



## THE 4 PILLARS OF HEALTH

The secret to feeling good is straightforward: Focus on a few essential elements, and you're on your way to true wellness.

BY STEPHANIE BOOTH

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM O'BRIEN



Healthfads come and (thankfully) go. Despite the shiny promises that one particular superfood/workout/biohack will get you in the best shape of your life, the truth is, you don't need to overthink (or overpay) to get healthy.

It really boils down to four fundamentals, says Roshini Rajapaksa, MD, *Health's* contributing medical editor (a.k.a. Dr. Raj). Eat well, exercise regularly, manage your stress, and get enough sleep—and you'll be better able to

avoid illness, and even live longer. "When I was in med school, everyone was focused on treating diseases," says Dr. Raj. "Now, we're embracing the idea that health is more than taking medicine or getting an X-ray. It's about making holistic choices that set you up for success."

For a little help getting back to basics, we asked renowned experts to share their most vital, stripped-down advice on nutrition, fitness, self-care, and catching high-quality z's.





# I

## DIET

### Eat a Variety of Foods.

BY ROBIN FOROUTAN, RDN

Registered dietitian specializing in integrative medicine, and national spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

The secret to simple, healthy eating? Variety. Choose different kinds of veggies, fruits, and other plant-based foods, since they all have phytonutrients that contribute to good health in unique ways. The same goes for protein foods. Try new kinds of fish, poultry, meats, beans, and legumes. And don't overlook nuts and seeds.

Even if you're avoiding processed foods, eating the same healthy foods on repeat only gives you certain nutrients—and not all the nutrients you actually need. It's like trying to play a symphony with only a few violins and flutes: The sound may be nice, but a whole orchestra with the full range of instruments sounds even better.

We tend to label some foods as "bad," when in fact it's really our eating pattern that may not be great. If the only veggies you eat are corn and potatoes, that's not healthy. Not because corn and potatoes are bad, but because what you're choosing isn't balanced.

Look through the lens of color: Are you eating foods in all the categories, like blue, purple, brown, orange, red, and green? Each offers your health a little something different. Plus, they keep your meals interesting.



#### HOW TO MAKE NUTRITIOUS CHOICES

**GO HALF-VEGGIE.**

As often as you can, fill 50 percent of your plate with vegetables. "Aim for three different colors at each meal," says Foroutan. Split the remaining half of your plate between lean protein (like shrimp or tempeh) and a source of complex carbs (such as beans or a whole grain).

**LOAD ON THE FLAVOR.**

"Herbs and spices are nutritional powerhouses," says Foroutan. Parsley, for instance, is high in apigenin, a potent anti-cancer compound. Oregano may help fight off viruses, and special compounds in thyme are anti-inflammatory. "It's lucky for us that they also taste great."

**BUY LOCAL.**

Your food will taste fresher when it spends less time going from the field to your fridge. It may be healthier, too. Researchers at Montclair State University in New Jersey found that locally harvested broccoli had twice the amount of vitamin C as that obtained out of season and shipped from far away.

**MIX UP YOUR FRUIT BOWL.**

If it's always full of apples and bananas, consider the many vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals you're missing by not snacking on other types of produce, too. Swap a kiwi for your usual Red Delicious, for example, and you'll get 18 times more vitamin K that day.

# II

## EXERCISE

### Get Moving Most Days.

BY NICOLE R. KEITH, PHD

President-elect of the American College of Sports Medicine, and research scientist and professor of kinesiology at Indiana University

No matter if you're thin, it's still important to keep working out. Research has even found that people who are obese and cardiovascularly fit have better health outcomes than people who are slim and not fit.

Aim to be active 150 minutes each week, spread across five or six days instead of just one or two. Your body benefits more from daily increases in your heart rate and oxygen consumption—just like your system benefits more from food and water that's consumed over the course of a week, rather than a giant feast eaten in a single day.

On two nonconsecutive days each week, focus on strength and flexibility exercises to help your bone health and muscles, and stave off injuries. The rest of the time, choose a cardiovascular activity to strengthen your heart.

If you're not a fan of working out, focus on all the good reasons there are to do so anyway: It improves cognition, for instance, and reduces stress and anxiety. Exercising regularly also helps you stay active and independent for years to come.



#### HOW TO FIT IN WORKOUTS

**COUNT EVERY BIT.**

"Move whenever you can. Go for a walk, take the stairs in your building—you can even do laps around your house, or march in place during TV commercials. Just get more steps in your day," says Keith.

**EXPECT SETBACKS.**

Real life will occasionally interfere with your workouts, and when that happens, it's easy to fall off the wagon. "Return to your routine ASAP," Keith urges. "Think of it this way: If you get really busy and skip lunch one day, does that mean you'll never eat again? Nope. The same goes for exercising."

**RECRUIT OTHERS.**

Instead of a buddy to work out with, find a group. "That

way, if one person's schedule gets derailed, yours won't too," notes Keith. Exercising with other people may also give you a bigger mental boost: One study found that med students who worked out in a group setting had a bigger drop in their stress levels compared with solo sweaters.

**KNOW WHAT MOTIVATES YOU.**

For some, it's signing up for a nonrefundable SoulCycle class. For others, it's tracking their progress on an Apple Watch. Even buying a cute pair of leggings could help. A survey of 2,000 gym-goers found that 7 in 10 felt inspired just by putting on their gear. When you find a strategy that works, embrace it.

# III

## STRESS

### Strike a Balance.

BY LARA E. FIELDING, PSYD

Behavioral psychologist, professor of psychology at Pepperdine University Graduate School of Education and Psychology, and author of *Mastering Adulthood*

Stress is inevitable. But its cumulative effects over time are what damage your health. Chronic stress has been linked to a host of issues, including anxiety and depression, weight gain, inflammation, digestive issues, fertility problems, even poor memory. The way to avoid repercussions is by dealing with stress in the moment, as it happens.

The idea is to become psychologically flexible—or in other words, to learn to balance your exposure to stress with self-soothing efforts. I often equate this to standing on a surfboard, on top of a bowling ball. You can lean into your uncomfortable emotions, and then discipline yourself to pull out of that discomfort. Being able to toggle back and forth like that will make you more resilient.

Research shows that it's not stress itself but our attitudes and beliefs about stress that can make it "toxic." When you feel powerless, that's when stress becomes harmful. So it's really not the amount of stress you have in your life that matters. It's the way you ride it out.



#### HOW TO CHANNEL YOUR INNER CALM

**HACK YOUR BRAIN.**

Identify your responses to stress. Do your shoulders pop up? Do you talk faster? "Catch yourself when you're reacting," Fielding notes. "Then control the only thing that's in your control—your behavior." Drop those shoulders down. Soften your belly, and slow your breathing. These subtle changes reassure your body that any stress you perceive isn't a physical threat. "You're overriding your sympathetic nervous system," Fielding explains.

**FIND THE POSITIVE.**

Demanding new boss? Think of all the things you will learn from her. Dread your commute? At least you have time to listen to every ep

of *My Favorite Murder*. We know from research that reframing an event to change your emotional response to it—a strategy called cognitive reappraisal—helps keep stress in check.

**BOUNCE BACK.**

When (not if) you handle a stressful situation ineffectively—snapping at your partner, for instance—go easy on yourself. "We reflexively do things that make us feel better in the short term," says Fielding. Next time, choose to handle your stress in a way that helps you recharge: Make a green smoothie. Apply a face mask. Go for a swim. You're not running away from your stress, Fielding points out: "You're fostering resiliency."

# IV

## SLEEP

### Don't Skimp on Shut-Eye.

BY W. CHRIS WINTER, MD

Board-certified neurologist, double-board-certified sleep specialist, and author of *The Sleep Solution: Why Your Sleep Is Broken and How to Fix It*

Your brain is pretty binary when it comes to sleep. It has to rest. When you sleep, your brain rids itself of waste products and consolidates memory. Sleep also keeps your heart and circulation working, and your digestion regular. It's not yet known why we have to be unconscious for these things to happen, but we do.

On average, people need 7½ to 8 hours of sleep each night. Lots of people say they do "fine" on 5 hours. But they're more likely to be functional despite mild sleep deprivation. "Functional" and "doing what is best for your body" are not synonymous. Taking care of your future self is important, and a long-term lack of sleep has been tied to so many diseases that you could play a version of Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon with it.

Once you know how much sleep your body needs, think of it in terms of a week. You have seven days to get 49, 56, 63 hours...whatever. Studies show if you make up sleep in the short term, you live as long as those getting a perfect night every night. So if you have a sick child, delayed flight, or July 4th party to attend, plan on taking a nap the next day.



#### HOW TO REST EASY

**PREP FOR BED.**

An hour before you hit the hay, start signaling your brain that it's time to unwind, says Dr. Winter. Close the kitchen. Keep your bedroom cool—between 60 and 67 degrees. (Your body temp needs to drop in order to sleep, so this gives it a head start.) Dim the lights, and limit your screen use, since the blue light disrupts your circadian rhythm.

**PRIORITIZE ME TIME.**

We all crave a little time to ourselves after a hectic day, but "that often happens at the cost of our sleep," Dr. Winter says. "What if you were more efficient earlier in the evening?" For instance, if you know you want to decompress in the bathtub

or catch up on *Big Little Lies*, do it right after dinner (even if that means bumping a few to-dos to tomorrow).

**PRACTICE RELAXING.**

"Many experts will tell you, 'If you don't fall asleep in 15 minutes, get up and do something else,'" Dr. Winter says. His advice: Stay in bed and think about the people who make you happy. Or try "square breathing" to relax: Inhale for four counts, hold for four, exhale for four, hold for four more, and repeat. "Studies show that people who effectively rest are almost as physically and cognitively refreshed as people who actually slept," says Dr. Winter. "Rest is not failed sleep. And it is something we can control!"