

Day 1: How Are You, Really?

Fresh Start Challenge | By Tara Parker-Pope, The New York Times

The challenge

Today, ask yourself “How are you, really?” Think before you answer. Find a word that describes exactly what you’re feeling. Unsettled? Energetic? Delighted? Frazzled? (Avoid standard answers like “good,” “fine,” or “OK.”) Emotions are brain messengers, and studies show that regularly labeling your emotions and creating a “feeling vocabulary” is good for your health.

Why do this

A large body of research shows that labeling emotions — something scientists call “affect labeling” — can calm your brain and reduce stress. Matt Lieberman, professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of the book “Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect” says: “In reality, labeling the emotion tends to dampen it a bit so we move on to other things.”



Day 2: Let's Have an Exercise Snack!

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The challenge

Instead of mindlessly grabbing a handful of chips or a cookie to snack on today, try snacking on exercise! An exercise “snack” is a short burst of movement you can do anywhere, anytime. You don’t even need to change your clothes. Try 10 wall push-ups or 20 jumping jacks. Take a dance break or do the Standing 7-Minute Workout.

Why do this

An exercise snack can last for 20 seconds, a minute or several minutes. It may not seem like much, but a number of scientific studies show that exercise snacking a few times a day leads to meaningful gains in fitness and overall health. The key to getting the biggest benefit from exercise snacking? The shorter the exercise break, the more you should step up the effort.



Day 3: Try a Fierce Meditation

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The challenge

Today, try a four-minute fierce meditation with the Rev. angel Kyodo williams, created just for the participants of the Fresh Start Challenge. Ms. williams, who capitalizes only her Buddhist name, Kyodo, teaches that fierce meditation is about showing up to whatever is happening in the world right now.

Why do this

Science shows that a regular meditation practice can reduce stress, increase calm and clarity, and promote happiness. Other research shows regular meditation can relieve chronic pain, ease depression, help people quit smoking and help people sleep better. The basic premise of mindfulness meditation is to pay attention to the present moment – especially your own thoughts, emotions and sensations.



Day 4: Ask a Connection Question!

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The challenge

What was your role in the school play? Your most embarrassing moment? What superpower would you want? For today's challenge, find a friend or partner and ask a connection question. Science tells us that when you skip the small talk and instead reveal something about yourself, you form deeper ties to the person you're talking to, whether it's a friend, family member or romantic partner.

Why do this

A number of studies show that when we reveal our opinions and feelings rather than just basic facts about our lives, we're more likely to build close relationships. Self-disclosure is the concept behind a study called "The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness," led by Arthur Aron, a scientist at the State University of New York. "One of the main reasons self-disclosure is a good thing for friendships or romantic relationships is that it gives the other person the opportunity to be responsive," said Dr. Aron. Asking and answering the questions lets you know "they understand, and they hear, and they value what you're feeling."



Day 5: Resist Your Tech

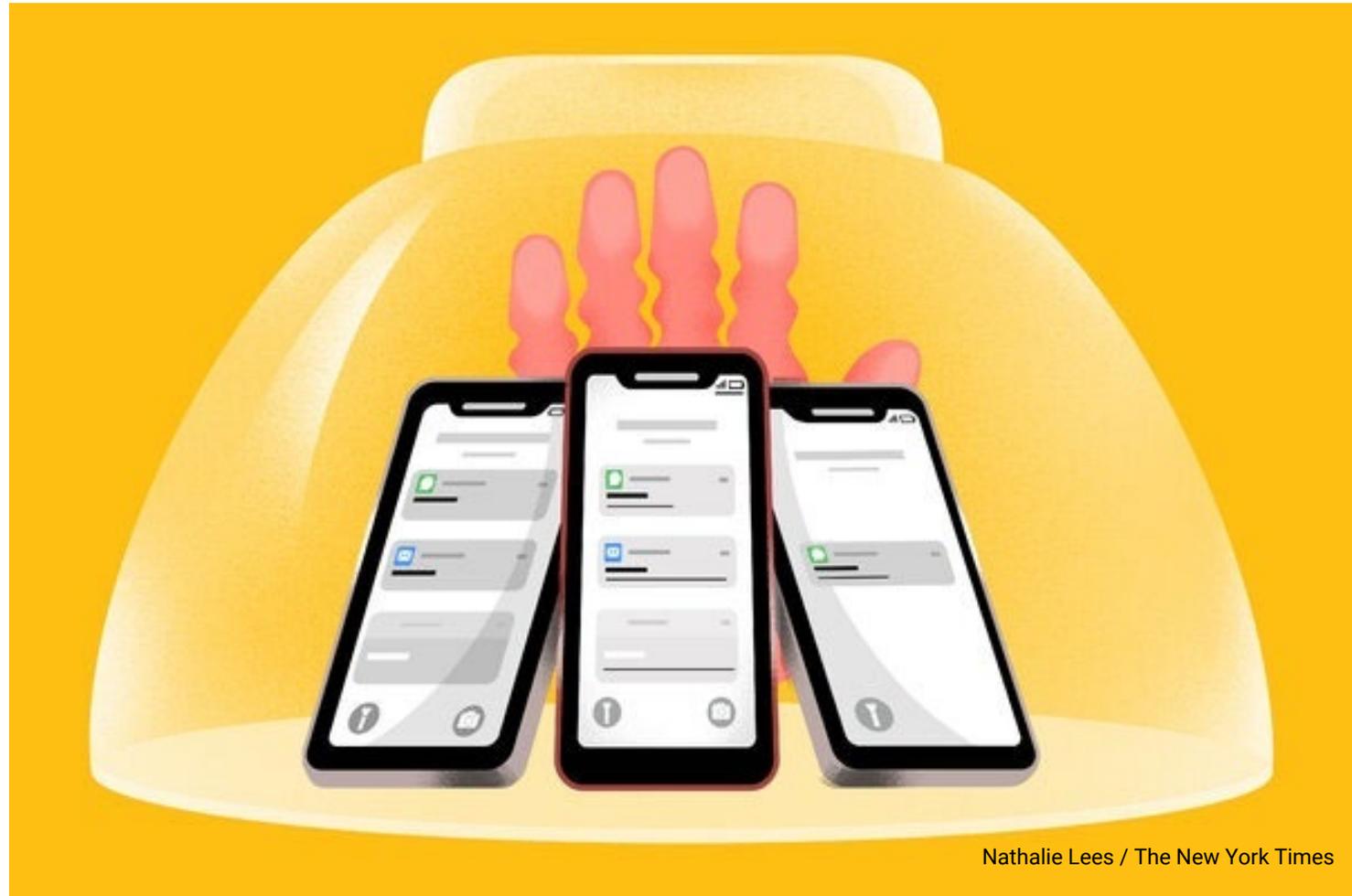
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The challenge

Practice separating yourself from your phone for periods of time. Some ways to do this: Don't check any screen until you've been up for a half hour. Take a walk or go to lunch without your phone. At dinner, try a "first-to-look" game. Put all phones at the center of the table. The first one to look does the dishes or pays the tab!

Why do this

Incoming texts, alerts, emails and vibrations are a near-constant presence in our lives, and these interruptions can take a toll on our minds, our sleep and our ability to engage with others. In one study, just the presence of a cellphone in the room made people feel less connected to conversation partners. Screens don't need to be banned entirely, but putting away our tech from time to time can help us focus on real life.



Day 6: Meditate On the Go!

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The challenge

Try this simple five-finger breathing exercise you can do anywhere: Hold one hand in front of you, fingers spread. Now, slowly trace the outside of your hand with the index finger on your other hand, breathing in when you trace up a finger, and out when you trace down. Move up and down all five fingers. When you've traced your whole hand, reverse direction and do it again.

Why do this

This multisensory meditation practice has been popularized by Dr. Judson Brewer, neuroscientist, and director of research and innovation at Brown University's Mindfulness Center. When you look at your hand and trace along your fingers, you've engaged your sight as well as your sense of touch in both hands. Plus you're concentrating on breathing, which leaves very little room in your brain for negative thoughts.



Day 7: Brush Your Way to a New Habit

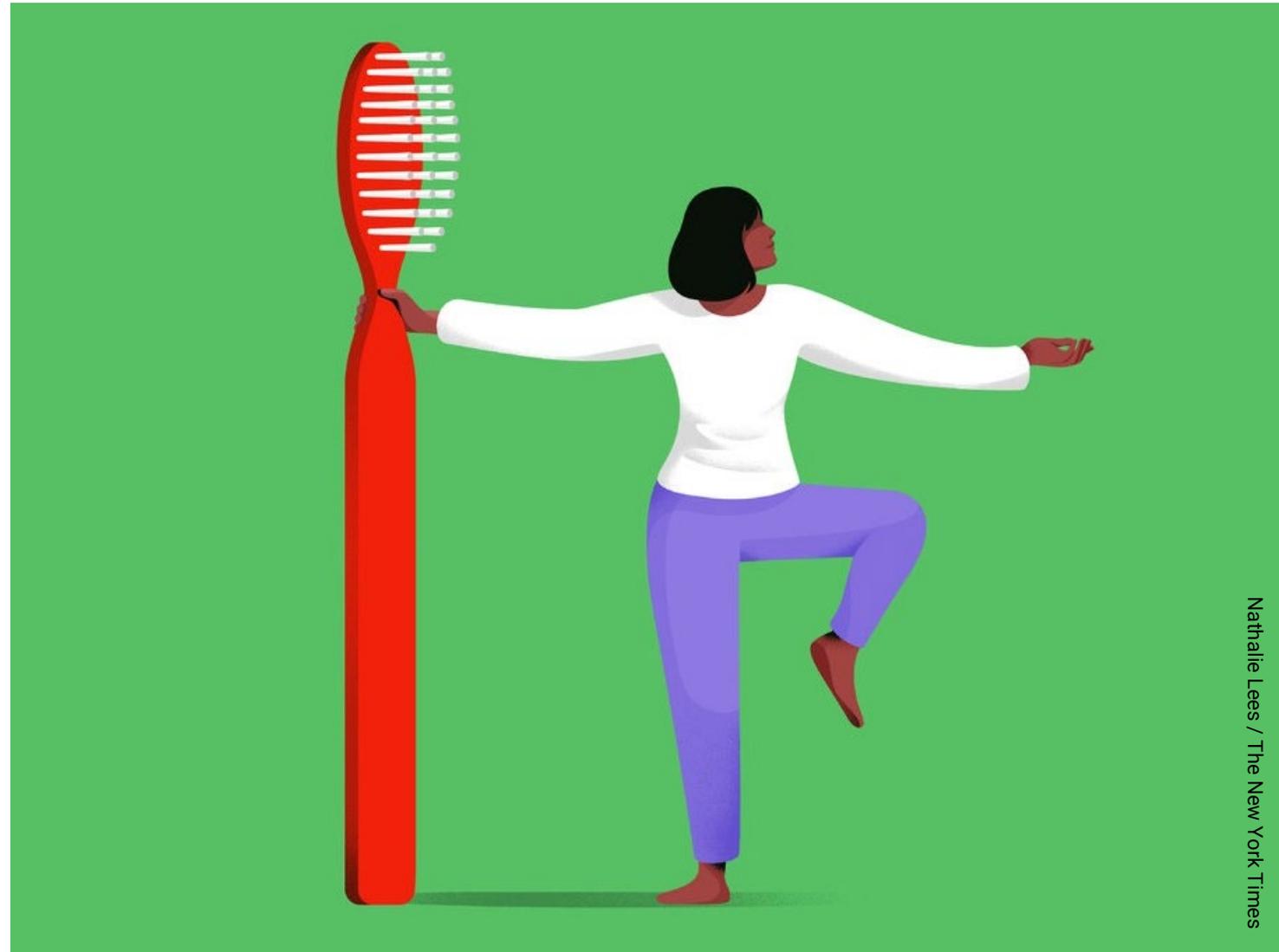
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The challenge

Your daily tooth-brushing routine is a great opportunity to schedule a new goal. Today, try doing calf raises, squats or lunges for a burst of exercise while you brush your teeth. Use the time to meditate by focusing on the taste of the toothpaste and sound of the water. Or schedule push-ups, a wall sit or yoga for after you've finished.

Why do this

Picking a time and place for a new goal makes it far more likely that you'll do it. Keep it simple by bundling your new goal to a consistent habit you already have. Brushing your teeth, enjoying your morning coffee, coming home after work, sitting down for dinner and getting ready for bed are all daily rituals that present great opportunities for scheduling a new habit. When you pick a specific time and opportunity to start a new goal, it's called an "implementation intention." One study published in the British Journal of Health Psychology showed that people were twice as likely to follow through on a goal if they made a plan for a time and place to start doing it.



Day 8: Take a Gratitude Photo

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The challenge

Take a fresh look at the people, places and things in your life. Now snap a photo. It could be a building you haven't noticed before, a tree in your yard, children playing or your pet.

Why do this

When we make an effort to notice our surroundings or show appreciation for the people, places or things that make us happy, it's called "savoring." Scientists know that savoring exercises can lead to meaningful gains in overall happiness and well-being. One small study found that mindful photography can be a fun and easy way to savor everyday experiences and cultivate gratitude. The research was conducted by James Madison University psychology professor Jaime Kurtz, who explained what mindful photography is: Mindful photography is about slowing down. It's not just snapping mindless photos. It's keeping an eye out for something that is beautiful or meaningful to you.



Day 9: Hug (Just a Little) Longer!

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The challenge

Today, try hugging someone a little bit longer than you normally would. When you're ready to stop the hug, remind yourself to stay close for just five more seconds. Stay present, and tune in to all your senses as you enjoy the embrace.

Why do this

There is a surprisingly large body of science devoted to the health benefits of hugs. The broad conclusion is that hugs are good for you. Not only do hugs help you better cope with the stress of daily life, but they are associated with beneficial physical changes inside your body as well. One research has shown that when women receive hugs from their partner, they have lower cortisol levels during stressful situations. More frequent partner hugs have also been shown to lower blood pressure and raise oxytocin, a calming hormone that can lower stress and strengthen feelings of connection. Another study linked hugging with a stronger immune system. In this study, the researchers found that when people had conflict in their day and fewer hugs, they were more likely to become ill. It doesn't mean though that lots of hugging will always boost your immune system. It may be that all the hugging served as an indicator of social support, which is good for the health as studies have shown.



Day 10: Give Yourself a Break!

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The challenge

Are you as kind to yourself as you are to others? Take a self-compassion break. Ask yourself, “What do I need right now?” Then, do something nice for yourself: Take a walk or a hot bath. Call a friend for support. Adopt this mantra: “I’m going to be kind to myself. I accept myself as I am.” Being good to ourselves makes us more likely to adopt healthy behaviors.

Why do this

Shaming yourself is counterproductive. A large body of research shows that when we give ourselves a break, and accept our imperfections — a concept called self-compassion — we’re more likely to take care of ourselves and live healthier lives. At its most basic, self-compassion is treating yourself as kindly as you would treat your friends and family. Self-compassion is rooted in centuries of Buddhist tradition, but it has more recently been subjected to rigorous scientific review. Numerous studies have shown that self-compassion is strongly linked to overall well-being. Practicing self-compassion can reduce depression, stress, performance anxiety and body dissatisfaction. It can lead to increases in happiness, self-confidence and even immune function.

