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Daily healthy habits to reduce stress and increase longevity

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Daily Healthy Habits to Reduce Stress and Increase Longevity

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Daily Healthy Habits to Reduce Stress and Increase Longevity

Abstract

Physicians and other healthcare professionals often counsel patients on the many benefits of healthy lifestyle habits, but may neglect to incorporate healthy strategies into their everyday behavior. To have more time for work demands, busy healthcare professionals may fail to prioritize their own health and self care. In addition, making unhealthy lifestyle choices can increase stress levels which are detrimental to already stressful lives. Adopting a healthier lifestyle can greatly reduce premature mortality and increase longevity for all adults in the United States (Yanping et al., 2018). Key evidence-based, lifestyle-related factors include eating a healthy diet, being physically active, maintaining a healthy weight, and never smoking (Ford et al., 2009; Yanping et al., 2018).

This featured collection of daily healthy habits have been selected from various evidence-based strategies encouraged by lifestyle medicine (American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Smirmaul et al., 2020), dimensions of wellness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016; Kobrin, 2017), whole person health (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2021), healthy lifestyle factors (Ford et al., 2009; Yanping et al., 2018), performance triad, (Army Medicine, 2016; United States Army Public Health Center, n.d.), and common longevity-enhancing lifestyle habits (Buettner, 2016; Buettner & Skemp, 2016). A number of these suggested self care strategies are also helpful in managing anxiety (Aylett et al., 2018; Naidoo, 2021), and reducing stress (American Psychological Association, 2019; Office on Women's Health, 2021) additional useful practices for harried providers.

Healthcare Professionals Overlook Their Own Self Care

With the many changes and pressures in medicine today, adopting the old adage of "Physician heal thyself" is even more crucial for maintaining the health and well-being of physicians and other healthcare professionals. Overworked healthcare providers often fail to take time to eat healthy food, be active, get restorative sleep, manage their stress, and maintain their important relationships (American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Rippe, 2018). Various factors contribute to physicians neglecting their own self care. Work demands and family obligations compete with the professional tendency to prioritize the needs of others first (Clairborne, 2017; Londoño, 2022; Sanchez-Reilly et al., 2013). The importance of maintaining healthy habits, addressing the emotional well-being of clinicians, and prioritizing self care became clear during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mollica et al., 2021; Shapiro & McDonald, 2020; Smirmaul et al., 2020). Covid lockdowns and limitations compelled people everywhere to find new ways to keep up with their healthy behaviors and set new goals in the face of significant life disruptions (Greene, 2020; Harvard/MGH Trauma Programs, 2020; Mollica et al., 2021; Newbold et al., 2021; Shapiro & McDonald, 2020).

After reading this article, readers are challenged to come up with their own list of daily healthy habits to adopt for reducing stress, increasing longevity, and practicing self care.

Adopting Daily Healthy Habits and the Evidence Base

Physicians and other healthcare professionals may be knowledgeable about the numerous benefits of healthy lifestyle habits, but how does that expertise get translated into their own self care? That knowledge gets applied by making healthy behaviors part of everyday routines.

Daily habits can impact both short-term and long-term health (Rippe, 2018). Self-defined routines and habits, good and bad, influence one's health and overall well-being. The impact on health can be positive, like choosing to eat healthy food, or negative, like choosing to smoke or use tobacco products (Rippe, 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016; Stoewen, 2017). Linking a new behavior to an existing one can increase the likelihood of the new behavior sticking (Rippe, 2018; Wood & Neal, 2016). Examples of linked behaviors include flossing after brushing teeth and combining a walk with getting out in nature. Studies have shown nearly 40% of people's daily activities are automatic, ingrained habits (Neal et al., 2013; Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 2014). Ensuring that these automatic, ingrained habits are healthy ones is key to wellness and supporting a healthful lifestyle (Neal et al., 2013; Stoewen, 2017).

Establishing new, healthy habits to support self care and wellness goals can be challenging. The three main components of habit formation are frequent repetition, recurring contexts and associated context cues, and intermittent rewards (Wood & Neal, 2016). Arranging one's surroundings for success makes it easier to adopt healthier habits. A simple way to increase vegetable intake is to keep refrigerated cut vegetables for quick grab-and-go snacks. Frequent repetition helps in making new behaviors automatic like driving or taking daily vitamins (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). Researchers have shown it can take anywhere from 15 days to over 200 days of repetition to establish a new habit (Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 2014; Wood & Neal, 2016). Understandably, one needs to be patient and persistent when working to establish new habits.

Successful habit learning also depends on the presence of contextual cues which can be environmental, temporal or social (Maltagliati et al., 2021; Wood & Neal, 2016). A simple cue to drink more water is to bring a water bottle and refill it during the day (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Another cue example is to set out running clothes and shoes (environmental) before going to bed as visual reminders to meet with a running group (social) at a particular time (temporal) (Maltagliati et al., 2021). Stable context cues are essential for establishing and "locking in" the behavior to make the healthy routine(s) stick and become automatic (Maltagliati et al., 2021; Society for Personality and Social Psychology, 2014). Studies have shown that those with strong habits are more likely to act on these habits even when their willpower is momentarily distracted or weakened. Strong habits favor maintaining healthy behaviors over time (Maltagliati et al., 2021; Wood & Neal, 2016).

Rewards also promote habit formation, especially those that enhance health and promote the repetition of healthy behaviors (National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, 2022; Wood & Neal, 2016). Curating an inspiring music playlist can boost activity. Purchasing a comfortable sheet set may help improve sleep. Getting a colorful water bottle can promote drinking more water. Readers are encouraged to come up with their own special motivating rewards.

Many of the suggested healthy habits are supported by evidence-based tenets and guidelines of lifestyle medicine (American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Rippe, 2018; Smirmaul et al., 2020), the physical, social, and emotional wellness guidelines (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016; Kobrin, 2017), whole person health (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2021), healthy lifestyle factors (Yanping et al., 2018), performance triad (Army Medicine, 2016; United States Army Public Health Center, n.d.), and common longevity-enhancing lifestyle habits from the Blue Zones (Buettner, 2016; Buettner & Skemp, 2016). Other featured habits are supported by research and guidelines on specific self care strategies such as spending time in nature (Cox et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2017), practicing gratitude (Cheng et al., 2015; Melnyk et al., 2020; Sansone & Sansone, 2010; University of California Davis Health, 2021), staying hydrated (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d.; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2011), and safety recommendations for avoiding toxic substances (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, 2011; Pathak et al., 2022; University of Rhode Island, 2015).

Instructions and Recommendations for Use

This collection of suggested healthy habits range from ones that take a few seconds or minutes to ones that require more time and potentially, acquiring new skills. To get started, focus on the triad of nutrition, exercise, and sleep (Army Medicine, 2016; United States Army Public Health Center, n.d.). Once the triad of health-promoting behaviors is established, add on other habits.

Eat a healthy diet. A healthy diet involves eating a nutrient-dense, phytonutrient-rich, plant-forward, sustainable diet, plus making dietary choices beneficial for the environment and the planet (The EAT-Lancet Commission, 2019; Pathak et al., 2022; Willett et al., 2019). Eating a healthy diet is one of the key modifiable lifestyle habits that promote health and longevity (American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Rippe, 2018; United States Army Public Health Center, n.d.; Yanping et al., 2018), and one of the Blue Zones lifestyle habits of the longest-lived people (Blue Zones, 2020; Buettner & Skemp, 2016).

Move throughout the day and exercise regularly, especially outdoors. Taking a brisk walk can reduce anxiety, decrease stress, improve mental, physical and social health (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2021; American Psychological Association, 2019; Cox et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2017; Haas, 2021; Hansen et al., 2017). Getting at least 30 minutes a day of moderate activity helps to reduce stress, is one of the key modifiable lifestyle habits that promote longevity, and one of the Blue Zones lifestyle habits of the longest-lived people (Aylett et al., 2018; Buettner & Skemp, 2016; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018; Rippe, 2018; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2018; World Health Organization, 2020; Yanping et al., 2018).

Get enough restorative sleep. Most adults need between 7 to 9 hours of sleep. Getting insufficient sleep can negatively impact one's health (American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Army Medicine, 2016; Office on Women's Health, 2021, Pathak et al., 2022; United States Army Public

Health Center, n.d.; Weir, 2017). If needed, look at ways to improve sleep hygiene—one's sleep environment and sleep-related habits (Troy, 2021).

Drink more water. Headache, confusion, fatigue, lightheadedness, anxiety and impaired physical performance can indicate dehydration. Water is the best beverage choice for those with access to clean water (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d.; USDA, 2020). Drinking plain, sparkling or infused water throughout the day helps prevent the side effects of dehydration (Blue Zones, 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d.; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2011; Popkin et al., 2010; Reiland, 2021).

Find ways to reduce stress. Many of the suggested healthy habits—Healthy Diet, Exercise, Getting enough Sleep, Staying Hydrated, Practicing Gratitude, and Cultivating a Supportive Circle—also aid in reducing stress (American Psychological Association, 2019; American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Buettner & Skemp, 2016; Office on Women's Health, 2021; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). Other stress reducing strategies include limiting time spent on social media, meditating, getting out in nature, taking deep breaths, and performing progressive muscle relaxation (American Psychological Association, 2019; Office on Women's Health, 2021; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016).

Maintain a healthy weight. A healthy body weight is considered having a BMI between 18.5 and 24.9. It is one of the key modifiable lifestyle habits that promote longevity (Loef & Walach, 2012; Rippe, 2018; Yanping et al., 2018).

Don't smoke or use other tobacco products. Never having smoked or quitting smoking is one of the key modifiable lifestyle habits that promote longevity (Loef & Walach, 2012; Rippe, 2018; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016; Yanping et al., 2018).

Avoid toxic substances. Harmful toxic substances include environmental toxins, heavy metals, household chemicals, illicit drugs, pesticides, and contaminated foods that can cause foodborne illnesses or food poisoning. Avoiding them is important for staying healthy (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, 2011; Pathak et al., 2022; University of Rhode Island, 2015).

Practice gratitude. Being thankful or grateful is associated with decreased stress and anxiety, better overall health, and longevity (Cheng et al., 2015; Melnyk et al., 2020; Sansone & Sansone, 2010; University of California Davis Health, 2021). Pausing to think about someone for whom you are grateful, verbalizing or writing two positive things at the end of the day can improve sleep, overall well-being, and enhance feelings of gratitude (Sansone & Sansone, 2010; University of California Davis Health, 2021).

Take time to maintain important relationships with family, friends, and community members. Fostering social connections is important for overall health and well-being (American Psychological Association, 2019; Martino et al., 2015; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). Positive social connection is one of the six pillars of lifestyle medicine

(American College of Lifestyle Medicine, n.d.; Phillips et al., 2020). Having a social circle that supports healthy behaviors is one of the Blue Zones lifestyle habits of the longest-lived people (Buettner & Skemp, 2016; Buettner, 2016).

Strategies that Promote Regular Practice

Several strategies can be applied to increase the likelihood of successfully incorporating healthier habits into a daily routine. Incorporating healthy habits into regular daily routines can be reinforced at the individual, the environment, and the community levels.

Individual Level - Support Daily Healthy Habits

Modifying one's home environment to increase health-promoting cues helps in establishing healthier habits (Rippe, 2018; Wood & Neal, 2016). People are more likely to stay on track with their healthy habits and wellness goals, even when facing unhealthy temptations, if they have well-established, habitual behaviors (Neal et al., 2013). Practicing healthy strategies as part of a daily routine, while removing the unhealthy options, can make it easier and automatic to make healthier choices. Keeping healthy foods visible and hiding (or not buying) tempting, unhealthy foods makes opting for the healthy option the effortless one. Given adequate time, the healthy choices will become habitual, like brushing teeth (Rippe, 2018). Strong, ingrained habits favor maintaining healthy behaviors long term (Maltagliati et al., 2021; Stoewen, 2017; Wood & Neal, 2016).

Environment Level - Encourage a Healthy Workplace

In the blue zone regions the culture, villages, and surroundings are set up to support a healthy lifestyle (Buettner, 2021). Modifying one's workplace and work lifestyle are also important for maintaining healthy habits (Wood & Neal, 2016). One example of changing the workplace culture is to replace boxes of donuts with bowls of fresh fruit as treats for the office, clinic or hospital staff. Another idea is to empower co-workers to infuse more gratitude in health care settings by sharing the "Gratitude as Medicine Survival Kit" (Greater Good Science Center, n.d.). Other examples include hosting cooking classes for patients and staff, enlisting work colleagues to go on daily walking breaks, and encouraging office staff to sign up for a local Walk/Run for charity (Heath et al., 2022; National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, 2022; Wood & Neal, 2016).

Community Level - Foster a Supportive Community

Ideally everyone would work in health-supporting workplaces and live in health-promoting communities. Physicians and healthcare providers can advocate for workplace health and encourage health care systems to make workplace wellness an organizational priority (Gooch, 2018; Harvard/MGH Trauma Programs, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2020). Hospitals and health systems can positively support their employees' health efforts by offering wellness programs, healthy food options, cooking demonstrations, onsite fitness centers, or discounted rates at local gyms, tobacco cessation programs, and other health-promoting programs (Gooch, 2018; Heath et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2020; Shapiro & McDonald, 2020). Physicians and healthcare professionals can foster healthy habits in the community through health education, by promoting walking programs (Sabgir & Dorn, 2020), and writing Park Prescriptions for patients to spend time in nature (ParkRx, 2016). Local communities programs can encourage healthy

behaviors by providing walkable areas, bike lanes and making healthy foods and beverages readily available at schools, workplaces, grocery stores, restaurants, and farmers markets (Buettner, 2021; Case, 2020; Wood & Neal, 2016).

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Resources for Continued Exploration and/or Guided Practice

These resources provide more in-depth information on several of the topics for further review.

Lifestyle Medicine Pillars

The Six Pillars of Lifestyle Medicine

<https://lifestylemedicine.org/What-is-Lifestyle-Medicine>

The six pillars of lifestyle medicine come from the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, a medical professional society. The pillars include a whole-food, plant-predominant eating pattern; physical activity; restorative sleep; stress management; avoidance of risky substances (like tobacco); and positive social connections.

Guide to Wellness

Creating a Healthier Life: A Step-by-Step Guide to Wellness

<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma16-4958.pdf>

This Step-by-Step PDF file guide to Wellness comes from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The instructional guide provides useful information on the Eight Dimensions of Wellness (emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, environmental, financial, occupational, and social) along with worksheets to engage the user in writing out ways to improve the different wellness dimensions.

Blue Zones Power Nine Key Lifestyle Habits

Power 9® Key Lifestyle Habits of the World's Healthiest, Longest-Lived People

<https://www.bluezones.com/2016/11/power-9/>

National Geographic journalist Dan Buettner studied several regions in the world, which he dubbed the Blue Zones. Buettner uncovered 9 evidence-based common denominators in these Blue Zones among the world's centenarians that are believed to slow the aging process.

EAT - Planetary Health Diet

Healthy Diets From Sustainable Food Systems: Food Planet Health

[https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet Commission Summary Report.pdf](https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf)

The planetary health diet comes from the EAT-Lancet Commission, made up of commissioners and co-authors from 16 countries who cover the fields of human health, agriculture, political science and environmental sustainability. The EAT guide is largely plant-based, but it can also be flexitarian, by including modest amounts of fish, meat, and dairy foods.

Gratitude as Medicine

Gratitude as Medicine Survival Kit

https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/major_initiatives/expanding_gratitude/gratitude_partnerships/health_care

The Gratitude as Medicine Survival Kit comes from the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. This survival kit, based on the latest gratitude science, includes resources to support health professionals' work. The materials can be shared with colleagues to make a science-based case for including more gratitude in their workplace and health care organization.

Changing Habits

Changing Your Habits for Better Health

<https://naldc.nal.usda.gov/download/1759319/PDF>

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, NIDDK, developed an informative worksheet that explains the four stages of changing a healthy behavior. It also includes useful strategies to improve healthy habits and help users move closer to their health goals.

Tiny Habits

Create any habit you want in your life using Tiny Habits

<https://tinyhabits.com>

Researcher and author, BJ Fogg, PhD, from the Behavior Design Lab at Stanford University offers a free 5-Day program on his website to build new habits based on his research and book, *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything*. In this email-based program participants learn how habits work and how to create new ones.

Self-Care during Covid (and Beyond)

Practice Guide for Healthcare Practitioners and Staff: New Self-Care Protocol

<https://hprtselfcare.org>

As part of their response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Harvard and MGH (Massachusetts General Hospital) Trauma Programs developed several free resources. The materials include: the “New Self-Care Protocol: Practice Guide for Healthcare Practitioners and Staff,” the “Harvard/MGH Trauma Programs 10 Point Toolkit for Self-Care during the Covid-19 Crisis” and a pocket card with a summary of the self-care recommendations. These resources help to remind healthcare practitioners and staff that their top priority is to take care of themselves, their families and loved ones.

Key Takeaways

Useful tips for establishing strong, automatic, ingrained health, habits:

1. Start with the performance triad—nutrition, activity and sleep.
2. Add in other healthy behaviors gradually.
3. Arrange routines for success by linking new, beneficial behaviors with existing healthy ones.
4. Enlist a support network of family, friends and colleagues to stay on track.
5. Celebrate small successes with health-enhancing rewards.
6. Remember that it takes time to establish new behaviors, so be patient and persistent.

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