

→ 60 WAYS TO LIVE LONGER STRONGER BETTER

2021 offers an incredible opportunity to improve your health and your life. Here's how to seize it.

BY NICOLE PAJER WITH CLINT CARTER

Automated behaviors—making the coffee, reading the news, playing a game on a phone, checking email—account for nearly half of the average person's daily activities, according to research by Wendy Wood, a psychology professor at the University of Southern California and author of *Good Habits, Bad Habits*. “We do the same thing in the same context almost every day,” she says. “And we do it without thinking about it.”

Intentionally or not, you've spent the past year or so creating new, often unhealthy habits. But as the world gets back to normal, we're presented with an unusual opportunity to reset our patterns. Here are 60 ideas from health experts. Just remember: Your brain requires up to three months of daily repetition to develop the neural pathway that automates a behavior. “But the biggest gain comes during that first month,” Wood says. “So it's important to stick with it initially.” Be persistent: The habits you set now may be the habits you stick with for life.

BOOST YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

1 | Make weekly exercise dates.

You can easily talk yourself out of a workout, but it's more difficult to do when you have a standing commitment to work out with a friend. Overall, aim for 150-plus minutes of weekly moderate-intensity aerobic exercise. Exercisers are 45 percent less likely to develop Alzheimer's disease, the Alzheimer's Drug Discovery Foundation reports.

2 | Eat a daily salad. Just one serving of leafy greens a day was associated with slower cognitive decline, a 2017 study by Rush University Medical Center showed.

3 | Have a superberry dessert.

Dark-colored berries like blueberries and blackberries contain compounds that fight inflammation and help protect your brain. One cup of blueberries consumed daily for six months can also lower your risk of cardiovascular disease by 12 to 15 percent, according to 2019 research in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Try berries and plain yogurt as your go-to after-dinner treat.

4 | Develop a green tea habit.

Especially if your favorite drink is soda. Researchers have found that people who consumed sweetened beverages were more likely to develop Alzheimer's, while some studies suggest green tea might promote cognitive functions.

5 | Join a book club.

Those who engage their mind most often through intellectual activities such as playing games or reading were 29 percent less likely to develop dementia during a five-year follow-up period, reports a 2018 Hong Kong study of adults 65 and older that was published in *JAMA Psychiatry*.



6 | Once a week, try something new. Listen to new music, learn some words in another language or sign up for a lecture. Lifelong learning is associated with improved brain health, and staying mentally active is linked to delayed onset of cognitive decline.

GO TO SLEEP EASIER

7 | Make your bed each morning. According to a survey by the National Sleep Foundation, those who make their bed nearly every day were more likely to report getting a good night's sleep.

8 | Change your bedsheets every Sunday. Allergens can disrupt sleep. To cut down on build-up, wash your sheets weekly. Also replace pillows at least every two years and mattresses every 10, both for hygiene and for comfort (they can break down over time).

9 | Face your alarm clock toward the wall. And place your cellphone facedown. Artificial

light disrupts sleep. Instead of night-lights, keep a flashlight next to your bed to use when needed.

10 | Turn the fan on when the lights go off. Or invest in a sound machine. Snoring partners, traffic and other ambient noise can cause you to wake during the night and experience more daytime sleepiness and fatigue. A source of white noise, like a fan, can help modulate that problem.

11 | Enjoy some chamomile tea at bedtime. In a randomized, double-blind study from the University of Michigan, those taking a chamomile extract twice a day zonked out 16 minutes faster, on average.

PUMP UP YOUR HEART HEALTH

12 | Brush and floss regularly. Swollen or bleeding gums caused by bad oral health may lead to microorganisms traveling into the bloodstream, which could cause inflammation and heart damage. Older adults who skimped on oral hygiene were 20 to 35 per-

cent more likely to die during a 17-year study done by University of Southern California researchers.

13 | Try doing 10 minutes of resistance training every morning. That adds up to a truly healthy week of muscle strengthening. In research published in 2017 in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, women (average age 62) who did just 20 to 59 minutes of muscle-strengthening exercises each week were 29 percent less likely to die during the 12-year study than those who did none. Low muscle strength is associated with an elevated risk of death in people 50 and older, regardless of general health levels. Even cardio exercise doesn't appear to protect you if you allow your strength levels to deteriorate.



14 | Be an avocado sneak. Replace half the butter in your baking recipes with mashed avocado, and sneak this source of healthy monounsaturated fatty acids (MUFAs) into smoothies and spreads whenever you can. Replacing saturated fats with MUFAs can help lower LDL (bad) cholesterol.

15 | Walk off your cravings. Smoking puts you at a higher risk for heart disease and stroke. When a craving hits, try lacing up your shoes and heading out for a quick walk and breath of fresh air. Who knows? You might just want to keep going!

16 | Put a banana on it. A diet rich in potassium can help offset some of sodium's harmful effects on blood pressure. Add bananas to everything from breakfast cereal to nighttime desserts to PB&J sandwiches. While you're at it, squeeze in more sweet potatoes, tomatoes and oranges.

SHAKE OFF STRESS

17 | Organize one thing each day—your handbag, a bedside table, a drawer. You'll feel one chore is behind you, which is helpful in feeling less pressured in general.

18 | Take a daily "do not disturb" break. Whether at your desk, in your kitchen or on a deck outside, close your eyes and do not open them for anyone. Even five minutes will feel wonderful!

19 | Have a go-to ritual that you look forward to when the anxiety is too much. Do something simple like calling a friend, having a cup of tea, playing a song on the piano or sneaking away to read a few pages of a novel.

20 | Enjoy a daily "play snack." Remember what you used to enjoy doing as a kid, and go do that.

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Play with a yo-yo or Rubik's Cube. Go outside and skip rope or swing a golf club. Doodle, build a tower with toy building blocks, fold origami, draw with colored markers. Inject fun in five- to 10-minute chunks during your day as a way to let your brain relax.

CLEAN UP YOUR DIET

21 | Bribe yourself into eating vegetables. Find a salad dressing or dip you love; you'll be more inclined to eat veggies dipped in it.

22 | Store fruit at front of the fridge. When you bring fruit home, immediately wash and put in a bowl at the front of the top shelf rather than in a drawer. The minute you open the fridge, it will prompt you to eat some.

23 | Portion out nuts. In a study that appeared in *BMC Medicine* in 2013 of adults ages 55 to 80 at high cardiovascular risk, those who ate more than three servings of nuts per week were 39 percent less likely to die of any cause over the next five years of the study. The problem is that people often overindulge and eat them straight out of a large bag or can. Prepack them into individual serving sizes in zip-close bags so you have just one serving, not five.

24 | Decorate healthfully. If chocolates are on the table, you'll eat them. Hide the less-healthy snacks and put fruit and nuts on the table within reach.

25 | Snack before you shop. Going to the grocery store on an empty stomach—even if it's a digital store—can lead to unhealthy impulse buys. Have a bite to eat, and while you're eating, write out a shopping list and stick to it.

26 | Drink your fiber. Throw some fruit into the blender right

before it goes bad. Try blending a banana, an orange and spinach; throw in some walnuts for even more fiber and omega-3 fatty acids.

GET BACK IN SHAPE

27 | "Commute" even if you work from home. For many of us, COVID means no commuting to and from the office—which means no moving, either. Use that gift of time for a walk, bike ride or jog. In a study, older women who averaged 4,400 steps per day (compared with just 2,700 steps) were 41 percent less likely to die during a follow-up of 4.3 years.

28 | Set a "stretch timer." Use the timer to prompt you to stand up and get your blood flowing and muscles moving once every hour. Your brain needs oxygen to be productive—so if that's how you can persuade yourself to get up and move, then do so!

29 | Take your phone calls standing or walking. They're called "mobile phones" for a rea-

son. Each time yours rings, stand up or go for a walk. It's an easy way to decrease the amount of time you are sedentary.

SET BOUNDARIES WITH TECHNOLOGY

30 | Turn off all phone notifications. Americans are already checking their phones an average of 96 times a day, according to research from 2019, so you're not going to miss anything.

31 | Establish no-phone zones, starting with no phones at dinner and in the bedroom. One review of 290 studies by a Swedish university researcher that was published in 2018 found an association between frequent mobile phone use and depressive symptoms and sleep problems.

32 | When you wake up, don't reach for your phone. Do something you love instead: Journal, stretch, make coffee or read one book chapter. Get an alarm clock so you won't need to rely on your phone to wake up.

33 | Go screen-free one day a week. "My family and I have turned off all screens for one full day each week for 11 years, and we spend the day doing things we love. It's our favorite day of the week," says author Tiffany Shlain.

IMPROVE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

34 | Do the dishwasher boogie. Pick a chore you both hate, and turn it into a nightly dance party. Dancing together in the kitchen or anywhere in your house will remind you of how much fun you both are.

35 | Make eye contact over dinner. Hold each other's gaze for 60 seconds. It will help you find the grace, beauty or soul in each other's eyes!

36 | Give Friday night thanks. Share three things you're grateful for every Friday night over dinner (or any other night of the week). This is a terrific habit that will give you a new perspective on your family members.

CONQUER LONELINESS

37 | Keep your list of loved ones close. Write three to five names on a Post-it note and stick it on your fridge or near the computer, or post their photos. Typically, we're happier if we feel deeply connected to a few relationships we want to prioritize rather than trying to stay in touch with everyone.

38 | And make short, regular check-ins to loved ones. A study showed that even a few 10-minute phone calls each week can reduce loneliness by 20 percent.

39 | Call one long-lost friend every week. We often talk



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ourselves out of reaching out, thinking we'd be interrupting them or they won't welcome hearing from us. But being the one who initiates contact can be a great gift—and another way to cure loneliness. In a study published in 2020 in the journal *Heart*, male and female cardiac patients who reported feeling lonely were two and three times more likely to die, respectively, a year after their hospital discharge.

40 | Give little gifts. A handwritten card, flowers, an act of service or a texted photo are examples of how we can bring joy to both ourselves and those who may be lonely or anxious.

BECOME MORE RESILIENT

41 | Spend 20 minutes among the trees. That's exactly how much time you need in nature to reduce your level of stress hormones significantly, according to a 2019 study. Additional time reduces it more, but not dramatically, researchers found.

42 | Ask what you can do to help. Make a habit of asking others if you can be of service.

The more connected you are with your community, the more support you will receive during difficult times.

43 | Keep a "no regrets checklist." Write down a list of all the things you've had to put off over the years because of work or raising a family. Then make a timeline for how you'll revisit these goals. Regret is largely avoidable with a little reflection and mindful focus.

44 | Journal a little each day. Keeping a daily gratitude journal in which you can count your blessings will help you keep perspective when hard times hit. At the end of each day, write down three or four things you feel proud of, positive traits you learned about yourself or positive actions you took toward nurturing yourself that day.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR SKIN

45 | Apply SPF 30 sunscreen every day. Even on rainy winter days. Don't forget areas such as your ears, the tops of your feet and the back of your neck. Once you begin a skin protection routine, it allows your skin to start repairing itself.

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53 | Bring plants into your home. Plants not only look beautiful, but many of them, such as bamboo palm and English ivy, can improve air quality.

54 | Choose organic fruits and vegetables when possible. By opting for organic produce, you're reducing your exposure to pesticides. Organic foods may also be more nutritious than their conventional counterparts.

GET YOUR GUT IN SHAPE

55 | Try natural constipation treatments. OTC laxatives can interfere with how you absorb nutrients, an issue of rising importance as you age. Look for ways to add more fiber to your diet, as well as foods that are natural laxatives: Kiwi, prunes and rhubarb are all good options.

56 | Lay off the artificially sweetened gum. For some,

foods sweetened with sucralose or fructose, like sugar-free mints or candies, will cause problems with abdominal pain and cramping, bloating, gas or diarrhea.

57 | Do some diaphragmatic breathing. Stress or anxiety can amplify problems in your GI tract. Work on taking deep breaths that expand your abdomen. This activates the autonomic nervous system and makes your GI tract less sensitive to various stimuli.

58 | Place a step stool in front of the commode. The idea is to get your knees above your hips so that you're in more of a squatting position. This straightens out the lower part of your colon so you can pass stools more easily.

STAY FLEXIBLE AND IMPROVE YOUR POSTURE

59 | Do an hourly posture check. Sit or stand up tall with

your feet flat on the floor. Look straight ahead, bring your shoulders back and down, and slightly tuck in your chin. Hold this position for a count of five. Repeat this several times throughout the day. Doing so will get you used to maintaining a healthier, upright posture.

60 | Change how you carry stuff. The goal is to balance the weight evenly to both sides of your body. When carrying bags in your hands, it's best to have a similar amount of weight on both sides; this will allow you to maintain an upright posture. If you're using a backpack, put on both arm straps to spread the burden equally. You should avoid slinging a heavy bag over just one shoulder. If you are leaning over to the side or bent forward, you are carrying too much of a load. ■

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