

Make Art, Melt Stress

Sculpting, painting, drawing, or creating a collage helped reduce levels of cortisol – a hormone that increases when you are under stress – in 75 percent of a group of people recently studied. Making art helped both newbies and veteran artsy-craftsy types alike. Volunteers who struggled at first (but ultimately liked their project) or who said the experience helped them learn something about themselves were more likely to see a drop in cortisol.

So it might be time to pick up some scissors, a paint brush, or a lump of clay!



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Shape Up With Some Exercise Guidance

This has been a year like no other. Locked away for part of the year, unable to follow our normal, daily routines. Tempted daily to park on the couch and binge watch our favorite shows...ignoring that little voice in our brains to GET UP and GET MOVING.

Most people know it's important to be physically fit, but a lot of us aren't sure how to achieve that goal. Research has shown that regular physical activity can help prevent dementia, heart attacks, strokes, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers, such as those of the breast and colon. Here are some do's and don'ts based on guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine about the quality and quantity of exercise.

DO lift weights. In fact, if time is limited, shorten your aerobic activity to make time for weight lifting. Strength training is critical for older adults to help prevent age-related bone and muscle loss, both of which can lead to falls and serious injuries.

DON'T be a “weekend warrior.” Research suggests that it's less effective for adults with cardiovascular risk factors to do most of their physical activity on Saturday or Sunday. Instead, do shorter bouts of exercise through the week.

DO diversify your exercise. The ACSM now recommends “functional fitness” activities such as Pilates, tai chi, and yoga. These combine balance, stretching, and muscle strengthening and can improve your agility and body control.

DON'T stay sedentary during your downtime. Try to find 6 or 7 more hours a week to spend on your feet, and move around more throughout the day. And try to cut your evening screen time.

DO stretch after working out, not before. Your muscles need to be warm in order to obtain maximum benefit from flexibility training.

DON'T rely solely on step counts. While pedometers can be effective for promoting activity, step counts aren't an accurate measure of exercise intensity or quality. Better to use a heart-rate monitor to track intensity, and aim for a set number of minutes rather than a certain number of steps.

DO watch your eating. While exercise alone can cut your body fat and alter your body's composition, it has a small impact on actual weight loss over the short-term – as little as 5 pounds a year. And losing pounds if you're overweight can enhance the health benefits of exercise.

DON'T get discouraged if you're not that fit. Even a little exercise is better than nothing. Slowly build up your duration first, then focus on increasing the intensity, since it's the amount of exercise that relates most to the health benefits. Try to add 1 to 5 minutes every two to three weeks.

Food for Thought

Eating behaviors that can help the brain:

Research has found that it's not just what you eat but how and when you eat that can affect your mental function. These three practices can help sharpen your mind and raise your spirits.

Eat breakfast within 90 minutes of waking, every morning. A meal that has protein, complex carbohydrates, and healthy fat, has been linked to better cognitive performance and a brighter mood during the day.

Keep blood sugar steady. Don't skip meals; eat a meal or snack that combines protein, carbs, and fat every 4 to 5 hours; and try to eat at the same times each day.

Drink enough fluid. Fatigue and irritability can stem from dehydration. Even mild dehydration after team practices can lead to a negative mood.

Fewer carbs, fuzzier mind?

In recent years, scientists have studied the effects of low-fat vs. low-carbohydrate diets on cognition and mood. In one study, women who followed a carb-free diet for a week showed impaired memory compared with those who adhered to a more balanced, reduced-calorie plan. When the low-carb dieters added small amounts of carbohydrates to their regimen the following week, it reversed the cognitive impairment.

In another study, lasting a year, low-carb and low-fat dieters did equally well in memory and cognition tests, but people in the low-fat group scored higher on measures of mood. Experts say that cutting carbs might impair cognition by reducing the blood level of glucose, which is produced when carbohydrates are broken down during digestion and which serves as the brain's primary fuel source.

Bottom line: If you're considering a low-carb diet, look for one that allows some complex carbohydrates in the form of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. That might help mitigate crankiness or brain fog.

Eating healthfully doesn't have to cost more.

That is the encouraging conclusion of a recent study. The group analyzed 20 snacks and 19 side dishes, including fruits and vegetables. It found that snack foods, such as cookies and M&Ms actually cost twice as much on average as similar-sized servings of fresh fruit and vegetables. And processed side dishes such as ready-made stuffing cost more on average than better-for-you vegetable options.

Right Drug, Wrong Dose?

It's common for older adults to be prescribed a higher dose of a medication when a lower dose might work just as well. That's a problem because higher doses can increase the likelihood and intensity of side effects.

There are a couple of reasons that older adults may require lower doses. Aging changes the way our bodies metabolize medications – the kidneys and liver process them less efficiently, so they can linger longer in your system. Also because many older adults tend to have a higher percentage of body fat compared with muscle, medications could be more highly concentrated in the body than they would be in younger people. Both can increase the risk of side effects.

So during brown-bag reviews, ask your doctor whether you can lower the doses of medications that you use. Sometimes you may not need as much as you were actually getting. You might be able to get the same benefit with a reduced dose.

If you and your doctor decide that you can lower a dose, or even stop a drug, follow these tips to make yourself safe:

Make a plan. Work out a schedule for tapering the dose of your medication that includes follow-up appointments, so your doctor can closely monitor you for withdrawal symptoms or other problems.

Know the warning signs. Get a list of the symptoms that can be triggered by stopping the drug you're taking, and call your doctor if you notice any.

Keep symptoms from returning. Ask your doctor about strategies that can help. For example, exercise and psychotherapy can help ward off depression symptoms while you are getting off an antidepressant.

