Simple Changes, Big Rewards

A practical, easy guide for healthy, happy living

In this report:

Tools to help you reach your health goals

42 different changes to help you exercise, eat healthier, stress less, and more

Choose from easy, medium, and harder changes to make

SPECIAL BONUS SECTION
Control your spending
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Dear Reader,

*Change your life.* Three simple words, no easy task. Yet a richer, healthier life is well within bounds. Small changes can add up to surprisingly big course corrections. But which changes should you make? And how can you stick with them?

As the director of the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine at Harvard Medical School, I know people can achieve remarkable changes in their lives one small step at a time. The day-to-day choices you make influence whether you maintain vitality as you age or develop life-shortening illnesses and disabling conditions like heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and stroke. You may understand exactly what you need to do to enjoy a healthier, happier life: carve out time to exercise, perhaps, or find a way to ratchet down stress. There's just one hitch. You haven't done it yet.

Often, the biggest hurdle is inertia. It's true that it isn't easy to change ingrained habits like driving to nearby locations instead of walking, let's say, or reaching for a donut instead of an apple. However, gradually working toward change improves your odds of success. And once a new, healthy habit takes root, I guarantee it will be hard to break, too.

This Special Health Report highlights small changes you can make across seven spectra to enhance your health and life: stick to exercise, eat healthier, lose weight more effectively, ease stress, control finances, harness the power of positive psychology, and nip unhealthy habits in the bud. The actions you'll undertake range from easy to challenging. If you're starting from scratch, you'll find an encouraging foothold. And if you're already engaging in some healthy behaviors, I can help you up the ante to reap greater benefits.

Guided by this report, month by month you make choices that appeal to you. In every section, “The goal” sets a target. For example, a goal may describe current exercise guidelines, distill the tenets of healthy eating, or point out possibilities for happier living through positive psychology. “Six choices” explains changes that help you move toward the goal.

Ambitious attempts to improve often fail because people try to make too many changes at once or can't implement the changes they've selected. Here, you set your priorities, choosing only the changes that appeal most to you. Try mastering just one change at a time before moving on to the next. Each month, you can select a different goal from the seven goals or decide to explore further changes within the goal you've been working on. The tools provided will help you break down worthwhile changes you want to make into small, manageable steps that set you up for success.

Sincerely,

Edward M. Phillips

*Medical Editor*
In this section, you'll learn how to make changes that last, set realistic goals, and sidestep pitfalls that commonly trip up people when they try to make healthy changes.

Making lasting changes

When you're ready to brush your teeth, you don't hunt everywhere for your toothbrush, do you? Quite possibly, you could find it with your eyes shut because you reach for it every day. That's a habit.

We know from experience that creating new habits takes time and energy. Not much solid scientific evidence tells us exactly how long it may take, however. A preliminary study of 96 participants reporting daily for 12 weeks on new eating, drinking, or activity behaviors they had adopted found it took 18 to 254 days before the action became automatic—that is, a habit. The average was 66 days. Writing in the *European Journal of Social Psychology* and in subsequent interviews, the researchers noted that missing one opportunity to perform the behavior didn't interfere with creating a habit, although frequent inconsistency did prevent success. Perseverance was important.

A new behavior won't become automatic overnight. Yet you may enjoy some of its benefits fairly quickly. Also, as you start to take walks regularly or engage in stress-soothing practices frequently, you'll find you won't feel quite right if you stop. That's a great incentive to continue. So, keep nudging yourself in the direction you'd like to go. And try the following seven tips to help you create long-lasting change.

1. **Dream big.** Audacious goals are compelling. Want to compete in a marathon or triathlon? Lose 50 pounds or just enough to fit into clothes you once loved? With perseverance, encouragement, and support, you can do it. An ambitious aim often inspires others around you. Many will cheer you on. Some will be happy to help in practical ways, such as by training with you or taking on tasks you normally handle in order to free up your time.

2. **Break big dreams into small-enough steps.** Now think tiny. Small steps move you forward to your ultimate goal. Look for surefire bets. Just getting to first base can build your confidence to tackle—and succeed at—more difficult tasks. Don't disdain easy choices. If you start every plan with “Make list,” you’re guaranteed to check one box off quickly. That's no joke: a study on loyalty programs that aim to motivate consumers found giving people two free punches on a frequent-buyer card encouraged repeat business. So break hard jobs down into smaller line items, and enjoy breezing through the easy tasks first (see “Breaking it down,” page 12, for examples).

3. **Understand why you shouldn’t make a change.** That's right. Until you grasp why you’re sticking like a burr to old habits and routines, it may be hard to muster enough energy and will to take a hard left toward change. Unhealthy behaviors like overeating and smoking have immediate, pleasurable payoffs as well as costs. So when you’re considering a change, take time to think it through (see Table 1, at right). You boost your chance of success when the balance of pluses and minuses tips enough to make adopting a new behavior more attractive than standing in place. Engaging in enjoyable aspects of an unhealthy behavior, without the behavior itself, helps too. For example, if you enjoy taking a break while having a smoke, take the break and enjoy it, but find healthier ways to do so.
Otherwise, you’re working against a headwind and are less likely to experience lasting success.

4 Commit yourself. Make yourself accountable through a written or verbal promise to people you don’t want to let down. That will encourage you to slog through tough spots. One intrepid soul created a Facebook page devoted to her goals for weight loss. You can make a less public promise to your partner or child, a teacher, doctor, boss, or friends. Want more support? Post your promise on Facebook, Tweet it to your followers, or seek out folks with like-minded goals online (see “Resources,” page 43).

5 Give yourself a medal. Don’t wait to call yourself a winner until you’ve pounded through the last mile of your big dream marathon or lost every unwanted ounce. Health changes are often incremental. Encourage yourself to keep at it by pausing to acknowledge success as you tick off small and big steps en route to a goal. Blast your favorite tune each time you reach 5,000 steps. Get a pat on the back from your coach or spouse. Ask family and friends to cheer you on. Look for an online support group. Or download the “Attaboy” app for your iPhone or iPod to enjoy a stream of compliments whenever you need to hear it.

6 Learn from the past. Any time you fail to make a change, consider it a step toward your goal. Why? Because each sincere attempt represents a lesson learned. When you hit a snag, take a moment to think about what did and didn’t work. Maybe you took on too big a challenge? If so, scale back to a less ambitious challenge, or break the big one into tinier steps (see “Breaking it down,” page 12). If nailing down 30 consecutive minutes to exercise never seems to work on busy days, break that down by aiming for three 10-minute walks—one before work, one during lunch, one after work—or a 20-minute walk at lunch plus a 10-minute mix of marching, stair climbing, and jumping rope or similar activities slipped into your TV schedule.

### Table 1 Is a change worthwhile?

Sketch out the benefits and costs of the change you’d like to focus on. Remember to include the reasons you’ve been sticking with the status quo. Here we sketch out a simple analysis, using smoking as an example. You can try something similar for each of the changes you would like to make.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT’S GREAT ABOUT SMOKING</th>
<th>WHAT’S GREAT ABOUT QUITTING</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I get to go outside.</td>
<td>• I’ll save a lot of money and be able to spend more on things I enjoy or need.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I get to take a break at work or at home.</td>
<td>• My breath will smell better, and my teeth will be whiter.</td>
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<td>• Nicotine wakes me up or calms me down.</td>
<td>• My senses of taste and smell will come back.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I enjoy the camaraderie with other smokers—it’s like belonging to a club.</td>
<td>• My body will start recovering right away. According to the American Cancer Society, in</td>
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<td>just 20 minutes, my heart rate and blood pressure will drop; in two weeks to three</td>
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<td>months, my circulation and lung function will improve; in one to nine months, I’ll</td>
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<td>cough less; and a year after quitting, I’ll cut my risk for heart disease by half.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• I’ll cut my risk for dying from lung cancer in half in 10 years; my risks for other</td>
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<td>cancers will drop, too.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>COSTS OF SMOKING</th>
<th>COSTS OF NOT SMOKING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Smoking causes lung cancer, and contributes to heart disease, stroke, and many other</td>
<td>• I’m worried that I’ll gain weight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>kinds of cancer, too.</td>
<td>• Nicotine withdrawal will make me feel grouchy and awful.</td>
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<td>• My skin, hair, and clothes smell.</td>
<td>• I’ll get nervous and won’t be able to calm myself with a cigarette.</td>
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<td>• I know smoking worsens wrinkles.</td>
<td>• I’ll miss the companionship of my smoking buddies.</td>
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<td>• I can’t taste food well.</td>
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<td>• I cough a lot.</td>
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<td>• I don’t have much endurance—it’s hard to bike with my kids or walk uphill or even</td>
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<tr>
<td>upstairs without feeling out of breath.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I don’t have a lot of energy.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• I’m spending way too much money on cigarettes (at $5.25 or more a pack, one pack a</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>day costs at least $1,916 a year).</td>
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Give thanks for what you do. Forget perfection. Set your sights on finishing that marathon, not on running it. If you compete to complete, you’ll be a winner even if you wind up walking as much as you run. With exercise—and so many other goals we set—you’ll benefit even when doing less than you’d like to do. Any activity is always better than none. If your goal for Tuesday is a 30-minute workout at the gym, but you only squeeze in 10 minutes, feel grateful for that. It’s enough. Maybe tomorrow will be better.

Sidestepping pitfalls
What trips people up when they try to make healthy changes? And how can you learn to be nimble enough to sidestep pitfalls? These six tips can help.

Always launch change with a plan. Map out the journey you’re embarking upon. It’s tempting to skip straight to the action, especially when you’re feeling inspired to make a change. By winging it, though, you may ignore important issues, such as why you do—and don’t—want to make this change. Make a commitment based on that knowledge, then plan a path of small steps that lead to your ultimate goal.

Set off at a reasonable pace. Rushing change rarely works. Few of us are designed to go from zero to 60. In the exercise world, you set yourself up for injuries; in the diet world, you get sick of nibbling only celery sticks and raw cabbage, and head for the chocolate cake. Let small, steady changes help you achieve what you hope to do.

Envision a happy outcome. Choose the carrot, not the stick. Rather than sternly telling yourself “I should be meditating every day” or blaming yourself for failing, try saying aloud “I feel calmer and happier when I meditate regularly.” Reminding yourself why a change is worthwhile can help you over rough spots.

Expect lapses. Lapses are so expected, experts actually write this into the stages of change. So embrace lapses as part of the process, then brainstorm solutions to challenges that derailed you. If necessary, whip out your plan to maneuver around lapses (see “Break glass in an emergency,” at right). And try, try again.

Live in the gray zone. Give up on all-or-nothing thinking. It’s not helpful to live in a black-and-white world that dictates “I am good and am following my diet” or “I ate a fat-laden meal at lunch, so I’m doing a bad job on my diet and might as well eat anything I want.” Even if you treated yourself to a double scoop of ice cream, then later enjoyed an unplanned bedtime snack, then forgot to pack a healthy lunch the next day, try not to let slipups snowball to the point where you throw up your hands and declare all of your effort a complete loss. Realize that perfection isn’t possible. Just take a deep breath, smile, and get back on track at the next opportunity.

Accept full responsibility for making the change. Personal responsibility is essential for lasting change. Don’t expect someone else to act as food police, or push you out the door on days when you just don’t feel like taking a walk. Again, remember why this change matters in your life.
### Break glass in an emergency

Uh, oh. Have you veered off course? Let us help you get back on track. First, try a few easy fixes. Think about whether you need to tweak your plan a bit by figuring out what went wrong and plotting a path around the problem. Too wrung out by work and home life to fit in 30 minutes of exercise on a weekday? Try writing three 10-minute bouts into your schedule (be specific) and checking off each one you complete:

- 6:40–6:50 a.m.: March in place and do jumping jacks and squat shuffles before showering.
- 1:45–1:55 p.m.: Walk after lunch with Susan.
- 7:30–7:40 p.m.: Take the dog for a walk after dinner.

Sometimes, simple fixes aren’t sufficient. You’ve gotten so far off track you can’t imagine bushwhacking your way back. That’s when you need to break the glass! So let’s prepare for that day. While you’re feeling upbeat about the change you’re trying to make, write down what got you to this point. Reading it later when you’ve been derailed can be inspiring, encouraging you to try again. You might write something like this:

> I made a commitment to my health by planning to exercise 30 minutes a day, three days a week. This is my first step en route to a bigger goal: two-and-a-half hours of exercise a week. I want to do it because I feel better, my back pain improves, and I have more energy when I exercise regularly.

Then write down five steps that will help when you relapse. For example:

- I’ll call Kaye and Molly for support and see if one of them can join me in a walk, or babysit while I work out.
- I’ll buy an exercise DVD or video to work out at home when the weather is bad.
- I’ll try mixing in new activities once a week so I won’t get bored: boxing, a Latin dance class, biking, tennis, hula hooping, jumping rope, a trampoline workout, snowshoeing, or cross-country skiing.

Put this paper in an envelope, seal it, and put it in your favorite hiding spot—one you’ll remember, not a spot where it will stay hidden forever. Dig it out when needed.

### What if these efforts don’t work? Try these additional strategies:

- Keep brainstorming about what might help. Talk it over with a partner or friend. What’s derailing you? Rain, cold, humidity, or gloom of night? Bored by repeating the same routine? No energy by the end of the day? Not enough encouragement or support? Lack of equipment? Now consider solutions beyond those on your relapse list. What could you do differently to shift back on track?
- Break down the step you’ve been trying to take or set the bar a little lower so that it’s possible to succeed. You can step it up again once you meet with success.
- Consider other routes that might help you move toward your bigger goal. For example, flip to “Stick to exercise,” page 14, to see if another selection from “Six choices” appeals to you.
- Shift your sights to an entirely different goal. Maybe you’re just not ready to make this change. That doesn’t mean that you’re not ready to make any change, however. Rethink your dreams and pick the surefire bet.
Let's get started. This section walks you through shaping your personal plan. Here, you’ll set your first goal and practice breaking down choices that feel overwhelming into tiny steps that can help you succeed. The personalized tools will help you track your progress, note what’s working, and brainstorm changes when challenges arise.

Shaping your personal plan
As you go through these seven steps, you can begin filling out a copy of the month-by-month calendar (see page 8). Each month, you can select a different goal or decide to explore further changes with a goal you’re working on.

- **Select a goal.** Choose a goal that is the best fit for you right now by filling out the 1-to-10 chart (see “Harvesting low-hanging fruit,” page 7). It may not be the first goal in this booklet—you don’t have to start with exercise and slog through to positive psychology—or the goal you know you should choose. You’re much more likely to succeed if you set priorities that are compelling to you.

- **Ask a big question.** Do I have a big dream that pairs with my goal? A big dream might be running a marathon or climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, wiggling back into a closet full of clothes you love, cutting back on blood pressure medication, or playing games and sports energetically with your children. Write your big dream down on a copy of the calendar. One word to the wise: if you can’t articulate a big dream, don’t get hung up on this step. You can still succeed in moving toward your goal.

- **Pick your choice for change.** Turn to “Six choices” in the section that describes the goal you’ve chosen. Select a choice that feels like a sure bet. It’s best to concentrate on just one choice at a time. When it fits into your life comfortably, you can add another choice or step up your current choice a notch (by adding another day of exercise, for example).

- **Commit yourself.** Make a written or verbal promise to yourself and one or two supporters you don’t want to let down: your partner or child, a teacher, doctor, boss, or friends. That will encourage you to slog through tough spots. Be explicit about the change you’ve chosen and why it matters to you. If it’s a step toward a bigger goal, include that, too. I’m making a commitment to my health by planning to take a mindful walk, two days a week. This is my first step to a bigger goal: doing a stress-reducing activity every day (and it helps me meet another goal: getting a half-hour of exercise every day). I want to do this because I sleep better, my mood improves, and I’m more patient with family and friends when I ease the stress in my life.

- **Scout out easy obstacles.** Maybe you’d love to try meditating, but can’t imagine having the time to do it (see “Finding time,” page 12). Or perhaps your hopes for eating healthier run aground if you’re hungry when you walk through the door at night, or your kitchen cabinets and refrigerator aren’t well-stocked with healthy foods.

- **Brainstorm ways to leap over obstacles.** Now think about ways to overcome those roadblocks. Not enough time? I’ll get up 20 minutes early for exercises and fit in a 10-minute walk before lunch. Cupboard bare of healthy choices? I’ll think about five to 10 healthy foods I enjoy and will put them on my grocery list.

- **Plan a simple reward.** Is there a reward you might enjoy for a job well done? For example, if you hit most or all of your marks on planned activities for one week, you’ll treat yourself to a splurge with money you saved by quitting smoking, a luxurious bath, or just a double helping of “attaboy.” Try to steer clear of food rewards since this approach can be counterproductive.

Picking your first goal
Use this chart to help you decide which goal to tackle first. Remember, it may seem counterintuitive, but choosing the change you most need to make...
to enhance your health and well-being—let’s say, losing weight or easing stress—isn’t as successful as choosing the change you’re most confident you’ll be able to make (see “Set a,” page 4). Pick sure bets: if you picture a 10-point scale of confidence in achieving your goal, where 1 equals no confidence and 10 equals 100% certainty, you should land in the 7-to-10 zone. To help you evaluate and record this information, see “Harvesting low-hanging fruit: How to choose the goal you are most likely to accomplish,” above.

### Your month-by-month calendar

Follow these instructions to use the universal calendar.

1. Make copies of the blank calendar as well as “What’s working” and “Brainstorming changes.”

2. Each month, fill in the information at the top of your copy of the calendar, plus the month and dates. Refer back to “Shaping your personal plan” and “Picking your first goal,” page 6, if you have questions about deciding on a goal, a big dream, and a commitment statement. Then pencil in the actions you’ll be taking to further your goal, using exact times and days. (Why use a pencil? Just in case you need to brainstorm changes to boost your odds of success.)

3. Put the calendar in an easy-to-see spot.

4. Whenever you complete a small step, put a big splashy check mark next to it. Any time you fall short, try to brainstorm changes.

5. Once a week, look over what you checked off and jot down what’s working well. Look at “Brainstorming changes,” page 11, and decide how you can tweak your plan to meet success next week. If necessary, go to “Breaking it down,” page 12, and think about smaller steps that will help you move toward your goal.

Once you feel confident that you’ve mastered a change from one of the “Six choices” sections, select another change you’d like to tackle. If the change you’ve selected seems super-simple to you—“Wear a pedometer,” page 15, say, or “Carry your coffee,” page 32—it’s all right to try another change at the same time. Just don’t overload yourself. Remember, you want to pick surefire bets, so you can succeed.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>MONDAY</th>
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Having trouble filling this out? See “Shaping your personal plan” on page 6 for assistance.
MY MONTH-BY-MONTH CHANGE CHECK-INS

WHAT'S WORKING: MY SUCCESSES

Week 1:
My successes: ____________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

Week 2:
My successes: ____________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
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Week 3:
My successes: ____________________________________________________________
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Week 4:
My successes: ____________________________________________________________
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Additional: _____________________________________________________________
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MY MONTH-BY-MONTH CHANGE CHECK-INS

BRAINSTORMING CHANGES

Any day that you run into obstacles, jot them down (for example, couldn’t find time, felt too tired, forgot my sneakers at home). Once a week, brainstorm possible solutions (see “Break glass in an emergency,” page 5). Remember, sometimes the best solution is to break a choice into tinier steps that will keep you moving toward your ultimate goal.

❌ Obstacle: I forgot to record my spending today.
✔️ Solution: I can estimate what I spent today. Or I could average my spending after collecting information for two weeks.

❌ Obstacle: ____________________________
✔️ Solution: ____________________________

❌ Obstacle: ____________________________
✔️ Solution: ____________________________

❌ Obstacle: ____________________________
✔️ Solution: ____________________________

❌ Obstacle: ____________________________
✔️ Solution: ____________________________

❌ Obstacle: ____________________________
✔️ Solution: ____________________________
Breaking it down

Taking a 10-minute walk as part of a larger plan to exercise, or deciding to drink more water and less soda, certainly seem like easy choices. Even so, breaking them down further can help you succeed. Again, if you picture a 10-point scale, where 1 equals no confidence you’ll succeed in accomplishing each step and 10 equals 100% certainty, you should be in the 7-to-10 zone. If not, try breaking the step down again.

Make a big check next to every item you accomplish on your list. If you start with “Make a list,” you’ll always have one item to check off. While it may seem like an unnecessary step, checking an item off your to-do list can be gratifying and can give you some forward momentum. And it underscores that proper planning can help you reach your goals more easily.

Here are a few examples of how you can break a goal into smaller bites.

Take a 10-minute walk

■ Make a list.
■ Pencil in one day each week to look back at the checks on the calendar. That’s when I’ll fill out “What’s working.” I’ll also look at “Brainstorm changes” and decide what I can do to make next week work better.
■ Find my comfortable walking shoes or buy a pair.
■ Choose days and times to walk, then pencil this in on the calendar.
■ Think about a route.
■ Think about possible obstacles and solutions. If it’s raining hard, what’s Plan B? (I’ll do 10 minutes of mixed marching, stair climbing, and jumping rope before dinner.) Maybe I dislike getting my work clothes sweaty. If I’m planning to hop off the bus a few stops early and walk the rest of the way home, what could I do? (I’ll need T-shirts to change into at work. If I bring in five every Monday, I’m covered. Oh, plus I’ll put my walking shoes in my work bag at night.)
■ Each time I’m successful, make a check on the calendar. On any days I’m not successful, write a note in “Brainstorm changes” section.

Drink more water, less soda

■ Make a list.
■ Pencil in a weekly day to look back at the checks on the calendar. That’s when I’ll fill out “What’s working.” I’ll also look at “Brainstorm changes” and decide what I can do to make next week work better.
■ Find my water bottle (or buy one).
■ Wash out the bottle, fill it up, and put it in the refrigerator at night.
■ Put a sticky note on the front door, or on my bag, to remind me to take the water bottle with me.
■ At work, take a break in the morning and one in the afternoon to freshen up my water bottle. This is a good time to notice how much (or little) I’m drinking.
■ When I get home from work, scrub out my water bottle for the following day and repeat.
■ Each day I successfully bring my water bottle along and each time I substitute water for a higher-calorie drink like soda, make a note plus a check on the calendar. On any days I’m not successful, write a note in “Brainstorm changes” section.

Track my budget for a month

■ Make a list.
■ Every night, put all receipts and paid bills in an envelope placed in a visible spot.
■ Choose one: a) Buy budget-tracking computer software, such as Quicken or QuickBooks; b) buy a similar application for my phone; c) use a debit card for every purchase; d) tuck a notepad into my purse or pocket to record all purchases.
Follow instructions to load software on computer, or application on phone, if I’ve chosen to use it.

Pencil in time on the calendar twice a week to enter spending information, either by hand from saved receipts and paid bills, or via downloads from bank and credit card Web sites. When I complete this step, put a check mark on my calendar.

Once a week, look at the check marks on my calendar and fill out “What’s working” and “Brainstorm changes.”

Schedule 30 minutes at the end of the two-week mark to go over expenses with an eye toward identifying low-hanging fruit to trim. Sort expenses into categories first (rent or mortgage, utilities, groceries, entertainment, etc.). Consider what categories to trim. Set a goal to reduce or eliminate some of these expenses (for example: cut out 5% of spending across the board or in one category, ride a bike to work rather than paying commuter fees, or make my own coffee rather than buying it).

At the end of the fourth week, review all spending categories and add up the money I’ve saved. Decide on an appropriate reward—maybe spending half the money, spending time in a pleasurable pursuit, or just basking in praise for a job well done.

What’s working: You go, girl (or boy)!

Once a week, jot down what’s working well: using computer warm-up time as a chance to do deep breathing; closing the kitchen after dinner on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; setting out a thermos at night to remind you to bring coffee to work the next day. And give yourself a pat on the back by affirming your successes with positive statements like these examples, or others that are meaningful to you: Great start! Keep up the good work! I’m on my way to making this a habit! This isn’t as tough as I thought. I’m feeling more confident.

Special thanks

Thank you to the Institute of Lifestyle Medicine for helping to develop these “Breaking it down” examples, as well as some of the six healthy choices found later throughout the report. The Institute was founded by Harvard Medical School and Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital and is led by Edward M. Phillips, M.D., the medical editor of this report. Its aim is to reduce the prevalence of lifestyle-related disease by having physicians work closely with patients to change unhealthy behaviors, such as physical inactivity, unchecked stress, and unhealthy eating. For more, see www.instituteoflifestylemedicine.org and “Resources,” page 43.
Quite probably, you know a lot of good reasons to exercise. It's good for body and mind. By strengthening muscles and shaving off excess weight, it takes a load off aching joints. Some people find regular exercise allows them to cut back on medications, such as drugs for high blood pressure or diabetes, saving money and easing unwelcome side effects. For these reasons and others described below, becoming more active or stepping up to vigorous exercise can improve your health and quality of life tremendously if you stick with it.

The goal for sticking to exercise
In 2008, new activity guidelines from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services set a reasonably high bar for physical activity—so much so that some people simply froze in their tracks rather than getting a move on. All adults are urged to accumulate a weekly total of at least two-and-a-half hours (150 minutes) of moderate aerobic activity, or at least one-and-a-quarter hours (75 minutes) of vigorous activity, or an equivalent mix of the two. The experts also recommended twice-weekly strength training sessions for all major muscle groups and balance exercises for older adults at risk of falling. This combination nets you all the benefits described in “Why bother to exercise?” on page 15.

Keep in mind:
• Two minutes of moderate activity equals about one minute of vigorous activity. During moderate activity you can talk, but not sing; during vigorous activity you can't say more than a few words without catching your breath.
• Sessions of aerobic activity (walking, biking, swimming) should last at least 10 minutes.

If you're shaking your head at the thought of managing even much less than recommended, relax. Any amount of exercise beats none. Just try to do as much as possible. Even short stints of activity—such as five minutes of walking several times a day to help you boost endurance—are a good first step toward the bigger goal.

Six choices for sticking to exercise
Our six choices are designed to nudge you toward the basic exercise goals described above or catapult you further along. Some choices will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet. Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (see page 12) and think about how you might make headway with tinier steps.

One easy way to bump up your activity is to seek ways to slip exercise into your day. Start noticing downtime during your day—while holding on the phone, during TV commercials—and fill these minutes with simple activities, such as marching or jogging in place, a few strength exercises (see “Take up strength training, ” page 15), jumping jacks, and so on. This can be a time-saver, too. You'll build stamina while reaping some health rewards, particularly if the activities you choose last 10 minutes or more.

What to do: Pick three to five options and mark your plan down on a weekly calendar. Stick with your plan for at least three weeks before progressing.
• Walk, rollerblade, or bike to work or while doing errands, rather than hopping in your car.
• If you take public transportation, get off a few stops early and walk to your destination.
• If you need the car to run errands, park in one spot and walk to several shops.
• At the mall, choose parking spots that are farther away from the stores.
• Take stairs, not elevators.
• Rather than watching your kids play, challenge them to an active game, on or off the computer: Wii Sports, Dance Dance Revolution, Frisbee, a hula hoop contest, hopscotch, basketball.
• While on the phone, pace or do simple exercises like lunges, squats, and heel raises.
• Walk your dog instead of just letting him out in the backyard.
• Rake leaves and shovel snow instead of using leaf-blowers or snowblowers. Use a push-reel lawn mower rather than a riding mower.
• Try a walk with a friend instead of meeting at a coffee shop.

In an analysis of 26 studies published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, pedometer users added more than 2,000 steps per day to their baseline over an average of 18 weeks. More important, they lowered their blood pressure and body mass index. Having a step goal helped. Many experts recommend aiming for 10,000 steps a day.

**What to do:** Start by buying a basic pedometer. Then determine your baseline by wearing the pedometer above your hip for three days from the time you get up until bedtime. Divide the total steps taken by three. For example, counting 10,935 steps over three days sets your baseline at 3,645 steps per day. Each week, add 500 steps until you reach your ultimate goal (perhaps 10,000 steps a day).

Two weekly sessions that work all the major muscle groups (legs, hips, chest, back, stomach, shoulders, and arms) are ideal. Strength training causes tiny tears in muscle tissue, and muscles grow stronger as the tears knit up. Progressively challenging muscles with increasingly heavy resistance supplied by machines, weights, stretchy tubes or bands, or your body weight strengthens them. These workouts strengthen bones, too, because the muscles tug on tendons attached to bone.

**What to do:** Set aside 20 to 30 minutes twice a week for our Home and Travel Workout on page 17. The only equipment you’ll need is a sturdy chair along with a mat or thick towels for floor exercises. Warm up first by marching in place while swinging your arms for five to 10 minutes, or dancing to several songs. Focus on good form—that is, aligning your body correctly and moving smoothly through each exercise. Start slowly, doing only as many repetitions as you can manage with good form, and build up. Allow the worked muscles at least 48 hours between strength training sessions so that they can recover properly.

Need to break this down further? Start with one session a week for the first two to three weeks, then add the second session. Another option is to do the
first four exercises in the morning and the second four in the evening (or split the workout over two days: first four exercises on Monday, second four on Tuesday).

Add core exercises

Strong core muscles support your back. Working these muscles can help you avoid backaches and possible injuries, plus it tones the tummy nicely.

What to do: Practice front planks (see page 18) two to three times a week.

Double up

Jumping up to 300 minutes of moderate activity, or 150 minutes of vigorous activity, or an equivalent mix, nets you additional health benefits. Your risks of dying prematurely or developing chronic ailments like heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension drop further. What’s more, the extra exercise aids in weight loss and chips away at excess abdominal fat that contributes to chronic health problems like heart disease and diabetes.

What to do: Every week, try adding 10 to 30 minutes of moderate activity, or 10 to 15 minutes of vigorous activity, until you reach your goal. Stepping up gradually will help you avoid sore muscles and injuries. Identify opportunities to build active moments into your day. Take longer walks, hikes, or bike rides on weekends while continuing to stay active regularly throughout the week. Add an exercise class once or twice a week. Seek out seasonal activities like skiing and snowboarding, boating, golfing, hunting, and gardening. Whenever possible, sample new activities to see what else you might enjoy.

Kick it up a notch

Being moderate—at least in terms of the intensity of an activity—wins you most of the health gains offered by exercise. Switching to vigorous activities offers enhanced benefits, such as greater protection against breast and colon cancer; better control of blood lipids like HDL and LDL cholesterol; a marked drop in insulin levels; and, for men, a zippier sex life, since it lessens the likelihood of erectile dysfunction. Pushing yourself harder can bring many enjoyable recreational options into reach. It’s a necessity if you’re hoping to run a race or triathlon. Plus it can help you burn extra calories—or trim the time you spend exercising if you prefer, since one minute of vigorous exercise equals two minutes of moderate exercise (see “The goal for sticking to exercise,” page 14).

What to do:

• If you’re in good shape: Try salting your exercise sessions with more vigorous activities like jogging, hiking or biking uphill, or singles tennis, squash, or basketball. Downhill skiing, trimming the lawn with a push-reel mower, chopping wood, and even fishing a stream in waders count, too. Check the President’s Council on Fitness (see “Resources,” page 43) for additional examples of vigorous exercise.

• If you’re not fit: Talk to your doctor first. Mapping out a plan to slowly work up to vigorous activities will help you avoid muscle or joint injuries and rare but serious heart problems. One good way to start is alternating walking and jogging for 20 minutes. Week by week, increase the amount of time spent jogging and decrease the time spent walking. For example:

  • Week 1: Walk for four minutes, jog for one minute, walk for four minutes, jog for one minute, and so on until you reach 20 minutes total.

  • Week 2: Walk for three minutes, jog for one-and-a-half minutes, walk for three minutes, jog for one-and-a-half minutes, and so on until you reach 20 minutes total.

  • Week 3: Walk for two-and-a-half minutes, jog for one-and-a-half minutes, walk for two-and-a-half minutes, jog for one-and-a-half minutes, and so on until you reach 20 minutes total.
Home & travel workout

This excellent full-body workout for home or travel requires practically no equipment. A sturdy chair and a comfortable spot for floor exercises is all you need. That leaves plenty of room in your closets—or carry-on bag—for clothes. Remember to bracket your workout with a warm-up and cool-down.

**Equipment:** Sturdy chair • Mat, towels, or carpet for comfort during floor exercises

1. **Wall push-up**
   - **Reps:** 8–12   **Sets:** 1–3
   - **Intensity:** Moderate   **Tempo:** 2-1-2
   - **Rest:** 30–90 seconds between sets
   
   **Starting position:** Stand up straight in front of a wall with your arms extended at shoulder height. Put your palms against the wall with the fingers pointing upward.
   
   **Movement:** Bend your elbows to lower your upper body as far as possible toward the wall, keeping a straight line from head to heel. Pause, then push away from the wall to return to the starting position, maintaining neutral alignment from head to toe throughout the movement.

   **Tips and techniques:**
   - Keep your hands no higher than shoulder level.
   - Keep your elbows close to your sides as you bend them.
   - Keep your shoulders down and back.

   **Too hard?** Lower your upper body less toward the wall.
   **Too easy?** Lift one foot a few inches off the floor behind you as you do the push-ups. Keep your arms at shoulder height and maintain neutral alignment.

2. **Triceps dip**
   - **Reps:** 8–12   **Sets:** 1–3
   - **Intensity:** Moderate to high   **Tempo:** 2-2
   - **Rest:** 30–90 seconds between sets
   
   **Starting position:** Sit near the edge of a sturdy chair with your legs partly extended, knees bent, and heels touching the floor. Put your palms down on the chair next to your hips and curve your fingers over the edge. Pushing down on your hands, raise your buttocks up a bit and move them forward to clear the edge of the chair.
   
   **Movement:** Bend your elbows and lower your hips toward the floor. Straighten your arms to return to the starting position.

   **Tips and techniques:**
   - Maintain a neutral spine throughout, keeping your back close to the chair.
   - Keep your arms near your sides and your elbows pointing toward the back of the chair.
   - Exhale as you extend your arms.

   **Too hard?** Lower your body less toward the floor.
   **Too easy?** Fully extend your legs in the starting position.

3. **Chair stand with staggered legs**
   - **Reps:** 8–12   **Sets:** 1–3   **Intensity:** Moderate   **Tempo:** 3-1-3
   - **Rest:** 30–90 seconds between sets
   
   **Starting position:** Sit up straight near the front edge of a sturdy chair with your arms crossed and fingers touching opposite shoulders. Position your feet hip-width apart and stagger them by moving one foot forward.
   
   **Movement:** Smoothly stand up with your knees and hips pointing straight ahead. Pause, then return to the starting position. After completing the 8–12 reps in one set, move the opposite foot forward and repeat the movement for the next set.

   **Tips and techniques:**
   - Maintain neutral posture throughout the movement.
   - Tighten the muscles in your abdomen and buttocks.

   **Too hard?** Line up your feet evenly, hip-width apart, in the starting position.
   **Too easy?** Lift your arms over your head. Keep your shoulders down and back throughout the move.
4. Bridge with chair
**Reps:** 8–12  **Sets:** 1–3  **Intensity:** Moderate  **Tempo:** 2-1-2  **Rest:** 30–90 seconds between sets

**Starting position:** Lie on your back with your knees bent and your arms at your sides, palms up. Put your heels on the seat of a chair placed so that your knees form a 90-degree angle. Relax your shoulders down and back into the floor.

**Movement:** Squeeze your buttocks as you lift your hips off the floor. Pause, then slowly release to return to the starting position.

**Tips and techniques:**
- Maintain a neutral spine throughout.
- Keep your shoulders, hips, and knees in a straight line during the bridge.

Too hard? Put both feet flat on the floor rather than on the chair.
Too easy? Put your left heel on the chair and extend your right leg toward the ceiling before doing the bridge. After completing the reps in one set, switch leg positions and repeat the movement for the next set.

5. Curl-up with one leg extended
**Reps:** 8–12  **Sets:** 1–3  **Intensity:** Moderate  **Tempo:** 2-1-2  **Rest:** 30–90 seconds between sets

**Starting position:** Lie on your back with your fingertips lightly behind your head, elbows out. Bend your right knee and place that foot flat on the floor while keeping your left leg extended.

**Movement:** Tighten your abdominal muscles. Lift your head and shoulders off the floor as you curl upward. Exhale as you lift. Pause, then return to the starting position.

**Tips and techniques:**
- Keep your fingertips resting lightly behind your head throughout the movement.
- If you have trouble maintaining a neutral neck, make a fist with one hand and place it under your chin for support.

Too hard? Put your fingertips behind your waist on the floor before starting the curl-up.
Too easy? Cross your arms over your chest before starting the curl-up, or increase the number of reps.

6. Front plank
**Reps:** 2–4  **Sets:** 1  **Intensity:** Moderate to high  **Hold:** 15–60 seconds  **Rest:** 30–90 seconds between reps

**Starting position:** Start on your hands and knees.

**Movement:** Tighten your abdominal muscles and lower your upper body to your forearms, clasping your hands together and aligning your shoulders directly over your elbows. Extend both legs with your feet flexed and toes touching the floor so that you balance your body in a line like a plank. Hold. Breathe comfortably.

**Tips and techniques:**
- Keep your neck and spine in neutral alignment during the plank, not curving upward or downward.
- Keep your shoulders down and back.

Too hard? Put your knees on the floor instead of extending your legs.
Too easy? While holding your body in a line like a plank, lift your right foot and move it to the side six inches, tap the floor, and move it back to the center. Lift your left foot and move it to the side six inches, tap the floor, and move it back to the center. Continue for 15 to 60 seconds.
7. Standing side leg lift
Reps: 8–12 on each side  
Sets: 1–3  
Intensity: Moderate  
Tempo: 2-1-2  
Rest: 30–90 seconds between sets

Starting position: Stand up straight with your feet together and your hands on your hips.  
Movement: Slowly lift your right leg straight out to the side. Pause, then slowly lower the leg. Keep your hips even throughout. Finish all reps before repeating with the leg positions reversed. This is one complete set.

Tips and techniques:  
• Maintain neutral posture throughout.  
• Tighten your abdominal muscles and squeeze the buttocks of the supporting leg.  
• Exhale as you lift.

Too hard? Hold on to the back of a chair for balance and lift your leg a shorter distance.  
Too easy? Hold for 4 counts at the top of the lift during each repetition.

8. Heel raise
Reps: 8–12  
Sets: 1–3  
Intensity: Light to moderate  
Tempo: 2-1-2  
Rest: 30–90 seconds between sets

Starting position: Stand up straight with your hands on your hips.  
Movement: Slowly rise up on the balls of both feet. Pause, then slowly lower your heels back to the floor.

Tips and techniques:  
• Maintain neutral posture and tighten your buttock muscles for balance.  
• As you lift, keep your ankles firm to avoid rolling to the outside of your foot.

Too hard? Hold on to the back of a chair for balance while doing the exercise.  
Too easy? Try the exercise standing on your right leg only while lifting your left foot slightly off the floor. Finish all reps before repeating with the leg positions reversed. This is one complete set.

Special thanks to Kristy Discipio for demonstrating the exercises and to the Equinox Fitness Club on Dartmouth Street in Boston for the use of its facilities. This workout was taken from Harvard Medical School’s Special Health Report, *Workout Workbook: 9 complete workouts to help you get fit and healthy.* For ordering information, see the back of this report.
Our recipe for healthy eating combines nutritional science, a jolt of common sense, and pure enjoyment. Approaching food this way may be a revelation for you, or may just underscore what you’ve known all along: fresh salad, berries, and slowing down when eating do more for your health and well-being than wolfing down energy bars and sweets.

The goal for eating healthier
It took Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*, just seven words to describe a sensible approach to eating: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

Our approach is a tip of the hat to the master, which tweaks those sentiments only slightly: “Eat healthy. Small portions. Savor each bite.” The goal seems simple enough: Help downsize the supersizing of America by choosing healthier foods and scaling back portions. (For more on portion control, see “Pay attention to portions,” page 25.) But anyone who has tried to make a major overhaul of his or her diet in one fell swoop knows how difficult that can be. Your chances of success are greater if you approach this task in smaller steps.

Six choices for eating healthier
Our six choices spotlight healthy, delicious ways to eat and encourage you to slow down so you can savor meals. Some choices will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet. Remember to set a SMART GOAL (see page 4). Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (see page 12) and think about how you might make headway by taking tinier steps.

Get off whole milk
Not only does this reduce saturated fat in your diet, it shaves off calories. Saturated fat drives up your total cholesterol and tips the balance of cholesterol in your body toward low-density lipoproteins (LDL), which help form coronary artery blockages, the hallmark of heart disease. While you can’t avoid saturated fat entirely—even healthy fat sources have small amounts of it—aim to limit it to 10% or less of your daily diet. An 8-ounce glass of whole milk has 8 to 9 grams of saturated fat and 149 to 156 calories, depending on overall percentage of fat; 8 ounces of low-fat 1% milk has 1.6 grams of saturated fat and 102 calories; 8 ounces of nonfat milk has 0.3 grams of saturated fat and 86 calories.

**What to do:** Switch to 1% or nonfat milk, and nonfat versions of other dairy products like yogurt and ice cream. Can’t bear to go cold turkey? Step down more slowly to 2% milk, then 1%, en route to nonfat, if possible. Or try a taste test of new lower-fat milk products—or low-fat non-milk alternatives like soy, rice, or almond milk—that boast of having whole-milk taste. Use the same strategy to cut back on cream in your coffee: first try half-and-half, then whole milk, and so on.

Go nuts (and seeds)
Almonds, cashews, filberts, hazelnuts, peanuts, pecans, and pistachios pack plenty of beneficial nutrients, including vitamin E, folic acid, potassium, and fiber. Although some of these nuts are high-fat, the fat is mainly unsaturated—a healthy choice. Except for filberts and hazelnuts, the nuts listed in the first sentence are low-glycemic foods. That means they’re digested slowly and thus don’t cause spikes in blood sugar that may impair your body’s response to insulin over time. Walnuts and flaxseed are plant sources of omega-3 fatty acids, which can
Why not just nosh on Twinkies, caramel corn, and the occasional peeled grape? Alas, such a diet might put a smile on your face for a day or so, but it’s bound to drag down your health and energy. To guide you in choosing a better path, take a look at the Harvard Healthy Eating Pyramid (above) and Table 2. It emphasizes vitamin-packed vegetables and fruits, fish and similar lean sources of protein other than red meat, low-fat dairy products, and healthy fats, while downplaying unhealthy fats and refined sugars and starches.

While researching this approach, Harvard scientists examined the eating habits of more than 100,000 nurses and male health professionals taking part in two long-term studies. Among men, those who most closely followed the pyramid cut their overall risk of major diseases by 20% over eight to 12 years compared with those who scored lowest on these recommendations; among women, overall risk for major diseases dropped by 11% compared with low-scoring participants. The biggest win for men and women on the top nutritional tier of these studies? Lowering their risk for cardiovascular disease by a third.

Since the Healthy Eating Pyramid is a work in progress, it continues to change as new research on nutrition flows in. Of course, it’s not the only model for healthy eating. Other pyramids adapted to Mediterranean, Latin American, Asian, and vegetarian foods appear on the Web site for the respected nutrition think tank Oldways (see “Resources,” page 43).

### Table 2 Healthy eating recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fats and sweets</td>
<td>• Use olive, soy, corn, sunflower, and peanut oils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limit saturated fats and avoid trans fats, substituting healthier fats instead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limit sweets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy products</td>
<td>• Eat one to two servings per day of low-fat dairy products, or take a daily calcium and vitamin D supplement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, nuts,</td>
<td>• Eat one to three servings of nuts and legumes per day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and legumes</td>
<td>• Eat up to two servings of fish, poultry, or eggs per day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Choose vegetable sources of protein, such as nuts and beans, more often than animal sources, such as red meat and dairy products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables and fruits</td>
<td>• Eat two to three servings of fruit per day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Eat vegetables in abundance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aim for nine servings a day of fruit and vegetables; seek variety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread, cereal, pasta, and rice</td>
<td>• Eat whole grains and whole-grain products liberally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limit potatoes and refined carbohydrates such as white bread, white rice, and refined-grain pasta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>• Use in moderation if you enjoy it, as long as you have no health problems or conditions that would dictate otherwise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamins</td>
<td>• Take a multivitamin daily.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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[Image of the Harvard Healthy Eating Pyramid]
help prevent—and even help treat—heart disease and stroke by lowering blood pressure, boosting HDL cholesterol, lowering triglycerides, and protecting against lethal heart-rhythm disorders. Some evidence suggests omega-3s help with certain dementias (not Alzheimer’s disease, sadly) and lessen the need for corticosteroid medications in people with rheumatoid arthritis.

**What to do:** First, put nuts on the grocery list. Nuts are high in calories, so it’s best to enjoy them in place of other snacks, not in addition, and to keep serving sizes small. Measure out a serving (typically a small handful equals one ounce) to nibble when mid-afternoon slump hits or on the way home from work, so you won’t be ravenous at dinnertime. Try eating nuts and fruit on oatmeal or yogurt for pleasing texture and taste, or sprinkling ground flaxseed over a salad or adding it to granola.

![Taste food before you salt it](MEDIUM)

**Break the autopilot habit of reaching for the salt shaker.** According to the Centers for Disease Control, two out of three Americans are salt-sensitive, which means excess sodium will raise their blood pressure. (Table salt is 40% sodium by weight.) One in three Americans suffers from hypertension (high blood pressure). And that disease accounts for roughly one in six deaths every year, many from heart disease and stroke, say experts at the Institute of Medicine. A 2009 study using computer-generated models of salt consumption estimated that bumping down daily sodium consumption from the current daily average of 3,400 milligrams (mg) to 2,300 mg (about a teaspoon of table salt) could reduce the number of people with hypertension by 11.1 million. The American Heart Association recommends a daily limit of no more than 1,500 mg of sodium, yet acknowledges that Americans who eat a good deal of processed foods (a major source of sodium) aren’t likely to attain this. Instead, the AHA suggests aiming for 2,300 mg a day as an interim goal.

**What to do:** For two days, forgo salting food entirely. That short break can help reset your taste buds. After that, leave the salt shaker in the cabinet, so you’ll have to get up to get it. Make a ritual out of truly tasting your food—taking a small bite and savoring the flavors—before you decide if it needs tweaking. Better still, put out non-salt herb mixes bought commercially or made yourself. Since canned and processed foods are a major source of sodium, the more fresh foods you buy and prepare, the better you’ll be able to control how much salt you take in. Frozen foods with no sodium are a fine choice, too. Read labels: “sodium free” means less than 5 mg of sodium per serving; “very low sodium” means 35 mg or less; “reduced sodium” means the usual level is reduced by 25%; “unsalted,” “no salt added,” or “without added salt” means the product has no added salt, though it still has its natural amount of sodium.

![Pack lunch once a week](MEDIUM)

This makes healthy food choices readily available to you at work or on an outing. And since you are controlling portion sizes, you can make sure that you’re not supersizing your meal. Plus, it saves you money.

**What to do:** Once a week before you shop for groceries, write out a meal plan that leaves enough leftovers for one or two lunches. For example, cook or buy enough roast chicken for a Monday dinner to have in different guises for lunch on Tuesday and Thursday. Chop the chicken and mix in fruit and a handful of nuts, then layer this over a salad, stuff it into a whole-wheat pita, or roll it into a wrap. Or slice chicken and add avocado, tomato, sprouts, and pesto to whole-grain bread for a great sandwich. Round out lunch with a piece of fruit and some crunchy carrot, celery, or jicama sticks, or grape tomatoes. Too much to eat? Save half for later in the afternoon when you need an energy boost, or keep a small portion to help fill you up with healthy foods an hour or so before dinner. You’ll be less hungry and less likely to snack on junk when you walk through your front door.

![Eat five (or more) vegetables and fruits a day](HARDER)

It’s a nutrient-packed way to fill your plate that is generally low in calories. Fruits and vegetables contain hundreds of healthful components called phytochemicals, many of which...
have yet to be identified. They also contain beneficial minerals like potassium, which helps lower blood pressure, and well-known vitamins like folic acid, vitamin C, and vitamin A. Studies show diets rich in vegetables and fruits help lower blood pressure and may reduce risks for esophageal, stomach, and lung cancers, as well as diverticulitis, a painful gastrointestinal condition. What's more, it reduces the risk for sight-impairing macular degeneration. Fiber found in plants slightly lowers LDL cholesterol, improves insulin resistance that can pave the path toward diabetes, and is linked to lower rates of heart disease. It slows digestion, smoothing blood sugar spikes, and creates a sense of fullness that can help prevent overeating. And by bulking up stools, fiber helps you avoid constipation.

**What to do:** First, take stock of how many fruit and vegetable servings you eat on average by jotting this down for a week. One serving equals one-half cup of chopped fruit or most vegetables; for raw leafy vegetables like lettuce and spinach, a serving is one cup. When you've totted that up, try adding one fruit or vegetable serving a day. Aim for deep, rich colors and a variety of produce, including more non-starchy vegetables than starchy ones (see “Color is key,” at right). Five servings a day could be one at each meal, plus two snacks. Salads and homemade soups are excellent ways to get several vegetable servings in one meal.

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**Color is key**

The key to getting the greatest benefit from fruits and vegetables in your diet is to eat a variety of them on most days. And to get the most out of the fruits and vegetables you do eat, go for those with deep, rich colors; they contain the most powerful phytochemicals. That's because some of the pigments (chemicals that provide color) in fruits and vegetables are healthy phytochemicals.

No single type of fruit or vegetable can deliver all the known beneficial phytochemicals and nutrients. Try to get at least one serving daily from each of the following categories:

- dark green or leafy vegetables (dark lettuce, kale, spinach, broccoli)
- yellow or orange fruits and vegetables (squash, carrots, nectarines, cantaloupe)
- red fruits and vegetables (red peppers, tomatoes, strawberries)
- legumes (lentils, green beans, soybeans, and other beans)
- citrus fruits (oranges, grapefruits, lemons, limes).

Also choose “non-starchy” vegetables over their “starchy” cousins (white potatoes, peas, or corn). Examples of some good choices include asparagus, bamboo shoots, beans, beets, cauliflower, cucumber, eggplant, onions, mushrooms, peppers, pea pods, radishes, salad greens, tomato, and water chestnuts.

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**Plan meals that are delightful, delicious, and healthy**

In an ideal world, food delights all our senses: it looks beautiful, smells heavenly, and tastes delicious, and its textures feel and even sound satisfying. Approaching meals as more than a way to refuel can bring much pleasure.

**What to do:** Pencil in time to prepare and truly savor one or two special meals a week (also see “Eat mindfully,” page 26). Shop where you know fruits, vegetables, and other foods will be fresh. Sniff melons and fruits for ripeness. Bright-colored produce is packed with antioxidants and other healthy nutrients: dark green spinach and arugula, deep red and yellow beets, purple grapes, orange-fleshed papayas, sweet potatoes, and cantaloupes. To pare costs, buy a small portion of a special food: radiant-hued vegetables, organic berries, wild fish, local eggs, dark chocolate. Visit farmers’ markets in season. Consider a share or half-share in community-sponsored agriculture if a local farm or collective offers this. Plant a few pots or window boxes with fresh herbs; break ground for a small garden; or place container plants on a deck. Once you’ve assembled great ingredients, set a gorgeous table. Pause before you eat to drink in scents, companions, and surroundings, and offer up a thankful prayer, if you like.

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Diet more effectively

While people gain weight for many complex reasons, the bottom line is easily described: day after day, calories in outnumber calories out. This section spotlights small choices you can make each day to help reverse that trend. It’s important to note that much research shows that being active is crucial to losing weight and keeping it off. Improve your odds of making a successful change by considering simple ways to step up activity, too (see “Stick to exercise,” page 14).

The goal for dieting more effectively

Whittling off just 5% to 10% of excess weight can add up to surprisingly significant health gains. For example, combining a 7% weight loss with 30 minutes of exercise daily lessened the likelihood of developing type 2 diabetes by 60% among more than 3,200 adults at higher than normal risk for that ailment, according to research reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Another study found losing 10 pounds over six months was equivalent to medication in lowering blood pressure—a reduction of 2.8 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg) in systolic pressure (top number of your blood pressure reading) and 2.5 mm Hg in diastolic pressure (bottom number). Your knees benefit, too, because losing weight eases pressure on the joint: each pound lost equals a four-pound reduction in knee pressure during every step you take, according to a 2005 study reported in *Arthritis & Rheumatism*. That’s a real blessing if you have osteoarthritis.

Keep in mind:

- If you weigh 200 pounds, 5% to 10% equals 10 to 20 pounds.
- One pound represents roughly 3,500 calories. To lose a pound a week, you need to shave off 500 calories a day through diet or exercise, or preferably a mix of both.
- Likewise, a 1-pound gain represents 3,500 added calories. If you do the math, you’ll find it’s easy to gain 10 pounds a year simply by having a few extra cookies or a soda per day without stepping up activity to burn off the additional calories.

Six choices for dieting more effectively

Our six choices encourage gradual belt-tightening by helping you cut back peripheral calories, amp up fidgeting, and take pleasure in eating mindfully. Some choices will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet. Remember to set a SMART GOAL (see page 4). Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (see page 12) and think about how you might make headway with tinier steps.

Skip the sipped calories

Your body needs plenty of fluids, but it pays to be selective when pouring. Soda, lattes, sports drinks, energy drinks, and even fruit juices are all packed with unnecessary calories. (What’s more, regularly quaffing sugar-laden drinks raises risk for type 2 diabetes, according to the Nurses’ Health Study, which tracks more than 90,000 women, and the Black Women’s Health Study, ongoing research following 60,000 African American women in the United States.) Switching to diet drinks might not be the solution. Although not all research on the topic agrees, an eight-year study of Texas residents found people who had three or more sugar-free sweet drinks per day gained more weight than those who skipped such drinks.

What to do: Make no-cal water your top choice to quench thirst. Start by replacing one or two drinks a day with water (or green tea, a healthy alternative as long as you drink it without added sweeteners). It helps to get in the habit of carrying a water bottle, or
keeping one ready to refill at work. Be aware that you may think you’re hungry when you’re actually thirsty, so reach for your water bottle before you start snacking. To find out how many calories you’ll save, check nutrition labels on the drinks you currently enjoy. And be sure to pay close attention to the serving size. You may be surprised to find that a single sports drink or juice bottle contains two to three servings, and thus far more calories than you realized.

**Stop TV snacks**

Studies show eating in front of the TV stimulates you to eat more calories overall—and more calories from fat. Maybe that’s not so surprising. TV time for Americans has risen to an estimated four hours a day. Each hour-long TV show features an average of 11 commercials showcasing food and drinks.

**What to do:** Declare the TV room off limits for food every day. Or work up to that policy by starting with one day per week. Then add another day during each subsequent week. If your kitchen has a TV, switch it off during meals and snacks. When you’re hungry, it’s much better to sit down at the table with no distractions other than your dining companions. Better still, if the urge to eat comes on while watching a TV show, see if five to 10 minutes of calorie-burning exercise works as a healthy distraction.

**Pay attention to portions**

Even if you read nutrition labels thoroughly, it’s easy to underestimate serving sizes, a mistake that can easily tack on hundreds of calories over the course of a day. You may be surprised to find that your bowl of morning cereal is three servings, and those two scoops of ice cream after dinner added up to—well, let’s just say quite a bit more than a single serving.

**What to do:** Begin by familiarizing yourself with how much you should eat from each food group. This varies based on your age, sex, and level of physical activity, but a handy tool at the USDA web site quickly and easily calculates this for you. Visit MyPyramid.gov and click on MyPyramid Plan to get a personalized list of the amount of grains, vegetables, fruits, milk, meat, and beans you should eat each day. Then, for one week, measure your portions until you find them easy to eyeball (also see “Quick tips for portion control,” page 26).

Portions seem larger on smaller plates, so consider scaling down your dinner plate, or substituting a salad plate, to fool your mind into feeling full. Then divide the plate: heap half of it with salad or vegetables, saving one-quarter for protein and one-quarter for starch.

**Fidget more**

A lot more! In fact, get up and move around frequently. Bringing fewer calories aboard through what you eat is only part of the equation. Burning off additional calories through activity is essential for most people who are trying to lose weight. Even among folks who are fairly sedentary, non-exercise activity thermogenesis (NEAT)—that is, ordinary movements that might not normally count as exercise, like fidgeting, walking to the corner store, going upstairs to retrieve your wallet, or even just standing for periods of time—may be one factor that helps separate the lean from the plump. One study that measured NEAT in lean and obese people, all of whom

**Why lose weight?**

Excess weight plays a role in many serious illnesses, so overweight and obesity can trim years off your life. A 2006 study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* tracked over half a million people ages 50 to 71 for a decade. Mortality was 20% to 40% higher among those who had been overweight at midlife, and a full two to three times higher than usual among those who had been obese. In people 50 and older, overweight and obesity account for 14% of cancer deaths in men and 20% of cancer deaths in women. Just 22 excess pounds can boost blood pressure to a point where stroke risk rises by 24%, according to the American Heart Association. Type 2 diabetes is so closely linked to excess weight, experts coined the term “diabesity” to describe the phenomenon driving up record rates of this illness. Even simple daily challenges—rising from a chair, lifting 10 pounds, walking a quarter-mile—are harder for heavier people than those at a healthy weight.

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were sedentary and had similar jobs, noted a key difference between the two groups. The obese people sat an average of two-and-a-half hours more per day than their lean counterparts. The lean people stood or walked more than two hours longer each day than their obese counterparts.

What to do: Actively seek opportunities to fidget and move around more. Pace while you’re talking on the phone. Walk down the hall to talk to a co-worker rather than calling or e-mailing. Clean house less efficiently by alternating tasks in different rooms or floors so that you walk up and down stairs and in and out of rooms more often. Fidget when you’re sitting down or lying on a couch: jiggle your foot, cross and uncross legs, shift in place, get up to stretch or walk around for a few minutes every hour. If you’re watching TV, use commercial breaks as your cue to start moving—better still, march in place while watching the show or skip it entirely for an exercise session.

Rooted in Buddhist practices, mindfulness teaches us to live each moment as it unfolds, accepting it without judgment. Mindful eating asks you to sidestep distractions and tune into body signals. It also slows you down, a true boon since speed at the table may encourage you to eat more food, according to a 2008 study. When 30 women were asked to eat quickly from a large plate of pasta, stopping when they were full, they ate an average of 646 calories in nine minutes. Served the same dish on another day and asked to eat slowly, putting the fork down between each bite, they stopped at an average of 579 calories, eaten in a leisurely 29 minutes. This difference may partly reflect the time it takes for the stomach to transmit a signal of fullness or satiety to the brain. Eating slowly allows this to happen before you’ve taken in as much food.

What to do: Start by penciling in one mindful meal a week, then gradually expand to other meals. Skip distractions like watching TV or reading the paper. Set the table nicely. As you eat, slow down and truly savor your food, enjoying taste, texture, colors, scent, and sound. Notice how your body feels when hungry and satiated. Stop eating when you start to feel full. Try practicing mindful eating with snacks and the occasional dessert, too—you’ll be amazed at how satisfying a handful of mixed nuts, a few spoonfuls of sorbet, or even a single square of chocolate can be.

Peeling and eating an orange offers an excellent example. For the first few moments, just concentrate on your breath moving in and out of your nostrils. Look at the orange, turning it over in your hands. Run your fingertips over its bumpy texture. Absorb its vibrant color and light citrus scent. As you start peeling it, engage your senses fully. Note the slight spray of citrus oil as your fingers dig into and peel back the protective skin and soft white pith. How does the orange feel and smell now? Are you salivating? When you put a slice of it in into your mouth and break through the thin membrane into its juicy center, what sensations do you feel?

Try not to hurry through one mouthful of orange to get to the next. Slow down and stay in the moment. Before you swallow each portion of the orange, be aware of the rising desire to do so. Then note how it feels when you swallow. Throughout the experience, remain fully aware. How much are you eating? How do you feel physically and psychologically before, during, and after eating?

Quick tips for portion control

1 thumb tip = 1 teaspoon of peanut butter, butter, or sugar
1 fist = 1 cup cereal, pasta, vegetables
1 palm = 3 oz. of meat, fish, or poultry
1 handful = 1 oz. of nuts
2 handfuls = 2 oz. of pretzels
Close the kitchen at night

Drifting through the kitchen to snack after dinner can tack many more calories onto your daily totals.

What to do: If possible, close the kitchen every night after dinner. If that’s too difficult, start with one or two nights a week. Or work backward hour by hour from your bedtime—that is, close the kitchen by 10 p.m. if you go to bed at 11. Add another night, or cut back another hour per night, every week. When you finish clearing up after dinner, go brush your teeth to signal your body that you’re done eating for the night. If you have a kitchen door, shut it. Some people go further by taping it shut (or run a strip of tape across an open doorway). Any physical barrier that you need to remove will do—a heavy chair, for example. If you find yourself ready to break the tape or toss aside the chair, try this four-step process taught at the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine:

1. Stop: Consciously call a time-out.
2. Breathe: Take a few deep breaths to help relieve burgeoning tension.
3. Reflect: Ask some questions. Why did I want to close the kitchen at night? Why do I feel the urge to eat right now?
4. Choose: Decide how to handle your urge. Could you satisfy it in another way? For example, take the dog for a walk, do push-ups till you’re tired, curl up in bed to read a book, call friends, hop in the shower, get caught up in a TV show, or try a stress relief technique like a body scan (see page 29).
Ease stress

The tumbling cascade of hormones the body pumps out in the face of real or perceived threats prepares you to fight or flee. Encoded for survival, this surge of adrenaline and other hormones coursing through your bloodstream can help you jump out of the path of a speeding car or act fast enough to protect yourself and others during a fire or natural disaster. When tripped off too often, though, the stress response can grind down your health and well-being. This section is devoted to helping you become more resilient to stress.

The goal for easing stress
Try as you might, it’s not possible, or even desirable, to scrub all stress from your life. Sometimes stress springs from happy situations, such as a wedding or a new baby. And at work, an uptick in stress and anxiety may be mirrored by rises in performance and efficiency—at least for a while. Physical and psychological challenges can add zest to life and deliver satisfying rewards. Often, though, stress is less benign and stems from events beyond your control. You can’t change the world around you—fixing the economy, or just convincing your aging parent to take her medication, willing an always-late friend to arrive on time, or persuading your partner to pitch in more around the house probably seem like equally far-fetched possibilities. What you can try to change is your reactions, by taking small steps that enhance your ability to handle stressful situations. In time, you may reap palpable benefits: lower blood pressure, better sleep, and fewer flare-ups of ailments in which stress plays a role.

Six choices for easing stress
Our six choices help build resilience to stress and fold moments of calm into your days. Some choices will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet. Remember to choose a SMART GOAL (see page 4). Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (page 12) and think about how you might make headway with tinier steps.

Cue a deep breath
Most of us have predictable, repeated moments that drive us to distraction. Hoping the morning traffic jam ahead of you will magically unsnarl? Stuck on endless hold with a phone glued to your ear? Wishing your computer fired up swiftly or moved from one task to another speedily without forcing you to stare at a slowly turning hourglass?

Instead of grinding your teeth, melt your frustration by recasting these cues as an opportunity to breathe deeply. Breathing shallowly—which people often do when tense—restricts the diaphragm, a strong sheet of muscle below the lungs that drops downward to help pull in oxygenated air and pushes upward to help expel carbon dioxide. Breathing deeply gives the diaphragm wider range, encouraging a full, beneficial trade of incoming oxygen for outgoing carbon dioxide. Not surprisingly, deep breathing slows the heartbeat and can lower or stabilize blood pressure when practiced often.

What to do: Practice breath focus, a deep breathing technique, whenever your cue appears. To learn it, sit comfortably and quietly. First take a normal breath. Then try a slow, deep breath, letting air flow in through your nose and move downward to your lower belly so that your abdomen gently swells. Breathe out through your nose or your mouth—which feels most comfortable. Now alternate normal breaths and slow, deep breaths. Pay attention to how each one feels. Shallow breathing often feels tense and constricted, while deep breathing produces relaxation. Still breathing deeply, place a hand just below your belly button. Feel your hand rise and fall about an inch as you inhale and exhale.
Your chest will rise and fall slightly, too. Relax your belly so that it fills fully each time you inhale.

### Turn off bells and buzzers

The modern world fractures our attention into ever-smaller shards. E-mail chimes, iPhones buzz, Twitter tweets, Facebook beckons, land lines and cell phones ring, sometimes in unison and always in the midst of other tasks.

**What to do:** Start by trying one of these options once a week. Over time, work up to several days—or all seven—by adding another day each week.

- When working on a task, turn off e-mail chimes, hold calls, and squelch urges to check on your Facebook friends for a planned amount of time, such as two hours.
- Deliberately seek places where you must unplug: a religious sanctuary, yoga class, or swimming laps in a pool.
- Choose an hour a day when nothing electronic, wired or wireless, can intrude. Unplug phones, turn off chimes, flip on voice mail and let electronic messages arrive unannounced.
- Better still, pick a longer span of time to unplug and enjoy each moment of peace. During dinner? After sunset? At 10 p.m.? One entire weekend day?

### Do a body scan

Relax. This has nothing to do with airport security or hospital CT scans. It’s a chance to engage in a relaxation technique that loosens tense spots in your body through a blend of deep breathing and visualization.

**What to do:** Plan a body scan once a day, several times a week, and whenever you’re especially stressed. The key is to concentrate on one part of your body at a time. As you do, picture that muscle in your mind. Imagine it open, warm, and relaxed. Feel any tension melt away. Then move on to the next portion of your body and repeat. As an example, these steps are adapted from Dr. Herbert Benson and Aggie Casey’s book *Mind Your Heart*:

- Sit or lie down comfortably. For a few minutes, just breathe deeply (see “Cue a deep breath,” page 28). Allow your belly to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Now concentrate on your right big toe. Imagine the atoms in your toe and the space between each atom. Imagine your toe feeling open, warm, and relaxed. Now visualize each of the other toes on your right foot, again noticing sensations, first imagining atoms and space, then envisioning each toe as open, warm, and relaxed. Slowly shift to your foot, moving mentally from the ball of your foot to the arch and heel, then the top. Work your way up your ankle, calf, knee, thigh, and hip, taking your time. Allow your right leg to fully relax, sinking down softly.
- Turn your attention to your left big toe and repeat each step until your left leg is fully relaxed, sinking down softly. Now become aware of your back. Focus on each vertebra, then the muscles. Slowly move on to your abdomen and chest. Now turn to your right thumb, then to each finger. Relax your palm, wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Now scan and relax your left thumb and each finger, then your left palm, wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Think...
about your neck and jaw. Yawn. Allow each part of your face to relax, easing through your jaw, eyes, and forehead, then your scalp, and the back of your head.

- Let your whole body sink deeper and deeper into your chair or bed. Do you feel light? Relaxed? Imagine you are breathing in calm and peace. Imagine releasing any remaining tension as you breathe out. Sit or lie quietly, still inhaling and exhaling, noting lightness and spaciousness. Slowly, open your eyes and take a moment to stretch, if you like.

### Take a mindful walk

Rooted in Buddhist practices, mindfulness teaches us to live each moment as it unfolds and accept it without judgment. By doing so, you slow the breakneck pace of modern life and participate more fully in life. One intriguing study measured electrical activity in the brain before, immediately after, and four months after a two-month course of mindfulness. Participants experienced persistent increased activity on the left side of the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with joyful, serene emotions.

Often, mindfulness is taught through meditation focused on deep breathing, a phrase, or an image. A less formal approach permits you to practice mindfulness in any task or moment by following these three steps:

- **Begin with a few moments of breath focus (see “Cue a deep breath,” page 28) and return to this periodically, staying aware of each inhalation and exhalation.**
- **Proceed slowly and deliberately with your activity.**
- **Savor every sensation, engaging all five senses fully.**

**What to do:** Try a mindful walk two to three times a week, preferably in green space like a park or nature preserve or along quiet streets. During the first few minutes of your walk, practice deep breathing. As you move and breathe rhythmically, tune into the sensations of your body. How does it feel as breath flows in through your nostrils and out through your mouth? Gradually expand your awareness of the sights, smells, and sounds around you. Notice the scent of freshly mown grass, colors of flowers, textures of trees, the crunch of fallen leaves and twigs, dappled sun—or gray clouds and the sound and feel of raindrops. How does the air outside feel against your body? How does the surface beneath your feet feel and sound? What thoughts are moving through your head? Notice them, then release them like birds flying off. Tune into your breathing for a minute or two, then expand your awareness again. A slow, mindful walk helps center and relax you. Alternatively, a brisker pace that pushes your limits can be calming and energizing at once. In this case, place more emphasis on the sensations of your body—your quickened breathing and heartbeat, the way your muscles respond when you tax them.

### Try daily meditation

Meditation can evoke the relaxation response, a physiological sea change that slows heartbeat and breathing by focusing you on a word, phrase, prayer, or repetitive physical activity. Landmark research done by the renowned mind-body pioneer Herbert Benson, a cardiologist and president of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, has shown that regularly evoking the relaxation response lowers high blood pressure and eases many stress-related ailments.

**What to do:** For one week, make a commitment to yourself to pare down your schedule so you can meditate for 10 to 20 minutes every day. Preferably choose the same time each day. After a week, see how this makes you feel.

To start, sit or lie down comfortably, closing your eyes if you like. Silently repeat a word, sound, prayer, or phrase, such as “one,” “peace,” “Om” or “breathing in calm.” Let stray thoughts go, simply saying “Oh, well,” and returning to silently repeating your focal sound. Now, slowly relax your muscles, moving your attention gradually from your face to your feet. Continue to silently repeat your sound and breathe easily and naturally for 10 to 20 minutes. After you finish, sit quietly for a minute or so with your eyes closed. Then open your eyes and wait another minute before getting up.

Alternatively, try breath focus, mindfulness meditation, visualization or guided imagery, body scans, repetitive prayer, and other activities that can serve as routes to
the relaxation response. If meditation isn’t for you, practice one of these other relaxation techniques regularly.

**Simplify your days**

If you feel like you’re being tugged in too many directions, it’s probably true. So ease your stress by seeking ways to simplify. Identify tasks and social commitments you could drop without missing them. And practice saying “no” when asked to tackle tasks that make you feel overextended or activities you simply don’t want to do.

*What to do:* Start by writing down your tasks and activities for a week. Using two shades of highlighters, divide them into those that must get done—like paid work, grocery shopping, laundry, caring for children or elders—and those you enjoy doing. For some items, you’ll use both colors: if you enjoy your work or like to cook dinner, for example. Then prune one to two non-essential items off your weekly list.

How can you do this? First, focus on dropping nonessentials that you don’t enjoy off your list. Then take a creative look at the must-get-done-but-don’t-enjoy items. Could you trade a task you detest for one you like better? Could a task be done less often, or not at all? Is it worthwhile to pay for the service, or could an online resource like grocery or catalog shopping save you time and energy at the same cost?

Learning to say “no” gently but firmly will also help you simplify your days. Practice in front of the mirror or with a sympathetic friend. Try saying, “Boy, you really do need to get that done. I’m not able to do it, though—who else might be able to help?” To turn down a social engagement, try a regretful, “No, I’m afraid I can’t.” If that’s not sufficient, explain that you have other commitments or are just too pressed for time. Setting limits relieves your stress and opens a path for other solutions and volunteers to emerge. People won’t realize where your limits lie if they seem infinitely expandable.
Control spending

While money can’t buy happiness—not entirely, anyway—it bolsters security and strings a safety net for use when life goes awry. Yet plenty of people drift along, day after day, without much in the way of a financial plan. Ka-ching. Small purchases add up month by month. Ka-ching, ka-ching. Bigger buys can drain money better earmarked for emergency funds or retirement. If you’ve chosen to drift because delving into personal finances seemed too overwhelming, this section can help you move several steps down a path to gaining greater control.

The goal for controlling spending
It’s not simply about saving more, but also about spending thoughtfully. Work on freeing up funds and identifying hot spots where you tend to mindlessly overspend. Invest in yourself by directing money to the issues and items you really value. Discerning what you truly enjoy—what brings meaning to your life, not expendable stuff into your home—can help you decide when to save and when to spend. When extra cash piles up in a coin jar or bank account, divert it to reducing debts (paying down a credit card or loan), building an emergency fund, or plumping up retirement accounts before splurging.

Six choices for controlling spending
Our six choices will help you chip away at budget deficits, save for rainy days or a long-desired trip, and take steps toward financial planning. Some choices will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet. Choose a (SMART GOAL) (see page 4). Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (see page 12) and think about how you might make headway with tinier steps.

Carry your coffee
A quick stop every morning at Dunkin’ Donuts or Starbucks adds up to a whopping sum by the end of the year. Do the math yourself. If a cup of coffee rings in at $1.50 while a home-brewed cup costs you $.25 or less, you stand to save $1.25 a day—or more if you down several cups in the course of your day or like fancier coffee drinks or premium grinds. The difference can help trim your budget or be a slow, steady way to save for something you want.

What to do: Carry coffee to work in a thermos or thermal cup every day for a week. Setting everything up the night before will make this easier. Prefer a fresh brew? Borrow or buy an inexpensive cone that sits on a coffee cup, plus filters and...
your favorite grind, then add hot water, as needed. Bank the money you would have spent daily in a coin jar. At the end of the week, repeat your commitment, or scale it back to several days a week, if need be.

Baby carrots, prepared salads, pricey take-out, pizza nights, house-cleaners, landscapers, car washes—the list goes ever on. Sometimes convenience is well worth the price, but often it’s a great place to pocket some savings.

**What to do:** List five to 10 ways you pay for convenience. Pick off two that seem easy enough to take on and do-it-yourself for two weeks: cut your own carrots, mow the lawn yourself (using a push-reel mower also adds more exercise to your week), have the kids wash the car, park further away from a sporting or theatrical event to avoid higher parking lot prices, bike to work, or ride public transportation. Bank the savings in a coin jar. If you meet success, pick off another few items from your list. Bartering tasks, buying convenience less often, or paying children a modest sum for going above and beyond their usual family chores helps you save, too. Grandchildren and neighborhood children can also be a good source of low-cost labor.

Why indeed, in a report that largely centers on health? Financial health and happiness count toward a better life, too. A 2008 survey conducted for the American Psychological Association identified money and the economy as the top source of stress, followed by work, family responsibilities, and health concerns. Fallout from the recent economic meltdown could put many people at higher risk for compulsive behaviors like depression, anxiety, overeating, gambling, and substance abuse, warn experts at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Indeed, a health poll taken by the Associated Press and AOL noted that people reporting higher levels of stress from debt were more likely than those experiencing less stress to suffer headaches, trouble sleeping, muscle tension, digestive problems, severe anxiety, and other stress-related ailments.

While you can’t change the larger economy, you can rein in your small slice of it. At every income level, staying within your means adds up to better financial health and is likely to lessen stress. So invest in yourself through judicious use of your money. Social pressures and marketing geniuses prod people into big, splasy purchases or services they can easily do without. If you have thrifty genes that help you put on the brakes, bless your good fortune. You’re better positioned to weather unexpected illnesses that siphon off savings and other financial bumps and bruises. On the other hand, if your credit cards get more exercise on most days than you do, it’s high time to flip that equation. Taking control of your finances in small and big ways helps defuse a major source of unhealthy stress and create more space in your life for joy.
on activities that get you moving improves your fitness, too.

Flag on the play

Slow down or entirely skip non-emergency purchases. Impulse buys may be fun—an iPad you covet, those shoes you love—but usually they’re an unnecessary drain on your wallet. And, truth to tell, you probably won’t enjoy the lift for long if you’re always sighing after the next best item.

What to do: Wedge time between impulse and purchase by waiting a week to think it through. Pencil in no-spend days on your calendar to remind you of your efforts. It may help to set up an emergency number to call—a hotline to a sympathetic friend or sensible spouse who can talk you in off the ledge. Ask yourself whether you’d spend the cash if you had to take it from an emergency fund or retirement savings. According to Money Magazine, behavioral economists say it’s harder to take money from a savings account than a fund you’ve mentally marked “windfall”—winnings from a poker game, certainly, or even a tax return or work bonus.

Track your budget

It’s hard to control spending if you’re not sure where the money goes. Once you get a handle on it, it will be easier to pare unnecessary expenses.

What to do: Every night, put receipts and paid bills in an envelope placed in a visible spot, such as on your dresser or desk. Buy and load budget-tracking computer software like Quicken or QuickBooks, or a similar iPhone or smart phone application. This makes it easy to see where all the bucks go—whether that’s rent or the mortgage, utilities, medical costs, groceries, or haircuts—and offers instant feedback on any changes you make. Pencil in time on the calendar twice a week to enter spending information in the program by hand, or via downloads from bank and credit card Web sites. Schedule 30 minutes at the end of the two-week mark to look at expenses with an eye toward identifying low-hanging fruit you can trim, overspending hot spots, and less predictable expenses so you’ll be able to do a better job of budgeting in the long-term. Now set a goal to reduce or eliminate specific expenses and plan a tangible reward if you succeed. At the end of the month, sum up victories and reward yourself appropriately. If you like, choose another category and repeat. (For more on this, see “Track my budget for a month,” page 12.)

Carrying your coffee and trading less cash for convenience are great first steps. Identifying a monthly charge you can trim—or, better still, cut—pays off automatically, month after month after month.

What to do: Take a close look at bills you pay every month. Here are three places to start:

• Gym membership. Stop your gym membership entirely; ask about options to lower the bill, such as using the membership in off hours; or move to a less expensive gym in your area. Also, ask your employer and health insurance plan whether they offer any subsidy for gym membership. One caution: If a gym membership encourages you to work out in ways you won’t replicate at home, this isn’t a good spot for savings. (Maybe you should go more often instead. After all, the more often you go, the lower the cost per visit.)

• Cable TV. Cut back to basic cable or at least cut off premium channels. Many libraries have a debit card, or stash a notepad in your purse or pocket to jot down every purchase. Still too hard? Try tracking one category in a small notepad for two weeks: groceries and cash taken from the ATM are two good choices. Set your goal for cuts and see how you’ve done by the end of the month.

Embracing Change
excellent DVD collections that you can search and reserve online. And studies suggest less TV time could help slim your waistline, especially if you exercise during some of the time you’ve saved by watching less TV. Diverting just a quarter of the average time Americans are estimated to spend daily on TV—four hours!—to walks or other exercise could garner significant health benefits.

- **Energy costs.** Install programmable thermostats to save on energy costs when you’re sleeping or not home. Check Energy Star, a U.S. government program, for recommendations on how high or low to set your thermostat (www.health.harvard.edu/thermostat).

    Often, greater savings can be found in your health insurance (by scaling back to an adequate, yet lesser health plan; higher copays, coinsurance, or higher deductibles typically add up to lower premiums) and your mortgage (by refinancing while interest rates hover at historic lows). Either of these steps will require more homework. ♥

Which card first? The one that gives a confidence boost

If you do funnel part of the savings into paying off credit card debts, try focusing on the card with the smallest amount due first, then move on to the one with the second lowest balance due, and so on. It may mean paying a bit more in interest than the often touted strategy that pays off the card with the highest annual rate first. Yet that may be a reasonable trade-off if it bolsters your confidence in taking control and lessens your stress by taking one creditor off your list.
Harness positive psychology

When psychology was in its infancy, its aims encompassed a desire to understand what helps people flourish. Over time that goal gave way to a narrower focus on deciphering and repairing mental illnesses. This frustrated some mental health professionals, who chose a different tack in their work. “Treatment is not just fixing what is broken, it is nurturing what is best,” Martin E.P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, two leaders in the burgeoning field of positive psychology, wrote a decade ago when looking back on why this new movement gained traction. In this spirit, this section will help you find ways to flourish.

The goal for harnessing positive psychology
Positive psychology seeks to help people thrive and stretch, to recognize and build upon deep-seated strengths, to identify and actively create happiness. Excelling here doesn’t depend on your paycheck, the car you drive, or the size of your home. With these thoughts in mind, the goal is to encourage you to appreciate your life, invest it with greater meaning, and reap more joy.

Six choices for harnessing positive psychology
Our six choices aim to add joy, deeper meaning, and greater connection with others to your days. Some will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet. You’re more likely to be successful if you begin by choosing a SMART GOAL (see page 4). Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (see page 12) and think about how you might make headway with tinier steps.

Smile at the first 10 people of the day

Why? Smiling is contagious and feelings may mirror the face. When Swedish researchers monitored facial muscles on study participants shown images of faces expressing different emotions, they observed that a smiling face triggered muscles employed when smiling and a frowning face begat flickers in muscles engaged when frowning. A smile—at least a genuine one—telegraphs inner happiness to everyone around you. A number of researchers have asked if the reverse is true, too: could your facial expressions influence your emotions? Some research indicates that it does: simply smiling or frowning elicits feelings of happiness or distress. And deliberately inhibiting facial expressions appeared to tone down emotions triggered by negative and neutral (though not positive) video clips, according to a separate study published in the Journal of Research in Personality in 2009.

What to do: Smile for the first 10 people you see. You’re likely to find they’ll smile back. Plus the positive feedback loop might make your morning happier, too. Try this for a week. Observe how you feel when smiling—maybe silly, maybe a bit forced, maybe genuinely happy—and during the rest of your day.

Give thanks
Gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness in positive psychology research. All of us have much to be thankful for—a sunny day, a loving partner, a full belly, a joyful moment shared with a friend, or even light traffic on the way to work. Shining a spotlight on goodness in your life allows you to truly relish positive experiences. As you do, you may recognize that the wellspring of this goodness lies beyond you. Such feelings connect us to something larger than our indi-
individual experiences—whether to other people, nature, or a higher power.

What to do: Every day, set aside a few moments to write down three things for which you feel thankful. It was a beautiful day today. We had a chance to have dinner together as a family. I finally called my sister and had a good talk. Be specific and relive the sensations you felt as you remember what each of the gifts means to you. If it seems more natural, say it aloud to yourself or a loved one, or turn it into a prayer.

Seek out happy people

After crunching social network data derived from more than 4,700 adults in an arm of the Framingham Heart Study, researchers reported intriguing findings in BMJ. People surrounded by, and at the center of, many happy people are more likely to become happy in the future. Statistical models suggest this is more than birds of a feather flocking together. Rather, clusters of happiness appeared to spring from the spread of happiness. For example, having a friend who lived within a mile become happy boosted a person’s probability of happiness by 25%. Upbeat moods radiated as far as friends of friends of friends. And each additional friend counted as happy increased a person’s likelihood of being happy by about 9%.

What to do: Revel in the company of happy souls. In fact, it may be worth seeking happy people out through activities you enjoy, a religious community that resonates with you, and volunteer opportunities (see “Volunteer,” below), though the study doesn’t cover these situations. Snubbing less happy people isn’t necessary. As a BMJ commentator noted, unhappy acquaintances may make other contributions to our lives.

Volunteer

Helping others kindles happiness, as many studies have demonstrated. When researchers at the London School of Economics examined the relationship between volunteering and measures of happiness in a large group of American adults, they found the more people volunteered, the happier they were, according to a 2008 study in Social Science and Medicine. Compared with people who never volunteered, the odds of being “very happy” rose 7% among those who volunteer monthly and 12% for people who volunteer every two to four weeks. Among weekly volunteers, 16% felt very happy—a hike in happiness comparable to having an income of $75,000–$100,000 versus $20,000, say the researchers. Giving time to religious organizations had the greatest impact.

What to do: Local volunteer opportunities abound, so spend time in a realm you enjoy. Try a senior center, park, school, religious organization, or political group you appreciate. Your workplace may organize volunteer projects—and may even offer a day of pay while you help out. Vacations that mix travel and volunteerism are another option. At disaster sites throughout the world, people with medical and building skills are especially welcome. The Internet has made volunteering easier. You can search for organizations you know and like, or nearby opportunities that could use an hour or day of your help, through Volunteer Match (www.volunteermatch.com), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening communities; the U.S. government site Serve.Gov (www.serve.gov); and

Positive psychology tucks under one umbrella the study of positive emotions, full engagement in activities, personal virtues and strengths, and paths to fulfillment and a meaningful life. That’s quite a disparate grab bag, and by dipping into it you may well locate deeper satisfaction, fun, and greater abundance in your life. Experts in the field of positive psychology consider questions of happiness, vitality, and meaning worthy of serious scientific research—as well they should, since these issues affect our quality of life and well-being. A sunny, unflappable disposition is a plus, but it’s not the price of an entry ticket to all that’s good in life. Indeed, a growing body of research is finding that it’s possible to nurture qualities like optimism even in people who lean toward pessimism, heighten fleeting feelings of happiness by savoring them, and find joy through expressing gratitude and helping others. By doing so, some studies suggest you stand to gain a longer life and better health by some measures, such as lower risks for hypertension and diabetes.
Senior Corps (www.seniorcorps.gov), which puts the expertise and energies of Americans over 55 to good use. Another good source is AARP, which has launched a Web site called Create the Good (www.createthegood.org) to help you match interests and abilities to needs in your community. The site also has step-by-step videos and do-it-yourself tool kits for people who wish to head up or handle alone big or small volunteer efforts like conserving energy, organizing a river cleanup, helping someone get a handle on medications or find public benefits, starting a giving circle, and more.

**Table 3 Six virtues and underlying strengths**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIRTUE</th>
<th>UNDERLYING STRENGTH</th>
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| Wisdom: Intellectual strengths that help you gain and use information | • Creativity  
• Curiosity  
• Open-mindedness  
• Love of learning  
• Perspective |
| Courage: Strengths of will that help you accomplish goals in the face of fear and obstacles | • Integrity  
• Bravery  
• Persistence  
• Vitality |
| Humanity: Strengths that help you befriend others and tend relationships | • Social or emotional intelligence  
• Love  
• Kindness |
| Justice: Social or civic strengths that help bolster a healthy community | • Teamwork  
• Fairness  
• Leadership |
| Temperance: Protective traits that help you avoid excess and stay on track in the face of temptations | • Mercy  
• Humility and modesty  
• Self-control  
• Prudence |
| Transcendence: Strengths of meaning that connect you with the larger world and provide meaning | • Appreciation of beauty  
• Spirituality  
• Gratitude  
• Hope  
• Humor |

Adapted from the VIA Institute on Character. For more information on virtues and signature strengths, go to www.viacharacter.org.

Signature strengths can be defined as character traits you identify with, appreciate, and enjoy using: you’re a curious person, perhaps, and you have a lot of integrity. Christopher Peterson, scientific director of the VIA Institute on Character in Ohio, and Martin Seligman wrote a handbook describing six universally valued virtues, or core characteristics, and the underlying strengths through which people display them. They drew on philosophers and religions throughout history and across cultures to distill these virtues.

Strengths may change throughout life as circumstances do. Playing to strengths can help you meet challenges. For example, one person trying to influence a local school board to ban soft drink sales might tap into the strength to speak up forcefully and clearly at a meeting; another person strong in team-building might feel uncomfortable speaking out, yet could help build consensus among parents, nutritionists, and school officials. A study published in *American Psychologist* noted that happiness increased and depression decreased for six months in participants who were asked to identify their signature strengths and then use one in a new way every day for a week.

**What to do:** First assess your strengths (see next paragraph). Then choose just one to use in a new way every day for a week. For example, on day one you might plunge into an activity that makes you nervous (bravery), set a beautiful table for an ordinary meal (appreciation of beauty), or listen to a talk show you normally are at odds with and consider legitimate points it may raise (open-mindedness), depending on which of these strengths you’ve chosen. Strengths most closely linked to happiness—gratitude, hope, vitality, curiosity, and love—may be worth cultivating even if they’re not on your current list of signature strengths.

Look over the accompanying table of six virtues and underlying strengths (see Table 3). If you have trouble identifying key strengths, think about what comes easily to you and what you often are complimented on. Or ask someone you respect and who knows you well to help. Or delve into this more fully by filling out the online Inventory of Signature Strengths Survey. You’ll find it at www.health.harvard.edu/strengths. This 30-minute online questionnaire developed at the VIA Institute on Character identifies signature strengths. A free report provides a brief write-up of your five signature strengths. Paying a fee (currently $40) entitles you to a more comprehensive discussion of your strengths and virtues, plus sug-
gested activities intended to bolster or expand on this foundation.

**Find the flow**

Ever been so immersed in what you were doing that distractions and background chatter just fell away? Nothing existed except the shush of your skis on the snow, the sensation of your car sweeping around bends in the road, the images cast by the book you had your nose in, or the satisfying sense of pieces clicking into place as you worked through a challenging task. Dubbed “flow” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, director of the Quality of Life Research Center at Claremont Graduate University, this state of being feels effortless, yet active. You lose awareness of time, you cease to think about yourself or feel distracted by extraneous thoughts. You may be working toward a goal—earning a graduate degree or winning a chess tournament—yet that isn’t your primary motivation. Rather, you find the activity itself rewarding. Researchers have found flow hinges on a balance between the size of a challenge and the level of your skill. Watching TV, for example, isn’t likely to spark a sense of flow even though you may find it relaxing.

**What to do:** Think about times in your life when you’ve experienced flow and seek a new way to invite it into your life. So if you feel confidence and pleasure in your driving, or have the ability to play a particular piano concerto, you might try driving your car on unfamiliar roads or playing a more complex composition. Match your skills to a new activity that offers rich sensory experiences: perhaps a pottery class, a carpentry project, or a different medium in art.
As you strive to make health-enhancing course corrections described in this report, it's worthwhile to look at unhealthy habits that creep up on you. Smoking a cigarette now and again can quickly morph into a regular habit. Likewise, if occasional social drinking is becoming a nightly event, or if your morning coffee is now a daylong ritual that disturbs your sleep at night, it's time to take stock.

Sometimes, even seemingly harmless pursuits become an issue when you start to indulge in them too often. Trolling the Internet night after night, watching eye-glazing hours of TV, or spending more time on social media with online pals or avatars than you do with flesh-and-blood friends and family all qualify as unhealthy habits, too. At best, these activities soak up excessive amounts of time, leaving you less opportunity to engage in healthier pursuits, like a walk or a favorite sport, and to enjoy and deepen social ties. Close relationships not only add pleasure to life, studies have shown that they might help you live longer and stay mentally sharp.

There's a very big difference, of course, between a minor unhealthy habit you can fix yourself and an addiction or dependency that calls for more serious intervention. If you suspect that you're dealing with addiction or dependency (see page 42), you'll need additional sources of support and professional help to change course.

The goal for nipping an unhealthy habit in the bud

Striking a better balance in your life is an excellent goal for nipping unhealthy habits in the bud. Unless you're trying to stop drinking alcohol or using other chemical substances, abstinence usually isn't necessary, as long as the object of your indulgence—online poker, caffeine, TV, or texting, for instance—doesn't rise to the level of addiction or dependency (see page 42). So, with the exception of drugs and alcohol, banish all-or-nothing thinking. Instead, aim to throttle back the unhealthy activity or indulgence to a point where it isn't compromising your ability to handle daily challenges, harming your health, or loosening ties with family and friends. Ultimately, nipping an unhealthy habit in the bud can be a gift in many ways, whether it helps you improve your health, save money, or reconnect with people and activities you enjoy.

Six choices for nipping unhealthy habits in the bud

Our six choices aim to help you take stock, derail harmful routines, and start cutting back on unhealthy habits. Some choices will seem easy, others harder. Start by selecting one that seems like a sure bet and is a SMART GOAL (see page 4). Successfully incorporate it into your life before moving on to another challenge. If all the choices seem too difficult, flip back to “Breaking it down” (see page 12) and think about how you might make headway with tinier steps.

Take stock


What to do: Log the habit for one to two weeks in a journal, answering all of the questions asked above. Then write down why you shouldn't—and should—make a change, following the example in the chart “Is a change worthwhile?” on page 3. Once you have a better understanding of your habit, distract yourself when the urge arises with a substitute tailored to the underlying issue. For example, call a friend or family to connect if you're feeling lonely; try a relaxation technique like deep breathing or a body scan if you're...
Why nip an unhealthy habit in the bud?

Your health, finances, and social life are all good reasons to nip unhealthy habits in the bud. Many of these habits are quite costly, either in dollars or in terms of time you could spend better elsewhere. While it’s not possible to touch on the effects of every unhealthy habit, here are a few common problem areas:

**Smoking.** Most smokers are well aware of the harmful health effects of smoking, which kills an estimated 440,000 Americans each year—more than alcohol, cocaine, heroin, homicide, suicide, car accidents, fire, and AIDS combined. Smoking raises the risk for lung and other cancers, emphysema and other respiratory ailments, hypertension, and heart disease.

**Alcohol.** Alcohol misuse sharply raises the risk of illness from numerous health problems, including liver disease, heart disease, and some types of cancer. Alcohol also interacts with many prescription medications, causing dangerous side effects.

**Caffeine.** Coffee, taken to excess, may cause heartburn, sleep problems, yellow teeth, jitteriness, and anxiety. Other caffeinated beverages prompt most of these side effects, too. Generally studies don’t implicate moderate caffeine use as a significant health risk, but at $3 for a cup of java at specialty coffee shops and at least $1 per cup at less expensive venues, finances may be an even bigger reason to cut back.

**Electronic media.** Electronic media connects people living everywhere and opens routes to information and new sources of enjoyment. Yet brightly lit screens and constant dings, pings, and buzzes serve as enticing distractions. Time that could be spent on exercise, nurturing hobbies, finishing tasks, or visiting friends instead gets sunk into imaginary second lives, online poker or solitaire, shoals of e-mails, flashy computer games, iPhone applications, cell phone chatter, texting, or tweeting. Ironically, all these connections can still feel socially isolating, disrupt sleep or daily tasks, and create more stress than they relieve. Once you become wired—or wireless—it may be hard to disconnect in a calming, mindful manner. In extreme cases, overuse of social and electronic media can cross the line into addictive behaviors.

Peer pressure doesn’t end after high school. Many people who drink or smoke like to have others join in. Ditto for buddies who aid and abet as you pry the seal off a pint of ice cream, or who spend just as much time in online chat groups as you do.

**What to do:** Watch out for peer pressure, good-natured or not. Let friends and family know in advance that you’re trying to cut back and ask them for their support. Script responses you can make for different situations and practice using them. Actively seeking out people who share healthier interests will help, too: volunteer in your community, join a sports club or gym, take an adult ed course, and so on.

**Practice saying no**

Powerful cues help keep us on autopilot. If you’re a smoker, for example, the cue might be as direct as the lingering smell of ciga-

rettes in your car, or as indirect as the route you take home, which swings by a bar where your friend’s car is often parked. When you stop to chat, you end up with a drink in hand, and whenever you drink, you feel like having a cigarette. Breaking longstanding routines linked to your habit helps get you out of this loop.

**What to do:** Identify the cue (see “Take stock,” at left) and switch up your routine. Announce your resolve to quit smoking and ask a nonsmoking spouse or friend to trade cars for a stretch. Before trading back, detailing your own car to clear out the reminders of smoking and tone down the scent can help you turn over a new leaf. Choose a different route, bring new music, and replace the cigarettes with a pack of chewing gum. Or use public transportation, where smoking is squelched by law. Similarly, if you always have a drink when you get home from work, clear away the alcohol and stock your fridge with nonalcoholic substitutes. Or instead of going straight home, go to a movie, art exhibit, or author reading.

**Cut the habit in half**

Once you establish how often you engage in the habit, set your sights on reducing this by half each day or week.
What to do: Over the course of a week, track the time you spend on the activity, the amount of substance used, or the amount spent (14 hours of TV, six candy bars, $15 on fancy coffee drinks). Then divide this in half and write down on the calendar how much to cap it at for each day (or per week if you do it less frequently). Check off days you hit that goal and brainstorm changes if you hit obstacles. At the end of the following week, if you’ve saved money, reward yourself by spending half of it, if possible, and saving the other half.

Try going without

Try bypassing your habit entirely one day a week. Too easy? Try two days (or more).

What to do: Write down on the calendar the day or days that you’ll go without TV, alcohol, social media, online poker, or another questionable habit. Plan ahead for obstacles: when you feel like indulging, what will do you to stave this off? Keep track of how you felt, what made this easy or hard to accomplish, and what sort of substitutions helped. Keeping your hands and mind busy is often a boon: go for a long bike ride, try knitting or gardening, set up Scrabble, or invite a friend along to see a movie.

Addiction and dependency

Loss of control over a substance or behavior and continued craving for it despite negative consequences characterize addiction. New imaging technologies that show the brain responding similarly to different pleasurable experiences have persuaded many experts to consider addiction to be a single disorder with varied expressions.

Illicit drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and even medicines prescribed for sleep, pain, or anxiety have long been recognized as potentially addictive substances. Excessive gambling, shopping, sex, and overuse of an array of electronic media represent another side of this coin.

When a dependency develops, a person exhibits at least three of these symptoms or behaviors:

• greater tolerance to the substance or behavior
• withdrawal symptoms when cutting back or quitting, such as anxiety, trouble sleeping, or nausea
• unsuccessful attempts to cut down or quit
• loss of control over the amount, or period, of use

• a greater focus on thoughts, plans, actual use, and recovery time
• a decreased focus on other aspects of life, including sports, time with friends and family, and hobbies
• ignoring problems caused by indulgence in the substance or behavior, such as trouble with relationships or worsening health.

If this applies, you’ll need more assistance in breaking unhealthy habits than this report can offer. Talk to your doctor or seek a treatment program if you think you may have an addiction or dependency. Many people turn to peer support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and Overeaters Anonymous. Residential (live-in) treatment centers provide the most intensive addiction treatment. (Also see Harvard Medical School’s "Overcoming Addiction: Paths Toward Recovery" for in-depth information on understanding and treating addiction. To order, see the back of this report.)

Know when to ask for help

The hardest step to take may be admitting you can’t handle this issue by yourself. Let’s say you do well all day—you eat healthy foods and walk off urges to splurge. Instead of snacking, you do 10 push-ups. But sometime after you click off the lights on a clean kitchen and before the clock strikes midnight, your resolve crumbles and you eat every calorie you’ve walked off (and then some).

What to do: Congratulate yourself for trying heroically and making many good moves. But this habit is entrenched too deeply to be rooted out so easily. You need more support and possibly more direction to reach your goals. Discuss the issue with your doctor or a mental health professional, preferably one experienced in techniques to enhance motivation or in cognitive behavior therapy, which teaches people to change patterns of thought and behavior that contribute to problems. Or contact a 12-step program or support group on your own: Overeaters Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, the American Cancer Society, and similar organizations, or SMART Recovery (self-management and recovery training), which emphasizes helping participants identify emotional and environmental triggers.
Resources

Organizations

American Council on Exercise
4851 Paramount Drive
San Diego, CA 92123
888-825-3636
www.acefitness.org
ACE is a nonprofit organization that promotes fitness and offers a wide array of educational materials, including a video fitness library on the Web site.

Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital
151 Merrimac St., 4th floor
Boston, MA 02114
617-643-6090
www.bhimgh.org
Home base to mind-body pioneer Dr. Herbert Benson and colleagues, who have taught the relaxation response and other stress management techniques for many years. The Institute has programs for people with stress-related health concerns, such as heart disease, chronic pain, and infertility, as well as exercise, nutrition, and wellness programs.

Institute of Lifestyle Medicine
Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital Network
65 Walnut St., Suite 260
Wellesley, MA 02481
781-234-1205
www.instituteoflifefstylemedicine.org
Led by Edward M. Phillips, M.D., the medical editor of this report, the Institute seeks to reduce the prevalence of lifestyle-related disease by changing modifiable behaviors. Physicians work with patients to change lifestyle choices—such as physical inactivity and unhealthy eating—that damage health and longevity.

Oldways
266 Beacon St.
Boston, MA 02116
617-421-5500
www.oldwayspt.org
A nonprofit nutrition think tank that has blended science and tradition to present healthy eating pyramids derived from Mediterranean, Asian, and Hispanic cultures, plus one for vegetarians. The Web site offers abundant tips for eating well every day and enjoying the pleasures of the table along with recipes to help you do so.

The Nutrition Source—Knowledge for Healthy Eating
Harvard School of Public Health
Department of Nutrition
677 Huntington Ave.
Boston, MA 02115
www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource
This Web site offers free public access to the latest information on nutrition and health.

Shape Up America!
www.shapeup.org
A not-for-profit organization founded by a former U.S. Surgeon General and committed to helping people achieve a healthy body weight. Provides evidence-based information and guidance on weight management, plus handy tools to encourage eating well and exercising.

VIA Institute on Character
312 Walnut St., Suite 3600
Cincinnati, OH 45202
www.viacharacter.org
The VIA Institute on Character does research on character virtues and strengths. The Web site features a full-length inventory of strengths, a brief survey, and a version for children. All can be taken and scored online.

MyPyramid
U.S. Department of Agriculture
www.mypyramid.gov
A government Web site with tools that permit you to assess and personalize eating plans and exercise.

Books

Eat, Drink, & Weigh Less: A Flexible and Delicious Way to Shrink Your Waist Without Going Hungry
Mollie Katzen and Walter C. Willett, M.D.
(Hyperion, 2006)
Written by a well-known cookbook author along with the head of Harvard School of Public Health’s Department of Nutrition, this book describes a flexible, medically sound weight-loss program. Dietary changes, behavioral steps, and healthy, easy-to-prepare recipes work together to help you lose weight.

Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment
Tal Ben-Shahar, Ph.D.
(McGraw-Hill, 2007)
The teacher of Harvard’s popular undergraduate course in positive psychology, Ben-Shahar uses examples from research, his course, and his life to encourage people to develop greater levels of happiness in their lives.

Making the Most of Your Money Now: The Classic Bestseller Completely Revised for the New Economy
Jane Bryant Quinn
(Simon & Schuster, 2009)
A compendium of solid advice from longtime financial columnist Jane Bryant Quinn. Touches on a range of topics, including weathering financial setbacks, cutting your budget to fit your income and savings intentions, buying insurance of all types, making investments, and planning for retirement.
Resources  continued

The No Sweat Exercise Plan: Lose Weight, Get Healthy, and Live Longer
Harvey B. Simon, M.D.
(McGraw-Hill, 2006)
Written by a leading Harvard Medical School physician, this book introduces an innovative exercise plan that details ways to be healthy and lose weight through day-to-day activities without working up a sweat. Based on scientific data and written for people who know they need to exercise, but aren’t interested in heavy workouts.

Relaxation Revolution: Enhancing Your Personal Health through the Science and Genetics of Mind-Body Healing
Herbert Benson, M.D., and William Proctor, J.D.
(Scribner, 2010)
Written by mind-body pioneer Herbert Benson, this comprehensive new guide covers an array of mind-body therapies shown to help treat certain ailments, such as high blood pressure, anxiety and depression, hot flashes stemming from menopause, headaches, and backaches. Specific techniques and the science behind them are detailed.

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life
Jon Kabat-Zinn
(Hyperion, 1994)
An accessible guide to mindfulness from the founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. The book features formal mindfulness meditation practice as well as more casual ways to bring mindfulness into everyday activities.

Related Special Health Reports
You can order these Special Health Reports from Harvard Medical School on related topics online at www.health.harvard.edu, or by calling 877-649-9457 (toll-free):

- Exercise: A program you can live with
- Healthy Eating: A guide to the new nutrition
- Healthy Eating for a Healthy Heart
- Healthy Solutions To Lose Weight and Keep It Off
- Overcoming Addiction: Paths toward recovery
- Positive Psychology: Harnessing the power of happiness, personal strength, and mindfulness
- Stress Management: Approaches for preventing and reducing stress
- Workout Workbook: Nine complete workouts to help you get fit and healthy
addiction: Loss of control over indulgence in a substance or behavior and continued craving for it despite negative consequences.

body scan: A relaxation technique that involves releasing tense muscles in sequence from head to toe while breathing deeply.

breath focus: Deep abdominal breathing that slows heartbeat and respiration and helps lower blood pressure when practiced regularly.

calorie: The unit for measuring the amount of energy in food.

flow: A term coined by positive psychology pioneer Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe an effortless, active state of being during which you lose awareness of time, self, and distractions. Flow hinges on balancing the size of a challenge and the level of skill a person brings to it.

hypertension: High blood pressure, a condition that raises risk for heart attack and stroke, among other health problems.

mindfulness: A technique rooted in Buddhist practices that focuses on living each moment fully as it unfolds, accepting it without judgment. Formally, it is often taught through meditation; informally, it is often applied to eating, activities like walks, and everyday tasks.

obesity: An excess of body fat, usually defined as having a body mass index of 30 or more.

optimism: A characteristic frame of mind that leads a person to expect positive outcomes and to view the world as a positive place.

overweight: A condition marked by a body mass index of 25 to 29.

pessimism: A characteristic frame of mind that leads a person to expect negative outcomes and to view the world as a negative or fearful place.

positive psychology: A burgeoning area of psychology that focuses on helping people flourish. Positive psychology tucks under one umbrella the study of positive emotions, full engagement in activities, personal virtues and strengths, and paths to fulfillment and a meaningful life.

relaxation response: A term coined by Dr. Herbert Benson to describe the physical effects of meditation and certain other techniques that help oppose the stress response, including marked drops in heartbeat and respiration as well as stabilized or lowered blood pressure.

saturated fat: A type of fat found in animal foods, such as meat, poultry skin, butter, whole-milk dairy products, and palm and coconut oils.

signature strengths: Character traits like curiosity, integrity, and modesty that people identify with, appreciate having, and enjoy using.

SMART: An acronym for an approach to setting goals for behavioral change: set a very specific goal; find a way to measure progress; make sure it’s achievable; make sure it’s realistic; and set time commitments.

strength training: A type of exercise that uses resistance from body weight, hand weights, stretchy bands or tubes, or machines to build strength in muscles and bones.

stress response: Physiological changes, such as quickened breathing, fast heartbeat, and higher blood pressure, caused by an increase in stress hormones prompted by real or perceived threats.

virtues: Core characteristics that are universally valued by philosophers and religions across time and cultures, such as wisdom and courage.