. But a small crowd gathered, and I realized that although most natives wouldn’t have asked the questions, they were curious about the answers.

RS: What other advice do you have for someone considering the expat life?

JB: Plan an extended visit during the offseason so you can appreciate living in the prospective city rather than just visiting. Be respectfully curious. And again, hone your critical observation skills!

RS: What do you miss about the U.S.?

JB: So much! Target. Going to a diner at 2 a.m. I’m an only child, and it’s hard to be far from my mother as we’re both getting older. I don’t feel like a Chicagoan anymore, and I don’t feel like a Parisian. But I try to take the best of both those wonderful worlds and make them part of who I am. —E.G. ■

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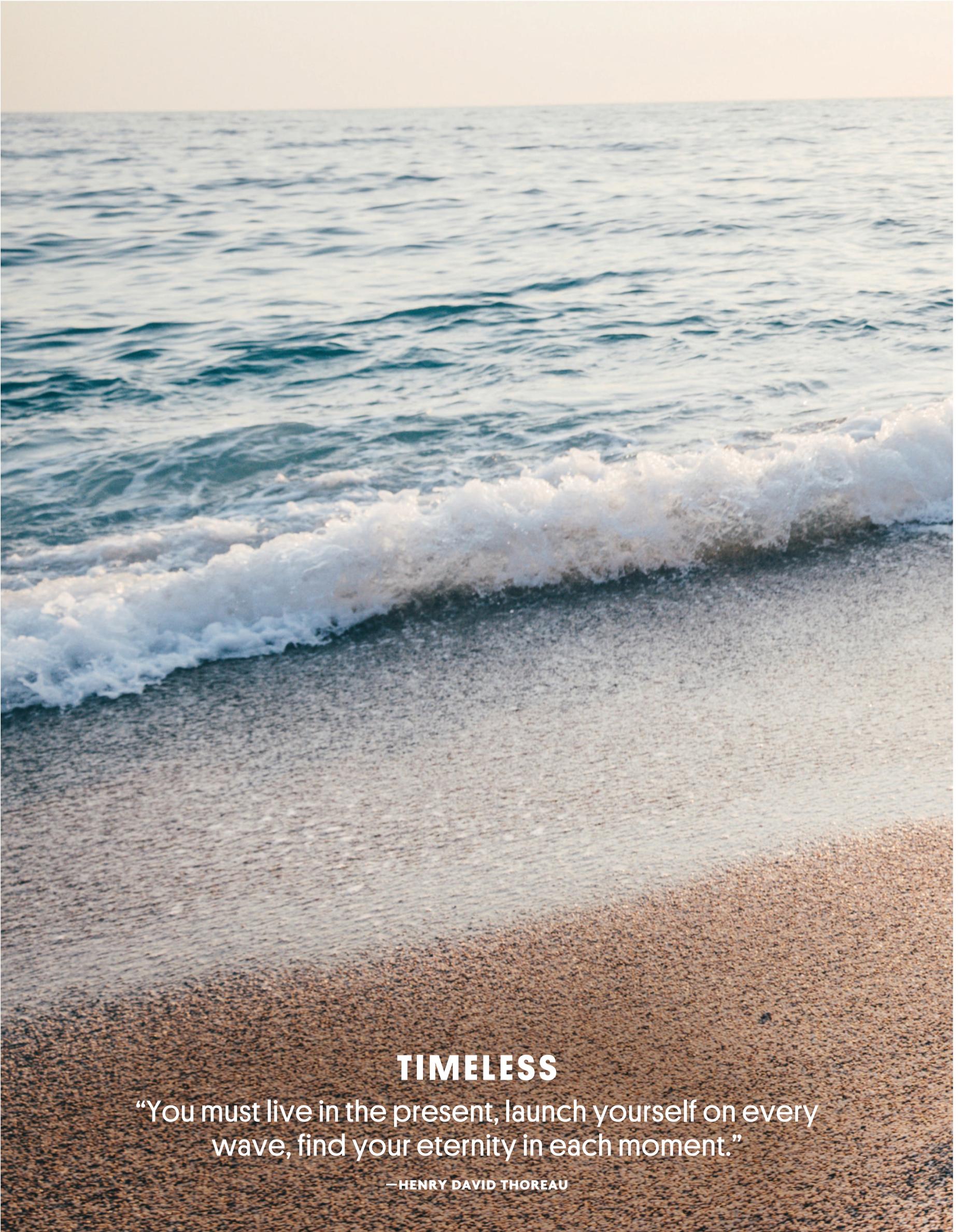
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TIMELESS

“You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment.”

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU



SMALL CHANGES, BIG BENEFITS

Discover easy secrets to a less stressful life. Streamline your way to happier days, a peaceful home, and smart work habits—and spend your most precious resource, time, in the way that you want.

