

From the HEART

A newsletter from Saint Luke's Cardiovascular Consultants

Summer 2023

INSIDE

Spanish Lessons: How to Live Forever, or at Least Until 100 4

Won't You Be My Neighbor? 6

The Healing Power of Touch 8

The Upside of Anxiety: Harness Its Energy to Improve Your Future. 10

Sex and Well-being Part 1: Health Dividends from an Active Sex Life 12

Living Wholeheartedly 15

Coming to Your Senses Before It's Too Late. 16

Creed for a Shipshape Lifestyle. 19

New Providers at Saint Luke's Cardiovascular Consultants 20

Ancient Practice; New Perspective

Kathleen C. O'Keefe

Before the pandemic arrived, my time was scheduled down to the minute. I was a 24-year-old, building a career in New York City; my days filled with commuting to work, meetings, dates, dinners, late nights, and high-intensity workout classes. I was drinking from the firehose—metaphorically—fueling a new life for myself. Even though I was well aware of my naturally reclusive and creative personality, it never occurred to me to slow down. At that time, I thought happiness could only come from doing it all.

Eventually, my body started to show wear. Although once a champion sleeper, I began to experience bouts of insomnia. I struggled to keep weight on. Mentally, if I wasn't feeling low, I was on the precipice of it. My mom frequently asked on our calls, "Is everything okay?" Although I was living the life I'd always dreamt of as a kid—working my dream job, living in downtown New York City, surrounded by wonderful family and friends—I was unhappy. A haze followed me everywhere. It was increasingly hard to enjoy regular days, and I had no clue why. Not until March 2020. After fighting off an early, nasty case of COVID, I shoved a few T-shirts and



Kathleen

a pair of jeans into a weekender bag and boarded an empty flight home. With my hamper piled high and food still sitting in my refrigerator in NYC, I fled carelessly. I thought I'd return the following weekend. Turns out, I wouldn't be back for another eight months.

Back in Kansas City, time slowed. I watched the trees bloom, had conversations with my dogs, and cut peonies in the garden for my mom. Who knew we had peonies? For most of my time at home, it was just my parents and me, but they weren't parenting me. I was past my days of stealing alcohol and breaking curfew,

and even if I wanted to, there was nowhere to go and no one to see. We synced to the same schedule: wake up at 6:30 a.m., dinner at 6 p.m., and dog walk on the golf course at 7 p.m. Day after day, night after night. All spring, summer, and fall long, that's what we did. I swapped my sleepless city life for a much quieter one with two roommates in their sixties.

Without speed-walking to the subway station every morning and high-intensity workout classes every night, I quickly fell into an exercise void. My dad had recently gotten back into yoga, and I had nothing else to do, so I joined him. We'd put the dogs to bed after their nightly walk, roll out the mats on the patio under the stars, and pick a yoga video on YouTube. The poses were slow; the teacher's voice was calm. For a month or so, it felt like a chore. Before I understood the value in low-impact, meditative, repetitive movement, it just seemed boring. The classes would vary slightly, but they were hypnotizingly the same. One of my yoga teachers now, Nevine Michaan, frequently says, "There is revelation in repetition."

Our nightly practice was not strenuous but restorative in nature. Easy, 20- to 30-minute yoga sessions would pass quickly and lull me to sleep soon afterwards. From time to time, I was tempted to skip, but my father kept me honest. In the beginning, I'd practice with him out of guilt. It seemed cruel to leave him practicing alone, especially at a time when he and I both knew very well that nothing was demanding my attention. Maybe that was his master-mind plan, to guilt trip me into better habits while I was around. Whether intentional or not, the peaceful routine started to rewire my brain. For the first time in my life, I committed to a daily



photo by Rocky Mountain Joe®, Boulder, Colorado

reflective practice, and I kept it up. After a few weeks, it felt less and less like a favor to my father. During the day, I caught myself looking forward to returning to the mat. Nightly yoga became my religion.

Over the course of this pandemic-induced Kansas sabbatical, I found some peace. Gratitude started to come easily, and my empty afternoons filled with activities I had left in my childhood—drawing, writing, helping my parents in the garden, reading for enjoyment, and walking my dogs. Paradoxically, during a time of horrific loss and uncertainty, somehow, somehow, I struck gold. I stumbled into a life filled with more grace. Quarantine taught me that I am my parents' child, introverted and routine-oriented like my mother, curious and active like my father. They are my greatest teachers, and unfortunately, it took a global health crisis and moving back home to remind me of that.

As my stability grew in quarantine, my interest in yoga did, too. I studied the poses—mastered easy ones and built strength for the harder ones. I lifted weights in the gym so my arms wouldn't collapse in crow pose. I stood in tree pose in the grocery store line

to train my balance. I struggled with *savasana* (meditation to close each practice), so I challenged myself to walk the dogs without music to practice silence. In between work calls, I forward folded to calm the mind chatter. Most nights at dinner, I opted out of wine to avoid headaches. I wasn't entirely conscious of it in the moment, but my daily habits reorganized to orbit around my nightly yoga practice.

As a result of going to bed earlier, spending time in silence, gently moving daily, and drinking less alcohol, I felt more like myself than I had in a decade—since childhood, really. When I slowed down, I discovered how I am supposed to operate; I found a routine that my mind *and* body agreed on; I figured out how to serve myself.

Yoga is a time-tested therapy, conferring well-being on its devotees. In recent decades, yoga's potential benefits for the heart and mind may be even more important because of the chaotic pace of modern life. For me, this was certainly the case. One of the most significant ways yoga helps the heart is by reducing emotional tension. It's a way to pop the cork on accumulated stress and relieve worries from the lived day. Out-of-control stress levels can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease, and other related illnesses.

Yoga is the Sanskrit word for yoke, or union. Traditionally, it refers to a practice of yoking the self and spirit—joining the physical and divine. Devotion to something greater than yourself, or *Ishvara Pranidhana*, is a pillar of yoga. It is one of the five *Niyamas* (inner codes or positive duties to oneself) in Hinduism. But devotion is universal. It's commitment to a passion and an excellent place to discover a community.

My parents have harped on the benefits of community my entire life—whether that meant attending church every Sunday or joining the soccer team. They have never told us which communities to join—fortunately, they left that up to us as individuals—but being a part of *something* was critical. So after I returned to New York, I decided to park my yoga fascination in a studio. I Googled "yoga studio near me in Manhattan," picked one, and went three times a week for the next six months. Soon the girl at the front desk knew me by name, and I befriended a few of the teachers.

In late January, I brought my dad to a yoga class at my studio. On our way out, he spotted a flyer: *Yoga Teacher Training*. He insisted I sign up—that day and about every other day for the next month. "You're made for this, and you need to find other people who like to do this too." He was right.

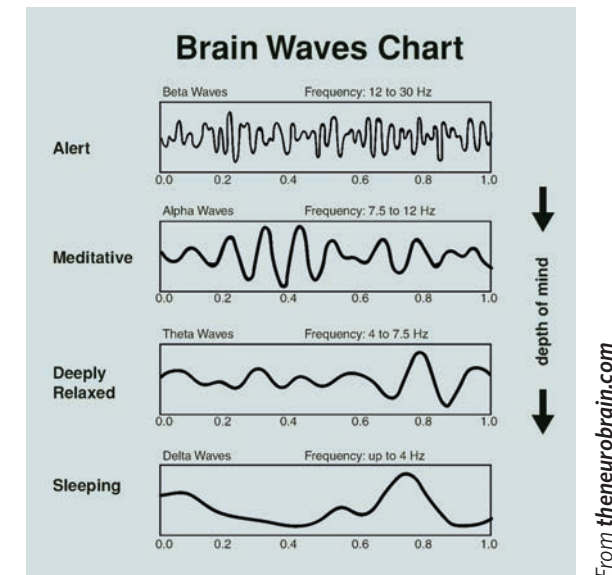
Dad says, "Belonging to a group that meets regularly has been shown to be good for your health and happiness by brightening mood and improving overall mental health, especially if the group is focused on physical activity, such as yoga, a team sport, or fitness class. Leisure-time meetings with a group can contribute to a sense of purpose and life satisfaction and help combat feelings of loneliness and isolation." So I enrolled, and today, I am a certified yoga teacher, practicing most days.

Yoga is the first recorded form of organized movement, originating in either Northern India or Egypt over 5,000 years ago (there is evidence of yoga popping up in both continents around the same time). In my opinion, if something is *that* old—not unlike genetically preserved traits that have persisted for eons of evolution—it's still around for a good reason. I assumed

that in its ancient history were hidden secrets about its magical health benefits. Turns out, I was right. Studies suggest that a regular practice of yoga can improve blood flow throughout the body and brain, lower blood pressure, and reduce risk of AFib. Yoga also tends to calm down chronic inflammation, which is a key risk factor for both in heart disease and dementia. A regular yoga practice will also reliably enhance balance, flexibility, strength, mood, and sleep.

Aside from the soothing routine and lowered stress, the *savasana* is what I've grown to admire most about the practice. *Savasana* (corpse pose) is a short meditation that closes most yoga sessions where you lie still on your back, eyes closed. Stillness is difficult for me; it always has been. However, I've found that yoga is an easy gateway to get there. Yoga is a great way to deaccelerate from the frenzied, over-stimulated, 21st-century lifestyle and calm the nervous system.

Opposing energies create balance. An equilibrium between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems is crucial for maintaining optimal mental and physical health. A regular yoga and meditation practice is an ideal way to balance the yin-yang energies that constantly ebb and flow through the autonomic nervous system. The slow deep breathing, mindful stretching, and spiritual grounding that are the essence of yoga work harmoniously to induce a state of relaxation. When done regularly, this practice can improve both physical and mental health and boost overall well-being. Sitting with myself in stillness, noticing the sound of my



breath, following the rise and fall of my chest, it's my daily cocktail for neutralizing anxiety.

While awake, most of our day is spent in beta brain waves—busy or anxious thinking—making to-do lists, working, exercising, socializing. High beta is stress; low beta is alertness. It's a brain wave that is emitted by a strongly engaged mind. On the opposite side of the spectrum, we sleep in delta brain waves—an unconscious, regenerative state with automatic breath.

In between beta and delta are theta and alpha brain waves, non-social states of consciousness, awake but not engaging with anything outside of yourself, where you wakefully drop into your vagal nervous system. Deep relaxation is where the mind allows us to feel emotion. Imaginary, timeless, and trainable—this is the state of mind where we daydream and feel inspiration; wakeful restoration where we can change or create. Children under age six primarily think in theta/alpha brain waves, but as we age, these healing states of mind become less accessible. That is, unless we meditate. Sitting in silence is a key

continued on page 14

Spanish Lessons: How to Live Forever, or at Least Until 100

Kim Baker



A study in the medical journal *The Lancet* reported that Spain is expected to have the world's highest longevity rate by the year 2040. The World Population Review currently ranks Spain number six in the world for life expectancy despite being hit particularly hard by the pandemic. According to *Business Insider*, "Spain is on track to have the world's longest life expectancy by 2040 with a lifespan of 85.8 years, surpassing Japan." The five countries currently above Spain are much better off financially, so how does Spain do it?

Party with Your Great-Grandkids

Instead of tucking their grandparents away in retirement communities where no one under 55 is allowed to reside, in Spain, grandparents and great-grandparents are welcome to the party. In my village, everyone gets together in the plaza, from babies to 100-year-olds—of which there are quite a few. A few months ago, there was a whole ceremony to honor the oldest living among us, and they all walked up to the podium to accept their recognition. People drink and carry on in front of every generation, and events are not segregated by age.

Walk! Your Legs Are Not Decorative Appendages

Most mornings I get up early and meet with my friend. We walk along the paths and waterways near the village. We cross paths with the same people

along the way and stop to say hi. Many of them are well into their 90s and are still out there with their dogs. Most of them have to use canes, but that doesn't stop them. In the evenings, whole families walk down to the river so they can walk back and see the sunset. They don't count their steps; they just walk because it is a part of their day, and walking makes you feel good.

Eat Like You Have a Garden and a Fishery

I have to confess, I am not a huge fan of Spanish food. I like fiery, extroverted dishes, and Spanish cuisine is more understated and subtle. It features simple, fresh ingredients whose flavors



stand out because of their quality. This is largely lost on me as I shovel hot sauce on everything, but I can appreciate it in theory. Most people in my village have access to at least a little plot of land, and they grow their own vegetables there. People freely give away produce to their friends and neighbors. I often come home to find a bag of tomatoes and cucumbers

hanging from my door—no note, just an anonymous gift. Spain is the world's leading producer of olive oil, and it is used in everything. Every winter everyone harvests their trees and takes their olives to the mill, where it is returned to them in the form of oil.

Because it is surrounded by sea, seafood is popular here. It even features in the iconic paella. Between the vegetables and the fish, people can't help but be healthy, even if they do indulge in a whole lot of ham and wine too. After all, ham and wine are what makes life worth living.

Sex It Up, Baby

When done in a healthy, loving, consensual way, sex is really good for you. It lowers your blood pressure, helps you fend off dementia, and generally just makes you smile in the morning. According to *Slice Magazine*, 72 percent of the adult population in Spain is having sex at least once a week. Interestingly, many of the top 10 countries for sex and those for highest life expectancy are the same. So don't skimp on the sexy time.

Siesta, Siesta, Siesta

In my village, everything stops between 2 and 5 p.m. You can't run to the store for eggs because it is closed. Don't stop by your friend's house because they are sleeping. It took me

a while to warm up to this concept, as it requires getting up early and staying up late. I had a hard time relaxing in the afternoon when I knew I had a lot to do, and I would get super annoyed when I hadn't finished my shopping but everything closed down and I had to put it off for another day.

I have learned to appreciate it, though. My energy level has always dipped between 3 and 4 p.m., but when I lived in other parts of the world, I had to push my way through and keep going. Now I don't have to. I let nature take its course and sleep for an hour. My body and mind feel better for it.

Happy Talk: Positive Words and a Positive Outlook

Thirty years ago, I fell in love with the Spanish language. I love the rhythms of the music, the passion of the poetry, the drama of the soap operas, and the incredible complexity of the literature. I love the energy of the way people speak and the way my personality becomes livelier and more emotional when I converse in Spanish.

I didn't know at the time, but not only is it attractive to me, it is good for my health too. All of that energy and life doesn't just hang in the air; it is passed from one person to another in a pandemic kind of contagion that reinforces life instead of eroding it.

I have often noticed how people here don't spend much time complaining about things like the weather. Instead, they talk about how beautiful it is. They call each other *guapa* or *guapo* (beautiful, handsome), and when you ask them how they are, they reply, "I'm here!" meaning, of course, "I'm great. How else would I be when I am here?"

So, *viva España*, *viva* the people who live here, and *viva* everyone reading this article! I wish you a long, healthy life full of small joys and pleasures all along the way.

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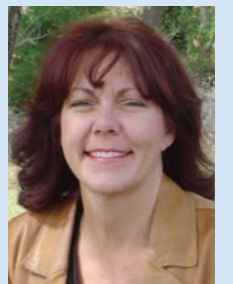
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Dr. Vivek Murthy, the U.S. surgeon general, recounts the tale of one of his more memorable patients who for years had worked in the food industry, living on a modest salary and leading an unpretentious lifestyle. One day he won a large jackpot in a lottery, and overnight his life changed dramatically. He quit his job and moved into a luxurious house in a gated community. Yet as he sat in Dr. Murthy's office two years later, he sadly admitted, "Winning the lottery was one of the worst things that ever happened to me." Wealthy but emotionally isolated, this previously social and vivacious person no longer knew his neighbors and had lost touch with his former co-workers. He had also developed depression, high blood pressure, and type 2 diabetes.

been rising from 47 years in 1900 to 68 years in 1950 to 79 years in 2019. But then it reversed course and started falling—to 77 years in 2020 and 76 in 2021. This abrupt U-turn was due in part to the COVID pandemic, but also to rising deaths of desperation—suicide, drugs (mostly opioids), alcohol, car accidents, and gun violence. These fatalities typically result from risky and self-destructive behaviors arising out of emotional distress and social isolation.

Despite being among the hardest working and wealthiest nations in the world, the U.S. faces a mushrooming emotional health crisis. For millennia, our lives were inevitably woven into a fabric of interconnectedness while living in small tightknit communities with lifelong friends and neighbors, and extended families nearby, often with a shared religion and worldview. Now most of these traditional sources of emotional support have unraveled, leaving many people feeling isolated and vulnerable.

If you are depressed and lonely, you probably won't have the motivation to exercise or eat a nutritious diet or bond with others. A person leading a miserable life today probably won't much care how long they're going to live. Moreover, people who are emotionally isolated, sad, and/

or anxious are susceptible to developing unhealthy coping mechanisms, like taking recreational drugs, drinking too much alcohol, eating junk food, or binge-watching TV. Bottom line: Tending to your emotional health is a keystone habit upon which many other positive lifestyle routines depend.

Rat Park

In the 1970s, Canadian researchers conducted the Rat Park studies, a series of experiments designed to investigate the effects of living conditions on drug addiction. Rats were given a choice of two water bottles—one that was pure water, and the other that had water laced with morphine. When the rats were housed in standard bare metal laboratory cages with no social interaction or stimulation, they consistently chose the morphine-laced water and became addicted to it. Yet when the rats lived in a more stimulating natural environment with fellow rats to socialize and play with, and they had fresh air and plenty of room to explore, they showed no interest in the morphine-laced water and didn't get addicted to it.

The message of the Rat Park study for humans is that addiction is not solely caused by the chemical properties of drugs, but also by environmental and social conditions. It suggests that a lack of playful connection with others, exercise, and fulfillment may contribute to addictive behavior.

The Good Life

Drs. Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz in their splendid new book, *The Good Life*, assert that our most essential need in life is meaningful connection with others. What makes for a vibrant life that is fulfilling and meaningful? The simple and intuitive answer is **relationships**. The stronger our relationships, the more likely we are to follow a healthy lifestyle, which eventually translates into a long, happy, and satisfying life.

Dr. Waldinger is the current director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which has been closely following a group of about 700 people year after year for their entire adult lives. This study, which has been going for 85 years and counting, reveals that more than cholesterol, blood pressure, or any other factor, the strength of our connections with others determine how gracefully our bodies and our brains age.

Relationships in all their forms—family, friends, romantic partners, coworkers, pickleball pals, bicycling buddies, garden or book club members, Bible study groups, friends that you walk, run or swim with, pets, and even plants—all contribute to a happier, healthier, and longer life. It's never too late to improve the relationships you have and never too late to build new ones. According to Dr. Waldinger, "Good relationships keep us happier, healthier, and help us live longer. This is true across the lifespan, and across cultures and contexts, which means it is almost certainly true for you, and for nearly every human being who has ever lived. We are sustained in a web of relationships that give our lives meaning and goodness."

Neighbors with Benefits

In my humble opinion, neighbors are an important and often overlooked source of mutually beneficial emotional support. My mother, Leatrice, taught me by example that if you want to have a friend, you need to be a friend. She had about 15 people who considered her their **very best** friend, many of whom were neighbors. When I was growing up during the Baby Boom of the 1960s, my siblings and I would run outside into a backyard that was contiguous with 15 other backyards on our block in Grafton, North Dakota, a town of 4,000 people. There were about 60 kids within a few years in age of each other whose backdoors opened onto our shared

backyard, with virtually no fences and very few hedges. We all knew each other and scampered in and out of various neighborhood homes like they were our own. My mother would frequently have coffee or birthday club with the other moms on the block. When the weather was nice, my parents would have happy hour on the back patio, where Helen and Bill and other neighbors often sauntered across the backyard to join them for a beer.

Each of us lives in a custom-built world—for better or worse—that is created by how we treat other people. Joan and I have throughout our lives tried to get to know our neighbors and befriend them. It hasn't always been easy. About 23 years ago we moved nearby an older couple, let's call them John and Mary. Our kids were little at the time and they would climb the neighbors' trees and sometimes light fireworks off in their yard. And our dogs might have been barking too much or relieving themselves on the neighbor's lawn. So, Mary would frequently call and leave nasty-gram messages on our answering machine, sometimes threatening to report us to the city. In contrast, it was easy to make friends with their black lab, Rory, and we offered to have him stay with us when they were out of town. That changed the whole relationship, and through the years we have gotten to be good friends with John and Mary and their family. When John developed Alzheimer's, he would show up confused at our front door, looking for Joan to reassure him that everything was going to be okay. She would take him by the hand and gently lead him back home.

Neighbors who become friends share a unique bond—one of place, a common turf. It's reassuring to know that you have people in your neck of the woods that you can count on to watch your back. Good neighbors keep an eye on each other's homes when one of them is out of town. My next-door

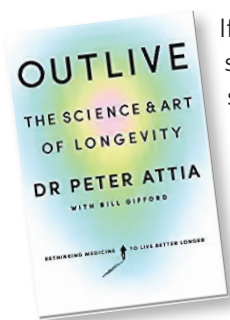
neighbor Dwarak is one of my best friends. We often play pickleball together and started playing this fun sport by painting lines on his driveway. We have close neighbors with whom we exchange homegrown vegetables and fruits—depending on whose garden or fruit trees are producing at the time. It is much easier to spontaneously visit with and socialize with neighborhood friends, since you often bump into them coincidentally.

Your Neighbor Might Just Save Your Life

On the other hand, we have neighbors down the street who for decades have walked by regularly and pretended to not know us. This just seems like a waste of a potential resource. Don't delude yourself into thinking you live in isolation just because you can climb into your car, click the garage door opener, and never take the time to get to know your neighbors. They could save your life one day, or you could save theirs. A friend and neighbor, let's call her Betsy, was out walking her Scottie dog last fall when she heard faint but distressed cries for help that she couldn't identify. She immediately called 911 and within a few minutes first responders arrived on our block and discovered Susan (not her real name), another friend and neighbor, at the bottom of her basement stairs, collapsed and hemorrhaging with a broken hip. Betsy saved Susan's life that morning. Whatever differences you may have with your neighbors are generally not more important than the things you share—like the desire to live in a safe, friendly, and familiar neighborhood. Keep in mind that neighbors can be friends regardless of age differences, and try not take personally the political signs they might put up in their yards.

My son Jimmy and his husband Darren used to live in Manhattan, New York,

continued on page 9



If you had to guess the single most important strategy for maximizing your future well-being and longevity, you'd probably say more exercise, better diet, or quitting tobacco. But Peter Attia in his superb new book, *Outlive*, makes a strong case for tending to emotional health as the top priority if you're on a quest to lead a long and vigorous life. For the past century in America, life expectancy had

The Healing Power of Touch

James H. O’Keefe, MD



For millennia, physicians relied upon “laying on of the hands” as an important part of healing a patient. These days, it’s generally not the physical exam that establishes the precise diagnosis, but rather a barrage of high-tech imaging and blood tests. Even so, I remind the young doctors in training that doing a good physical exam is still an essential element of patient care. Not only does it give us clues about what might be awry, but it’s also an essential step through which the patient establishes a bond of trust with their care provider.

In centuries past, this healing touch was sometimes all the physicians and nurses had to offer, and indeed they relied heavily on the power of placebo to help cure their patients. Yet even today I believe our patients will get better quicker and feel less emotional anguish if we provide reassuring, professional, and compassionate care, which includes laying on of the hands. The power of placebo, which can be amazingly effective, is conferred in direct proportion to the trust the patient has in their care provider. I tell medical students and physicians in training that if you don’t touch your patients, they may not recover as quickly as they should, nor will they fully trust that you genuinely care about them as a person.

Human touch has been shown to have various physiological and psychological benefits, and it has been used as a therapeutic intervention in many cultures and medical practices throughout history. Gentle, affectionate touch, like a hug, can stimulate the release of hormones such as oxytocin that fosters bonding and social support. Touch can also reduce stress, promote relaxation, lower blood pressure, and boost the immune system’s ability to fight off disease.

For newborns especially, touch is essential if they are to thrive. When our four children were little, Joan insisted that whenever possible, one of us was holding the baby rather than having him or her sit in a bassinet. My oldest son, Jimmy, was premature, born five weeks early. During the last trimester of that pregnancy and for the first six months after delivery, Joan was being treated with radiation therapy for Hodgkin’s lymphoma. I was a busy cardiology fellow, and Joan was exhausted, so her mother, Kathleen, came to live with us for the first six weeks after Jimmy was born. He would wake up hungry and crying every couple of hours during the night. Kathleen, who was 75 years old at the time, was an angel about holding and bottle-feeding baby Jimmy, day and night. Touch promotes bonding

between the newborn and the parent or caregiver, which is crucial for creating a strong emotional connection and building a secure attachment. It’s been 11 years since Kathleen passed away, but even now she occasionally shows up in Jimmy’s dreams as a reassuring and loving presence who is always there for him.

Sadly, there have been experiments in the remote past where infants were subjected to minimal physical contact to prevent infection. As part of the Hospitalism Study conducted during the 1940s, infants in an orphanage were cared for in a sterile, hospital-like setting in which they received little to no cuddling or affectionate touch and were rarely even held. These babies’ touch deprivation caused developmental delays and emotional distress, and some of them even died of “failure to thrive.” These kinds of studies made it abundantly clear that nurturing/affectionate touch is an essential “nutrient” that must be prioritized when caring for a baby. Although this is also true for adults, touch is often an overlooked need by many people.

Psychologically, affectionate touch can bestow comfort, reassurance, and emotional support, which can have a positive impact on mental and emotional well-being. Touch can also promote a sense of connection and

empathy between people and may help to improve communication and trust in therapeutic settings. By the way, affectionate interactions between people and dogs or cats, such as petting or grooming the animal, cuddling, hugging, or receiving kisses (licks) can help boost mood, melt stress, promote relaxation, and lower blood pressure. Joan and I have three dogs and one cat; we are being physically affectionate with them many times during our waking hours.

About once a month I get a professional massage, which feels like such a luxury on my achy muscles, but its benefits go beyond relaxation. During massage, the heart rate slows and blood pressure falls. The stress hormone, cortisol, drops and feel-good



Joan and Lola cuddling

hormones like serotonin, endorphins, and dopamine rise, leaving the body in a state of relaxed bliss. Massage can reduce anxiety and depression, boost

mood, and improve sleep quality, all of which are beneficial for heart and brain health. I often give Joan a foot massage just as she is dozing off in bed. She loves it and says it’s good for her soles and her soul. Look for ways to give and receive more affectionate, wholesome touch; it’s a proven way to strengthen interpersonal bonds and make you healthier and happier.

Overall, touch can be a powerful means for supporting mental and physical health. Whether it’s a hug from a loved one, a massage from a professional, or even a gentle pat on the back, incorporating touch into our lives can have numerous benefits. Of course, it’s important to always ensure that touch is consensual and appropriate, and that we respect personal boundaries and preferences.

Won’t You Be My Neighbor? *continued from page 7*

and hardly knew their neighbors. But about two years ago they bought a brownstone apartment in a gentrified Brooklyn neighborhood. Now they live in a storybook setting where they walk their dog Theo to Prospect Park a few blocks away every morning to frolic with her canine playmates. They’ve gotten to know folks who are routinely out pushing baby strollers or walking their dogs; they see familiar kids playing on the sidewalks after school and neighbors out doing errands. Living in a real neighborhood has become a wellspring of joy for Darren, Jimmy, and Theo.

Having friendly relationships with your neighbors can be beneficial for both your mental and physical health.

1. Social support. Neighbors can provide a sense of community and social support. Having someone nearby to talk to and share experiences with can help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

2. Physical activity. Being friends with your neighbors encourages you to be more physically active. You may be more likely to garden, take a walk, or participate in other outdoor activities if you have someone to interact with.

3. Safety. Knowing your neighbors and having a good relationship with them can help create a sense of safety and security in your community. You may feel more comfortable leaving your home and your children in the neighborhood if you know your neighbors are looking out for you.

4. Reduced stress. Having a positive relationship with your neighbors can help reduce stress levels and allow you to feel more comfortable asking them for help with tasks such as caring for your plants or pets when you go on vacation.

Being friends with your neighbors is a unique opportunity to strengthen personal bonds and improve your



Jimmy, Lauren, Theo, and Darren in their Brooklyn neighborhood

sense of belonging. Like Mr. Fred Rogers said, “All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we’re giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That’s one of the things that connects us as neighbors—in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver.”

The Upside of Anxiety: Harness Its Energy to Improve Your Future

James H. O'Keefe, MD

When Joan's mom, Kathleen, was about 40 years old, a doctor told her she had type 2 diabetes. This shocked Kathleen, who had always thought of herself as healthy. At first, she was frightened and even a bit depressed. But soon she transformed her anxiety into dogged determination to understand nutrition so that she could use her diet to make herself healthy again. Joan recalls her mother frequently sitting on a bed with several open books strewn in a circle around her, avidly reading everything she could find from reputable sources about nutrition and health. Kathleen's glucose levels quickly normalized, and her diabetes was cured—never to return.

In fact, Kathleen figured out long before modern science did that the best eating style for health and longevity was a Mediterranean diet. Joan grew up eating lots of fresh vegetables, berries and nuts, beans, fish, and seafood, along with large salads dressed with extra-virgin olive oil and red-wine vinegar. Kathleen's angst-motivated mission to find and follow the healthiest diet enabled her to live to age 99. Joan was an only child, and her father, Leonard was about the least anxious person I've ever known; he lived to age 94. Paradoxically, Kathleen's distress about being diagnosed with diabetes was a key turning point that changed for the better the trajectory of all three of their lives. The diet Kathleen fed her family kept Leonard vigorous for over nine decades and inspired Joan to become a dietician.

Jim Morrison said, "You shouldn't take life too seriously; nobody gets out alive anyway." This existential angst—worry that goes along with being alive—is unavoidable. It's part of what makes life so precious, and it is a powerful motivator to accomplish big things. My kids—as they were growing up, and even today—complain about their anxiety as if it were an illness. Their generation grew up thinking anxiety is dangerous and destructive, and that the solution to its discomfort is to eradicate it. I tell them, "Look around; the people who make a real positive difference and who change the world for the better, they are generally not well-adjusted individuals." Abraham Lincoln was pathologically depressed most of his life, and it goes without saying that he wasn't on Prozac. Mikel Jollett is a brilliant author and singer-songwriter who has struggled with anxiety, anger, and depression since being raised in an orphanage in a commune/cult in Northern California in the 70s. His memoir *Hollywood Park* is one of my favorite audiobooks. He says, "Take the pain and make it useful. The longing, the fear, the heartache, and dread. The ability to see these broken pieces of yourself like cracks in your armor through which you are better able to see the world: too broken to be normal, just broken enough to see beauty." Many successful people have learned to harness stress, nervousness, and fear to fuel their creative ventures. Face it—you are going to have some chronic anxiety, even if it's subconscious, and that's okay. It's even a good thing if you can redirect that energy to become more productive.

When we accept that anxiety is unavoidable in our day-to-day lives and understand it is meant to be a useful emotion, we can transform it into a positive force for our well-being. Kathleen learned how to leverage her distressing anxiety, rather than be overwhelmed by it, and this allowed her to discover fundamental insights about how to eat for longevity 50 years before modern science finally figured it out. This can be a lesson for all of us in our struggles with inescapable anxiety. If Kathleen had complained to her physician that she was paralyzed by worry about her diabetes, he probably would have prescribed her Valium, a benzodiazepine. This would have kept her "comfortably numb" but would have also melted away her energy and motivation to figure out her own solution. Benzodiazepines like Valium, Xanax, and Ativan are addictive and decades of use might increase risk of depression and dementia.

Many of my healthiest patients have had a coronary stent, coronary bypass surgery, AFib, or an abnormal calcium score. They used their health scare to motivate them to follow our advice about diet/exercise/lifestyle and are disciplined about taking their meds and supplements as prescribed. Most of these folks are healthier than ever and destined to lead long lives. When we chronically medicate our worries with substances like tobacco, marijuana, and/or alcohol, we short-circuit our natural coping mechanisms for dealing with stress, and those skills atrophy. Play, pets, meditation, music, dance, yoga, reaching out and connecting with

family and friends, prayer, attending religious services, exercise, and outdoor activities like gardening can all be remarkably effective for dissipating anxiety. If you are not harnessing your worries as a motivation to think up solutions and make changes, you are doomed to a downward spiral of unsolved problems and maybe even issues related to dependence and addiction.

That sense of worry is there for a reason—to spur us on and boost our creativity and problem solving. It helped our ancient ancestors endure in the wild, and it is also essential for your health and survival today. Although stress and fear are uncomfortable emotions, they can be valuable motivators to imagine an uncertain outlook and do things now to make the future safer and better. In that way, anxiety is inextricably linked to hope.

Shortly after our son Evan started medical school, he called home in a distressed tone: "I don't think I can get through this. There are just so many opportunities to fail." I reassured him and used a quote from Dan Harris that I often recite to myself: "The price of security is insecurity." Evan leaned into his sense of self-doubt to motivate him to pay close attention during lectures and study endlessly during his medical school years. By accepting his insecurity, he ensured that he would not fail, and secured his future.

Beliefs have the power to shape reality. When you cultivate a mindset that focuses on the potential benefits of stress, it can make all the difference and transform a toxic emotion into a force for personal growth and newfound strength.

If you can change your mindset about the emotion of anxiety so that you think of it not as an illness that needs to be eradicated but instead as a signal



Dr. O'Keefe

of potential trouble on the horizon and a tool to motivate change, it can be a source of ingenuity and willpower.

Your brain is designed to learn from stress, whereby challenging experiences can help you grow stronger and wiser. Emotional stress can provide focus and energy. Navigating your way through a stressful period together with others, whether at home or at work, can help you bond and strengthen close relationships.

Prisons and graveyards are full of people who didn't have enough anxiety. They saw an unlocked car that was running with nobody in it and decided, "Heck yeah! What could go wrong?" Or they drove their motorcycle 140 miles an hour because they felt immortal. Or smokers who told themselves, "Lung cancer could never happen to me." Anxiety is a warning sign of danger ahead. Stress is a motivator to make you more resourceful. Forget about trying to be comfortably numb; instead channel your anxiety into actions to make your life better.

Bruce Springsteen in his book *Born to Run* writes about how his demons compel him to keep striving. When he stops pushing so hard to be a great musician, he becomes gloomy and despondent. Long ago, "The Boss" had enough fame and money to sit back and lazily coast through the rest of his life in luxury. But that makes him depressed. Instead, Bruce transforms his

melancholy into a perpetual drive to create, entertain, and be a spokesperson for noble causes; he's determined to make the best of his life while he is still here.

Deep down, you already understand that trying to eliminate anxiety in your life is futile. Stress pops up daily, so forget about getting rid of it. Instead, focus on getting better at recognizing stress, embracing it, and using it to mobilize you into action to either solve the problem or neutralize the harmful effects of stress on your system. However, if your anxiety feels overwhelming and unmanageable, speak with your primary care provider or psychiatrist about safe and effective drug options.

For people struggling with debilitating anxiety, SSRIs like escitalopram can help improve neurochemical imbalances caused by repetitive/internalized thought patterns. Rather than making individuals numb, low-dose SSRIs often calm the mind, allowing them to think more clearly and try to incorporate the above-mentioned lifestyle/mindset suggestions to get the most enjoyment out of life.

Lastly, omega-3 and curcumin are two over-the-counter natural supplements that help reduce inflammation in the brain and therefore help reduce anxiety and depression. Rather than temporarily dulling the angst, they make your brain better at problem solving so you won't be paralyzed by stress. I take both daily and strongly encourage my family and friends to take them; I also recommend them for most of my patients. Talk to your health care provider about whether omega-3 and curcumin supplements are okay for you. These are potent tools that boost your mood and can help you transform emotional stress into a productive mindset.

Disclosure: Dr. James O'Keefe is Chief Medical Officer for CardioTabs, a supplement company whose products include curcumin and omega-3.



Sex and Well-being Part 1: Health Dividends from an Active Sex Life

John Camoriano, MD, Mayo Clinic—Phoenix Campus

John and Jennifer Camoriano

Intimacy is so tightly linked with heart health—and vice versa—that we represent Valentine's Day and romantic love with images of the human heart. It should not come as a surprise therefore that sexuality and heart health are closely linked. It is time to provide a discourse on the health benefits of intercourse ... and more.

In this first of a two-part series, I will share data on the connection between sexual activity and health. In the second part—to be released in a future issue—I will discuss common sexual difficulties and strategies to manage them so that we all may, regardless of the challenges, enjoy the health benefits of sex. The internet is awash in misinformation about this hot topic; we will provide scientifically valid information that was obtained from reliable and academic sources.

Without sex, none of us would have been blessed by the miracle of being alive. Almost none of us will exit this life without at least some participation in this fascinating but confusing, alluring but frightening, and controversial but exhilarating, activity. The question is, how does sexual activity affect overall health?

A lifestyle that includes regular sexual activity bestows a host of scientifically documented benefits to well-being and longevity. Here are just some of the perks.

1. Sexual activity is associated with better life expectancy. Several longitudinal studies of varying duration have demonstrated an inverse relationship between sexual activity and mortality risk in the general population across multiple different countries and racial groups.

A study from the *British Medical Journal*, "Sex and Death: Are They Related?," followed 918 men aged 45 to 59 for 10 years. During the study, those who had highest frequency of orgasm had half the all-cause mortality compared to men with the lowest frequency of orgasm. For every 100 orgasms per year, there was a 36% reduction in death from any cause during the next decade.

In a 2017 Australian study, sexual activity was assessed repeatedly over seven years among 1,705 men aged 70 and older. It was observed that men who did not have sexual

activity had a twofold increase in mortality compared with sexually active men.

Participants in the Duke First Longitudinal Study of Aging included 252 men and women aged 60 to 94. It was a relatively small study but had long follow up. Over 25 years, sexual activity was a significant predictor of longevity in men, but not in women.

Wait. What about women? They seem to benefit too when enough subjects are included in the analysis. A 14-year study involving 2,453 Taiwanese men and women aged 65 or older also suggested an inverse relationship between sexual activity and mortality risk. Participants showed a 33% reduction in mortality for sexually active men and a 16% reduction in mortality in sexually active women compared to sexually inactive people. They showed a dose-response association too. Those who had sex once a week or more had the lowest mortality; those who had sex between once a week and once a month had the next lowest mortality. The highest

mortality was in those who had sex less frequently than once a month or not at all.

Is it that only healthy people have more sex, or is it that sex makes people healthier? More study is needed to determine cause and effect. But some of the following benefits may give us a clue that sexual activity itself is conferring vigor and longevity.

2. Sexual activity improves resting Heart Rate Variability (HRV).

Why is resting HRV important? Resting HRV reflects heart rate fluctuations in response to life's demands. Higher resting HRV is predictive of lower mortality rates among both normal people and those with a history of heart disease. Resting HRV is driven largely by the parasympathetic (vagal) nervous system, which also plays a key role in sexual arousal. This vagal branch of the autonomic nervous system, also known as the "feed and breed" response, balances the "fight or flight" response in a yin-yang relationship. A study of healthy German women and men found that higher sexual intercourse frequency was associated with greater HRV.

3. Sexual activity after a heart attack is associated with improved survival.

According to a 2020 study published in *The American Journal of Medicine*, there was an inverse association with sexual activity and mortality after a heart attack. People who had sex more than once a week had the lowest mortality, followed by those who had sex once a week or less, compared to those who had no sex at all. The reduction in risk of death for the most sexually active was about 30%.

If you have just had a heart attack, please don't jump in the sack without first checking with your doctor to make sure your heart is ready for that kind of activity.

4. Sexual activity improves blood pressure. Multiple studies from Germany found that greater frequency of sexual intercourse was associated with lower resting blood pressure. In an Italian study of married men, those with newly diagnosed high blood pressure had a frequency of sexual intercourse 25% lower than a control group of married men who had normal blood pressure.

How does getting frisky lower blood pressure? Sexual activity appears to blunt stress. In a study of healthy adults, blood pressure was recorded at baseline, and then after giving a speech to an unsupportive audience for five minutes (plus five minutes of time-pressured verbal arithmetic). Persons who engaged in sexual intercourse during the two-week period prior to the stressful episode had a markedly diminished blood pressure increase during and after the anxiety-provoking speech than did persons engaging in no sexual activities beforehand. They also had faster recovery from the stressor.

5. Sexual activity bolsters the immune system. Immunoglobulin A (IgA) levels help fend off respiratory infections like influenza

or COVID. In one study, 112 college students were divided into four categories of sexual activity, from none to very frequent—three or more times per week (yes, these were college students!). Then saliva samples were tested for the valuable immunity-boosting IgA. Individuals in the frequent-sex group showed significantly higher levels of IgA than the other three groups, which were comparable in other aspects.

6. Sexual activity improves female pelvic health. Women who orgasm during menstruation have a lower risk of developing endometriosis and have more regular periods. Sexual activity is also good for bladder control because when you have sex, your pelvic floor muscles get exercise. Vaginal intercourse helps to maintain vaginal and pelvic function. It appears that chemicals in semen such as prostaglandin PGE1 may help maintain vaginal oxygenation and blood flow. Improving blood flow could be expected to support sexual response and vaginal health (and perhaps general health).

7. Sexual activity may reduce prostate cancer risk. Increased frequency of male ejaculation has been shown to reduce the future risk of prostate cancer. A 2016 study of more than 31,000 men with more than 18 years of follow up showed that men who ejaculated more than 21 times per month had 20% less prostate cancer than men who ejaculated only four to seven times per month.

8. Sexual intercourse reduces depression. A study of young women in the United States found depression worsens with increasing time since last sexual intercourse.



HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

9. Having a happier spouse leads to a longer life for YOU. It has been long known that married people live longer than single people, though some have joked, “You don’t really live longer; it just seems longer.” A recent study of 4,374 couples followed for up to eight years showed that having a happy spouse was associated with a 13% lower mortality risk. The effect was independent of socioeconomic status and baseline health. What does this have to do with sex? We throw this one in because most couples subconsciously know what would make their spouse happy. If you’re looking for a longer, healthier life for you and your partner, focus on making your spouse happy, including bringing more love and joy to her or him in the bedroom.

10. Sexual activity, when aided by erectile medications, may lead to a reduction in major adverse cardiac events. A 2023 study in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* comprising 23,816 men with erectile dysfunction (ED) reported that heart attack, stroke, and

cardiac death were lower by 13% in men who used ED drugs like sildenafil or tadalafil. The men who used Viagra®-like drugs had lower rates of bypass surgery, stents, heart failure, chest pain, and cardiac death compared to the men with ED who didn’t use ED drugs. There was a 25% reduction in overall mortality, and it was dose dependent—the greatest reduction in risk of death during follow up was noted in men who used the Viagra-like drugs the most, with a 50% mortality reduction compared to those who used the drugs the least. Although the authors postulated the drugs provided direct health benefits, it seems more likely that it was the increased sexual activity made possible by the ED drugs that was the real longevity secret.

11. Orgasm improves sleep. Getting enough good sleep makes it easier for us to have better sex, and at the same time, an active sex life will improve the quality of our sleep. A survey of 778 adults found that



about two-thirds of women and men reported that they fell asleep faster and experienced deeper sleep following sex. Dr. Justin, a physician with expertise in sexual function, writes, “If you’re having trouble falling asleep, consider taking matters into your own hands, so to speak. For most people, self-pleasure to the point of orgasm is a handy way of getting to sleep—and staying asleep all night long. And make your partner’s sleep a priority, too. Research finds that, for women in relationships, getting one extra hour of sleep on a given night translates to a 14% increase in the likelihood of having sex with their partner the next day.”

Ancient Practice; New Perspective *continued from page 3*

form of mental restoration, separate from sleep, that most of us are deprived of. Most people toggle between beta and delta (high-function and sleep), missing all the states of reprogramming and creativity in the theta and alpha domains. Meditation is a chemical practice. It’s a deep study of our relationship to self, and how we can tap into those restorative brain states. Tuning your conscious states, or knowing how to switch gears from functioning to reprogramming, is the beginning of self-mastery.

Yoga is a brilliant way to approach meditation. It reduces anxiety and depression by bestowing a reflective state. Just be sure not to skip *savasana*; I recommend at least five minutes of stillness and silence to close each yoga practice. Ten minutes is even better. Stillness comes easily directly after movement, so *savasana* is a prime opportunity to engage in meditation. Motionlessness without outside distractions encourages people to be fully present in the moment. Intentionally dropping into the now can help diminish feelings of worry and angst in the long term.

I’m still working full time, building my career, and living in New York City—just as I was three years ago. But today, everything’s different. I carry a little token in my back pocket. I hold a thin, fragile thread tied to joy, and the more I tug on that thread, the stronger it becomes. Even if it’s only 15 minutes, brief but grounding, I’m a better person because of it. My daily yoga and meditation practice is a ritual that I deeply cherish, and something, that in some sense, saved me.



Living Wholeheartedly

Things that generate pleasure can often be expensive, but things that generate happiness are dirt cheap.

—Robert Lustig

Comparison is the thief of joy.

—Teddy Roosevelt

Attention is the most basic form of love.

—John Tarrant

Time and attention are not something we can replenish. They are what our life is. When we offer our time and attention, we are giving our lives.

—Marc Schulz

Over and over and over, the Stoics talk about community, partnership, fellowship, neighborliness, and our relation to a larger whole. It’s the belief in the mutual interdependence among everything in the universe, that we are all one.

—Ryan Holiday

To be alive is to be vulnerable.

—Madeleine L’Engle

There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.

—Leonard Cohen

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.

—Jane Howard

People get old when they stop thinking about the future. If you want to find someone’s true age, listen to them. If they talk about the past and they talk about all the things that they did, they’ve gotten old. If they talk about their dreams, their aspirations, what they’re still looking forward to, they’re young.

—Ric Elias

Dogs make me happy. Humans make my head hurt.

—Popular T-shirt

Keeping your body healthy is an expression of gratitude to the whole cosmos—the trees, the clouds, everything.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

If you want to go fast, go alone. And if you want to go far, go together.

—African proverb

Your life is a miracle. You are a miracle. Wake up and live like it!

—Jenna Wolf

Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Every person I meet is my master in some point, and in that I learn from them.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Consider detaching from the story of your life as it’s happening. A romantic relationship breaks up when you thought it was going well. A serious health issue arises. You lose a job you care about. As hard as it may seem, seek to experience these events as if you’re watching a movie. You’re observing a dramatic scene where the protagonist faces a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Instead of sinking into the pain of heartbreak, or the stress of being laid off, or the grief of loss, if practicing detachment, the response might be, “I wasn’t expecting that plot twist. I wonder what’s going to happen to our hero next.” There’s always a next scene, and that next scene may be of great beauty and fulfillment. The hard times were the required setup to allow these new possibilities to come into being.

—Rick Rubin

Health is the ability to realize our avowed and unavowed dreams.

—Moshe Feldenkrais

Judge each day not by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you plant.

—William Arthur Ward

Coming to Your Senses Before It's Too Late

James H. O'Keefe, MD



photo by Perry Ralph

Even as a medical student, I noticed that a major factor that makes people seem old is the gradual erosion of the astoundingly great sensory capabilities that we humans generally have when we are young. These are phenomenal data-gathering organs that keep us informed, safe, happy, and productive. Yet like many of life's blessings, we tend to take our five senses for granted until a problem arises with one or more of them.

In kindergarten, we learned that we have five senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Sensory organs, including eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin, are linked to the brain via nerves that transmit electrochemical messages about the world around us. As we age, our bodies undergo a variety of changes that can lead to the gradual loss of acuity of our five senses. Hearing tends to diminish, vision can become impaired, olfactory (smell) and taste senses are blunted, feet and hands can go numb, and balance can become unsteady. While some of these changes can be a natural part of the aging process, there are steps we can take to preserve our sensorium and remain keenly perceptive of the world around us, even with the passing decades.

These days, we spend too much time indoors, sitting and staring at a screen and living life vicariously while watching actors. Virtual reality pales in comparison to rich real-life sensory experiences. If you want to revitalize your life, focus on tuning into your five senses, like Gretchen Rubin did when writing her new book, *Life in Five Senses*. As an author, Gretchen realized she was spending too much time stuck in her head, and that she'd allowed the vital sensations of life to slip away unnoticed. This epiphany awakened her from a state of foggy preoccupation with screens and books into a world rediscovered by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching more real life.

Hearing is one of the senses that is most affected by aging. As we exit our teenage years, our ability to hear very high-pitched (>15,000 Hz) sounds predictably decreases. But many



people over age 50 get progressive age-related hearing loss (aka presbycusis) so that hearing higher-pitched voices (e.g., women and children) and deciphering speech becomes more difficult, especially when there is background noise, like at a party or a game. This can be frustrating and isolating. Hearing loss can also increase risk of Alzheimer's disease, so it's very important to protect your ears. Safeguard your hearing by wearing earplugs when around loud noises. I have learned to wear my Apple Air Pods Pro when I am in a noisy environment, such as when using a chainsaw or leaf blower, attending a live concert or fireworks display, or flying on an airplane. When they are in noise-cancelling mode, these ear buds are amazingly effective at reducing noise and protecting ears, even when the decibel level becomes dangerously loud. Other options are good old-fashioned ear plugs and over-the-ear headphones. Regular hearing tests can help detect any issues early on, and hearing aids can improve hearing and quality of life and may even help avoid dementia.

Vision is another sense that often dims with age. As we get older, the lens of the eye becomes less flexible, making it harder to focus on objects up close. This condition, known as presbyopia, is a normal part of aging and can be corrected with glasses or contact lenses.

Additionally, regular eye exams can help detect macular degeneration, cataracts, or glaucoma, which can be treated with surgery or medication.

Olfactory ability—the sense of smell—can also be affected by aging. The number of olfactory receptor cells in the nose tends to decrease with age, making it harder to detect scents. This can have a negative impact on our senses of both taste and smell, lessening our enjoyment of food and our ability to detect potentially dangerous odors, like gas leaks. Some studies suggest that regular exposure to a variety of smells and making a special effort to notice aromas may help preserve olfactory function. I love to use essential oils and often put a drop or two of cedarwood, pine, eucalyptus, or peppermint on the skin of my forearm.

Numbness in the hands and feet, as well as poor balance, are also common issues associated with aging. These symptoms can be caused by a variety of factors, including nerve damage and loss of muscle mass. Regular weight training can help maintain muscle strength and balance, while activities like yoga or tai chi can improve flexibility and balance. Additionally, avoiding tobacco and excessive alcohol consumption can help prevent nerve damage and maintain overall health.

While aging inevitably leads to some loss of sensory acuity, there are proactive steps we can take to maintain our quality of life as we get older. Regular health screenings, a diet low in sugar and refined carbs but high in antioxidants, fiber, and polyphenols, and a vigorous lifestyle that includes daily outdoor physical activity,

interactive play, and deep, restful sleep can prevent or mitigate the effects of age-related sensory decline. By being proactive about our health and following a healthy lifestyle, we may be able to enjoy a perceptive and discerning life for 100 years.

Steps to Keep Your Senses Razor-Sharp and Youthful

1. Use olive oil daily. There is growing evidence to suggest that consuming extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) high in polyphenols may help preserve brain and eye health. Polyphenols are a type of antioxidant found in plant-based foods, including olive oil, that have been shown to have numerous health benefits. Because these potent health-boosting compounds are dissolved in oil, they are transported across the cell membrane, which is composed of a lipid bi-layer. This allows these polyphenols to diffuse into the brain, heart, skin, and the walls of the blood vessels, where the molecules have a rejuvenating effect.

The polyphenols in EVOO don't just have a protective effect on the brain, but also on its accessories—eyes, ears, and nose. The antioxidants in EVOO have been shown to protect against age-related macular degeneration, a leading cause of vision loss in older adults. Polyphenols may also protect the optic nerve, which can be damaged by oxidative stress and inflammation. Not all EVOOs are created equal, and the polyphenol content varies widely depending on factors such as the ripeness of the olives at harvest, type of processing/storage, and



freshness. To ensure you are getting an EVOO high in polyphenols, look for a high-quality oil that has been independently tested for its polyphenol content. These polyphenols give a bitter aftertaste to EVOO, which you can learn to recognize. The stronger the black pepper-like burn at the back of your throat, the higher the antioxidant level.

2. Avoid tobacco and marijuana. When you smoke, the chemicals contained in fumes from burning tobacco or marijuana gradually damage the olfactory receptors in your nose, which can lead to a decreased sense of smell. This can also adversely affect your sense of taste, because most of the flavors we perceive when eating or drinking come from our sense of smell. Smoking can also have negative effects on your sight and hearing. The chemicals in cigarette smoke can cause damage to the blood vessels in your eyes, leading to a higher risk of age-related macular degeneration and cataracts. Smoking can also cause hearing loss by damaging the sensitive hair cells in the inner ear, leading to a decreased ability to hear high-frequency sounds.

3. Consume curcumin. This is a compound found in turmeric—a spice commonly used in Indian cuisine. Curcumin has been studied for its potential health benefits, including its effects on the eyes. Studies have shown that curcumin may have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects, which are helpful for maintaining eye health. In animal studies, curcumin has been shown to protect against the development of cataracts and delay the progression of macular degeneration. When I started taking curcumin about 4 years ago,



my vision improved from 20/20 to 20/15. One small study found that curcumin improved visual acuity and reduced inflammation in patients with diabetic retinopathy.

Some studies suggest that curcumin may have a protective effect on the auditory system and could help preserve hearing. A study found that curcumin supplementation improved hearing thresholds and reduced hearing loss in rats exposed to noise-induced hearing damage. Another study showed that curcumin could reduce hearing loss caused by ototoxic drugs in rats.

4. Avoid diabetes and prediabetes.

Eating too much sugar and putting on excess weight around your waistline increases risk of prediabetes and diabetes. Diabetes can damage the nerves and blood vessels throughout the body, including those responsible for the senses of smell, taste, hearing, vision, and touch. Even repeated glucose spikes in people without diabetes can cause damage to the nerves that power our five senses. Diabetes can adversely affect hearing and vision because high glucose levels can damage the blood vessels in the eyes and ears, leading to a higher risk of diabetic retinopathy (disease of the retina) and hearing loss. Over time, these conditions can lead to a decreased ability to see and hear clearly. Additionally, diabetes can also cause peripheral neuropathy, which is damage to the nerves responsible for the sense of touch. This can cause numbness, tingling, and a decreased ability to feel sensation in the hands and feet.

5. Eat fresh berries, carrots, tomatoes, and leafy greens. Drink a glass of Low Sodium V8 juice every morning. The lutein, lycopene, anthocyanidins, polyphenols, and zeaxanthin in



colorful produce are highly beneficial for preserving the vitality of your five senses. Studies have shown that consuming berries, such as blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries may help to reduce the risk of age-related loss of hearing and vision. Berries, which are also a good source of vitamin C and fiber, are ideally eaten with a natural protein food like unsweetened yogurt and/or nuts.

Use 'Em or Lose 'Em

I try to tune into my senses every chance I get. I make a point to listen to music I love—almost nothing brings me more joy than finding a new song on Spotify that I'm compelled to play on repeat. On my morning walk with the dogs, I listen to the birdsong as the sun rises. I love to stare at clouds sailing overhead as I am backstroking across an outdoor pool, or smell the lilacs in May, or savor the tangy taste of fresh berries, or gaze up in wonder at the night sky. I am sure you have many favorite sensory experiences—focus on them. Immersing yourself in sensations can make you feel more alive, and helps to train and maintain the brain's sensory processing abilities.

Stimulate Your Senses

Seeking out vivid real-world sensory input will stimulate neural connections, reshape neural pathways and promote brain plasticity, all of which might be helpful in preserving your five senses.

Sight

- Take a scenic walk or hike.
- Watch a sunrise or sunset.
- Go birding or observe other wildlife.

Hearing

- Listen to music.
- Attend a live concert or musical performance.
- Participate in a guided meditation, sound bath, or relaxation session.
- Focus on and appreciate the sounds of nature.
- Engage in conversation with loved ones or friends.

Taste

- Try new foods and flavors.
- Participate in a cooking class.
- Explore different cuisines from around the world.

Smell

- Visit a flower or botanical garden.
- Cook with fragrant herbs and spices.
- Enjoy the scent of freshly brewed coffee or tea.

Touch

- Walk barefoot on grass or sand.
- Get a massage or spa treatment.
- Learn a new craft or hobby, such as pottery or woodworking.
- Enjoy more intimacy and sexual activity.



Creed for a Shipshape Lifestyle



John Lindsay

John Lindsay is a remarkable character who served in the Navy for 32 years, including seven years aboard a nuclear submarine, where the sailors would remain submerged in the dark abyss for months at a time in a cold and claustrophobic metal tube that contained about one-half million Curies of radioactivity, which is as scary as it sounds. At 65 years of age, he just this year transitioned from working as an attorney to being a farmer. For decades, he has been gradually writing and living by a personal creed that he says to himself every morning upon awakening. I met John recently while we were attending the wedding of his nephew Aaron, and he shared his creed with me, which translated from Latin means "unconquerable spirit of life."

photo by Rocky Mountain Joe®, Boulder, Colorado

Invictus Spiritus Vitae

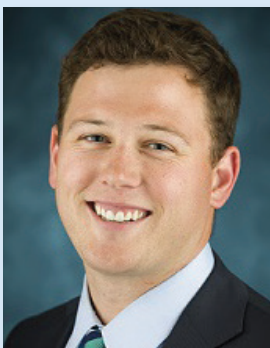
John J. Lindsay

- Rise early—conquer the morning, conquer the day.
- Make your bed.
- Watch the sun rise.
- Stand tall.
- Run a tight ship.
- You are the gatekeeper of your destiny.
- Today, be the greatest version of yourself.
- Be organized, orderly, fastidious, and thorough.
- Be constantly industrious.
- Always show up.
- Cometh the hour, cometh the man (in a crisis, often a hero arises). Be that person.
- Be on time.
- Look sharp, feel sharp.
- Fly *your* plane—trust and rely upon *your* own judgment.
- Never complain, never explain.
- Own it—no blame, no excuses, never lie.
- No false logic. No stories.
- Be faithful to the facts.
- No gossip. No affectations.
- Deeds not words.
- If it's to be, it's up to me.
- Do less, better.
- Shun no toil.
- Do lists and leading tasks.
- Contemplate your next four hours.
- Work hard and steadily.
- Stay the course.
- Do what you can, then do one more.
- Do your best work.
- Do something you don't want to do.
- Do the right thing right now.
- There is time enough for everything that matters.
- Never be tired, never give up.
- Make something with your hands.
- Look at it, then figure it out.
- Fix broken things.
- Tend your flock (family).
- Tend your garden (yourself).
- Don't eat junk. Stay hungry.
- Buy experiences, not things.
- Explore, lean over your edge, expand your consciousness.
- Know your core values.
- Follow your moral compass and stand by your convictions.
- Spend less than you earn.
- Do and say everything with intention.
- Do random acts of kindness.
- Slow down and reflect daily.
- Quietly endure but have boundaries.
- Do not suffer fools.
- It's never too late to have a happy childhood. So look at the sky, and feel the wind. Touch the sun, clouds, trees, and moon.
- Smile and breathe.
- Memento Mori* (remember, you must die), but do not go gently into that good night.
- Capture one more experience before departing.
- Remember what Virgil said: "Death twitches my ear. 'Live,' he whispers; 'I am coming.'"

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Dr. Patrick J. Miller has comprehensive training in both inpatient care—including intensive care and general cardiology—and outpatient cardiovascular care—including prevention, ischemic heart disease, arrhythmias, and heart failure. He is a graduate of the University of Kansas School of Medicine and completed a

fellowship in general cardiology at the University of Chicago Medicine with an emphasis on multi-modality cardiac imaging. His research has focused on cardiovascular manifestations of COVID-19, echocardiography assessment of aortic pulsatility index (API), and stress testing and ischemic evaluation in patients undergoing renal transplantation. Dr. Miller is a member of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society.



Dr. Elizabeth A. Grier specializes in general cardiology and interventional cardiology. She graduated with highest distinction from Wayne State University School of Medicine and completed fellowships in cardiovascular disease and interventional cardiology at UT Southwestern Medical Center, and structural heart and valve

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