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25 Great Ways to Live a Happier Life

Our guide shares simple acts that can result in a more fulfilling life

By Matt Alderton, Members Only Access
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AARP wants to help you find your happiness, so we interviewed authors, podcasters and other gladness gurus and compiled 25 of their most promising pointers. Give our tips a try, and we hope they will result in a happier, healthier you. When you're done reading our happiness hacks, please **share your own** in the comments section at the bottom of the page.

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1. Start your day like a Navy SEAL

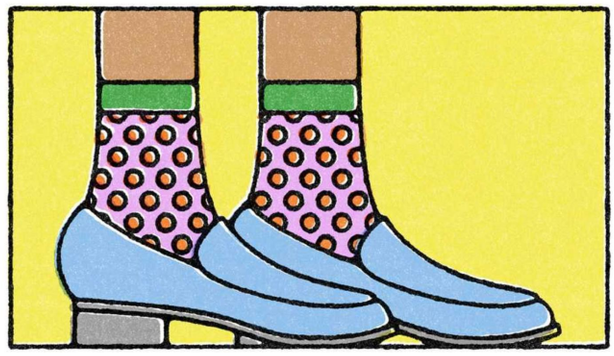
While researching her book *The Happiness Project*, author, blogger and podcaster Gretchen Rubin spent a year of her life test-driving happiness habits and hypotheses. Of everything she tried and recommended, making your bed is one of the practices that has most resonated with audiences. "It's a small thing you can do to make your world seem more orderly," says Rubin, who points out that Navy SEALS are required to make their beds every morning to precise standards. The importance of making your bed to improve your overall mindset was echoed in the graduation address retired Navy Adm. William H. McRaven delivered in 2014 at the University of Texas. His speech went viral on social media and resulted in McRaven writing the book *Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life … And Maybe the World*. McRaven asserted: "If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task, and another, and another. By the end of the day, that one task completed will have turned into many tasks completed."

2. Write when you wake up

Author and artist Julia Cameron says creativity is essential to happiness. "Without it, our lives feel flat. With it, we experience a feeling of adventure, and adventure is enlivening," she says. Cameron, who is the author of *The Artist's Way*, a 12-week self-guided book that aims to unlock creativity, says one of the best ways to cultivate creativity in your daily life is to pen what she calls Morning Pages — three pages of longhand, stream-of-consciousness writing done first thing every morning. What you write is for your eyes only, according to Cameron, who likens Morning Pages to a spiritual shortwave radio with which to send happiness signals out into the universe. The act of writing what comes to mind can help you clarify, comfort and prioritize as you prepare to face your day. "You are saying, 'This is what I like. This is what I don't like,'" Cameron says.

3. Embrace bright colors and round shapes

Have brightly colored polka dots ever brought a smile to your face? It might be time for a bit more fun in your wardrobe and interior design. Industrial designer Ingrid Fetell Lee, author of *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness*, recommends seeking joy from color and shapes: "We know, for example, that children's drawings typically use bright colors to represent joyful scenes, and they typically use dark colors like brown and black and deep purple to represent sad or angry scenes. That's universal. So are round shapes. Round shapes are found throughout childhood in bubbles, balloons, balls, merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels, hula hoops — the list goes on and on." If your life lacks joyful colors and shapes, your closet and home are good places to introduce them. "Accessorizing when you're dressing can be an easy way to bring color into your life. You don't have to go out and buy a whole rainbow wardrobe, but try things like scarves and shoes that add just a little pop of color," Lee says. "Same thing in your home. You don't have to go to the paint store and cover every surface with color. Try buying colorful candles or table linens, or painting your front door." For shapes, try round instead of square coffee tables, mirrors and picture frames, or polka-dotted socks and underwear.



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4. Look up

If you want to find more happiness, start by finding more joy. "Joy is how good we feel in the moment. It's an intense, momentary experience of positive emotion," says Lee, who says joy has been scientifically proven to improve productivity, relationships and cognition, all of which can add up to increased happiness. To find more joy, Lee recommends what she calls "joy spotting," a mindful practice wherein you deliberately tune in to the things around you that spark joy. Often, those things aren't in front of you, but rather above you. "When we talk about feeling sad, we say we feel down. When we feel happy, we say we feel lighter than air. So there's definitely a sort of vertical spectrum to the way we talk about joy," Lee says. "We can see that in the fact that we love to look up at cathedrals and tall sequoias, and that we love hot-air balloons and things that float and fly, like butterflies and birds." Think vertically at home, too, and consider joyful additions like hanging plants, mobiles or chandeliers.

5. Utilize your sniffer

For former educator Jennifer Eisenreich, the secret to happiness lies in the nose. "An unlikely lift for me has been indulging in self-care with beautiful, uplifting fragrances," says Eisenreich, founder of Shift Show Communications, which helps educators rediscover the joy in their work. According to Eisenreich, the sense of smell is linked to the limbic system, the part of the brain that processes emotion and learning. "Nearly 75 percent of our emotions are by scent," says Eisenreich, citing a landmark study conducted in 2005 by global research agency Millward Brown. She ordered a sample of fragrances from an online retailer as therapy when she was struggling with her transition to a new career. Her favorite scent — a delicate blend of amber and musk — evoked cherished memories of parenting her daughter. "Somehow the fragrance has enabled me to work on my thoughts and actually do more of the things I know will make me feel better, like going to water aerobics and yoga. Our thoughts control our feelings, so anything we can do to help create positive thoughts will help us live a happier life."

Scientists echo Eisenreich: In a 2020 review of olfactory studies published in the journal *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, researchers concluded that there is "extensive evidence that odors can overtly or subliminally modulate mood and emotion."

6. Take smiling selfies

Although they might seem trivial, selfies can actually be a major boon to one's self-esteem — and, therefore, to one's happiness, suggests Alex Palmer, author of *Happiness Hacks*. He cites a study at the University of California, Irvine, in which students who took a photo of themselves smiling every day over a three-week period reported an increase in positive affect. "The subjects who reported that the selfies boosted their happiness discussed how it helped them feel good about themselves, seeing the positive expression on their faces. It seems just the act of taking a moment of their day to smile and capturing that in a photo was a good mood-booster," says Palmer, who suggests doing a "selfie check-in" when you're feeling down. "What was especially interesting was that these were selfies meant to be taken and viewed just by the subject. They were not encouraged to share on social media, so those worries about 'How do I look? What will others think of me?' were much less likely to surface."

7. Be — and stay — curious

Curiosity can be life-affirming, according to Scott Shigeoka, author of *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life and Change the World*. "Curiosity is the search for understanding," says Shigeoka, who delineates between shallow curiosity, such as asking someone's name, and deep curiosity, which would be asking someone to tell the story of how they got their name. "The deeper your curiosity goes, the more likely you are to achieve its benefits." Those benefits include reduced anxiety, greater social connection and even increased dopamine — your body's "feel-good" hormone — notes Shigeoka, who says people who experience the most benefits practice three types of curiosity: inward curiosity, about themselves; outward curiosity, about external people, places and things; and beyond, or metaphysical, curiosity, about anything that doesn't live in the physical world. Look for ways to nurture all three. Inward curiosity, for example, might mean researching your family tree or journaling about your emotions. Outward curiosity might mean researching an actual tree in your front yard to learn what it is, or learning about a neighbor who has a different culture or political persuasion than you do. And curiosity about the beyond might entail visiting a new church or reading about philosophy. "It's about entering a mindset of exploration," Shigeoka says.

8. Take time to talk to strangers

As a graduate of the Happiness Studies Academy created by positive psychology expert Tal Ben-Shahar, life coach Shari Leid thought she knew a lot about happiness. She didn't discover true bliss, however, until she started the 50 States Project, with the goal of meeting and sharing a meal with a stranger in every U.S. state. "As I've traveled through the United States, there are times where I've felt pangs of homesickness. I've found that by starting conversations with people who I meet along the journey — my Uber driver, someone at the hotel, a restaurant server — my spirits are immediately lifted," says Leid, owner of coaching practice An Imperfectly Perfect Life. "Not only do those pangs of loneliness go away, but I also then feel a connection to the place I'm at, which brings not just contentment, but joy. During these conversations, not only are stories shared, but smiles, as well. And it is not just the smiles that are contagious, but also the happiness."

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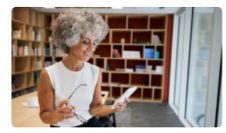

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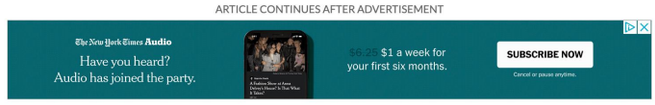

9. Focus on gratitude

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If happiness is a commodity, then one tool for mining it is gratitude, according to mindfulness and wellness expert Dorsey Standish, owner of workplace wellness company Mastermind. "Practicing gratitude supports mental health because it combats the human negativity bias and refocuses our attention on positive experiences," says Standish, who cites research showing that regular gratitude practice strengthens relationships, boosts immunity, improves sleep quality, increases overall well-being, and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression. "Grateful people also exhibit more mental strength and resilience, and they take more positive action towards their goals."

An effective way to practice gratitude is to keep a daily gratitude journal, Dorsey suggests. "Write down what you're grateful for. The more specific your entry and the more emotion evoked, the better the results," she says.

10. Strengthen your relationships

The Harvard Study of Adult Development is one of the world's longest-running studies of adult life. Established in 1938, it has spent 84 years following the lives of more than 700 men as they age in order to determine the biological and social determinants of happiness. Associate Director Marc Schulz — coauthor of *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness* — says the study's landmark finding is the importance of healthy, fulfilling relationships. "It's relationships with others that keep us happier and healthier throughout our life span," says Schulz, who likens loneliness to disease. "Research … suggests that loneliness is a risk factor on the order of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It has that much of a damaging effect on our health."

To keep loneliness at bay, Schulz recommends increasing your "social fitness" by exercising your social muscles in pursuit of more and deeper friendships. You can increase your social fitness, Schulz says, by:

- Making plans now, not later. When it comes to connections, socially fit people seize the moment. For instance, when a friend crosses your mind, reach out right away with an invitation to engage. And instead of making sporadic and piecemeal plans, consider setting up standing social dates at regular intervals.
- Creating social opportunities. New friendships typically bloom from repeated contact over a sustained period. Joining a recreational sports league, having breakfast at the same café every day, going back to school or volunteering at the same place every week are all good ways to sow the seeds of friendship.

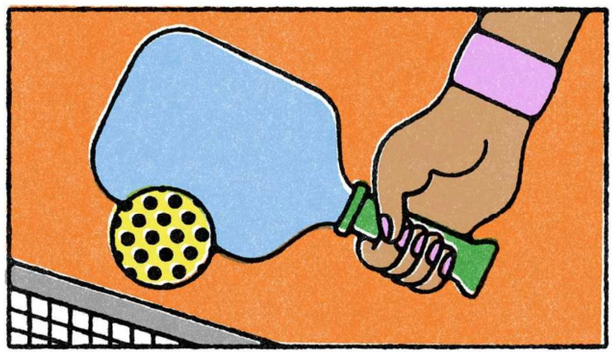
- Digging deeper. Because meaningful friendships require intimacy, vulnerability and authenticity, a willingness to reveal personal and intimate details about your life is important.

11. Send out life updates

Although quality time with friends and family is important, just staying in touch can make you happier, suggests Palmer, who says researchers at the University of Kansas found that having even just one brief interaction with a friend can increase happiness and decrease stress on a given day. And it doesn't need to be face-to-face. Rubin says she gets a jolt of happiness from even quick virtual contacts. Once a week or so, she sends an email to her parents and sisters with the subject line "Update." They do the same. Inside, the sender shares a brief "slice of life" from their day or week. It could be a funny anecdote about a pet, an account of a lunch date or a recap of a golf game. And no one is expected to respond, which creates a sense of connection without a sense of obligation. Rubin adds that you can establish an "Update" group with family, friends, colleagues, former college roommates — anyone you want to stay in touch with. "When you are in constant contact with little details, you feel so much more connected to people than when you connect very rarely and only when you have something big to report. … It's really remarkable, and it's very easy."

12. Find exercise that excites you

Physical fitness can be just as consequential as social fitness, according to Schulz, who says the Harvard Study of Adult Development found connections between exercise and long-term health — which, in turn, impacts happiness. "Health and happiness are absolutely connected," asserts Schulz, who says healthy individuals are more mentally and physically able to do the activities that bring them joy. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also notes that physical activity can help keep your thinking, learning and judgment skills sharp as you age; reduce your risk of depression and anxiety; and increase your ability to do everyday activities like climbing stairs, grocery shopping and playing with grandchildren. To get the full benefits of exercise, the CDC recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week, which could include fast walking, water aerobics, bike riding, tennis, ballroom dancing or pushing a lawn mower — anything that raises your heart rate and makes you sweat.



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13. Bend and breathe

Although scientists aren't sure how it works, research shows that stretching stimulates the release of calming chemicals in the brain that can positively impact mood and anxiety. Even the simplest yoga poses are like "happiness stretches," according to Radha Metro-Midkiff, executive director at Integral Yoga Institute New York. "Regular practice not only improves flexibility, but also releases those 'feel-good' vibes," says Metro-Midkiff, who recommends starting with yogic breathing, otherwise known as pranayama. "Breathe in, breathe out and feel the calm. … It's like a soothing breeze for your mind. Studies reveal it eases stress and lets positivity flow."

14. Connect with your emotions

Laughter really is the best medicine, says Michelle Burke, coauthor of *15 Minute Pause: A Radical Reboot for Busy People* and cocreator of Joy Cards, a deck of 48 motivational activity cards designed for self-care. She cites research published in 2017 by the American Physiological Society in its journal *Advances in Physiology Education*, showing that laughter reduces the level of stress hormones like cortisol and epinephrine while increasing the level of pleasure hormones like dopamine and endorphins. "Make it a priority to do one thing that makes you laugh daily, whether it be to watch a funny movie or TV program, go to a comedy club, be silly or meet up with a friend who makes you laugh," Burke says. "Most of us don't laugh every day, so making it purposeful is key."

Crying can be just as therapeutic as laughing, and may induce a similar hormonal response, researchers say. In fact, crying is so cathartic that people in Japan have crying clubs that are devoted entirely to rui-katsu, or "tear seeking."

15. Go easy on yourself

On the quest for happiness, you might be your own worst enemy. Practicing self-compassion can help, according to Kristin Neff, associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Self-*

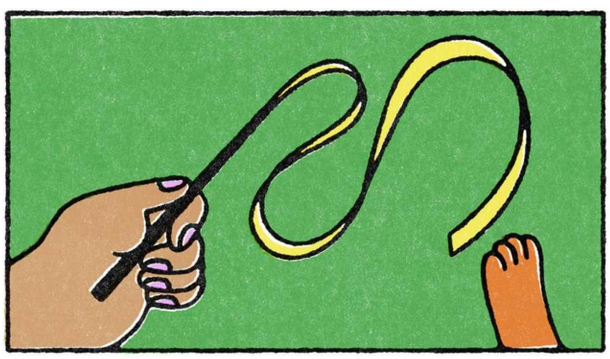
Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself. "Self-compassion is giving yourself the same warmth, care, understanding and support when you're suffering that you would naturally give to a good friend," explains Neff, who says self-compassion has been empirically proven to enhance mental and even physical well-being. "People are less depressed, they're less anxious and they're more satisfied with their life." An easy way to practice self-compassion is to replace negative self-talk, such as "You're so stupid," with positive self-talk: "I really blew it, but that's part of life. All human beings make mistakes." "When you fail at something, write down what you just said to yourself," Neff suggests. "Would you say that to a good friend who was in a similar situation? Usually, the answer is no."

16. Give out hugs — with consent!

In a 2022 study, psychologists found that people who hugged generally had a more positive mood than those who didn't, and also felt less lonely. Physical touch also has been shown to reduce one's heart rate — which is a sign of physiological well-being. "Warm physical touch … activates the parasympathetic nervous system," Neff says. "Heart rate variability increases. We feel calmer. We feel more supported." Do note that not everyone wants to be hugged, so always make sure to ask first! If you don't have anyone to hug, fear not: Neff says you can hug yourself by putting your hands on your heart. "Sometimes people do this naturally when they're upset, but when you do it intentionally it's even more powerful," she says. "Just give yourself a warm gesture. It doesn't matter if it comes from yourself or another person. The body doesn't know the difference. We can be there for others, but we can also be there for ourselves."

17. Welcome a new pet

Although there's no substitute for human affection, animal affection can be just as powerful, according to animal advocate Carlyn Montes De Oca, author of *Dog as My Doctor, Cat as My Nurse: An Animal Lover's Guide to a Healthier and Happier Life*. According to Harvard Medical School, research supports myriad benefits of pet ownership. For example, studies show that dog owners have a lower risk of heart disease thanks to the physical activity involved in walking and playing with their pets. Dog owners also have higher levels of social interaction and community participation. Petting and playing with animals has even been shown to improve mood and reduce anxiety. "Just looking at a dog you share a bond with can raise your levels of oxytocin, the love hormone, boosting happiness and an overall sense of well-being," Montes De Oca says. "Combine the two and you've got a powerful cocktail for human happiness." Do make sure you have the financial, emotional and physical ability to take care of an animal — pet ownership can be expensive and time-consuming, and many people adopt pets not fully able to care for them, resulting in crowded shelters.



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18. Do something good

A good way to be happier is to be more helpful, according to Rubin. "In my experience, if you do good, you feel good," she says. "So do a good deed. Maybe that's sending a quick email to tell somebody how much you appreciated something. Maybe it's recommending a good plumber to a friend, which helps the plumber and the friend. Or maybe it's donating to a cause you believe in." Research bolsters Rubin's advice: Studies have shown that people who volunteer or perform acts of kindness may experience reductions in anxiety and depression, as well as a "helper's high" that can improve mood, physical health and even longevity.

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19. Wax nostalgic

A common piece of advice for people seeking happiness is to avoid living in the past. If you focus on positive memories instead of negative ones, however, living in the past can actually be a good thing, according to research, which has linked nostalgia to attributes like social connectedness, personal meaning, self-acceptance and motivated goal pursuit, all of which can contribute to a sense of happiness. Consider a 2019 study from England's University of Cambridge, which found that the ability to remember pleasant events in detail is associated with lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. "Those who recalled more specific positive events from their past had better mental health even after major stressors. And, in fact, thinking about happier times seems to interrupt this cascade of negative thoughts and feelings," says Burke, who recommends making a list of your favorite memories or telling a friend three joy-filled stories from your past. "Reigniting these wonderful memories improves mood and energy and a sense of well-being, making us feel happy."

20. Crank up some tunes

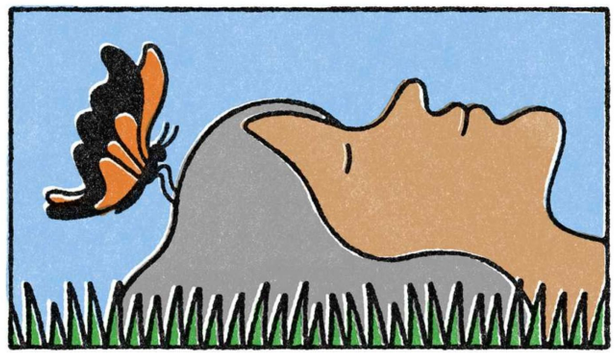
While you're reminiscing, consider playing music from your youth: Studies show that music can trigger autobiographical memories while reducing stress and increasing overall well-being. "Listening to music relates to increased life engagement and better health among older Americans," a 2018 study of music listening concluded. A favorite tune can also lift your mood if you're having a rough day. "Music has an inherent ability to alter mood because of the way it's processed in the limbic system and the way it releases feel-good chemicals in the brain," says Laurie Keough, clinical professor of music therapy at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. Listening to music regularly may help relieve depression symptoms, research shows, and the positive effects may linger even if you stop listening regularly. Different types of music were found to have the same effect — so whether you prefer rock, country, jazz or rap, try cranking up some tunes to boost your mood.

21. Start a collection

Lee says two things that consistently spark joy in people are abundance — the cornucopian sense of quantity and variety — and surprise: unexpected things that break the monotony of habit, tedium and routine. Whether you're drawn to art, antiques, autographs, comic books, stamps, shoes or sports memorabilia, collections offer both in one package. "Say you collect postcards that have a certain motif. When you go to a flea market, you're not just looking at a bunch of stuff; you're on a quest. And when you find a postcard, you get this little ping of surprise. It's the joy of winning," says Lee, who says you can derive even more joy from collecting by displaying your collections in your home. "It's ironic. We often have so much stuff around our homes, but the things we treasure the most — the collections — are often hidden out of sight. Why not flip that? Put the other stuff away and showcase the joyful forms of abundance in your life."

22. Connect with the Earth

Research consistently shows that green is good: A 2019 study, for example, found that people who spent at least two hours a week in nature were significantly more likely than those who spent no time in nature to experience good health and well-being. One way to maximize nature's happiness effect is to not just look at nature, but to physically touch it, says Tara L. Skubella, founder and guide of Earth Tantra, which provides workshops and retreats introducing people to the concept of "earthing" — skin-to-nature contact with soil, dirt, sand, grass, plants or rocks. "Earthing is the practice of touching the direct Earth with bare feet, hands, a back, belly, etc.," explains Skubella, who says earthing — also known as grounding — is thought to improve health and well-being by tapping into the Earth's natural electrical conductivity: "The practice can be done sitting in a chair with your feet on the earth in your backyard, or you can lay directly on the beach sand with many of your body parts touching the Earth, or you can lay down in a park with your head connected to the ground." Although more investigation is needed, there is evidence that earthing works. "Emerging evidence shows that contact with the Earth … may be a simple, natural and yet profoundly effective environmental strategy against chronic stress," one study concluded.



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23. Eat happy foods

You are what you eat. So if you want to feel happier, you need to eat more happy foods, research suggests. And no, that doesn't mean more chips, cookies and cakes. "Happy" means "healthy," as in more fruits and vegetables. In 2017, for example, scientists studying diet and mental health found that depression significantly improved over a 12-week period in people eating a Mediterranean-style diet consisting mostly of fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Another 2017 study found that among 14 different food categories, vegetables elicited the most "eating happiness." If you have a sweet tooth, though, fear not: Researchers discovered that dark chocolate (70 and 85 percent cocoa) causes microbial changes in your gut that can influence your brain chemistry in ways that improve your mood. In particular, they reported that daily consumption of dark chocolate — specifically, the 85 percent cocoa variety — "improved negative emotional states."

24. Tap into awe

If joy is one route to happiness, then awe is another, suggests emotion scientist Dacher Keltner, codirector of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*. "We know awe in our bodies — we tear up, we get goosebumps, we feel speechless — but it resists definition," says Keltner, who describes awe as an emotion that's experienced in response to things that are novel, vast and mysterious. Because people coalesce around awe-inspiring experiences, it creates a sense of community, and also plugs people into a sense of meaning and purpose, which is associated with a reduction of distress and depression. Awe even stimulates production of oxytocin — the "love hormone" — and activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which relaxes the body after periods of stress or danger. An easy way to infuse your life with more awe, Keltner says, is to plan "awe walks" — deliberate excursions to places that are vast or novel. Examples include a mountain with panoramic views, a trail lined with trees, the shore of a lake or ocean, the top of a skyscraper, a large stadium, a historic monument, a cathedral, a planetarium or an aquarium. Rubin takes her own version of an awe walk every day at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "I go to the Met every day that it's open," she says. "It's exercise, but it's also a very intense sensory experience."

25. Hit the hay earlier

Although you might be tempted to search for happiness at the bank, in the mirror, at the beach or on the menu at your favorite restaurant, the best place to find it might be in bed. In fact, a 2018 study found a strong correlation between sleep quality and life satisfaction. "Our physical circumstances always influence our emotional and mental states, so getting enough sleep is really important," says Rubin, who suggests setting an alarm not for waking up but for going to bed. "Most adults need at least seven hours of sleep, so give yourself a bedtime and try to stick to that bedtime."

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Matt Alderton has written about everything from classic cars and climate change to farming robots and fighter jets for publications such as USA Today, *The Washington Post* and *Forbes*. Originally from Denver, which boasts 300 days of sunshine a year, he now resides in Chicago, which boasts three. You can reach him on his website, MattAlderton.com.

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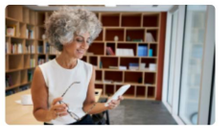

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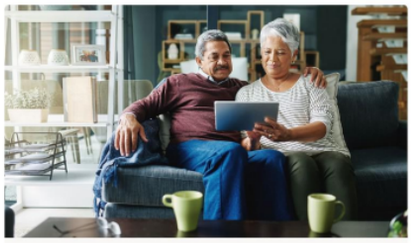

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