

10 Easy Things You Can Do to Improve Your Life by Next Week

A health journalist shares the best advice she's learned from doctors, psychologists, yoga instructors and scientists.

By Jessica Cassity

1 of 10: Learn Better After a Brain Break

While covering health and wellness for magazines and newspapers, Jessica Cassity compiled a treasure trove of research-backed advice on how to live a happier, healthier, more fulfilling and less stressful life. From her new book, [Better Each Day](#) (Chronicle Books), here are ten small changes you can make to start living better now.

If a thought-provoking movie, lecture, or book leaves your brain ready for a rest, go ahead and tune out for a little bit. Researchers have found that taking a mental break—like zoning out while you wash the dishes, or simply switching your thoughts to an easier topic—can actually help you retain any information you just learned. In a study recently conducted at New York University, people were asked to memorize pairs of images. Scientists measured brain activity while subjects viewed images and committed them to memory, and also a few minutes later, during a wakeful rest period. They found that absorbing information activated a certain spot in the brain, and in some cases, the brain became even more active during the rest period, which resulted in higher rates of retention. Daydreaming isn't a guaranteed path to better memory, but it's worth a try. In the middle of an intense study session, take a short break, then revisit the work and see how well you remember.

2 of 10: Use Your Mind-Body Connection to Strengthen Your Resolve

If you have a hard time flexing your willpower, try flexing your biceps instead. It turns out that clenching your muscles can actually help you to shore up the self-control you need to eat healthfully, commit to unpleasant tasks, and bypass calorie-loaded treats, among other good-for-you behaviors. In one recent study from the University of Chicago, researchers asked people to clench their muscles while drinking unsavory health drinks, while experiencing a painful situation, or when faced with temptation that was hard to turn down. When participants flexed—whether it was a finger, calf, or bicep that contracted—they all had stronger resolve, drinking

more of the healthy beverage, bypassing the bad-for-you foods, and tolerating discomfort for longer. Use this tactic the next time you need a boost in willpower: Simply make a fist and you'll skate through any situation with ease.

3 of 10: Vent Strategically After an Argument

Everyone's done it—you argue with a friend, then reach out to another friend for validation. The more people you get on your side, the more correct you are, right? While a vote of support will help you feel justified in continuing to fight, it probably won't help you solve the problem. Instead, seek the viewpoint of a trusted friend not to win the argument, but to try to see the argument more clearly. When you reach out for help in a dispute, find a person who you think will be able to shed light on the other person's perspective, says Robert Gould, PhD, chair of the department of conflict resolution at Portland State University. Rather than asking her to take sides, see if she can help you to see where the other person is coming from. Just don't let this information cause you to acquiesce too soon, warns Gould. "Some people give in to other people's perspectives too easily, so use a conversation with a friend to help you discover your own perspective more deeply, too."

4 of 10: Dine Alfresco For Mealtime Satisfaction

You've heard of the benefits of mindful eating, but paying attention to your food is often easier said than done. Luckily, there's a quick fix: if you have a hard time focusing on your food while you eat, move your meal outdoors, says Sarah Livia Szekely Brightwood, who runs Rancho La Puerta, a popular retreat in Mexico with a renowned garden and cooking school. When you eat outdoors, your senses are nourished by the sights, sounds, and smells of nature, says Brightwood. As a result, you're fully awake and engaged in the moment, which helps you to slow down, savor the meal, and ultimately eat less to feel satisfied.

5 of 10: Put an End to Waffling Over Decisions

If you're second-guessing yourself about a choice you just made, head for the sink for a quick regret-rinse-off. Recent research from psychologists at the University of Michigan found that the simple act of washing your hands can help you to stop questioning your judgment. While the decisions being made in the study were trivial—ranking preference of one CD over another—this act of "cleaning the slate" by washing your hands may work to help you gain confidence in the bigger choices you encounter, too, like deciding which car to buy, or when to have a difficult conversation.

6 of 10: Volunteer for More Vim and Vigor

If you've ever done volunteer work—dishing meals at a soup kitchen, walking dogs at a shelter, or reading to residents of a nursing home, for example—you probably noticed that you're full of good cheer when you leave. A number of studies back this feeling up, showing that helping others can lift symptoms of depression and improve overall life satisfaction. But the benefits don't end there: when scientists at a Finnish university analyzed the results of 16 studies, they found that people who performed volunteer work also reported better health and higher levels of physical activity. And, in an unrelated study, researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health found that women who were 65 and older and volunteered—in this case mentoring public school children—were able to delay or even reverse cognitive decline, actually improving brain function. You're never too young or old to start volunteering: seek out a particular cause that speaks to you, and find a way to use your time and energy to benefit others.

7 of 10: Alleviate Major Worries by Working Out

If you're a born worrywart, you may worry that your anxiety gets the best of you at times. But there's a natural way to relieve some of your fears: Studies have shown that aerobic exercise can ease mild anxiety, and according to recent research by Rodney K. Dishman, PhD, professor of exercise science at the University of Georgia, regular physical activity can temper severe anxiety, too. Exactly how exercise helps to reduce or eliminate major anxiety—such as the onset of panic attacks—remains unclear, says Dishman. People may start to worry less because they're doing something positive for themselves, because of the distraction exercise provides, or due to a physical reaction, such as the release of endorphins. Whatever the cause, Dishman recommends aiming for 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity or 75 minutes of vigorous working out per week to help alleviate anxiety. More is probably better, says Dishman, but less is better than nothing.

8 of 10: Strengthen Your Relationships by Learning to Listen

If your idea of being supportive is listening to a person's problems, then detailing the right way to solve them, you may actually be building a wall between you and your friend. According to Parker Palmer, PhD, author of *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, the mantra for true friends should be "no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting the other person straight."

"When someone has a worried look or comes to you with a problem, you'll probably invite them

to talk about it," says Palmer. But if you listen for a few minutes, then start telling her what to do about it, your friend may not feel heard or accepted. Instead, sit back and practice what Palmer calls "deep listening"—when you suspend your need to be a helper.

"A lot of us justify our existence by helping other people, but often that advice shuts the other person down," says Palmer. Let your friends talk, and if they aren't finding their own answers, ask questions that will help them to explore their own feelings a little deeper. "In creating safe space between yourself and another person, your task is to help them have a deeper and deeper conversation with themselves, not with you. What you think they should do about it is more about your ego than the needs of their soul."

9 of 10: Create Daily Pauses for Appreciation

If most of your inner dialogue seems to be taken up by to-do lists and worry, you'd benefit from finding a way to spend more time thinking about the things that bring you joy. To do this, says Linda Lantieri, director of The Inner Resilience Program, an organization focused on building emotional strength in school teachers, create rituals around things you do every day. Choose a few things you do regularly, like turning on your computer or brushing your teeth, and attach meaning to them, using that time to conjure up a thought or feeling you want more of in your life. For example, says Lantieri, each time you put the key in your front door, take a moment to be grateful that you have a place of respite to go each night. When the phone rings, take the opportunity to stop, take a deep breath, and thank your body for your health. Or, each time you pour a cup of coffee, think about someone in need. By making space for these moments, your mind shifts from its usual state of overstimulation into one that's calm and hopeful. Best of all, these mini-meditations won't take up any extra time since the prompts they're attached to—opening the door, pouring coffee—are already a part of your day.

10 of 10: Talk Yourself Into a Better Mood

It's okay to stick with chitchat around the water cooler, but meaningful conversation is the best way to talk yourself into a better mood, according to new research. In a recent study that matched self-reported happiness ratings with conversation quality, people who had more substantive conversations felt happier than those who engaged primarily in small talk. In the study, which was co-authored by Matthias R. Mehl, PhD, assistant professor in the University of Arizona's department of psychology, the conversations of ninety-seven undergrads were recorded over four days, then coded as either small talk or substantive. (Small talk was defined as trivial banter—like one-liners about the weather—while substantive conversation involved a

sharing of ideas and information, like catching up with friends or discussing opinions about current events.) Overall, higher well-being was reported by the people who talked the most and spent the least amount of time alone, period, but the happiest individuals engaged in a third less small talk and had twice as many meaningful conversations as the unhappiest people.

So how much deep conversation does it take to trigger an increased level of happiness? Researchers are hesitant to assign a value, but in a second study, Mehl found that "prescribing" just five extra fifteen-minute substantive conversations over the course of a week led participants to report feeling a bit happier. Rather than keep tally of your conversations, just look for opportunities to engage in a meaningful way. Your mood may get a boost, and whoever's at the other end of the conversation can benefit, too.

<http://www.oprah.com/health/10-Easy-Things-You-Can-Do-to-Improve-Your-Life-by-Next-Week#ixzz3xu7DjVJt>