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Brain gains: Are you feeding yours? **(P.11)** • Comeback queen: The power of bouncing back **(P.48)** • Sleep easy: Rest retreats on test **(P.111)**

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Mane character energy: *29 award-winning hair products*

Women'sHealth®

Feel the cringe and do it anyway

...why **embracing the ick** could unlock more joy

Priced out of Pilates?

The affordable alternative to reformer

Bliss states

The meditation 'cheat code' to an easier life

Daisy Ridley

On the diagnosis that changed everything

Harried. Hormonal. Hungry.

How the midlife calorie fallacy holds women back

'My daughter's struggles almost broke me'

Inside the crisis blighting a generation of girls

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Welcome to Women's Health

Almost two decades ago, I experienced an episode of depression so severe, it left me in hospital. It came out of nowhere and, all these years later, I wouldn't say it's retreated completely. Low moods can loiter for weeks and, while I haven't taken antidepressants since, I've had to develop strategies that I live by.

At the core of this approach is exercise. Working out is my non-negotiable and, along with focusing on nutrition – less processed food, a low-sugar diet and very little alcohol – exercise is my medicine. It lifts my mood, boosts my confidence and improves my body image – something that suffers when I'm feeling down. It's no exaggeration to say I find endorphins – the chemical your body creates during exercise – miraculous.

So I was fascinated by our feature 'Can you prescribe exercise for poor mental health?', in which we report on the researchers taking the link between movement and mental health seriously. A recent study published in the *British Journal Of Sports Medicine* found physical activity to be 'highly beneficial' for improving symptoms of depression, anxiety and psychological distress; another found working out to be just as effective as psychotherapy and medication, with short bursts of exercise even more beneficial than longer sessions.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting that anyone ditches their antidepressants; far from it – I know first-hand the invaluable role they can play in a treatment plan. But I am advocating for more of us to move our bodies, regardless of state of mind. When I was ill, I couldn't face going to the gym, so I ran – and I truly believe I recovered more quickly as a result. Now, on the days when I can't be bothered to exercise, I repeat the mantra 'you'll never regret a workout'. Because it's true; once those endorphins start circulating, everything seems better.

It's just one of the mental health maxims I was reminded of while reading this, our annual Mind Issue. In every section, you'll find evidence-based tools and expert-led advice for building a stronger mind, alongside forensic analysis on the issues affecting women like you and me. As the mother of a nine-year-old girl, our investigation into why teenage girls are experiencing poor mental health at a higher rate than boys made for particularly tough reading.

But it's also why I'm so proud to have partnered with the youth mental health charity YoungMinds to launch The State Of Modern Girlhood – an ongoing initiative that aims to spotlight the crisis in young women and girls' mental health. Together, we'll draw attention to the pressures girls are under – from misogyny and life online, to how economic and societal issues bear down on them. Look out for the Modern Girlhood badge across our platforms to hear from girls, the women who love them, plus the experts and changemakers demanding better for the next generation.

Until next month,

Claire

Claire Sanderson
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PHOTOGRAPHY: RACHELL SMITH

This month, I'm loving

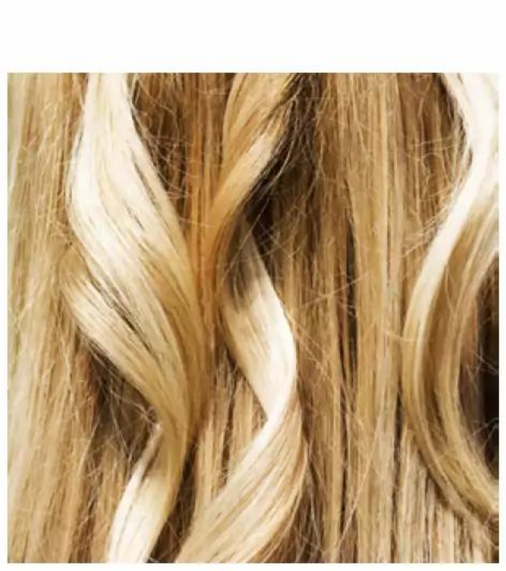
▲ Glaze Glaziplex Bond Repair Mask
As someone who's struggled with hair loss, I know only too well what a difference well-formulated haircare can make. So I was delighted to join a panel of esteemed judges to crown the winners of our Healthy Hair Awards on page 77. This product was the best I tried – turn to page 81 to find out why.

◀ Onyx weighted bracelets
Available in five colours, these bracelet weights (£34.99) are slimline and stylish enough to wear all day.

Sweaty Betty reflective leggings ▶
I love these reflective leggings (£88) from Sweaty Betty, which increase your visibility on night-time runs.

▲ Russell & Bromley loafers
I'm all about comfort, and these Russell & Bromley loafers (£325) will be my work wardrobe staples this winter. Not a high heel in sight.

November



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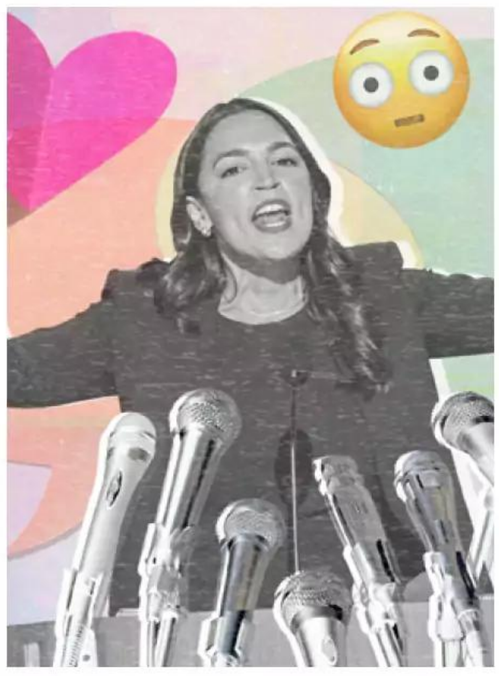

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Daisy Ridley

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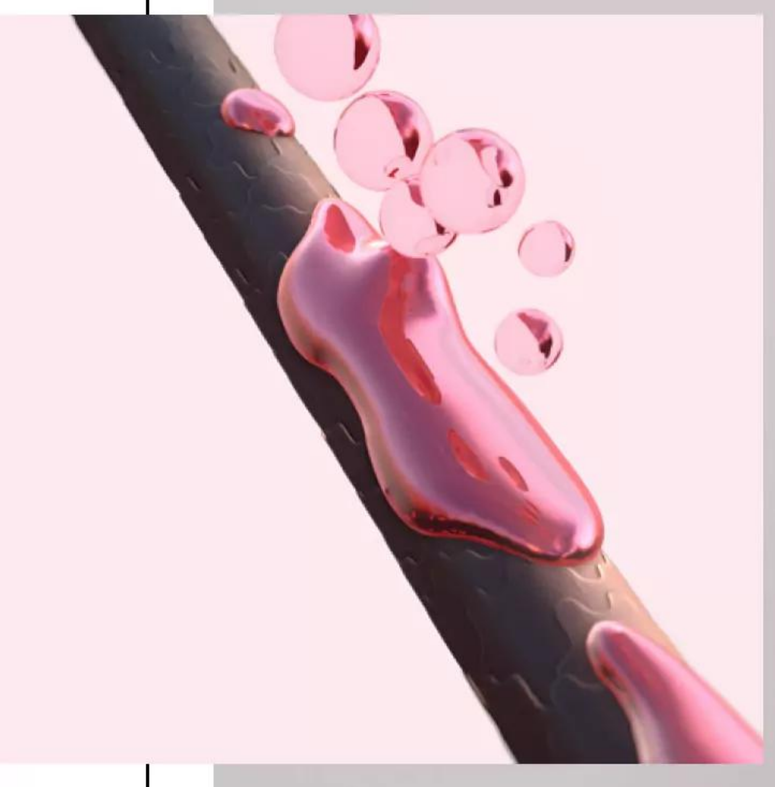
Colour that cares

Say hello to an ultra-nourished hair shade, courtesy of the reformulated Excellence Creme by L'Oréal Paris

If you've toyed with the idea of dyeing your hair, but put it off due to worries about it looking dull or dried out, you'll be relieved to know there's a new nourishing treatment in town that's changing the at-home colouring game. Introducing the reformulated Excellence Creme Triple Care Hair Colour by L'Oréal Paris, containing hyaluronic acid – a hero ingredient often associated with skincare due to its powerful hydrating and smoothing qualities. Delivering all-over shine and radiant colour, while being kind to the scalp, this DIY hair dye is super-easy to use, and gives expert-inspired results. Here's how to achieve a healthy new colour at home with the triple-care routine.

COLOUR

The first step in the three-part process is to apply the protective colouring mix. Suitable for all hair types, the cream provides long-lasting, natural-looking colour that covers up to 100% of greys*. Plus, its high viscosity formula ensures a clean, drip-free application, so your clothes and bathroom surfaces are safe from stains.



RINSE

After half an hour on the hair, it's time to rinse off the colour creme and lather up with the gentle pH shampoo, enriched with hyaluronic acid. The shampoo nourishes hair while cleansing the scalp and removing any excess dye residue. The result? Soft, radiant and hydrated-feeling hair that's ready for a final nourishing boost.

CONDITION

A gorgeous new colour doesn't have to mean dry, brittle strands. The lightweight Excellence Creme mask is enriched with caring agents to help seal cuticles for up to 10 times more nourished hair*, which looks visibly better than before the colour treatment**. Et, voilà! Your newly nourished colour is ready to be admired. Struggling to choose the right shade? Help is at hand for that, too. L'Oréal Paris has a virtual try-on hair-colour service that uses augmented reality to help you find the perfect match before taking the plunge, whether you're going full transformation or just keen to hide a few greys.

Find your perfect new shade at loreal-paris.co.uk/hair-colour/excellence

*INSTRUMENTAL TEST. **76% OF 102 HOME-TESTER-CLUB REVIEWERS AGREE

If you do one thing this month

buy a dumbphone

Ping! Is it WhatsApp, an email or a news headline about the world's impending doom? Why not give Instagram and your Oura stats a quick check, too? With every distracting app notification, there's evidence that our healthy bandwidth is being erased. In fact, a study by Daegu Catholic University School of Medicine, South Korea, found that using a mobile for four or more hours daily was associated with worsening stress perception, sleep satisfaction and depressive symptoms. Hence the growing popularity of the smartphone's antithesis: the dumbphone. Which, with just the ability to make 2G calls and telephone-keypad texts, now seems rather clever. Memory as blurry as its low-res camera? Think of the Nokia 2660 flip phone of your youth currently in Gen Z's nostalgic grip. Dial into the trend – the market for which is predicted to reach $10.6bn* (about £8bn) by the end of the year – for an overdue recharge.

WORDS: KATE CHENG. PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKSY. *SOURCE: STATISTA MARKET INSIGHTS

News you can use

Want the latest health intel? We've combed the science journals so you don't have to

3

The number of months of inactivity it takes to undo improvements to your VO_2 max – a good indicator of fitness – after eight weeks of HIIT. The researchers*, who identified negative effects on the heart and lungs from a gap in training, recommend daily 'exercise snacks' – short bursts of activity such as sprinting for the bus – to maintain gains.

GOING BANANAS

Eating more fruit from your mid-forties can lower depressive symptoms after 65, a recent study* found. Looking at 14 fruits, including bananas and oranges, the authors suggested that their high levels of nutrients reduce inflammatory processes and oxidative stress, and, in turn, the development of depression.

GOOD EVENING

A study by New Zealand's University of Otago found that participants who mixed periods of sitting in the evening with moves such as chair squats and calf raises clocked half an hour of extra snooze time, compared with those who were sedentary before bed. The key here? No intense cardio – keep it light.

NATURE NURTURE

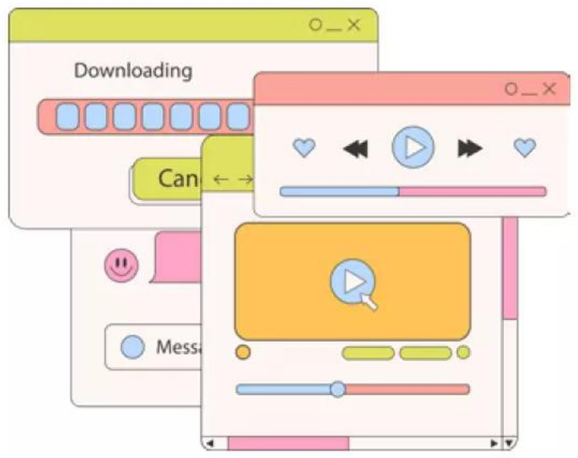
Swerve the shops in favour of the park at the weekend. Research in the *Journal Of Environmental Psychology* found that feeling connected to nature and the environment is associated with benefits such as reduced materialism, an increased desire to help others out and looking beyond one's own interests. Lush.

In the know

Beet it

The menopause has been linked to an increased risk of heart disease, thanks to lower cholesterol control triggered by reduced oestrogen levels. But research published in *Frontiers In Nutrition* showed that sipping on beetroot juice can have a protective effect by boosting blood flow around the body. A more extensive recipe for cardiovascular health? There's evidence* that the Dash (dietary approaches to stop hypertension) diet – packed with fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy – can also help circulation.

To boost blood flow, you can't beat the beet



TAB THAT

According to research by the University of Toronto, flicking between video content – or 'digital switching' – on platforms such as TikTok or YouTube actually increases boredom. It's thought that frequently swiping serves up a cognitive load that tires the brain. So, next time you feel bored, put down your phone instead and pay attention to what's happening around you.

COMFORT ZONE

A simple solution for lower back pain? Go for a stroll. Research from Macquarie University found that participants who went for a daily walk up to five times a week for six months suffered less than those who didn't lace up at all. So move it.

THE TO-DO LIST

READ
In *The Older I Get... How I Repowered My Life* (£22, Ebury Spotlight), Fern Britton, the 67-year-old TV presenter, gets honest about midlife challenges – including adult children flying the nest, retirement plans and a second shot at dating. Out 7 November.

PARTICIPATE
Hyrox, the prized indoor fitness challenge for solo, double or relay race entrants, returns to Birmingham this year (25-27 October). For more details, visit hyrox.com.

SUPPORT
For *National Fertility Awareness Week* (4-8 November), the theme is #FertilityinMind, to shed light on the impact on mental health when trying for a baby doesn't work out. See fertilitynetworkuk.org.

WORDS: KATE CHENG. PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKSY. ILLUSTRATION: ADOBE STOCK. *SOURCES: *CLEVELAND CLINIC JOURNAL OF MEDICINE; UNIVERSITY OF PAVIA, THE NORWEGIAN SCHOOL OF SPORTS SCIENCES AND THE UNIVERSITY OF INNSBRUCK; JOURNAL OF NUTRITION, HEALTH AND AGING*

Food for thought

Can you feed your brain microbiome?

We all know we should mind the contents of our plate, but science is increasingly alert to the powers of well-nourished microbes on mood and memory

THE EXPERT
Dr Emily Leeming is a microbiome scientist and author

Science has been serving up evidence that your gut – home to 100 trillion microorganisms, or microbes for short – isn't the only region of your body with its own microbiome.

While the gut microbiome dominates the health discourse as effectively as Taylor Swift does the news, these squads of microorganisms dwell all over your body. From the vagina and lungs to your skin. The brain was previously thought to be sterile thanks to its protective membrane – the blood-brain barrier. Now, there's debate about whether the presence of microbes is good or bad.

Last year, researchers from the University of Edinburgh – who compared the brains of healthy people with the brains of those with Alzheimer's – discovered the presence of microbes in those who did and didn't have the neurodegenerative condition. Around 20% were of the same variety as those usually found in the gut, leading the team to conclude that they had travelled from the stomach. The study hasn't been published in a peer-reviewed journal – where the seal of approval is given by other experts – so more research is needed before drawing firm conclusions, but it builds on a growing understanding of a symbiotic connection between brain and gut. While it's thought that our brains work downwards – hence 'gut feelings' and 'butterflies in your stomach' – there's evidence of upwards impact, too. That, in the same way your gut microbiome can send signals to the brain, what you eat can influence things such as your mood and memory.

So, what to eat? Think: fibre. The key nutrient, which is derived from plant roughage, is lauded for helping control blood sugar levels and normalising bowel movements.

But, when gut microbes feed on it in the lower intestine, it helps produce healthy molecules – some of which may end up in your brain.

Eating enough fibre is a smart move in lots of ways, and certain types of fibre can ease food cravings, lower stress and deliver a boost to your memory. But most of us eat just 60% of the recommended 30g we need daily. Whole grains, beans, legumes, nuts and seeds are rich sources, while consuming all forms of fibre means they'll work in tandem. Overwhelmed? Focus on the big hitters, which I call the BGBGs – beans, greens, berries, grains (and nuts) and seeds. It's a head start.

Dr Leeming's book, Genius Gut: The Life-Changing Science Of Eating For Your Second Brain (£18.99, Penguin), is out now

3 SMART WAYS TO EAT FOR GUT AND BRAIN

1. **PULSE IT UP**
Beans and pulses are your number ones. Chickpeas contain 17g of fibre per serving – add to tagines or bulk out a Greek salad.

2. **FOLLOW THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET**
It features plenty of gut-friendly, plant-based foods, as well as healthy fats – including extra-virgin olive oil and oily fish – for boosted cognitive function.

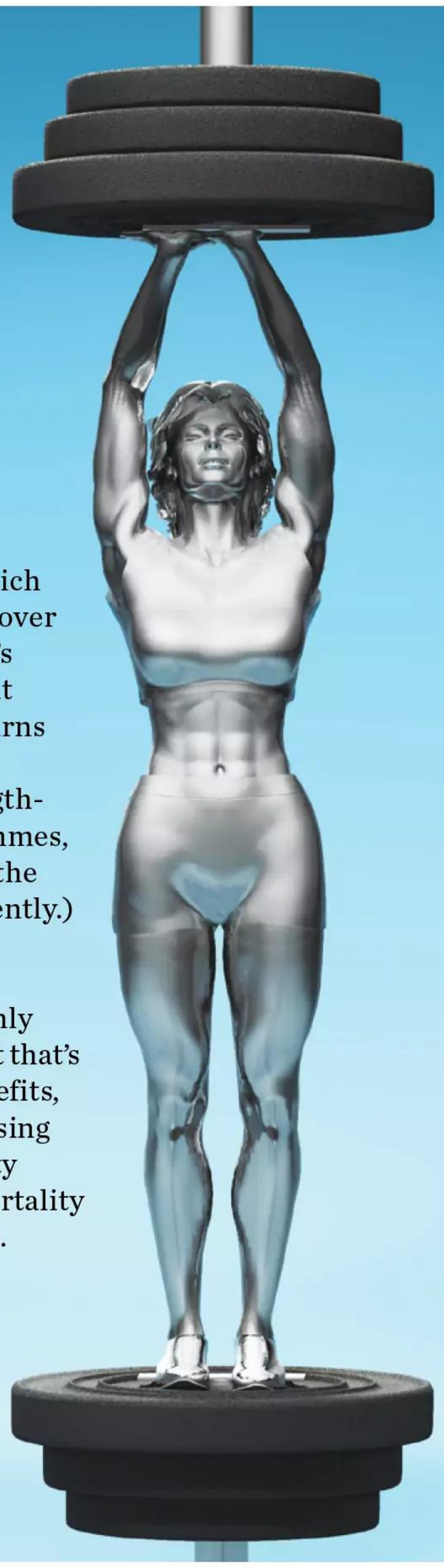
3. **MOVE YOUR BODY**
Basically, any exercise that gets your heart rate up, as it aids healthy blood flow to the head and digestive system.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID SYKES. FOOD STYLING: PETA O'BRIEN. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: DAN MATTHEWS; MICHAEL HEDGE; GETTY IMAGES. ADDITIONAL FOOD STYLING: HENRIETTA CLANCY

When it comes to friends, is quality better than quantity?

A glittering social circle or four-digit follower count might make you feel popular, but it turns out it's the quality of your pals that translates to feeling truly emotionally fulfilled, not the quantity. 'The research shows that having close, satisfying relationships is more strongly related to your emotional wellbeing than just having a lot of friends,' says JoNell Strough, a professor of psychology at West Virginia University. In fact, a study done on 400 older UK adults – mean age 69 – found that the threshold of connection for decreasing stress and depression was just two close friends; for anxiety, it was three; and for loneliness, four. So don't be disheartened if you find your WhatsApp chats dwindling. But ongoing investment from both sides must be made for a friendship to thrive. 'You have to be intentional about spending time together,' says Leslie Tarver, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego. Her advice? Set small goals such as a monthly coffee catch-up or a FaceTime call every week.

How tight-knit is your friendship group?



Q

Can I train just once weekly and still get strong?

When it comes to fitness, some people take a more minimalist approach than others. But even if you can only manage a 20-minute workout once a week, it's always worth it. A study analysed data from Dutch personal training company Fit20, where 14,690 clients – 60% female between the ages of 37 and 59 – did a weekly resistance-training workout for seven years. They performed machine-based exercises, including chest and leg presses. Weights were adjusted over time to ensure that failure (the max you can manage) was reached around four to six reps. Research consistently showed rapid strength improvements in the first year, which then tapered off over time. (Though it's worth noting that diminishing returns may apply to all long-term strength-training programmes, even if you're in the gym more frequently.) The upshot? A one-day-a-week sesh is still a highly effective workout that's packed with benefits, including increasing your bone density and reducing mortality risks. Give it a go.

Don't feel the pressure to go for gold; silver will do

Q

What are postbiotics?

You've most likely heard of probiotics and prebiotics – but what are postbiotics? Consider them the love child of both pros and pres: substances your body produces after it feeds on both. Including B vitamins, enzymes, amino acids and short-chain fatty acids such as butyrate, postbiotics show promise for calming intestinal inflammation, easing constipation, boosting immune health and managing allergies. What's top of the postbiotic menu? Think kimchi, kombucha, yoghurt, kefir and other pickled vegetables. But the best way to support a healthy microbiome generally? A balanced diet. 'Eat a wide variety of fermented, cultured, fibre-rich foods,' says nutritionist Monica Reinagel (nutritionovereasy.com). If you insist on getting your prebiotic fix via supplements, your best bets are sodium butyrate (which calms IBS-related pain, bloating and constipation) or lactococcus lactis (for respiratory health and immune support).

Q

Do sulphites found in wine really cause hangovers?

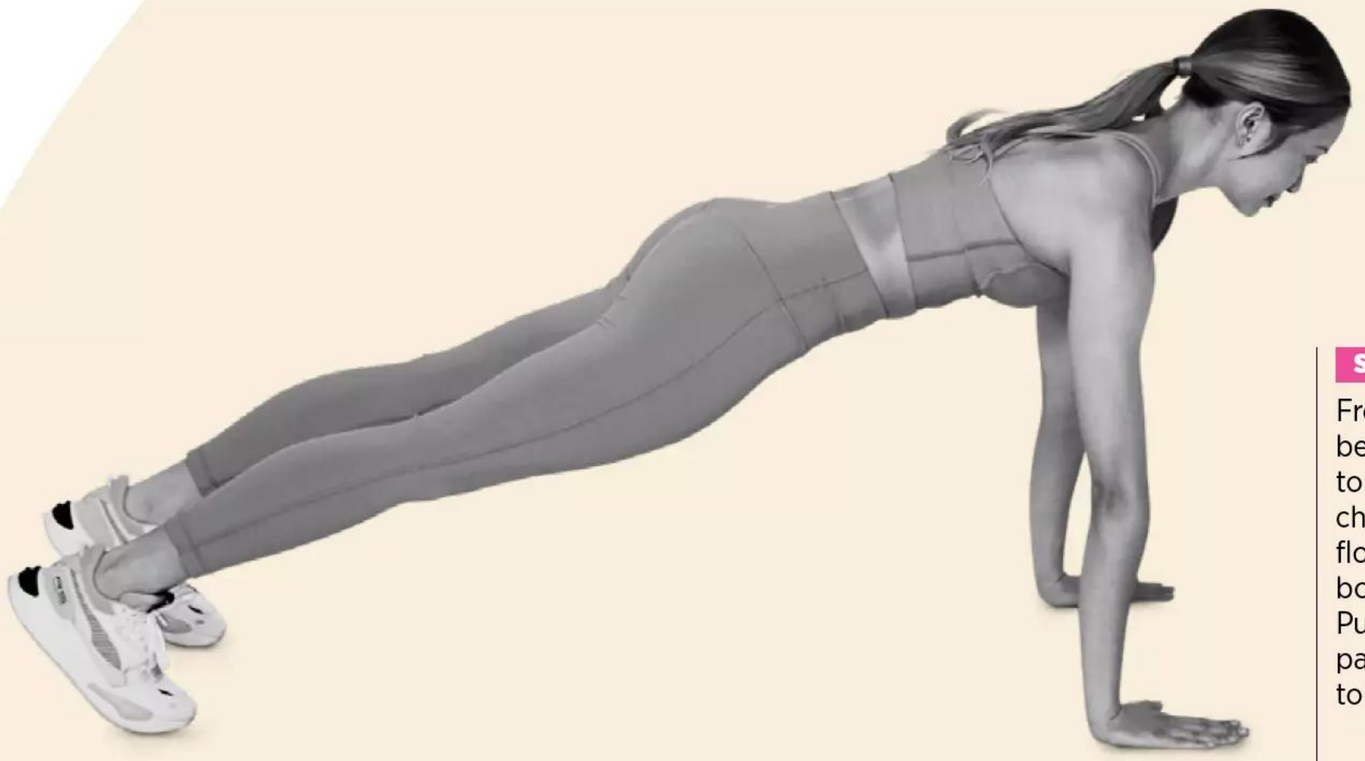
A glass of medium-bodied cabernet franc is a special pleasure; the dreaded 'red wine headache', less so. But is it the sulphites making you feel so awful? These preservatives in wine have long been blamed for hangovers, but a new study from the university UC Davis in California suggests the real culprit may be quercetin, a naturally occurring polyphenol that can cause a build-up of the toxin acetaldehyde, which interferes with how the body metabolises wine. Then this acetaldehyde accumulation – along with our good friends, dehydration and disrupted sleep – contribute to that throbbing headache and nausea, says John Brick, an alcohol researcher. So, that sulphite-free wine probably won't spare you that hangover. Sorry.

WORDS: ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE; MERYL DAVIDS LANDAU; ANDREW TRACEY; KATE ROCKWOOD.
PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES. ARTWORK: BARRY DOWNARD AT DEBUT ART

Move of the month

Press-up to side plank

Reap the strengthening rewards of a classic press-up and the core-stabilising benefits of a side plank with this body-weight multitasker



STEP 1

From a high plank, bend your elbows to lower your chest towards the floor, keeping your body straight. Push through your palms to return to high plank.

STEP 2

At the top, rotate your body to one side as you stack your hips and feet, and extend your top arm. Hold for 1 or 2 secs, then return to plank.

KEEP YOUR FORM IN CHECK by ensuring your hips are lifted and stable. Don't let your hips drop or over-rotate. This will maximise your core engagement and help maintain balance.

WORK IT IN during body-weight HIIT workouts or core-focused sessions. Perform 2 to 4 sets of 8 to 12 reps, resting for 30 to 60 secs between sets.

Tone it down

Both phases of this move can be done from your knees instead of your toes, says Colette Nguyen, PT and trainer at Soho Strength Lab. (Nguyen is also demo-ing the moves.) If planking from your knees is uncomfortable, another option is to place your hands on an elevated surface, such as a bench.

PHOTOGAARPHY: PHILIP FRIEDMAN. STYLING: ROSE LAUTURE.
CLOTHES: BRA AND LEGGINGS, LULULEMON. TRAINERS, PUMA

Does it really work?

Weighted vests for full-body fitness

Weights for ankles and wrists are common kit in strength and Pilates classes, but could weighted vests make your walks work harder? One writer finds out, one step at a time

Time to make an... in-vest-ment?

THE GUINEA PIG

Kate Neudecker, *MH* fitness writer and PT

In 2022, I was the strongest and fittest I'd ever been. For three years, I spent every day carrying heavy equipment on a 15-minute hike to reach an outdoor workout spot for my personal training clients. When I landed my current job in 2023, the commute to my desk wasn't the same. Then I noticed thousands of women walking with weighted vests across my social feeds...

Carrying weight over distance lets you increase your heart rate without the impact from other forms of cardio, such as running, reducing the risk of injury. One study* on women showed that wearing a weighted vest can increase your VO_2 max – the maximum amount of oxygen your body can use during exercise – when slow treadmill walking. Other research* has shown that exercising in a weighted vest can increase bone density by 1% . So, to get those gains back, I upgraded my daily walks with a weighted vest.

It's recommended to choose a vest at 10% to 15% of your body weight; I optimistically opted for the higher end – 10kg. I set out to hit 30 minutes on the treadmill at my usual walking pace, and while I had to slow down, I finished feeling great. My heart rate was considerably higher than usual and I was sweating, too. On days where I lacked energy, I removed a few of the weights – sometimes 2kg to 5kg. Other days, I'd walk 10 minutes with the full 10kg on the treadmill, then take off the vest for the rest of the walk.

A major plus was the idea that I'd had a 'workout' while doing something I'd do anyway. Walking for at least an hour has long been part of my daily routine, and a weighted vest adds just enough intensity to work my whole body.

Any downsides? Just one: the pressure on my traps – the muscles at either side of my neck. A vest was most practical for fitting under a hoodie or jacket, but on longer walks it gave me sore traps. A simple solution was to remove the weights from my vest and put them into my rucksack. Providing I fitted my straps tightly and comfortably, using a weighted rucksack – aka 'rucking' – became my personal preference.

As someone with a tendency to sustain injuries from running, I can attest that wearing a weighted vest or rucksack is a good way to boost cardiovascular health without the impact, and it's something I intend to keep doing. My vest cost £48, and I've used it – or its weights – daily for the past three months. Bargain.

The verdict

Fitness-building	●●●●●●●●●
Easy to use	●●●●●●○○○
Value for money	●●●●●●●●○
Long-term solution	●●●●●●○○○
OVERALL SCORE	●●●●●●●○○

*SOURCES: UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO; *QUALITY OF LIFE RESEARCH*

Skin deep

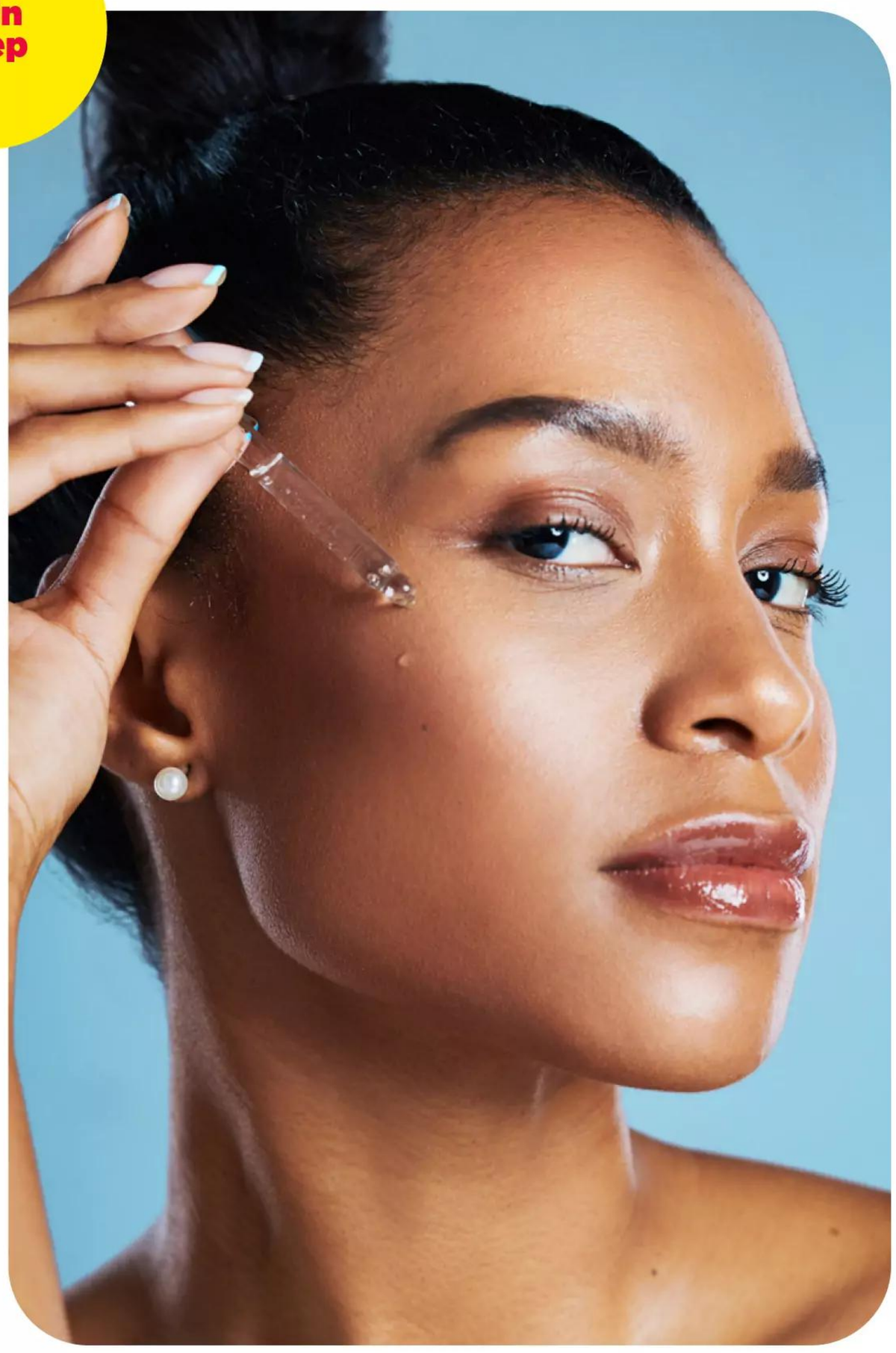
Should I swap out vitamin C for an antioxidant serum?

Dr Ifeoma Ejikeme, founder and medical director of Adonia Medical Centre

Vitamin C has been enjoying a moment in the sun – thanks to its ability to gently brighten skin, reduce pigmentation and stimulate collagen production, which in turn helps to diminish the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles. And that's not all; it also neutralises free radicals – unstable molecules generated by UV light and pollution that can damage DNA, proteins and lipids, leading to premature ageing – by donating the electron that free radicals are missing, preventing them from causing harm. It's not for everyone, though: its acidic nature and the form in which it's delivered can render it too potent for sensitive skin types.

Enter: antioxidant serums. Billed as a gentler alternative to vitamin C, they're making waves in the beauty industry for their ability to protect the skin from oxidative stress and free radical damage, often with far less irritation. While vitamin C serums primarily focus on brightening the skin and boosting collagen production, antioxidant serums offer a more comprehensive approach to repair and provide a multifaceted defence; think of them as the ultimate girl band, rather than a lone pop star.

As for the band members? Ingredients include vitamin E, ferulic acid, niacinamide, green-tea extract, resveratrol and coenzyme Q10, which offer various benefits when combined. Team ferulic acid with vitamin E and the former enhances the stability and efficacy of the latter, while providing its own protection against UV-induced damage. Meanwhile, green-tea extract is rich in polyphenols – particularly epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) – that have potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. In addition, they're soothing for acne-prone and sensitive skin.



Together, the benefits of combining multiple antioxidants range from repairing and protecting the skin barrier to improving skin elasticity and minimising pores.

When choosing the right antioxidant serum as an alternative to vitamin C, it's crucial to consider your specific skin type and concerns. If you have sensitive skin, look for products with soothing and anti-inflammatory ingredients such as niacinamide and green-tea extract. For dry or mature skin, serums containing vitamin E and CoQ10 can offer both protective and reparative benefits. All in all, if your skin needs a hug instead of a jolt, antioxidant serums might just be your new best friend.

ANTIOXIDANT SERUMS THAT ACE YOUR SKINCARE ROUTINE

1

Skin Rocks The Antioxidant, £70

Brimming with antioxidants, this serum goes above and beyond your typical vitamin C product. Plus, it's gentle enough to use on sensitive skin.

2

Dr. David Jack Good Morning, £89

Blending vitamin C, niacinamide and glutathione, this vegan paraben-free serum bolsters skin barrier function and enhances collagen production.

3

Allies of Skin Peptides & Antioxidant Firming Daily Treatment, £119

This skin superhero brightens, hydrates and firms while offering pore refinement and antioxidant protection.

4

Niod Survival 0, £22

Using antioxidants derived from the marigold flower, this serum delivers exceptional protection against free radicals; a must for city dwellers.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IAMGES

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Ask the

WH Fit Squad

Want to run further, lift heavier or nail your first pull-up? Each month, we put your questions to our team of the finest fitness brains to give you the tools you need to make good on your goals

Q I started weight training last month. How soon can I realistically expect results?

India Morse says: As I tell my clients, you need to quantify the 'results' you're hoping for. Do you want to build muscle and strength? Are you looking to lose weight? Or are you training with your mental health in mind? While weight training will help with all three, exactly how soon you'll notice results will vary from person to person, based on your age, genetics, gender, lifestyle factors and baseline fitness level.

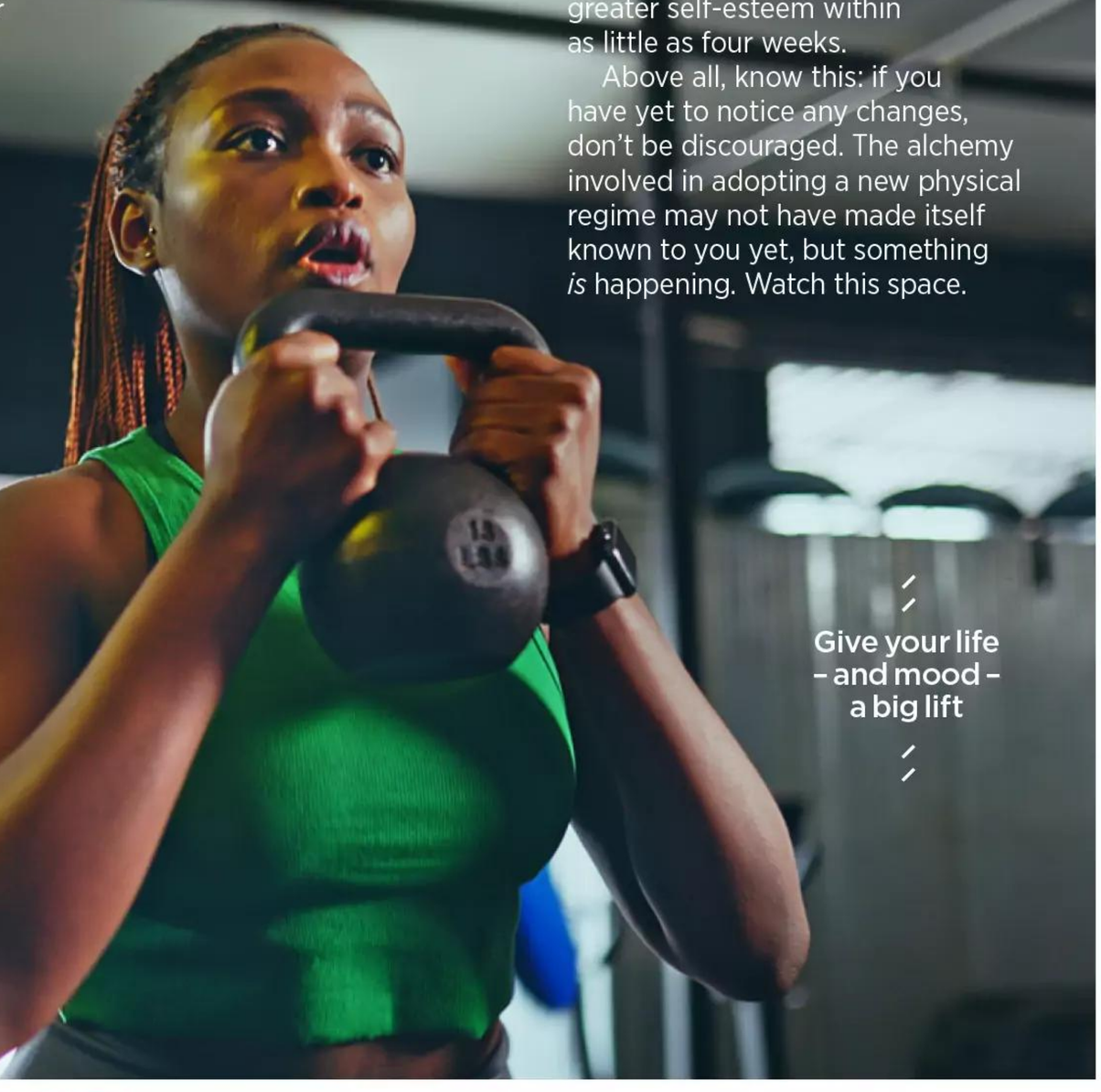
If strength is your goal, the fact that you've only recently started weight training means you may experience results sooner than more advanced exercisers. This is due to neurological adaptations – also known as 'newbie gains'. When you start at the bottom, there are more levels to conquer, which are often easier. More regular gymgoers may have already hit those milestones, leaving them fewer, harder levels to defeat. These adaptations occur within the first four to six weeks after you start weightlifting, providing you train consistently (three to five days weekly). With a month under your belt, you may be feeling stronger already.

Aiming for weight loss? By building strength, you'll replace fat with muscle in the same time frame – one month to six weeks. But weight loss is multifaceted; a calorie deficit (tailored to your weight, height, gender and activity level), a combination of strength and cardio training and, above all, consistency, all have a part to play. One study* showed that it takes a minimum of 18 days to form a habit once a decision to change a behaviour is made. If you feel you've done this in your first month, you've passed your first big benchmark.

Going forward, you'll still see results – just slightly slower than you might do initially. A review in the journal *Metabolism* found that the best way to boost your basal metabolic rate (how many calories you burn at rest) is to have more muscle mass; the more regularly you train, the more muscle you'll have, and the more sustainable your results will become. What's more, as you progressively lift heavier weights, your brain learns to recruit more muscle fibres during each move. This allows you to produce more force and execute each exercise more efficiently, reaping more rewards. The same goes for technique; the more familiar you become with the correct form, the more accurately you'll perform lifts and the more likely you are to experience results.

And when it comes to your mental health, just five minutes of moderate exercise has been proven to produce an instant mood boost, according to the American Psychological Association. Another study* compared the effects of aerobic exercise with resistance training on mental health and found that those in the resistance group experienced significantly greater self-esteem within as little as four weeks.

Above all, know this: if you have yet to notice any changes, don't be discouraged. The alchemy involved in adopting a new physical regime may not have made itself known to you yet, but something *is* happening. Watch this space.



Give your life – and mood – a big lift

Meet the squad

The team share the fitness supplement they swear by

Kate Rowe-Ham
Menopause fitness coach
I prefer free weights, since they work your stability, too.

India Morse
Accessible fitness coach
I couldn't go without the hack squat machine.

Amanda Ngonyama
Athlete, sports scientist
I can spend an entire session using only cables.

Rosie Stockley
PT, prenatal and postnatal expert
I'm with Amanda on cables – they're super versatile.

Michelle Griffith-Robinson
Olympian, life coach and PT
The squat rack, always.

Izy George
Strength and conditioning coach, PT
It's the hip thrust machine for me.

Sanchia Legister
Yoga teacher
I love the adductor machine.

AS TOLD TO BRIDIE WILKINS. PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES. *SOURCES: *EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY; JOURNAL OF CONSULTING AND CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY*

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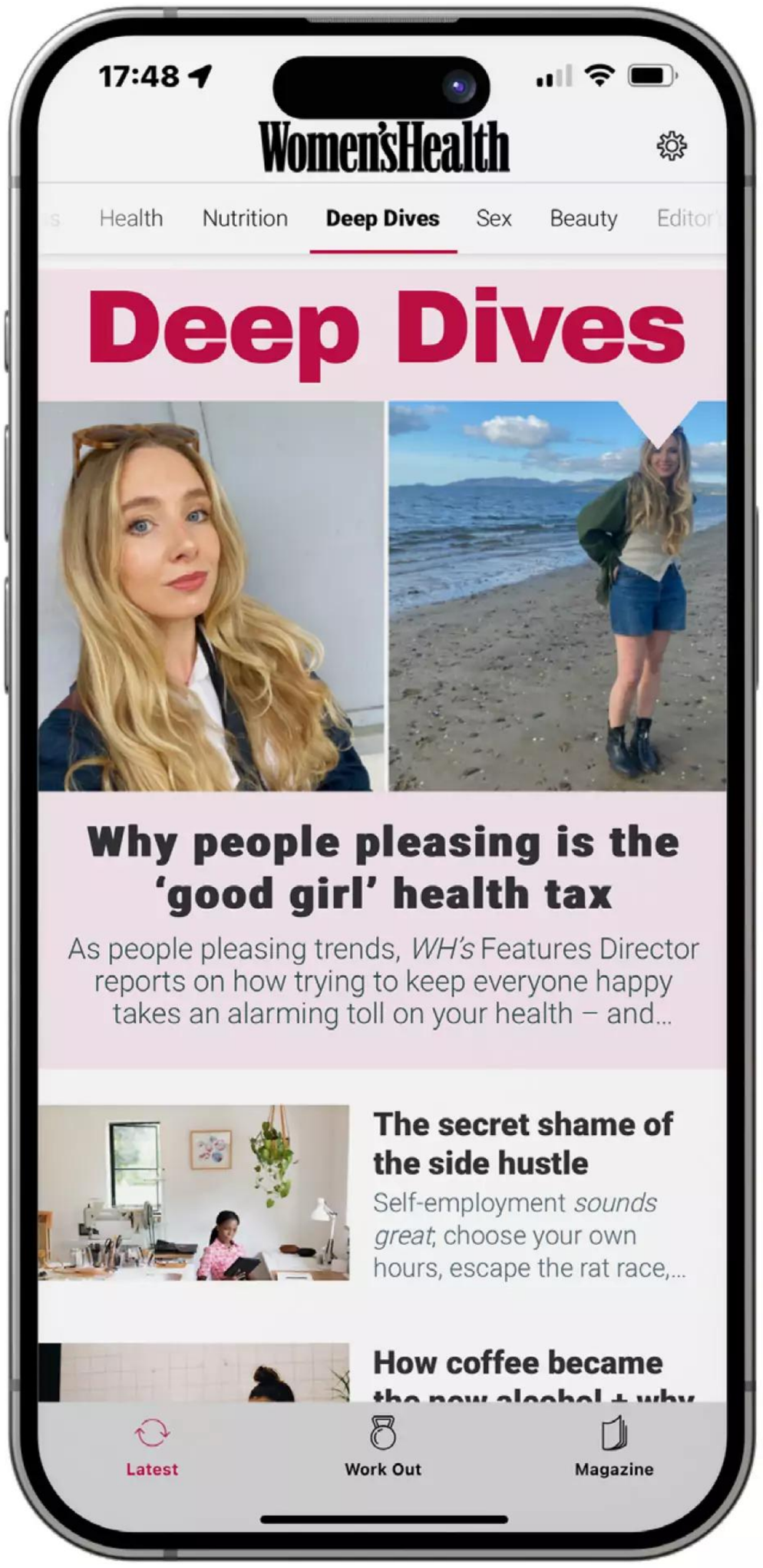

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JACKET, UNIVERSAL WORKS. CARDIGAN, SÉZANE. ONE-PIECE, ERES. HOOPS AND RINGS (RIGHT HAND), ALL JENNIFER ZEUNER. NECKLACE, BRINKER + ELIZA. RING (LEFT HAND), MEJURI. SOCKS, LOS ANGELES APPAREL. BOOTS, MONCLER

Daisy

Embodying the role of a record-breaking swimmer was intense for the 32-year-old actor, physically and mentally. But it was a surprise autoimmune diagnosis – following years of managing both endometriosis and PCOS symptoms – that ultimately led her to finally slow down and listen to her body. Here, she shares what navigating chronic illness has taught her about what it means to be well

Words: Samantha Leal

Photography: Jonny Marlow

Styling: Kristen Saladino

look up, and Daisy Ridley is standing and waving to me from across the room at the Soho House in West Hollywood.

Dressed in a grey sweater (Los Angeles has been cold and gloomy for this time of year), and with her signature short hair, she somehow has that particular mix of star quality and approachability – as if your best friend from next door is now an A-lister.

It's this same quality that gives her the chameleon-like tendencies that many actors strive for, with her acting projects ranging from portrayals of a troubled housewife to a socially awkward office worker and a strong and stubborn Jedi. 'It's all make-believe,' the 32-year-old says, laughing. 'It's about turning up and being very present and being very open and available, but also submitting to someone else's vision. It's about being open to what other people believe, even if you come up with ideas of what that is.'

In her most recent role, Daisy plays the real-life American athlete Gertrude 'Trudy' Ederle in *Young Woman And The Sea*, based on the story of the first woman who swam the English Channel. (Daisy executive-produced the film.) It's also the 98th anniversary of that historic swim – a feat Daisy learned about intimately. 'The first time I swam for the role, we were in a 20m pool, and I swam halfway, then started panicking. I was like, "I can't do it. I actually can't do it,"' she says. 'It was a classic lied-on-the-CV moment of, "What the f**k have I done?"'

Guided by Olympic medallist Siobhan-Marie O'Connor, Daisy trained for an hour and a half, three or four times a week, over the course of two and a half months, before flying to the set in Bulgaria, where she swam for an hour and a half at least five days a week for two weeks straight before filming began. She swam in the cold and harsh current, moving her body in and out of the water, breathing on either side to make sure she was in the right place – sometimes hearing when 'cut' was called, sometimes not, and always pushing and swimming and trying to align herself with the camera.

On the last day, filming in the Black Sea, Daisy was told to just swim as long as she could. She has no idea whether she swam for minutes or for much longer. 'I remember thinking, "I can't do this any more,"' she says. Emerging from the water with the thought, 'God, I hope that was okay,' and turning to O'Connor, she saw the tears in her trainer's eyes. Daisy had not just done it, but she'd done it well – both the cold and current be damned. 'The build-up to it was worse than the thing. Once you're [swimming], you're like, "Oh, I'm fine." And then after the fact, I was like, "How did I actually do that?"' she says of the experience.

And yet, Daisy is no stranger to doing hard things. Diagnosed with endometriosis (in which tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows outside of it, often causing severe pain) in her teens, and polycystic ovary syndrome in her twenties, she's been candid about her health, on social media and in interviews. But now she's dealing with another →

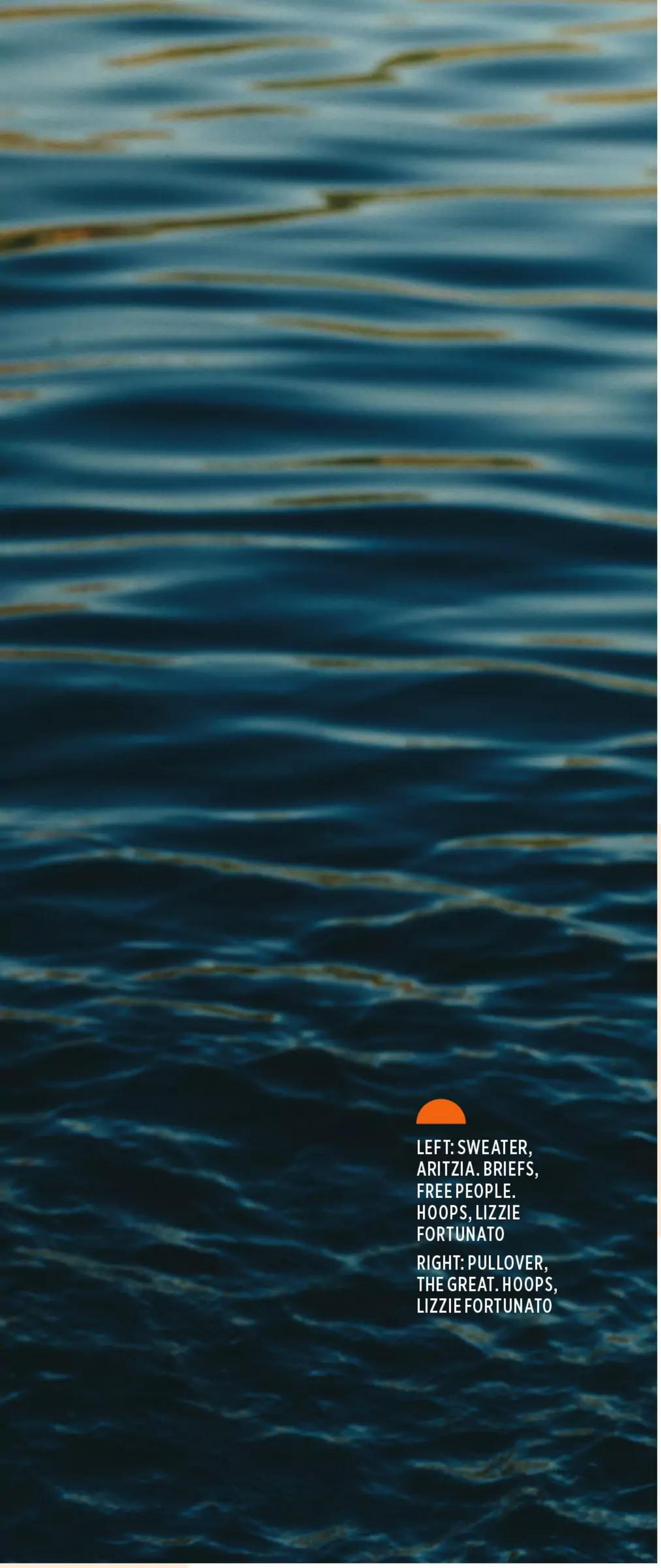
OPPOSITE PAGE:
KNIT TOP, NORMA KAMALI. RINGS (LEFT HAND), PASCALE MONVOISIN. RING (RIGHT HAND), PAMELA LOVE

THIS PAGE:
SWEATER, ADEAM. BRIEFS, ERES. HOOPS, BRINKER + ELIZA. RING, JENNIFER ZEUNER

curveball: Graves' disease, an autoimmune disorder that involves overactivity of the thyroid.

Back at our table, Daisy takes a drink of water, then looks at me. 'It's the first time I've shared that,' she says, moving her hands along the glass. She was diagnosed in September 2023, after her GP encouraged her to see an endocrinologist following bouts of hot flashes and fatigue. (She doesn't know if her three diagnoses are related, but the symptoms for all can be similar.)

The star had started feeling terrible following the filming of *Magpie*, a psychological thriller in which she plays Anette, a wife and mother who's dealing with a rocky relationship. 'I thought, "Well, I've just played a really stressful role; presumably that's why I feel poorly,"' she says. Then, when she started to describe her symptoms to her endocrinologist – symptoms including a racing heart, weight loss, fatigue and hand tremors – the doctor mentioned that the feeling of Graves' is often referred to as 'tired but wired'. Only then did Daisy realise that she felt irritable. 'It was funny, I was like, 'Oh, I just thought I was annoyed



LEFT: SWEATER, ARITZIA. BRIEFS, FREE PEOPLE. HOOPS, LIZZIE FORTUNATO

RIGHT: PULLOVER, THE GREAT. HOOPS, LIZZIE FORTUNATO

at the world,' but turns out everything is functioning so quickly, you can't chill out.'

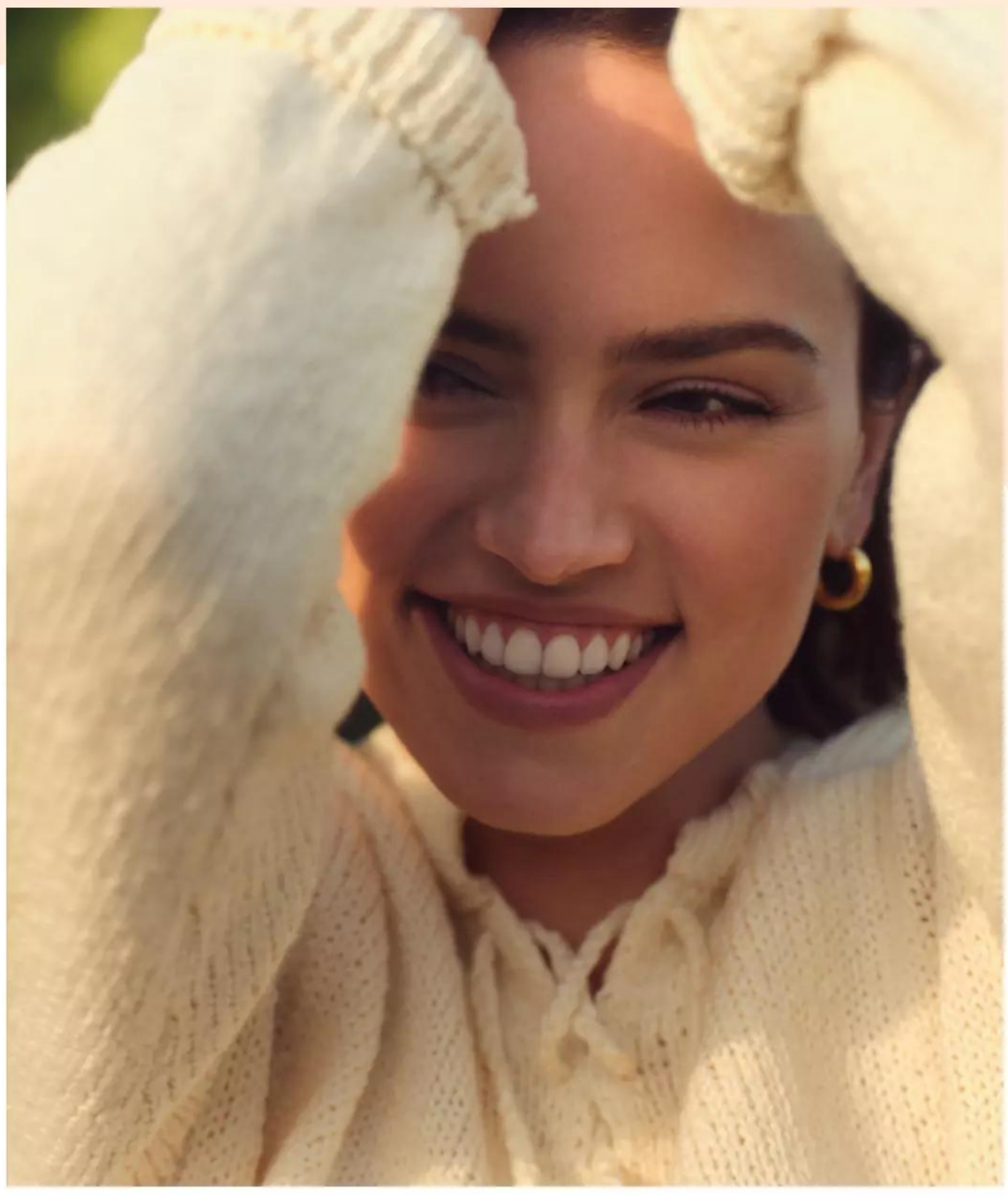
With the diagnosis, Daisy experienced some sadness, but also – if she's being honest – irritation as well. As someone who takes good care of herself physically, it felt to her like a random blow. On the silver linings side of things, the disease led Daisy to a more routine pattern of daily medication and a more mindful diet. She's been vegan for years but decided to go gluten-free following her diagnosis. 'I am not super strict about it, but generally cutting down on gluten makes

'I've always been health conscious, and now I'm trying to be more wellbeing conscious'

me feel better,' she says, noting it is said to help with inflammation for those predisposed to it, as she is.

Daisy is still trying to find balance. Soon after she started implementing the lifestyle changes, she woke up and found herself listening to the birds and noticing the colour of the sky and how it was so blue. 'I didn't realise how bad I felt before. Then I looked back and thought, "How did I do that?"' The diagnosis has also led Daisy to a renewed sense of body awareness and reminded her that not everything can be anticipated. 'I've always been health conscious, and now I'm trying to be more wellbeing conscious,' she says.

She's working to pay attention to her body, to slow down and rest when she needs to. She's also →



integrating infrared saunas, cryotherapy, massages and acupuncture into her routine, along with her beloved bath time. She's into crystals, too, carrying rose quartz – said to promote emotional balance, self-love and peace – everywhere she goes. 'I do a fair amount of the holistic stuff, but I also understand that it is a privilege to be able to do those things.'

Daisy is, like many of us, learning to continuously listen to her body, a thing that she knows many women are not inclined to do. 'We all read the stats about women being undiagnosed or underdiagnosed and sort of coming to terms with saying "I really, actually don't feel good" and not going, "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine." It's just normalised to not feel good.'

At that point, we sit in a moment of quiet, and I let the sincerity and severity of that statement sink in. If you look at the list of health issues she's dealt with, Daisy has every right to be bitter or overwhelmed. But she's thinking about those who have it worse. 'In the grand scheme of things, it's much less severe than what a lot of people go through,' she says. 'Even if you can deal with it, you shouldn't have to. If there's a problem, you shouldn't have to just [suffer through it].'

In coming to terms with her new reality, Daisy's exercise regimen has shifted as well. She's worked out consistently since she was 20, but she's been active all her life; her mum put her and her two sisters in gymnastics as kids just to keep everyone busy and moving. Having attended a performing arts school, she also danced and sang. Today, her routine includes working out with personal trainer Matt Bevan, who also trains the likes of Lily James, Sienna Miller and Jenna Coleman.

'He's just so good. He understands bodies; he understands fatigue,' says Daisy, who doesn't really do high-intensity cardio or running or things that 'just don't suit' her body, health issues and goals. 'I do lots of stuff that is reactive and functional,' she says, including mobility exercises, some lifting and general calisthenics and body-weight movements. Moves that keep her going include lateral lunges, split squats, Bulgarian squats and hip thrusts. Bevan also integrates coordination drills, so her muscles work together as a unit. To do so, they incorporate medicine ball throws and plyometric jumps and hops.

Working in tandem with Bevan, Daisy integrates specialised trainings for roles that call for it – like swimming with O'Connor or doing kick-boxing for another high-action role. For Jedi training, she relied on a lot of arm workouts. (Wielding a lightsaber is no joke.) 'Generally, my training stays pretty consistent. And then we tailor stuff to what I'm doing,' she says. 'It's just finding the balance, and me understanding now where my tolerance really ends.'

And yes, her tolerance does end. After doing her press tour for *Young Woman And The Sea*, she went straight into pick-ups (re-filming small scenes or moments for a film). 'I was just shattered, so I took a few days off training and am now on a "deload" week,' she says, referring to taking a break or lowering the intensity of your workouts. It's been an adjustment; for Daisy, working out is a mental escape, too. 'It's an hour just for me, and it's my time to do what I need to do to make myself feel good,' she says.

The other thing Daisy likes to do for her mental health? Reading. A voracious reader, she credits her love for it as a major reason that she's an actor today. (Two of her recent favourites include Meg Mason's *Sorrow And Bliss* and Roxy Dunn's *As Young As This*.) Getting immersed in a script is one of her favourite parts of the job. 'I get to the point where, if I'm reading, I can't hear other people,' she says. 'Reading is my meditation.'

It's hard not to see the parallel between tuning in to the words on the page and how she's now tuning in to her own needs – whether she's managing Graves' disease, figuring out what works for her or finding peace in new routines. Her hope is that others going through health struggles can do the same and realise there's calm and acceptance on the other side – you just might have to swim for it. WH

HAIR: MARA ROSZAK USING RŌZ HAIR, REPRESENTED BY A-FRAME AGENCY. MAKE-UP: CHANEL MAKE-UP ARTIST KATE LEE USING CHANEL BEAUTY. MANICURE: JOLENE BRODEUR AT THE WALL GROUP

OPPOSITE PAGE:
JACKET, FREE PEOPLE. BOTTOMS, LEFT ON FRIDAY. HOOPS, BRUNA. BRACELET, UNODE50. BELT, STYLIST'S OWN

THIS PAGE:
TRENCH AND BIKINI BOTTOMS, BOTH REFORMATION. SWEATER, LA LIGNE. HOOPS, PAMELA LOVE. SOCKS, LOS ANGELES APPAREL. BOOTS, MONCLER

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Eat Smart

Midlife eating disorders are hiding in plain sight

A sluggish metabolism and weight gain are among the symptoms we've been told to expect from (peri)menopause – and you've been paying close attention. *WH* chews over the science and asks: does disordered eating have a new face?

WORDS: CHLOE GRAY

Samantha's menstrual cycle was that rare and precious friend who prizes themselves on perfect punctuality. Every fourth Friday, without fail, her period arrived. Until last December, when it came on a Thursday. In January, it was a Tuesday. And erratic bleeding wasn't the only thing weighing her down. 'I noticed this pouch building around my stomach,' the 39-year-old marketing manager tells *WH*. She suspected a more relaxed approach to rich and indulgent food during the festive period was behind the weight gain. Then the hot flushes started – and Samantha's GP confirmed the arrival of perimenopause, the stage of oestrogen decline that precedes your periods stopping for good.

The news came as a surprise, but more alarming was what happened next. For with this unexpected jolt to the body she'd long trusted for its dependability came a disarming urge. Despite being Teflon to diet culture – and taking a diligent approach to fuelling her workouts – she developed a sudden distaste for carbs. 'Before perimenopause, I ate the same as my kids – aged three and six – always serving the vegetables and meat with pasta or rice, which I now feel I can't have,' she says, referencing the gains on her waistline for disrupting her healthy approach to food. 'I'm so worried about gaining any more weight that I think I've suppressed my appetite. Poached eggs and smoked salmon used to be my favourite treat. Now the thought makes me queasy.' It's a situation made more distressing by Samantha being the first in her friendship group to experience symptoms. 'Perimenopause has come quite early for me and I feel lost because there's no one to talk to, alongside pressure to not let it affect me,' she tells *WH*, before adding, 'I don't feel like I've got a good relationship with food at the moment – and that makes me sad.'

OUT OF ORDER

If the phrase 'disordered eating' calls to mind a teenage girl, recent data tells a different story. A 2023 study published in the journal *Menopause* found midlife women are at a high, risk on a par with young people: 3.5% experienced an eating disorder in perimenopause, compared with a teenage prevalence rate of around 1.2% to 4.2%. Some eating disorder behaviours, such as binge-eating and a dissatisfaction with eating habits, impacted almost one third (29.3%) of women in their forties. It doesn't help that their symptoms in midlife are often attributed to other causes. 'Diarrhoea, vomiting, painful joints and hair loss may be interpreted as part of the normal ageing process when, in reality, they could be side effects of an eating disorder,' says Chukwuemeka Nwuba, psychiatrist and author of *Eating Disorders Don't Discriminate*, adding that adults in midlife can also be more skilled at masking their illness than younger people.

When the University of California conducted a 30-year study of eating disorder prevalence through life, in almost half of cases, women who'd recovered from an eating disorder relapsed at 50. Perimenopausal food struggles were familiar ground for Kate Rowe-Ham, 43, a personal trainer from West Sussex and a member of the Women's Health Collective expert panel. 'In my teens and early twenties, food was my enemy and exercise was a punishment or way of controlling what went in,' she says. That changed when she had children, now 16, 14 and six; in a bid to set a good example, she adopted a more self-compassionate approach, but physique changes after 40 resurfaced old habits. 'When I noticed my middle was getting spongier and I was struggling

to maintain muscle, so many negative feelings about my body re-emerged. I found myself skipping breakfast and purging calories through 90-minute daily HIIT workouts and running.' The root cause of both Kate's over-exercising and Samantha's food-aversion correlate with what the *Menopause* study identified as the most common perimenopausal eating-disorder trigger: fear of losing control of body size.

For Georgia Kohlhoff, a menopause nutritionist and counsellor specialising in body image, this desire to be a Miranda Priestly-style boss of your body shape can be traced back to the way in which society treats ageing. 'The inbuilt belief that women have a shelf life pressurises them to remain as useful as possible and often that [belief] shows up in how your body looks,' she argues. Today's perimenopausal generation grew up seeing thinness glorified in the heroin-chic era of the 90s; now, it's the glorification of resisting ageing that's triggering. See: headlines declaring that 50-plus celebrities look good 'for their age' and the 'guess who' games that play out on social media about injectables, surgery or Ozempic. And as menopause awareness has morphed from compassionate campaigns into a £14bn industry, many businesses and content creators – ground-feeding on vulnerability – have tapped into fears with the overarching message that 'menopause is the root of all the problems in your body – it's thrown the brakes on your metabolism, and here's a quick fix,' says Kohlhoff.

'Women fear losing control'

SIZING UP THE ISSUE

Back to physiology. While women do gain an average of 1.5kg (3.3lbs) per year during perimenopause, according to the findings of the Healthy Women's study by Harvard University, that's not the whole story. 'Fat or weight gain during the menopause transition is primarily related to ageing,' explains Kohlhoff. 'Interestingly, men and women gain body fat at roughly a similar rate in their forties and fifties, there's just more focus on women – it's women who are taught to control their bodies.' In a further plot twist, a 2021 study of over 6,400 participants* found there were hardly any changes in metabolic rate (how much energy is needed to function) between the ages of 20 and 60.

That said, Samantha and Kate weren't imagining changes to their body. 'In perimenopause, the change in ratio of oestrogen to testosterone causes a shift away from storing weight around the thighs and bum towards holding more body fat around the middle,' explains Kohlhoff, pointing out that this change may cause clothes to feel tighter or cling in places they didn't before, fuelling an impression of weight gain. Oestrogen decline also makes it harder to maintain muscle and bone density – and losing muscle can change your shape and size, says Carla DiGirolamo, a reproductive endocrinologist and certified practitioner with The

‘Changes in oestrogen have an impact on how you think’

Menopause Society. ‘Skeletal muscle is one of the body’s greatest utilisers of blood sugar, second only to the brain,’ she explains. ‘So losing muscle in this stage of life can also slow glucose metabolism, which is another reason for weight gain around the stomach.’

Freefalling hormones also manipulate food behaviours. First, hormones that regulate hunger and fullness are impacted by fluctuations in oestrogen, says Kohlhoff, meaning you’re not imagining it when meals that once had you opening a trouser button now leave you eating leftovers out of the pan. Hormones can also hamper body positivity. ‘Changes in oestrogen have a huge impact on the way you think, feel and process emotions,’ she adds. That might mean body gripes you could normally quash with a quick affirmation in the mirror become all-consuming, or dessert spirals into self-judgment. Both, in turn, can influence how you eat.

‘Changes in body shape can lead to a preoccupation with your body – a main driver in binge-eating, while emotional eating is often a way to cope if you feel lonely and isolated,’ continues Kohlhoff.

THE MIDLIFE MEAL PLAN

Before we go any further, let us say this: an eating disorder is a mental health condition and should be managed as one. If you’re worried about your relationship with food – signs the NHS highlights include eating very little, exercising too much and adopting strict habits around eating – see the resources in the pink box on page 36. But the experts *WH* spoke to for this feature were clear that evidence-based nutrition advice can play a vital role in future-proofing your relationship with food during the (peri)menopausal years. So, what’s on a healthy midlife menu? Protein and lots of it. ‘Muscle and bones are made of protein, so to maintain strength you need to eat enough,’ insists Dr DiGirolamo, who puts the ideal value at around 2g of protein per kilogram of body weight. ‘That can feel hard to achieve – a 70kg woman would strive for 140g of protein a day [for context, a salmon fillet has 20g to 25g] – so take it as a target.’ As well as filling you up, protein offers prolonged energy and – if you’re doing your NHS-recommended two weight-bearing sessions a week – it will rebuild muscle mass, too.

Second course of advice? Give yourself permission to enjoy your food. It sounds simple, but when you’re fed an algorithm in which fasting and food restriction feature heavily, taking pleasure in your meals can feel groundbreaking. ‘Cutting calories not only risks cutting protein, which weakens muscles, but it can cause low energy availability (LEA),’ says Dr DiGirolamo, referring to a large gap between calories in and

calories out; once detected by your body, it activates a stress response. 'That means your body hangs on to fat cells, you won't recover properly from workouts and you're likely to get injured, all because there's not enough fuel.' Ordinarily, period changes are the key warning sign of LEA, but with the perimenopause already ticking that box, if you find yourself maintaining or gaining weight despite eating little, feeling constantly fatigued or experiencing recurring injuries, apply a principle of satiation, rather than deprivation, to your servings.

'The most extreme thing you can do is to go without food when your energy is already low from hormonal changes,' Dr DiGirolamo insists. 'When I see clients who've been recommended fasting by influencers, they often find themselves in a cycle of restriction and bingeing that they can't get out of.' Of course, fasting works for some – but one study from 2022 raised concerns among researchers when it found that eight weeks of intermittent fasting reduced levels of DHEA, a key component of oestrogen, in both pre- and postmenopausal women.

Beyond sensibly limiting high-glycaemic processed sugars, such as sweets, Dr DiGirolamo is critical of carbohydrate restriction (foods such as sweet potatoes, rice and grains are essential, especially if you're active, she says) as well as a taking a strict approach to meal tracking.

MIDDLE-AGED CRED

Kohlhoff has two behavioural pillars to support eating well in midlife. First, replace emotional, value-based language, such as 'good', 'bad', 'healthy' or 'junk', with objective terms, such as crunchy, salty or sweet. Then break away from conditional eating. Think: 'If I eat perfectly all week, I can have pastries at the weekend.' 'Having unconditional permission to eat means you can make choices based on preference, hunger and fullness versus what you should or shouldn't do,' she says.

Permission is a place Samantha is working at getting back to. 'I still →

PHOTOGRAPHY: STOCKSY; ADOBE STOCK. *SOURCES: *SCIENCE; IRANIAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH*

Menopause and metabolism – what to know

Muscle does make way

Because muscles contain a lot of oestrogen receptors, the drop in oestrogen means women lose about 10% of their muscle in perimenopause alone, according to a 2021 report*, and continue losing more after menopause.

This affects metabolism... slightly

'A lot of people think muscle helps burn more calories, but it's only by negligible amounts,' says Kohlhoff. 'The real benefit of building and maintaining muscle, aside from avoiding osteoporosis and osteopenia [low bone density that precedes it], is that it can improve how your body processes protein. Plus, you can store carbohydrates in your muscles for energy rather than storing them as fat.'

Being sedentary is a brake pedal

One factor that may alter the rate of food processing is a more sedentary lifestyle as you age. A 10-year research project showed that light activity, such as walking, declined by 30 minutes a day between ages 38 and 50, while sedentary behaviour increased by 40 minutes.

Eat Smart

feel a bit stuck and it's having an impact on the way I feel physically and mentally,' she shares. 'Now that my youngest has started full-time school, I can allow some extra time for planning and getting my diet right in a way that helps boost my energy.' As *WH* was going to press, she was considering psychological support, with the possibility of recruiting some help with her nutrition, too.

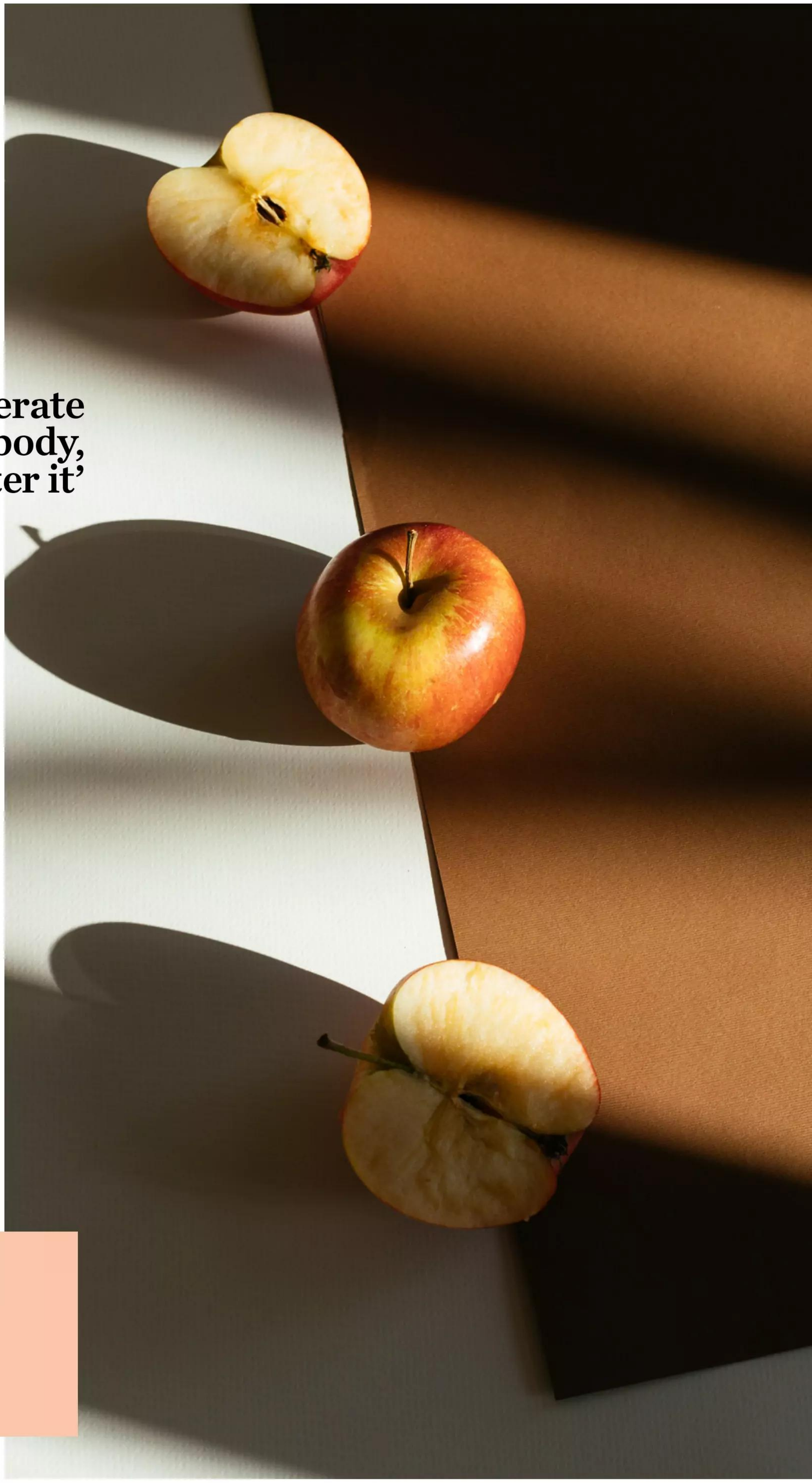
'For now, I'm trying to learn about my body and understand myself as best as possible.'

'Don't berate your body, look after it'

As for Kate, when she realised her approach to food was becoming disordered, she began the work of developing healthier outlets for the lack of control she felt over her body shape. She took a personal training course and became her own guinea pig, noticing how much better she felt with food in her system and adequate rest. 'I trained myself to eat breakfast and to not be afraid of eating more than what I would have previously thought of as "enough".' She noticed her muscle rebuilding and her energy coming back, and her bestselling book, *Owning Your Menopause*, encourages women to lift heavy and look after their bodies, rather than berate them – or keep them small.

Perhaps the most nourishing takeaway is that mind- and body-disrupting fluctuations are finite. 'In perimenopause, oestrogen production is still changing, which is what creates chaos in the body,' says Dr DiGirolamo. 'When you hit menopause, without chaotic, fluctuating hormones, your hot flushes, your mood and your anxiety all settle.' Hopefully, your relationship with food will, too. WH

If you're affected by any of the issues in this report, Beat (beateatingdisorders.org.uk) helplines offer confidential support and information by phone, webchat and email.



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How food can change your cells

There's more to food than staving off hanger, of course. But pause to consider that your body is built from food – what you feed it acts like a comms channel that relays vital instructions to cells – and it becomes clear how crucial nutrition is for overall health. In this extract from her bestselling book, *Good Energy*, Dr Casey Means shows how a quality diet can create a quality life and help protect you from chronic disease. The path to optimal health starts with your fork

We make hundreds of daily micro-decisions about food that can change our genetic and physiological fate. Like any doctor, I often ended appointments by giving patients vague dietary advice such as 'eat more fruit and vegetables' and then writing a prescription for medication. That's because, in training, doctors are told nutrition is a soft topic that 'isn't evidence-based'. You'll rarely find specific nutrition recommendations in the official treatment guidelines for any given condition. Interventions such as prescribing medication or performing surgery are seen as normal or even heroic, while nutritional interventions are seen as fuzzy. We ignore the fact that natural foods have over 5,000 known phytochemicals – each of which is a small molecule that has a positive effect on health.

The grams of molecular information we put into our bodies affect our health daily. Every thought and feeling comes from food. Inside your mother's body, you were 3D-printed from food, and every item you ingest continues to print the next iteration of yourself. Bodies, neurotransmitters, hormones, nerves and mitochondria are all made, exclusively and necessarily, from what you (or your mum) put in your (or their) mouth. We don't arise from thin air; we arise from food.

So often, doctors and patients are taught that genes are our destiny – but that's not true. Our genes don't determine most health outcomes. What we eat and how we live affect our gene expression and cellular biology, determining our outcomes. Food chemicals go into your body and act as signalling molecules. They can directly increase or decrease gene expression and activate key cell-signalling pathways. What we put into our bodies is the most critical decision for our health and happiness. To learn why food is our most potent weapon against chronic disease, I had to learn the following principles for myself long after becoming a doctor.

Food determines how your cells and microbiome behave

Our bodies are built entirely of food. Eating is the process of transforming and assimilating matter from the external world into our own form. Every day, the food we eat is broken down into different types of 'bricks' in our gut, and then those bricks are absorbed into our bloodstream to be used to continually rebuild the next version of our body. When we provide the body with the right bricks, we build the right internal structures – and the result is better health.

Eating matches oral input with your cells' needs

Any diet that sufficiently generates the optimal cellular function, eliminates chronic symptoms and leads to the most favourable biomarkers is the right diet for you. Let's think about what food is from your cells' perspective: the inside of your body is warm, wet and dark. Most of your 37 trillion cells live in darkness within you, just waiting for the signals and information about what to do and when, in order to give you a good life. Cells can't see, hear or smell. They have only receptors and channels on their membranes that allow them to receive input by waiting for nutrients to float by that they can take up and use to do their work.

Food is how you communicate with your cells

Think of your consciousness and free will as being like a military general. Your cells are the troops bravely defending the integrity and safety of your life. Foods are the messages the general chooses to send that motivate the troops and tell them what to do. The general's ability to continue to lead – as well as the troops' survival – depends on the quality and clarity of the messages. In an optimal state, food sends our cells clear messages about what our body needs to do to thrive. Specific

➜

Eat Smart

food choices and particular food behaviours can tell your body different things, such as:

- **Omega-3 fatty acids** (in salmon, sardines, chia seeds, walnuts) to immune cells: *lower your defences, things are safe now.*

- **Cruciferous vegetables** (eg, in cauliflower, cabbage, brussels sprouts) to DNA: *it's a tough time; we must produce more defences.*

- **Leucine** (an essential amino acid found in beef, pork, yoghurt, lentils and almonds) to your muscles: *it's time to build.*

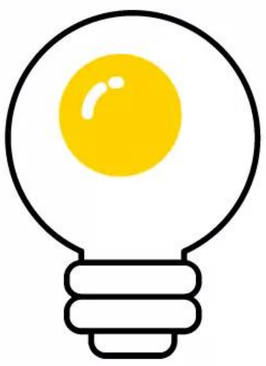
- **Magnesium** (found in pumpkin seeds, chia seeds, beans, leafy greens and avocados) to neurons: *relax!*

- **Fibre** to the microbiome: *I love you. I really do.*

Ignore diet philosophies and focus on whole foods

Diet controversy is a charade. I personally know brilliant, hard-working, highly educated people who subscribe to polar opposite ideologies about nutrition. One group feels a low-fat, high-carb diet is the only diet that makes sense, and another feels that a high-fat, low-carb diet is the best way. Both have data that shows these diets reduce liver fat (which is a key marker of insulin sensitivity), lower weight, improve insulin sensitivity and lower inflammation. And both are right.

And in between is the famed Mediterranean diet, for which there's also masses of literature supporting a more omnivorous approach. All these diets can work towards good health because they emphasise primarily unprocessed whole foods to give the cells what they need to function and cue satiety mechanisms so we don't overeat. It's important to realise that the body is remarkably capable of getting to similar outcomes with different inputs – that is, you could be eating a sustainably sourced, unprocessed, plant-based diet or animal-based diet and still get the same molecular information.



Don't neglect your protein needs

As we get older and muscle mass declines, we must actively fight the process with thoughtful protein intake and regular resistance training. The recommended daily allowance (RDA) for protein is 0.75g per kilogram of body weight, which doesn't account for activity level or dynamic metabolic needs (such as recovering from illness). For an active 79kg (12.4st) person such as myself, the RDA would suggest about 60g per day, or 20g per meal. This is probably not enough. I favour a higher value – a minimum of 30g of protein at every meal to promote satiety, minimise blood sugar fluctuations and provide my body with the building blocks for protein and muscle synthesis. Aim for whole-food sources such as meat, fish, seafood, dairy products (milk, cheese and yoghurt are good sources), eggs (which contain all essential amino acids), legumes, tofu, tempeh, nuts and seeds.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

How to eat unprocessed for less

The cost of living crisis is biting, particularly when it comes to filling the fridge; the latest figures saw grocery price inflation rise, with fruit and veg among the worst affected – a reality made harder by the affordability of ultra-processed foods, says Dr Means. 'It's a shortcoming of public policy that it's cheaper to purchase a fizzy drink than a bottle of water at many supermarkets,' she says. 'We must change the incentive structures of our food and health system – but, until that happens, we have to do all we can to reject ultra-processed food where possible.' Here's her advice for doing so on a budget.

- Buy frozen organic fruit, vegetables, meat and wild-caught fish in bulk, or buy fresh and freeze. Pack'd frozen organic cauliflower rice costs about £12 for 1.8kg, which would make close to eight meals.

- Cook large batches of organic beans or lentils in the slow cooker or on the hob. Bought in bulk, organic beans and lentils are often less than £5 for 1kg.

- Purchase the cheapest organic nuts and seeds. For instance, organic flax and chia seeds are often much more affordable than organic pine nuts.

- Purchase whatever organic produce happens to be on sale. (Doing this has the benefit of getting you to try new foods.)

- Buy wild-caught canned fish, such as salmon, instead of fresh fish.

- Sign up for a produce-delivery service that sells misshapen foods that otherwise would go to waste, such as Oddbox, from £11.99, or Abel & Cole's All British Veg Box, £16.50, which is organic and seasonal.

- Replace meat and fish with cheaper, plant-based proteins, such as beans and lentils, for some meals.

- Talk to sellers at farmers markets to get the best deals. Farmers will often reduce the price of items they have in excess. WH

15

Walking for at least 15 minutes after meals can reduce the glucose impact of your meal by up to 30%

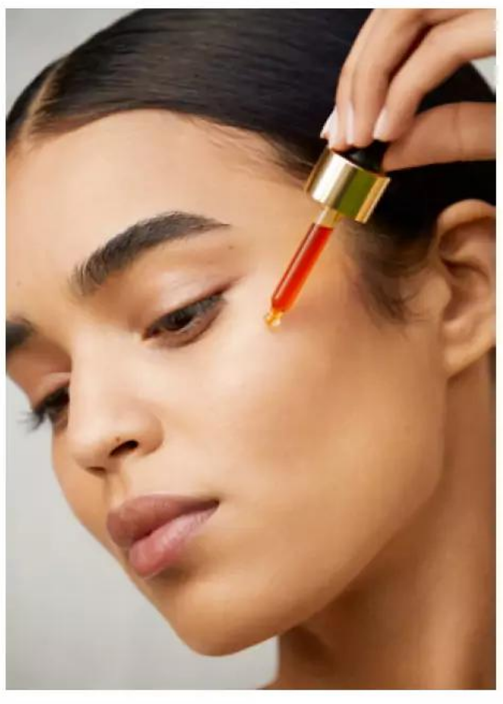
The ancient art of natural beauty

Kama Ayurveda skincare combines traditional Indian philosophies with modern-day medical innovation. The result? Inner radiance that shines through to the outside

Originating in India more than 5,000 years ago, Ayurvedic beauty is tightly intertwined with the holistic medicinal practice of Ayurveda (in Sanskrit, 'ayur' means 'life' and 'veda' means 'wisdom'). It teaches the importance of daily practices that bring balance to the mind, body and soul, such as nutrition, exercise and meditation, along with the use of essential herbs and oils.

THE BEAUTY PRINCIPLES

Ayurvedic beauty goes beyond surface level, taking a holistic deep dive, to look at everything from diet and movement to stress levels and emotional resilience when addressing skin and hair concerns.



Beauty brand Kama Ayurveda is rooted in these centuries-old traditions, and is passionate about bringing the power of Ayurvedic practices to the masses – allowing us all a moment of restorative calm and self-care amid the bustle of our hectic lives. Ready for your own Ayurvedic journey? Here's where to start.

THE WONDER ELIXIRS

Kama Ayurveda's bestselling Kumkumadi collection combines science with powerful plant-based ingredients in everything from a rich, youth-boosting Night Balm to an illuminating Silky Serum. The hero of the range is its Revitalising Facial Oil, which has been formulated and produced in line with a 1,500-year-old ancestral recipe. It's brimming with saffron (the world's most valuable spice) from more than 600 flowers. It's rich in vitamins A, B and C, which work together to help reverse visible signs of ageing such as dark spots and uneven tone, and boost collagen and elastin, helping skin to look brighter and more radiant. Just three drops is all you need for an instant glow.

Kumkumadi Revitalising Facial Oil, £124

THE NEW-AGE TECHNOLOGY

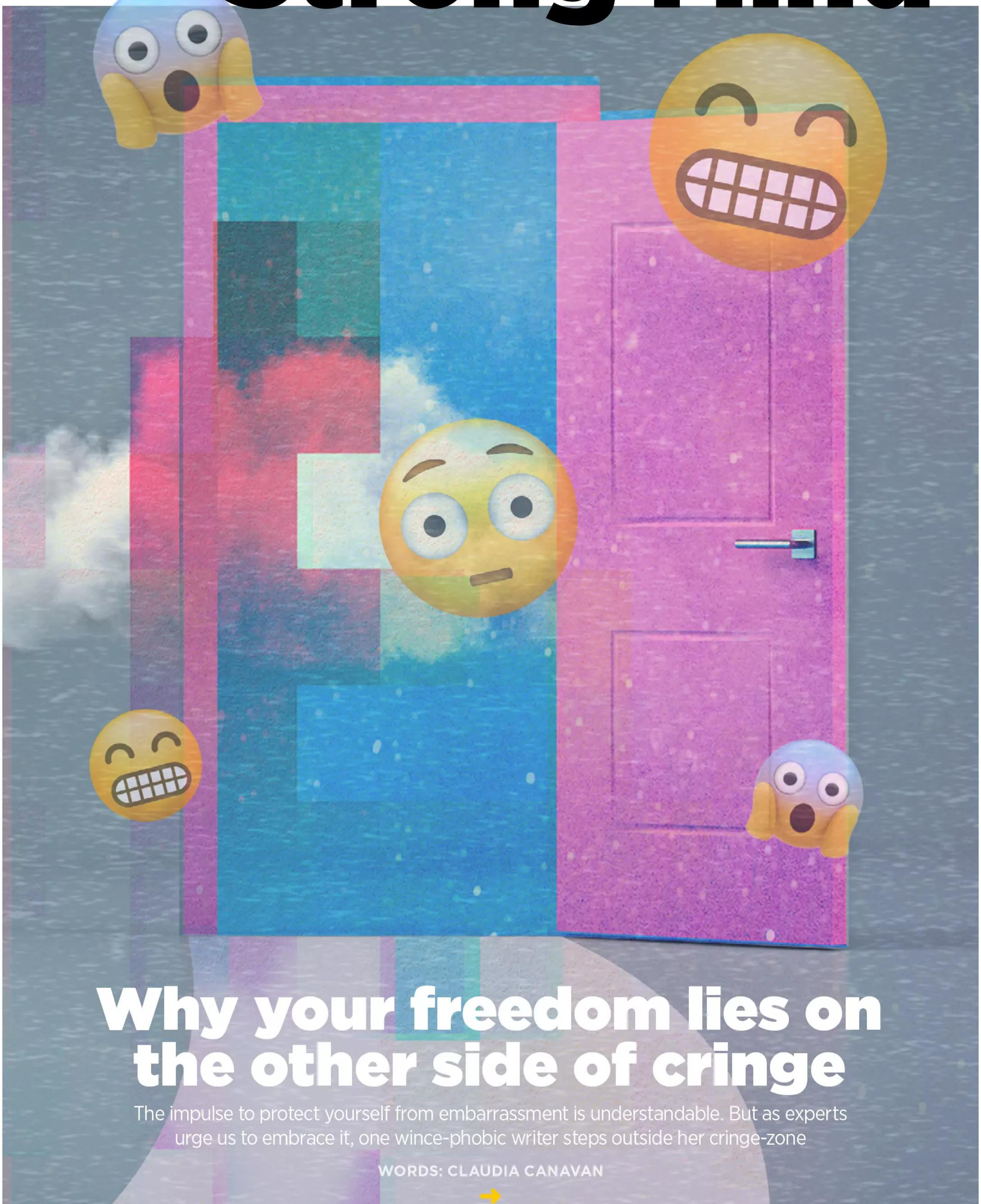
Ayurveda attributes each person with a dominant 'dosha' (energy pattern) – Vata, Pitta or Kapha – based on how their mind works and physical attributes such as skin sensitivities.

Seamlessly blending this ancient concept with the modern world, Kama Ayurveda's genius new AI skin scan tool makes it easy to get personalised Ayurvedic wisdom with just a few lifestyle questions and a quick face scan. The clever technology, available on Kama Ayurveda's website, then reveals your dosha, and provides tailored advice on everything from your perfect Ayurvedic skincare routine to lifestyle recommendations such as specific yoga stretches or dietary updates.

THE NEXT MOVE

Try Kama Ayurveda's AI skin scan tool for yourself online, or head to one of the brand's two London stores, which you'll find on Westbourne Grove and the fifth floor of Harrods, for guidance from its team of expert practitioners. **Discover Kama Ayurveda's AI tool by scanning below**

WORDS: VICTORIA JOWETT



Why your freedom lies on the other side of cringe

The impulse to protect yourself from embarrassment is understandable. But as experts urge us to embrace it, one wince-phobic writer steps outside her cringe-zone

WORDS: CLAUDIA CANAVAN

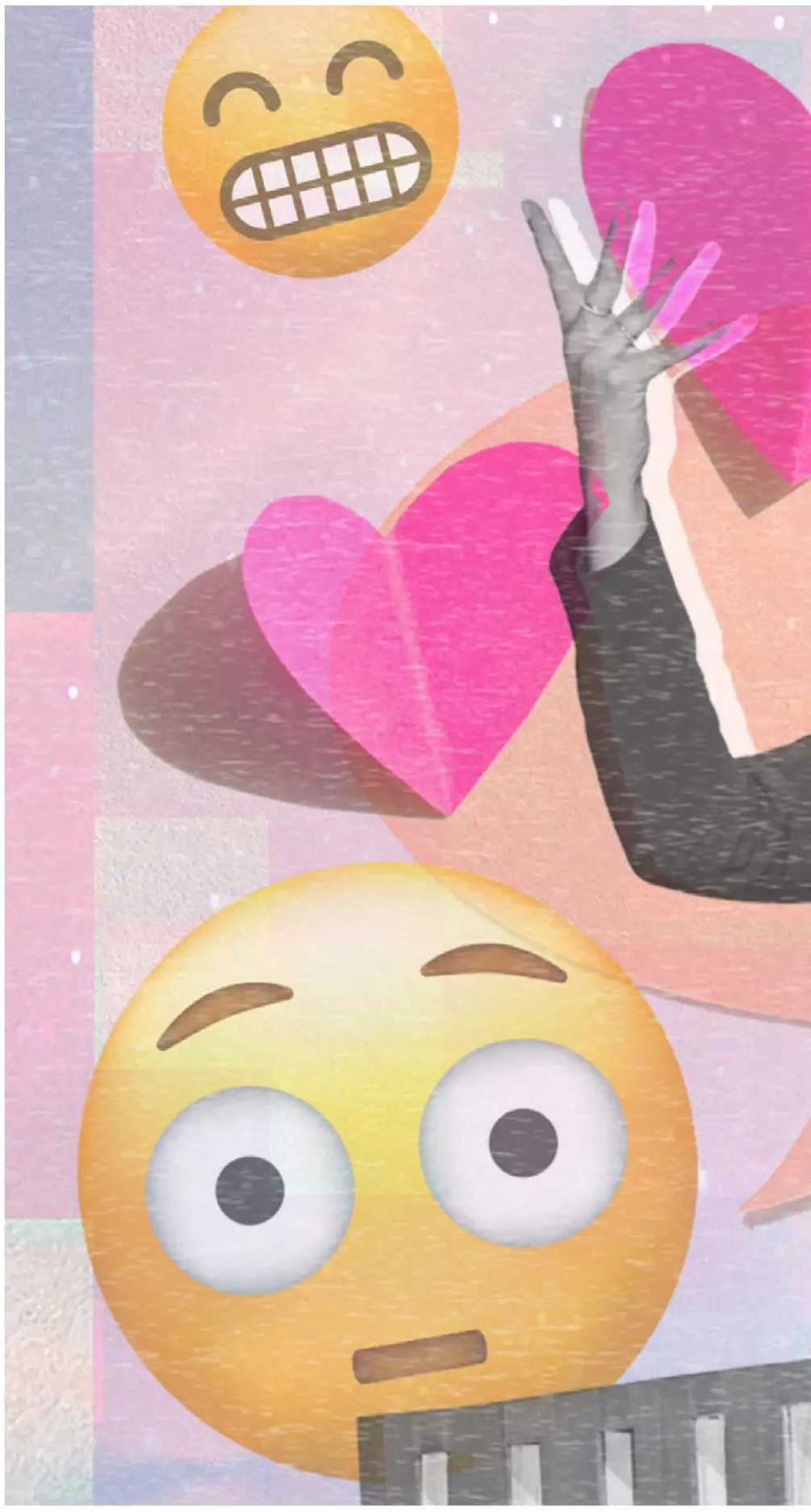
It was a video of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez that caused me to consider my relationship with cringe. In the clip, which I tripped over one mundane Wednesday afternoon while scrolling X, the US politician – famed for her progressive views on healthcare, prison and climate – launches herself on to a podium at a rally with the sort of energy I'd typically associate with unadvisable levels of amphetamine use. From the speakers, rapper Cardi B's 'Enough' crunches like a bike chain powering you up a steep hill. AOC throws her body around with both hands in the air before standing behind the lectern to greet the ecstatic crowd and shouting into the mic.

Watching it made me feel weird, as nasty parts of my psyche collided with one another. There was incredulity that someone could do something so heavy with potential for embarrassment, with just a dab of latent bitchy schoolgirl judgment ('she's full of herself'). Soon, the fuzz of envy hiding beneath it came into sharper focus; envy at AOC's self-assurance, oceans away from my own comparatively fragile confidence; envy at the adulation, since this behaviour would never fly in the UK (even if the Lib Dems' recent election success, in which party leader Ed Davey made cringe his campaign strategy, suggests we might be growing more amenable); envy that she felt free to act as she pleased, knowing she'd get eviscerated in certain quarters. I scrolled past it, moved on – but a question started grinding through my mind, one that hasn't let up since. Is the fear of being cringe holding me back?

Cringe!

You know you find something cringe because you move your body in specific, involuntary ways. Not the paralysis that arrests your muscles when you mistake a fox for a predatory man in an unlit alley. Rather, it's a series of contractions: hands over eyes; knees bending in; eyes squeezing shut. To cringe is to make yourself smaller. '"Cringe" can be used to describe feelings of intense embarrassment for oneself or others or, more intensely, shame,' says health psychologist Sula Windgassen. 'In the brain, it's underpinned by structures that process social and aversive experiences, which are hardwired to make you withdraw from a situation.' *Hardwired*. It's the reason it can feel nigh on impossible to do something you see as embarrassing. 'You may feel paralysis because you're fighting against your brain's natural processing.'

The British don't have a monopoly on cringe, of course, but it feels like we experience it acutely – a deeply felt cultural terror of being perceived as conceited or gauche. 'Your brain learns from experiences and social norms, so this informs what's encoded as "non-cringe" and acceptable,' Dr Windgassen continues. 'From childhood, your brain is constantly trying to work out what makes you acceptable. Historically, Brits favoured a "stiff upper lip" and valued humility and politeness. So, in this country, there's a lot of information that you shouldn't be "too out there".'



Can you get over yourself?

And yet, there's a case for embracing cringe. Years before the internet delivered us the cringe-free cow meme, Melissa Dahl was crafting a compelling argument that personal liberation lies on the other side of cringe-aversion via her book *Cringeworthy* (£10.99, Bantam Press). When we chat via Zoom, she likens cringe zones to comfort zones. 'You have to keep in mind what you want for your life and realise that you're probably going to have to get a little

uncomfortable to get it,' she tells me, before offering up an example. 'I got laid off in January – and there's a tendency when something kind of shameful happens to hide away, but that's not a useful thing to do. I ended up sharing on LinkedIn, very honestly, what had happened and the sort of work I was looking for. The post went semi-viral, got over 100,000 views and led to a tonne of offers for work. I was sweating as I typed it out, thinking, "This is so embarrassing." But I'm so glad I did.'

Play it cool

The deeper I delve into the cringe-hole, the more I begin to understand what fuels my own – and what catalyses your own cringe can, in turn, catalyse change. So says Isabel Unraveled. The Toronto-based transformational coach and writer – who goes by a stage name – teaches a six-week virtual course to help people overcome their cringe-aversion. She views the feeling as a personal growth steroid. 'We often cringe at other people doing something we would be scared to do ourselves.' This can be instructive. 'I think it relates to [influential Swiss psychotherapist] Carl Jung's concept of the shadow,' she adds, referring to the idea that we all have qualities that are like the underbelly of our personality. 'We tend to cringe at qualities or actions that others express that we're trying to disown within ourselves.'

For one expert, cringe is a personal growth steroid

But whether the part of your personality you're attempting to suppress is being demonstrative with a romantic partner (read: soppy) or being content to sit in silence, rather than feeling the need to drum up conversation, it's never fully possible – at least according to Jung's theory, which advocates integrating your shadows. 'Say you cringe at someone sharing their feelings on the internet. The judgment is an opportunity to look inwards and see where that's coming from for you, because there might be a desire there – to be more open about your feelings yourself – that you're pretending doesn't exist.'

Of course, it isn't just the fear of being perceived as cringe that can →

cause you to overthink how much of yourself you share, but the desire to be that other 'c' word. 'There's an implicit sense that a "cool girl" isn't easily moved, emotional or outspoken about her feelings,' says Emma Svanberg, clinical psychologist and author of *Parenting For Humans* (£16.99, Vermilion). For women especially, she says, to be cool is often to be effortless, unflappable, reserved. Kate Moss's tight-lipped media policy and 'I've been up all night but still look hot' aesthetic comes to mind. This drive, adds Dr Svanberg, is about being part of an in-group. 'This brings us a feeling of safety. The fear is that if we aren't in that group – if we are outed as not only not cool but, actually, cringe – then we might be rejected. For humans, who are highly social creatures, that is a scary place to be.'

actively trying to be perceived as cool, the net result is the same: you're putting on a performance – and doing so has consequences for your wellbeing. 'Anything that leaves you feeling that you might receive negative judgment can impact how authentically you act and how open you are about your thoughts and feelings,' adds Dr Svanberg. And when you become used to behaving in this way – be it online or with your friends – it can become a vicious cycle. 'The more we care about others' perceptions, the more anxious we might feel about being judged negatively.'

Born to perform

For Anna Krystyna, a 39-year-old coach, raised in the north, living in Lisbon (@iamannakrystyna), performing her personality in her school years had repercussions well

'Your judgment is a chance to look inwards'

It's a sensation 32-year-old London-based Darcy Jones*, who works in social media, relates to. 'I find being open about romantic feelings *deeply* cringe,' she tells me. 'I think it's partly why I spent my twenties single – I once downloaded [dating app] Hinge, but deleted it after two weeks, because I couldn't bear the idea of "liking" someone's profile and them knowing I might be interested.' When, in her thirties, she found herself in a relationship with a friend of a friend, she asked a sibling to tell her parents. 'I found the idea of saying "I've got a boyfriend" so cringe.' The fear shows up in her social life, too. 'I would love nothing more than to sign up for a dance class, but the thought of going and my friends knowing gives me such cringe. I can't be arsed with people taking the piss.' She chalks it up to 'a vicious combination of being hyper conscious of what people think of me, but also being extremely aware of other people and their emotions. In a way, I think it's empathy gone wrong?'

Thing is, whether you're trying to avoid being perceived as cringe or

into adulthood. 'I was an outsider at school and spent a lot of time observing and trying to follow the crowd, rather than being myself,' she recalls. 'Then through my twenties, I continued to follow the flock and went with a conventional career path as a fashion buyer in London.' It was a period of leaning into self-development that caused her to quit and try her new career. Only, doing so involved speaking about herself – and her points of difference – publicly.

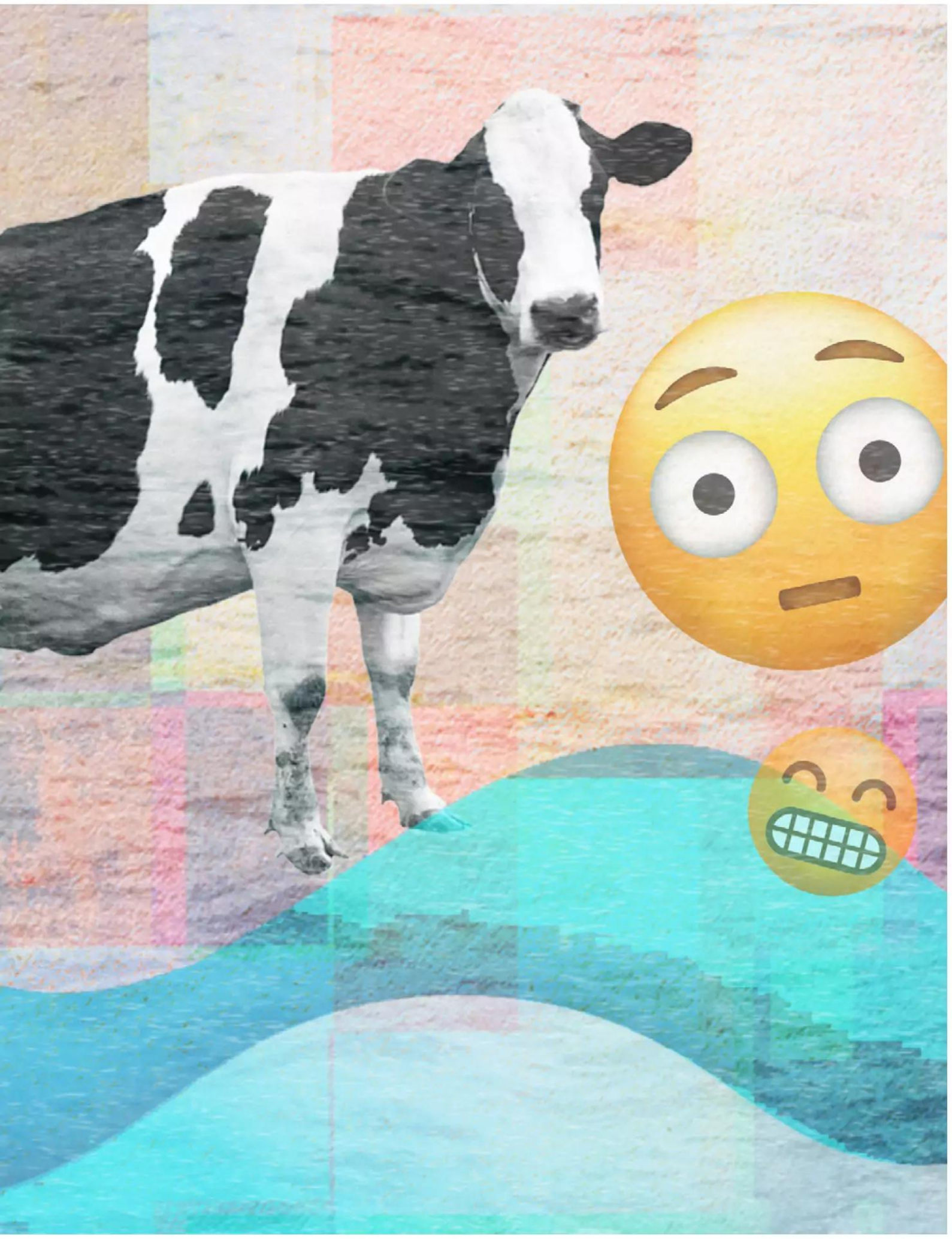
'People want to know the story behind a business, so I knew I had to be open. But most women my age are married with children and the idea of making myself visibly different on social media made me cringe. I worried people would think: "What's wrong with her? Why does no one want her?"' Anna overcame her cringe aversion through what she describes as an 'edging' process, taking baby steps towards her goal. 'I'd mention that I'm single in a post on Instagram, but be quite reserved about it. Eventually, I built up the confidence to be loud about it,

Cringing is a hardwired reaction

explicitly celebrating my single status in captions.'

Release me

Speaking to her gives me a shot of invigoration. My base relationship with cringe is fairly healthy; I chant borderline mortifying slogans about people being united at protests and really mean them, I rarely filter my opinions and I don't believe in keeping praise inside my head (no great-smelling stranger is safe). Sharing my feelings publicly is harder, though. I'll cower behind a shield of sarcasm when a moment asks for emotional honesty and I would have signed up to an Ironman before writing personal vows for my wedding.



I decide to try and shift this, starting by posting some recent work to Instagram with a caption that, while genuine, makes me cringe *deeply*. My left eye squeezed shut, I hit 'share' – I have a few moments of internal shuddering as I imagine people I know in real life thinking I'm pathetic and behaving like an Oscar-winner rather than a magazine journalist who likes what she wrote and is grateful for her profession. And, yet, I emerge on the other side largely unscathed. It feels good, sort of like I've unshackled from a silly rule that I didn't fully realise I was playing by – and leaves me wondering what else I could try.

Since I survived cringing myself out, I've started to think of cringe as a defence mechanism that's a little like the kind used by the hermit crab (stay with me). The crustacean protects its delicate exoskeleton by finding the shell of another animal and carrying it around on its back, contracting inside of it when danger arises. Trying to avoid the discomfort of cringe is defence armour that doesn't necessarily belong to us; we find and borrow it as a way to stay safe. The difference is, when they outgrow a shell, hermit crabs slip out and find a new one, something that fits for who they are now. Perhaps with the prospect of a more expansive, authentic life in front of us – one inspired by a surrendering of the last f**k you had to give, AOC-style – we might try and do the same. WH

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES. *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

Feel the *cringe* and do it anyway

The experts share their strategies for leaning into the emotion

Seek out cringe-fluencers

That politician you admire, the musician you love. 'Those people might be "cool" now, but they had to transcend stuff that would make most people flinch to get to the point they're currently at, be that going to auditions or asking for things and being rejected,' says transformation coach Isabel Unraveled, who suggests seeking out role models for being cringe.

Know your wince triggers

'Figure out what cringe means to you and what you're afraid of,' suggests Dr Svanberg. Is it rejection? Is it embarrassment, which might *lead* to rejection? Next, find the space between how you feel inside and the non-cringey persona you're performing. 'If those things are distant, ask yourself what that's costing you.' (A lack of genuine connection might be one thing.)

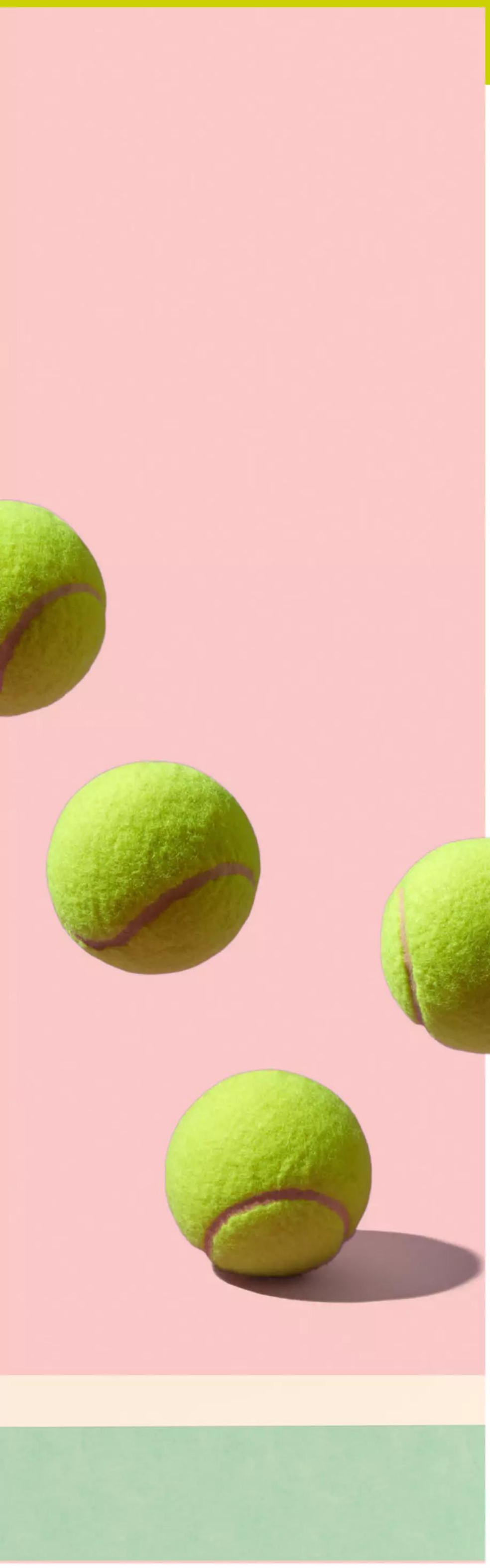
Embrace edging

Not bringing yourself to climax but showing up as yourself. 'Slowly, with self-compassion, bring a bit more of your authentic, cringey self into the outside world,' adds Dr Svanberg, with the warning that this feels hard because it is. 'If you don't feel you have people around you who'll support that or, worse, might tease or ostracise you, this can feel scary. So it's also worth thinking about who you can be most cringe-y with and spend time being your authentic self with them.'

The soft power of

From Simone Biles to Emma Raducanu, the sporting world loves an athlete who persists. So when life leaves you at a loss, here's how to use the same rules of engagement to stage a comeback of your own

WORDS: LINDSAY GELLER



bouncing back

Few things feel better than winning. Perhaps it's finally getting that hard-won promotion over the finish line, or buzzing from the virtual plaudits beamed from your Oura ring after nailing your sleep stats. Maybe it's rediscovering an old pair of Levi's after a wardrobe clear-out, or arriving early to meet a friend for the coffee date you're always late for. But as we bask in the glory of when things go right, it's easy to forget that life is strewn with numerous hurdles to be overcome – and it's in those moments, when we're down on our luck, that we can train ourselves in the art of the bounce back.

'We are all in need of one at some point,' says Richard Cowden, a social-personality psychologist who's the psychology research associate on the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science. Plus, experiencing a setback can unlock hidden strengths. 'We need adversity in our lives to grow and to reach our full potential,' he explains. Nowhere has this been better demonstrated than in the sporting sphere, where dusting yourself off is all part of the natural order.

It's why, as evidenced by both the Olympics and Paralympics over the course of the summer, we're gripped when we see mental resilience on display.

Indeed, for elite athletes, the comeback is an important – even necessary – skill to get to the top of their game. But everyone can benefit from developing the ability 'to recognise your own mistakes and use obstacles as a learning opportunity', says Jeannine Ohlert, a sport psychologist and researcher in the department of health and social psychology at German Sport University Cologne.

It's easy to root for an underdog from the comfort of your sofa, but when your own 'clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose' approach doesn't pan out, how can you channel the resilience of great athletes to overcome your own setbacks? Turns out there are some tried-and-tested techniques to nailing it – and they won't just help you navigate no-win situations but improve your overall life, too.

Gold standard

There's a reason the phrase 'keep your eyes on the prize' is a pep talk favourite of coaches from the local league to the Premier League. When you experience a big setback in life, you feel lost, explains Cowden, because you no longer know your purpose. 'The best way to ground yourself and set a firm foundation for moving forwards is to construct a purpose that is self-transcendent,' he says.

Translation: your purpose should be personally fulfilling →

but also align with a larger goal of serving others. Whether you want to run a charity race after healing from an injury or share a previously shelved passion project, that purpose is your 'prize'.

Goal keeper

The best defence is a good offence, and that's where goal setting comes into play. This is the first and most important step in making a comeback, because you need a clear, realistic goal to guide your motivation, says Ohlert. Got one? Then envision yourself as a mountain climber next, with your aim at the peak – you can even draw it on a piece of paper.

Think about it: you wouldn't start climbing a mountain with just the *hope* of eventually making it to the top. First, you'd set up your base camp at the bottom, then chart a course with resting points at regular intervals along the way. To apply that mountaineer mindset here, you'll also want to identify a sub-goal that's halfway up the summit. Then figure out the little steps required to get from the bottom of the mountain to the midway point, says Ohlert. Do the same for the second half of the hike.

Although this analogy may make your endeavour seem daunting, it'll encourage you to break down your comeback into smaller, more manageable goals. Perhaps each step takes the form of a daily task, so you can track your progress weekly, as you would on a training schedule – just like something you'd implement if you were coming back from a sports injury. This approach gives you more control because it's easier to stay on track when you know each small move to make, explains Ohlert.

On track

Next step in the comeback playbook? Calling it what it is. Because being honest and hopeful about your stumble can help you bounce back. 'We can recognise that what we're dealing with is challenging but also shift our attention,' says Cowden. 'We can focus our minds on the possibility of something good coming from this experience.' The result: obstacles become opportunities – to learn, to grow or to pursue something new.

Take a job loss, for example. You may be gutted at first, but can you focus on what you might gain – a new position that's better suited to your personal goals, or the chance to change careers entirely – rather than what you've lost? 'This is where it connects to holding on to hope,' says Cowden. 'We are anticipating the chance of a good outcome, even though we're facing this uphill battle.'

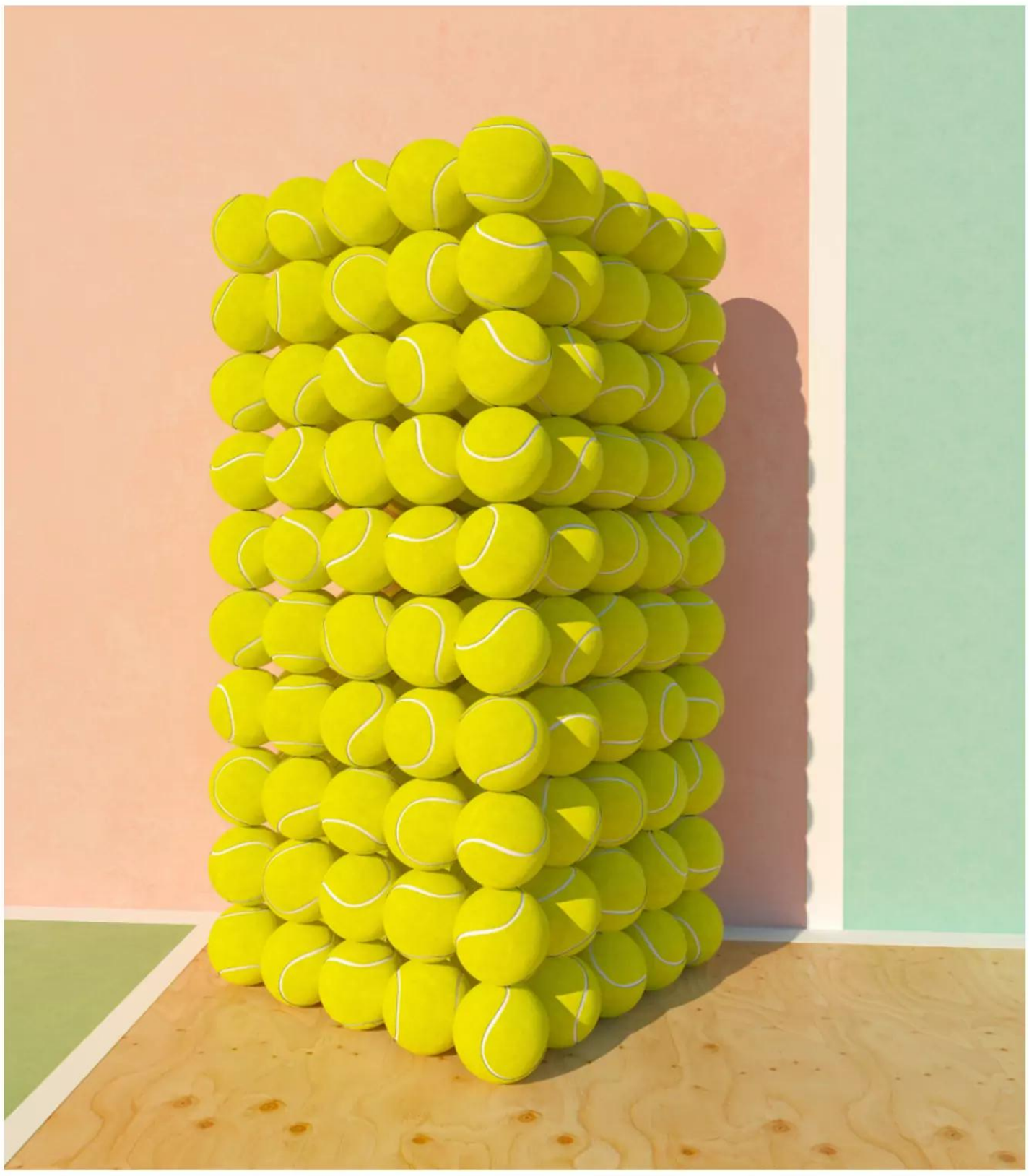
A positive perspective shift can also help you overcome smaller everyday setbacks. For example, forgetting about the brownies you promised to make for the school bake sale because you didn't write down the date. If you can have a positive attitude towards making mistakes, meaning you see them as tools that help you progress, it's easier to accept fault and then focus on what you can do better next time, says Ohlert.

Play back

After a team or athlete loses a game, they often have to make a concerted effort to work through self-doubt. Otherwise, they get stuck in a thought loop about losing, which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To stop the spiral, Ohlert uses a three-step approach in post-match debriefs with athletes to assess performance and plan for the next game. First, the athlete reflects on what they learned from the loss.

People who practise resilience approach obstacles with curiosity rather than fear of failure



Next, they consider how to avoid making those mistakes again. Then they think about which strategies still worked and how their game has improved over time.

When an athlete is reviewing a lost game, it's important to end on a positive note by naming any elements they can use to boost their self-esteem, says Ohlert, such as a good pass or a quick-thinking block. This technique helps close the chapter on the last competition so they can focus on the future, she adds. While you may want to avoid thinking about your own setbacks, taking stock of what went wrong – and what went right – can be a necessary step to move forwards.

Team work

As well as taking time to reflect on what led to a current loss, 'it can be helpful to look back into the past and ask, "When have I come back previously? What did that look like?",' says Cowden. It won't only show you past paths to success; it'll highlight who helped you get through difficult situations. 'The comeback doesn't need to be done alone or in isolation,' says Cowden.

In fact, it shouldn't be. The important people in your life – your family, friends, even a therapist – play a crucial role in helping you get back on your feet, he explains. Whether they offer support or simply a different perspective, having people in your corner with whom you can be vulnerable about what you're up against is extremely helpful.

Extra time

Athletes may have a single focus and determination within their sport, but they have many possible

Your mental strength cheat sheet

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK
In the world of sports psychology, mental toughness is generally considered the ability to continue striving to perform well even when faced with challenges. It's an important quality for athletes to possess, but anyone can increase their fortitude. To practise mental toughness, take actions that push you out of your comfort zone, or push yourself in little ways to grow your character, says Cowden.

RECOGNISE ITS LIMITATIONS
'The term is actually kind of paradoxical because there's a softness to it,' says Cowden. If you find yourself against a metaphorical brick wall, mental toughness doesn't mean telling yourself you're strong enough to bash your head against it in an attempt to bring it down. Instead, mental toughness may be taking a step back, assessing the wall's strong and weak points and finding a different way around or asking for help in climbing over this obstacle.

KNOW WHEN TO WALK AWAY
'There's something really important about saying no sometimes,' says Bicknell. 'It's better to pause and find a different way around than put ourselves in those career- or life-compromising situations just to achieve a goal.' So, when the going gets tough, sometimes the mentally tough *do* just go home – to rest up and come back another day.

pathways to achieve it – and that's how you practise resilience, says Kath Bicknell, an expertise researcher in the fields of cognitive science, performance studies and anthropology based in Newcastle, Australia. When one strategy fails, they implement another. Whether in sports or in life, success isn't purely the result of non-stop training; it's also necessary to refuel with proper nutrition, rest and self-care.

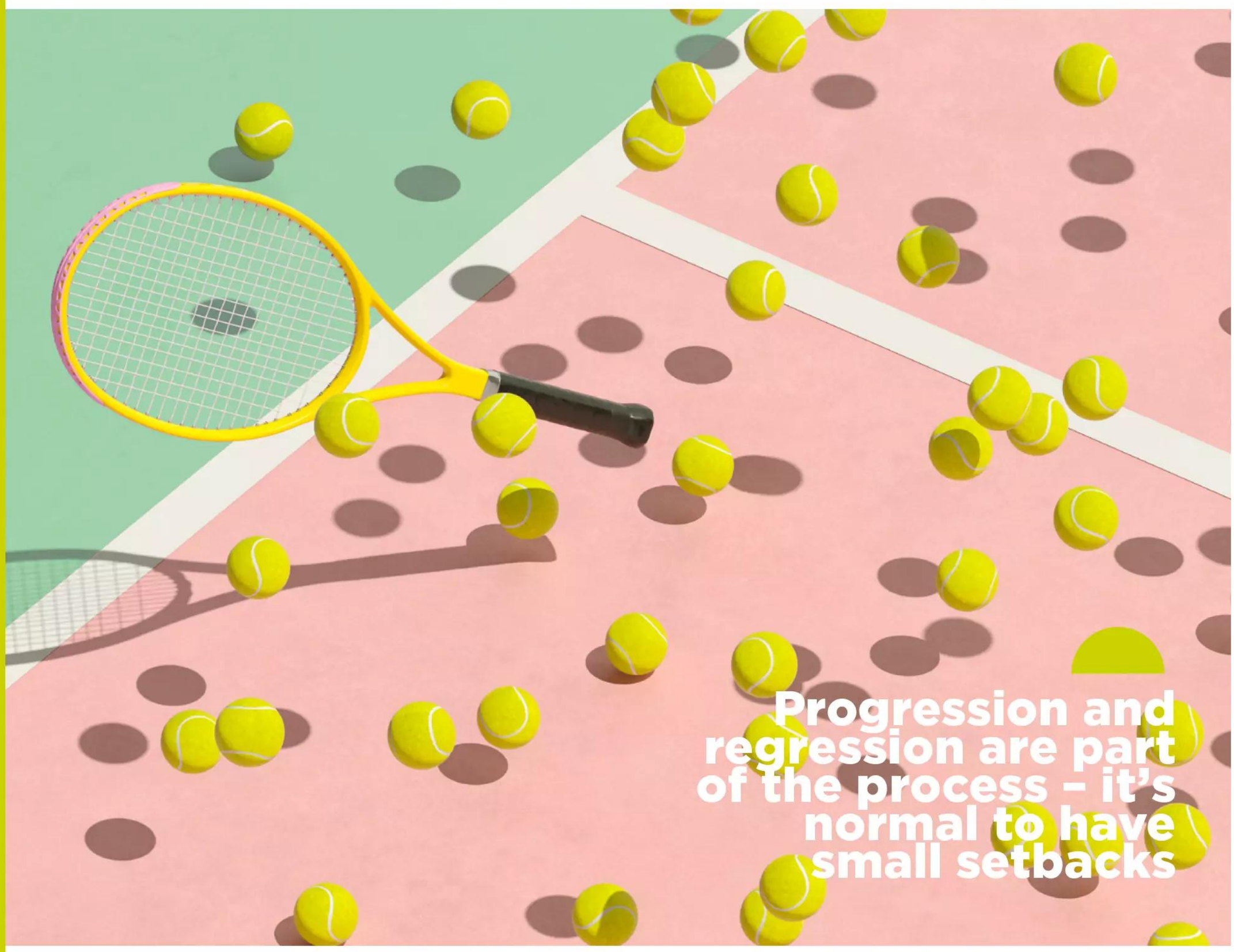
'You need physical recovery, but you also need mental recovery,' explains Bicknell. 'You need that holistic approach, or you'll burn out.' In her research, Bicknell and her team found that elite cricketers who were 'completely absorbed' in their sport were less consistent over time than those who had a life outside it – filled with friends, family and hobbies. The same holistic approach will also help you weather life's setbacks. When you're going through a break-up, for example, spending some time with friends and on hobbies 'helps you regain a sense of who you are' more quickly than if your life revolved around your relationship, says Bicknell. There's nothing wrong with dedication, but moderation matters more than you may think.

Good loser

False starts happen off the track, too. When you're learning a new skill, or trying to improve an old one, success is not linear. 'You don't just start here and keep improving for ever,' explains Bicknell. 'There are ups and downs and lefts and rights – it's a bit of a mess.' Recognise that progression and regression are part of the process – in fact, it's totally normal to encounter small setbacks. That's why you set all those mini-goals along your mountain – those handholds and footholds will steady you when you stumble.

'Focus on the process rather than just on the outcome,' says Bicknell. In fact, research shows that when professional cyclists focus solely on winning a race, some start to protect themselves from crashing and limit their speed, leading to loss of position. But when they focus on riding through each corner and obstacle on the mountain-biking path, staying present in the process, they are more likely to do what's necessary to win.

It's a worthwhile reminder that external motivators, such as winning for winning's sake, are no match for the ones that come from you, like doing the best you can. WH



Progression and regression are part of the process – it's normal to have small setbacks

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After breast cancer, I had to reclaim my body – and my marriage

When life-saving treatment tipped a mother-of-two into early menopause, it affected every area of her life – including her physical relationship with her husband. This Breast Cancer Awareness Month, she reveals how they found their way back to each other

Anna Sullivan, 44, is a mental health therapist, author and co-host of the podcast *Healing + Dealing*

In October 2017, I felt a small, hard mass above my right breast. I assumed it was a clogged milk duct from breastfeeding my 18-month-old son, Freddie. I tried hot showers and cold packs, but it didn't go away. And while I wasn't too concerned, I made a mental note to call my doctor. Just in case.

A few weeks later, on Halloween, I met with my doctor to review the results of my mammogram and biopsy. 'You have breast cancer,' she informed me. 'But you caught it early and it's treatable.' After the appointment, I sat in my car and cried. Then I called my husband, Alex. 'Just come home,' he said, softly. 'We'll figure it out.'

My breast cancer diagnosis ended up being early onset and oestrogen receptor positive (ER+), meaning I wouldn't need chemotherapy. After discussions with my oncologist and with women I met through a survivor network, I chose to have a unilateral mastectomy with reconstruction surgery, rather than a lumpectomy with radiotherapy. Less than six weeks after my diagnosis, I said goodbye to the body I'd known – and the breasts that had nursed both my children.

My surgery was successful and after I healed, my oncologist prescribed an adjuvant regimen that consisted of a 10-year targeted hormone therapy to lower the risk of recurrence. He said these treatments would push me into early menopause. At the time, the idea of menopause seemed abstract. I didn't know what it meant or what to expect. I was just happy my cancer was treatable and that I'd be alive to take my kids trick-or-treating the following year.

In February 2018, I began my treatment. I was prescribed a daily oral medication to kill the oestrogen in my body and every three months I had an injection to shut down my ovaries. Within weeks, I went from a healthy 37-year-old mum to a post-menopausal wreck. My hair thinned and I experienced night sweats, mood swings, fatigue, decreased libido, muscle aches and hot flushes.

After six months, I started to adjust to my new reality and began to believe the worst was over. Still, I knew a huge part of getting 'back to normal' – whatever that meant – was being intimate with Alex again.

Over months of hospital stays and oncology appointments, our sex life had been on hold. It was like I'd gone into survival mode, and

I couldn't access the part of myself that felt desire. During this time, Alex never rushed me or made me feel as if I were broken, but I knew he missed me. I missed him, too.

The first time we tried to be intimate after I went on the hormone blockers, I felt nervous and excited. But the moment we tried to have intercourse, I felt a sharp pain in my pelvis. I shrieked and pushed him off me. 'Is it your scar?' he asked. 'No. It's my vagina?' I said. It came out like a question.

It would be nearly a year of trying and failing to be intimate with my husband before I understood: the pain was due to genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM). When I mustered up the courage to talk to a new oncologist about my vaginal symptoms – dryness, itching and extreme pain during intercourse – she said that up to 84% of post-menopausal women experience GSM.

'I couldn't access the part of myself that felt desire'

I'd never heard of it; if few people are talking about the health risks caused by early menopause, such as osteoporosis, cardiovascular disorders and dementia, there's even less attention given to the side effects of GSM. During menopause, oestrogen levels decrease drastically, affecting everything from sleep cycles to vaginal health. Because I'd gone through it sooner than usual, my levels had plummeted practically overnight. I was ashamed of my changing body, but my oncologist assured me there was nothing *wrong* with me.

Instead, she explained the treatment options for GSM. Given my (ER+) breast cancer diagnosis, I was hesitant to try hormone replacement therapy in the form of a low-dose vaginal oestrogen ring. While my doctor said it was safe, she recommended non-hormonal options as the first line of treatment.

Over the next few months, I tried a multitude of remedies, from homemade lubes to expensive lasers, and while some of them made me feel like I was doing *something,* they didn't fix my pain. So Alex and I put our sex life on hold again. And while my husband remained patient, it would be a lie to say the lack of intimacy didn't negatively impact our marriage.

Eventually, I confided in a friend, who recommended couples counselling. At first, Alex and I were reluctant to go. But after a while, we both looked forward to our weekly session, where we talked about everything from doing the dishes to date night →

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

(or lack thereof). In counselling, we committed to spending time together, just us, once a week, be it a lunch, dinner or a hike.

Our therapist also recommended a 'five-minute exercise' where we'd detail how we felt and what we needed from the other person. We often forgot to do the daily exercise, but whenever we did, we felt closer.

Cancer had a severe negative impact on the physical intimacy in our marriage. But it strengthened the emotional connection. I'd become so obsessed with fixing my body that I'd missed the real issue: I needed to remember who I was after the fear I was terminally ill had subsided. And I had to do that before I could reconnect with Alex. I had to remember who he was, too, and disentangle him from the role of nurse and receptacle of my feelings.

I've yet to find a non-hormonal remedy for my GSM, but I recently started pelvic floor therapy and hope it will help. If it doesn't, I'll try the oestrogen ring. For now, Alex and I are focused on building intimacy in other ways. For the first time, we've talked openly about our sexual preferences, and these conversations have strengthened our bond. Going through this together helped us understand how relationships ebb and flow.

Some nights Alex and I will trade back massages or send each other funny memes while lying in bed. We've learned intimacy can take the form of a shared glance or a homemade latte with a lopsided foam heart. The truth is, our bodies and our relationships will age, but real intimacy deepens with time.

In December, Alex and I will celebrate our 10th anniversary. We're not the same people we were when we recited our vows, but over the years, we've really *lived* them. I never could have predicted how the past decade would unfold. Now, I live with the acute awareness that everything can change in an instant.

The path to healing has many twists and turns; like a marriage. In the aftermath of my diagnosis, I've come to discern that true intimacy is measured by how we adjust to life's shifts together – how we remain each other's constant, no matter what else changes. WH

'Cancer strengthened the emotional connection I have with my husband'

Cancer and relationships: the expert view

Fe Robinson is a psychotherapist who often works with cancer patients, and she's a spokesperson for the UK Council for Psychotherapy

1. How can cancer affect couples?

Cancer brings unknowns and intense feelings, and disrupts the status quo. Practical, financial and familial difficulties all potentially need to be navigated as one person becomes the carer and the other is cared for. While this can bring people together, it can also cause caution and distance, which can affect romantic feelings.

2. How important is intimacy?

Intimacy is the capacity to be vulnerable – physically and emotionally – and the needs in every relationship are different. It's important for a couple to have open conversations about what intimacy means to them, including sex specifically, and to find common ground. What's desired and possible may change over time, but staying connected is crucial.

3. How can couples reconnect after a diagnosis?

Talking will help you maintain a sense of connection. It may not be possible to engage in previous patterns of sexual activity in the same way, and exploring your feelings about this with understanding of each other's perspectives is important. I encourage couples to be honest about what's happening and how you're both reacting.

Can you prescribe exercise for poor mental health?

As two studies make a convincing case for doctors to consider exercise as a legitimate intervention, we take a deep dive into the science to examine the possibilities – and pitfalls – of treating movement as medicine

WORDS: ELLE HUNT

‘Exercise gives you endorphins. Endorphins make you happy.’ With these iconic words, *Legally Blonde*’s Elle Woods proved herself to be prescient for reasons beyond donning head-to-toe pink two decades before Margot Robbie did. Because while the heart-healthy, bone-boosting benefits of exercising for your physical health have been well-established – and reported enthusiasticlly within these pages – it’s only relatively recently that researchers have drawn attention to its effects on mental health, and the results are similarly transformative.

Studies have consistently shown that movement can boost mood and self-esteem, improve sleep quality and energy, and turn down the volume of anxiety and stress. Even single ‘doses’ of low-impact movement, such as walking, can produce an improvement, while different types are thought to do different things (yoga is understood to be beneficial for those with anxiety). In recent years, evidence has been mounting to suggest that as well as improving your mental wellbeing in the moment, exercise can be preventative, too. And while anyone who’s known the depths of depression (*Women’s Health* editors included) may balk at the framing of movement-as-medicine, two convincing new studies are encouraging clinicians – and the rest of us – to take the notion seriously, is it time you started moving for your mind?

Working it out

Back to those studies, and the first, published in the *British Journal Of Sports Medicine* last year, found physical activity to be ‘highly beneficial’ for improving symptoms of depression, anxiety and psychological distress. Months later, another – this one published in *The British Medical Journal* in February – went one step further. Walking, jogging, yoga and strength training, the researchers found, could be just as effective for treating major depressive disorder as psychotherapy or antidepressants.

Exercise could be the miracle cure we’ve been looking for

‘Previous reviews showed exercise helps depression, but our review was big enough that we could figure out what exercise works and how much,’ says Michael Noetel, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Queensland and the study’s lead author. Some of his team’s findings were surprising, even to them; while they thought longer workouts would deliver more potent results, they didn’t find a difference between sweating it out for two hours or 20 minutes.

Dr Noetel’s findings were widely publicised as a potential breakthrough for depression. Despite the condition affecting an estimated 280 million people worldwide, only half of those based in high-income countries receive treatment. Exercise – being readily accessible and highly effective, with few to no side effects – could be the miracle cure we’ve been searching for. If we can find a way to unlock its benefits consistently. And it’s a big ‘if’. Because while the science is increasingly persuasive about movement as an intervention for depression, we still don’t know *how* it works. Dr Noetel’s study didn’t reveal causal mechanisms, and previous research suggests there are multiple at play. Was it the run that turned your mood around, or the fact that you did it in nature? Was it throwing a ball on the netball court that calmed your cortisol – or doing so with friends?

Like and prescribe

And yet, those watching this space may not be watching for long. Jonathan Roiser is a professor of neuroscience and mental health at University College London. He’s currently leading a large clinical trial into the link between depression and physical activity, which he hopes will result in more conclusive findings than the research we have right now. The study, backed by the Wellcome Trust, will compare the effects of aerobic exercise on adults with depression, with those of gentle yoga and stretching. ‘The questions we are trying to answer are “How does it work?” and “For whom does it work?”’ They’re big questions – with answers that could pave the way for a proposed ‘prescription’ of exercise for mental health.

Much like the kind that involves a pill packet, there won’t be a blanket approach. ‘It’s actually very difficult to predict, just on the basis of people’s symptom profiles, whether a particular treatment is going to be good for them or not,’

LIFT your mood
Feel less heavy
Take 3x a week

adds Professor Roiser. 'Some people take an antidepressant, and it's like a miracle drug, with a massive reduction in symptoms and hardly any side effects; others find it doesn't really work for them at all.' It's likely the same for exercise, he says. With his careful, controlled clinical trial, Professor Roiser is hoping to gain clarity not only on how different types of physical activity affect depression, but whether there are groups of people for whom it might be particularly useful.

His team's results might be pending, but he has a working hypothesis. A regular exercise regimen helps to build motivation and increase energy; it also works to reduce inflammation (prevalent in people with depression and other mood disorders), and improve the brain's transmission of dopamine. One of the most common symptoms of depression is negativity bias, where patients focus more on negative thoughts than positive ones, worsening their mood and exacerbating the condition. Professor Roiser proposes that exercise may help to break that cycle, gradually influencing the brain to register positive experiences and seek out more of them. Over time, he suggests, this alters psychological processing. And while it will be at least three years until his study yields 'a nice big set of data', early findings seem to support his theory.

Team buidling

Back to what we *do* know. And while there's already such a thing as a 'dose' of exercise, something is better than nothing. A 2018 study of more than a million US adults, published in *The Lancet Psychiatry*, found that people who did any form of exercise over the course of a month endured about one and a half fewer days of poor mental health than those who didn't. 'Even relatively light forms of exercise, or relatively low volumes, seem like they can be helpful,' says Adam Chekroud, who co-authored the study. Team sports recorded the greatest benefits, likely due to the added social element, but walking, cleaning and even gardening made a difference.

If there *is* a sweet spot, it sounds an awful lot like the NHS advice for exercising for physical health: 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise (you're getting sweaty but you can still hold a conversation) per week. But it's advice that comes with a caveat. Back to the *Lancet* study, and researchers also found that exercising more than five times a week was associated with worse mental health. 'These are people who are either exercising three hours at a time, or for 24 to 30 days a month,' adds Dr Chekroud, warning that at this kind of intensity and frequency, not only are you more likely to fall victim to issues

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; STUDIO 33; ADOBE STOCK

involving body image, but there's an added risk of causing physical harm, which can lead to mental harm.

Fit for purpose

We've said it before and we'll say it again: the best exercise routine is the one you enjoy – because it's the one you'll stick to. And whether you're exercising for physical health, mental health or both, consistency is key. 'Many people in our studies don't feel amazing immediately after the session,' says Professor Roiser. 'But these changes – to their inflammation levels, neurochemistry, interaction with the world – are taking a bit of time to kick in.' Of course, finding a form of movement you enjoy begins with meeting yourself where you are. Struggling with feelings of isolation? A cycling club or football team could be for you. And while the benefits of yoga might not be as pronounced as they are for more intense activity, if you know that you respond well to mindful movement and meditation, you might choose to prioritise it nonetheless.

It's exactly this sort of personalised advice that Professor Roiser and other researchers hope will be made possible by a better understanding of movement's impact on mental health. Though it's included in national guidelines for treating depression, it's rarely prescribed in practice – in part because of lingering stigma ('Doctors can feel like they're telling their patients to "run from their problems",' says Dr Noetel). More research such as the kind both researchers are doing could help clinicians and patients alike to take exercise seriously, reducing both the burden of mental illness and the demand on healthcare services. At a time when the NHS has been declared 'broken' by the new health secretary – with waiting lists at record lengths – it's both an intriguing intervention and a potentially transformative one. As Professor Roiser puts it, 'I think there's quite good potential to really improve, at a population level, the mental health profile of the country.'

Dr Noetel is more cautious. While his findings were promising, he stops short of seeing exercise as a silver bullet – nor as a potential replacement for antidepressants or talking therapy, each of which have their place in a treatment plan. People with severe depression can find it hard to get out of bed, he says, let alone do a workout; in such cases, medication may be necessary to help someone reach the point of being able to engage in other beneficial behaviours. Likewise, therapy more directly targets the negative thought patterns contributing to mood disorders. Dr Noetel's study also found that people with depression did better with a treatment plan that featured structure, oversight and support; in the context of exercise. When the cost of PT sessions can run into three figures, these things can be hard to come by.

> 'Medication and talking therapy have a place in a treatment plan'

Of course, prevention is better than cure – and even if you're not struggling right now, the science suggests (strongly) that making a habit of exercise now can only serve you well down the line. Masha Remskar, a behavioural scientist at the University of Bath, likens moving for your mind to something of a protective buffer. 'So when you do experience a hard time, you're better equipped to deal with it – on the physical side and the mental side,' she says. It could even delay that day. Remskar points to a 2019 Harvard study, which found that an average of 35 minutes of physical activity a day significantly reduced the odds of developing depression, even among those genetically predisposed to it. Compelling evidence, if ever we've heard it, to get fit for purpose. See tips on the right to find out how. WH

*SOURCES: *MEDICINE & SCIENCE IN SPORTS & EXERCISE; THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL THERAPY SCIENCE; TRANSLATIONAL PSYCHIATRY; THE BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL; MENTAL HEALTH AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY*

Moving for your mind

From bookending your workouts with meditation to mindfulness as motivation, this is what we know about exercising for mental health

01
Do what you can
For both mental and physical health, any movement is better than none. One study found that just five minutes of walking every 30 minutes reduced blood sugar spikes by almost 60%, by clearing glucose out of your bloodstream and using it as energy for your muscles, rather than storing it as fat*.

02
Raise your heart rate
Aerobic activity – jogging, swimming, cycling, walking – seems to produce the strongest benefits for mental health, by increasing blood circulation to your brain and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which regulates your limbic system, responsible for controlling motivation and mood*.

03
Trust the process
It can take months for the effects of exercise on mental health to kick in, but bookending workouts with meditation can help. Research shows that doing meditation immediately after aerobic exercise is more effective for reducing depressive and ruminative thought patterns than doing exercise alone*.

04
Seek support if you need it
While exercise may be as beneficial for depression as antidepressants and psychotherapy, it shouldn't be thought of as a replacement. People with moderate to severe mood disorders, in particular, may benefit from a mix of both*. Speak to your GP before starting or changing any course of treatment.

05
Give mindfulness a try
It may not raise the heart rate, but developing non-judgmental awareness of your thoughts and feelings has been shown to be effective for mental health. In a study by Remskar, combining any physical activity with mindfulness training was found to be effective for improving mental health and wellbeing*.

Score a stronger core

Wall Pilates provides extra stability for some moves and levels up the resistance for others – no mat needed

WORDS: ANDI BREITOWICH

If it feels as though everyone you know – IRL and on Instagram – is a Pilates girlie now, no, you're not imagining it: 74,000 people google the workout every month in the UK, and 117 new studios reportedly opened here between 2022 and 2023. And the Pilates reformer market, specifically, has grown significantly, according to another industry review.

It's almost poetic that Pilates has been around for almost a century and is now having a modern renaissance of sorts. Created by German trainer, writer and inventor Joseph Pilates in the early 1900s, the exercise method focuses on strengthening the core muscles, including those of the abdominals and back, as well as improving stability, posture, balance and flexibility, says Ariel Schwartz, a Pilates instructor and co-founder of The Workshop Pilates, which is based in Phoenix, Arizona.

One lesser-known but very cool variation of the traditional discipline is called wall Pilates and – yep – involves doing traditional exercises against a wall. Beginners will benefit from using the wall to help with stability, form and alignment (think: lying against the wall on your side for fire hydrants), while those who are more advanced can use the wall to level up moves such as hip bridges by placing their feet against a wall for added resistance, which is part of the benefit of a (typically inaccessible, expensive) reformer.

'Wall Pilates movements are based on [the ones] you would see in both the class repertoire created by Joseph Pilates and those you might typically see taught in a group mat or reformer Pilates class,' Schwartz explains, adding that many of the moves are also compound exercises, which work multiple muscle groups at the same time. So, let's limber up and give them a try, shall we?

Take it up a notch

Wall Pilates is low impact, so you can incorporate it into your daily routine if it's something you enjoy, says Schwartz. To continue to see strength and/or muscle-building results, she recommends adding additional resistance with weights, a Pilates ball or resistance bands to create a more dynamic, challenging and effective workout.

ADDITIONAL REPORTING: CAITLIN CARLSON. PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

5 moves for any level

01
Roll-up

Lie on your back with your arms overhead and feet against a wall. Nod your chin to your chest and slowly peel your spine off the floor as you roll up to a seated position, then reverse the movement to return to the start. Actively press your feet into the wall as you articulate through the spine to roll up, as this will help provide stability to the lower body and your abdominals will be more engaged, Schwartz says.

02
Side-lying hydrant

This exercise targets the glutes, hip abductors and obliques, Schwartz says. Lie on your side with your back against the wall, your knees bent and resting in front of you. Lift your top knee up, then slowly lower it back down. 'The wall provides tactile feedback by not allowing our hips to roll back as the leg lifts, which will keep the target muscles working,' she notes.

03
Glute bridge

Set up your bridge with your feet pressing into the wall at knee height to add resistance to the classic move. 'It's harder to stabilise the feet against the wall than on the floor, so the hamstrings and the glutes have to work harder to maintain the height of the hips at the top of the glute bridge,' Schwartz says. You'll also benefit from a larger range of motion.

04
Roll-down to press-up

This move is almost like a slowed-down burpee: stand with a wall behind you so you can feel where your body is in space. Then slowly roll down to a forward-fold position. Walk your hands out to a high plank, do a press-up, then reverse the move to return to the start. 'This can help to identify parts of the back where we may have more tightness,' Schwartz says.

05
Squat

Squatting with your back against the wall keeps you more upright as you aim to keep your chest lifted. Start with your feet more than hip-width apart and your toes slightly pointed out. This helps to better target the inner thighs and lower abdominals, in addition to the glutes and hamstrings, according to Schwartz. From there, lower yourself as far as is possible, then return to the beginning and repeat. WH

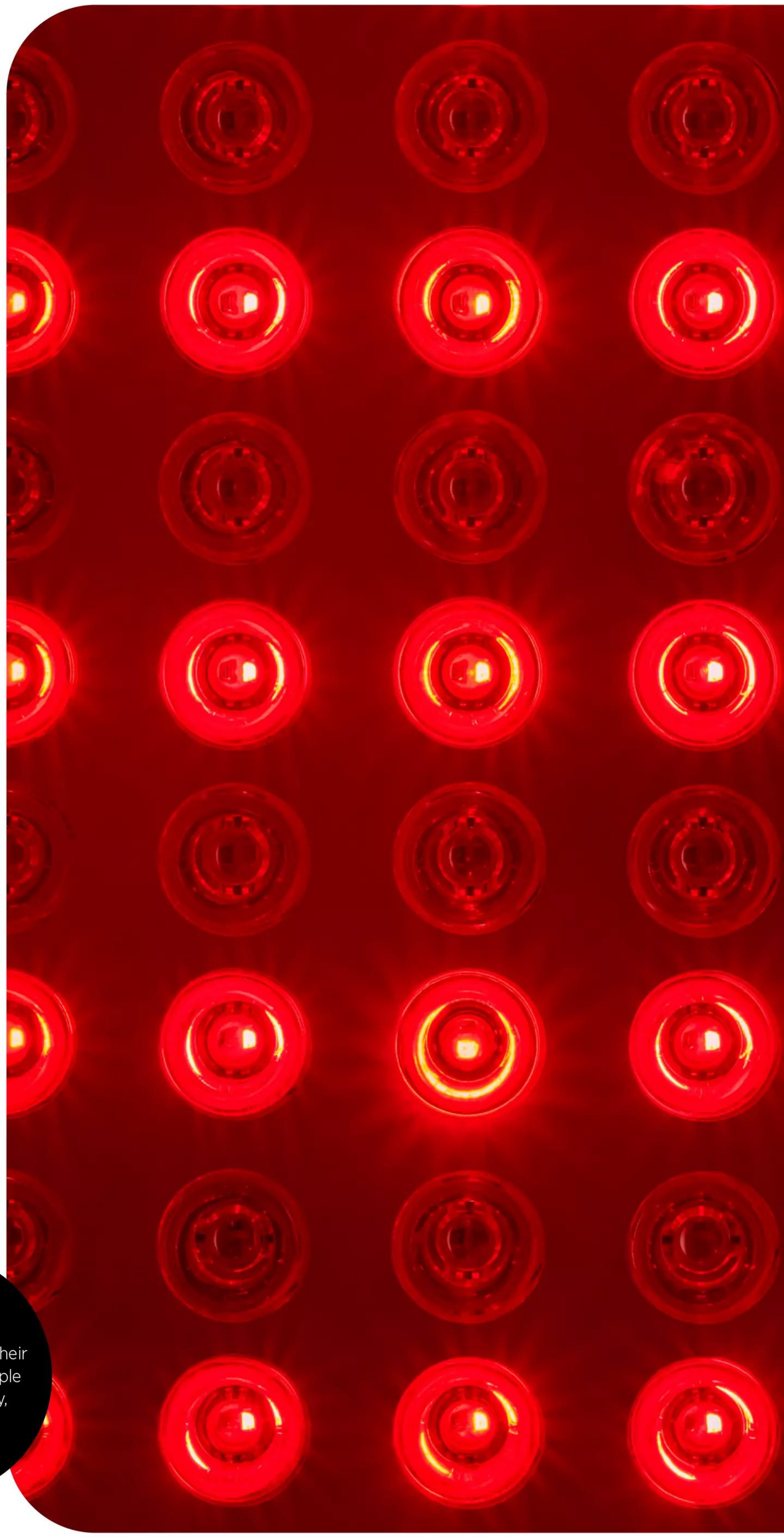
Red light therapy

From glowing skin to faster recovery times, the treatment is enjoying a moment in the sun. *WH* takes a closer look

WORDS: OLIVIA LUPPINO

You've seen the celebrities and influencers donning futuristic LED face masks to improve signs of ageing and acne. The technology that's behind it – red light therapy (RLT), which scientists say is a form of photobiomodulation, using low-level red and near-infrared light lasers – has potential perks that are more than skin deep. Elite athletes, for example, hop into specialised red-light beds to speed up recovery time. Doctors use it as a complementary treatment for patients with chronic and acute pain, and are hopeful it may help curb the amount of painkillers they prescribe post-op. Experts believe red light energises your cells and makes them function better. Just as plants convert light into energy, so can you, says physician Robert Bowen, a doctor who has been using the practice to treat patients for 20 years. Should you jump under the ruby-hued rays? Here's what the pros say....

Who shouldn't use RLT?
Pregnant women (in their abdominal area), people with photosensitivity, children and those with epilepsy



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

CLAIM
It levels up athletic performance and recovery

VERDICT
Just ask your fave athletes

▶ Not only can RLT potentially help you recover faster after a workout, but it may help prevent some muscle soreness in the first place. Researchers found that RLT decreases levels of an enzyme responsible for aches and muscle damage after a sweat sesh and prevents its activity at the outset.

This is why RLT beds can be found in professional sports training rooms. But even if you're not a pro, the energy red light provides to your cells should improve athletic performance overall, says Dr Bowen, who uses RLT for 15 minutes before and after he exercises. The method has also been found to decrease lactic acid and increase circulation, says Juanita Anders, a researcher at Uniformed Services University. (FYI, even the military is invested in RLT research because of its potential to help soldiers perform and recover better.)

Some studios, like Heartcore in London, offer exercise classes under a red light, but experts say you won't see many benefits as you're not getting close enough to the light – and it's best to sit still for it.

CLAIM
It heals inflammatory pain and swelling

VERDICT
True

▶ RLT has been found to change the expression of genes that lead to an inflammatory reaction, shifting them from a pro-inflammatory state to an anti-inflammatory one. It can also help regulate a reaction in either direction – turning up inflammation when needed or down if it's problematic. It addresses pain by speeding up the healing process instead of just masking it.

As long as the light can reach the target site effectively (think surface-level issues such as burns, rashes or cuts), RLT should help an inflammatory reaction. Hence why RLT first became popular in the skincare world. Skin is easy for light to reach. Deeper tissue pain such as arthritis is tougher to treat with a red light, but in a clinical setting, with a stronger laser, photobiomodulation should offer relief, says Soorena Khojasteh, director of pain medicine at Lankenau Medical Center in the US.

The treatment can also boost the rate of fluid removal along lymph vessels to decrease swelling – even treating lymphoedema in breast cancer patients. That said, it's unlikely to address swelling caused by kidney problems or congestive heart failure, says Dr Bowen.

CLAIM
You should start RLT today

VERDICT
Not so fast...

▶ Doctors and scientists are hopeful about how much RLT can achieve, from skincare and the athletic field to chronic pain management and even another possible frontier: the brain. Still, a lot of challenges remain. The biggest one is that unless you're receiving RLT from a doctor, it's hard to know if the device you're using is effective. There isn't a good way to determine whether a product is strong enough to work before you actually buy it. Luckily, the treatment itself isn't dangerous – meaning the biggest risk in purchasing one of these devices is to your wallet.

Overall, there's still more to study here, including which wavelengths can treat different concerns – and why exactly it works in the first place. 'Every year, we're finding out new things,' Dr Bowen says. 'We knew that it helped 20 years before we had any idea what the mechanisms were.' WH

How to optimise your sessions

If you buy a red light device, give yourself the best shot at feeling the benefits with these tips

01

Get as close as you can to the light source. Doctors even put lights directly in contact with skin, but consult the instructions carefully before trying this at home.

02

Do three sessions a week, spending 15 to 20 minutes under the light each time.

03

Make sure the light reaches the target. If you're sitting in front of a panel, rotate your body after 15 minutes and wear minimal clothing.

04

Use it ASAP for the best results. If you twist your ankle, get under the red light right away.

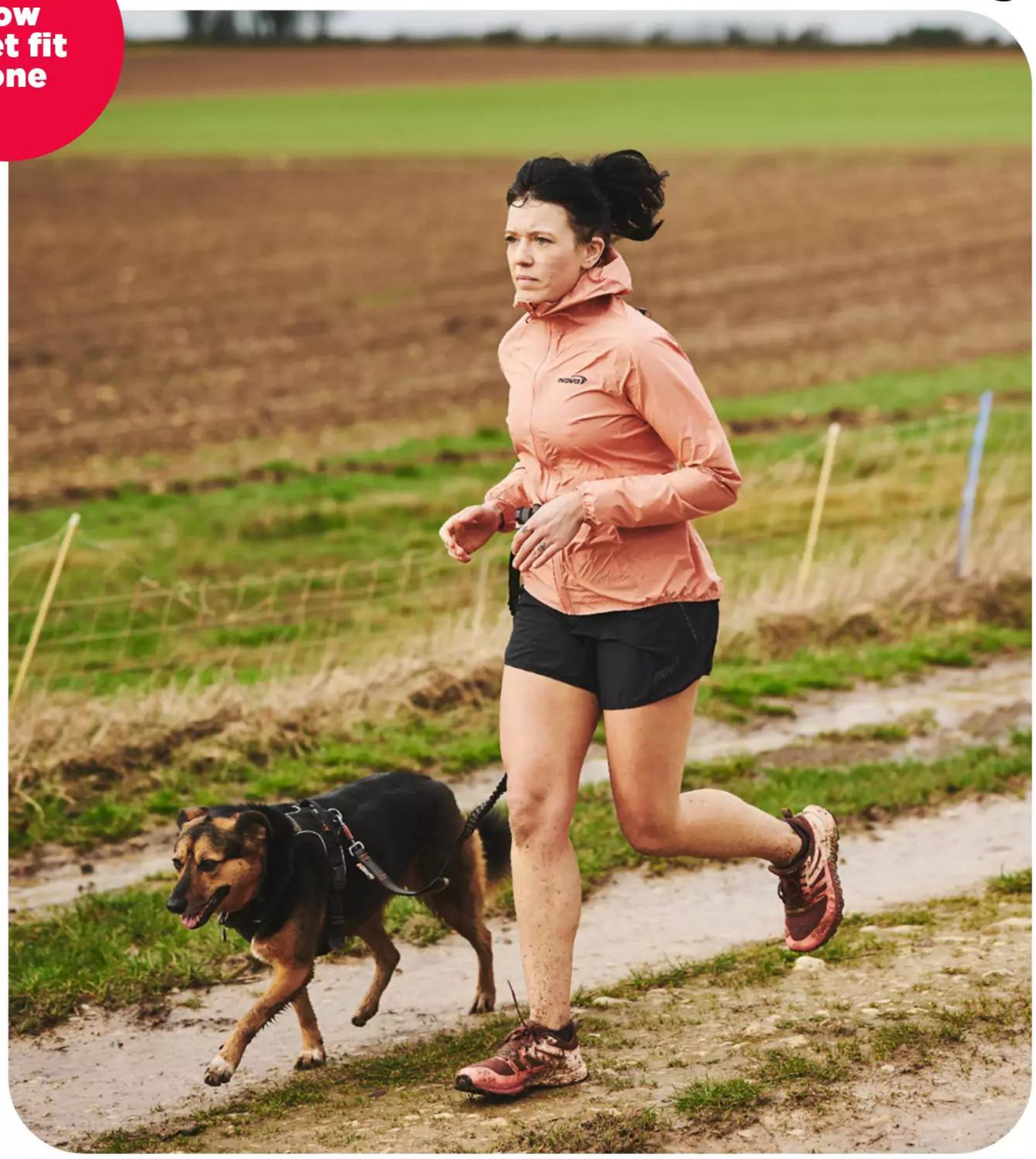
05

Talk to your doctor, too. With limited info available about reliable retail products, it's best to consult your GP about treatment options.

How I get fit done

‘I fuelled marathons with wine. Now sober, I help other women run’

Allie Bailey*, 42, once downed wine before 100-mile races. This Sober October, she reveals why quitting drinking changed her relationship with running



I was at my best friend’s house in Somerset in July 2021 – crying hysterically while glugging wine like it was water – when I knew I couldn’t go on like this. The feeling had been a long time coming. I was 14 when the deep sense that I wasn’t good enough first descended – a feeling I’d later recognise as depression. I tried numbing it with self-harm and, tragically, made several attempts on my life.

At university, I masked my emotions by knocking back six pints a day. Then, almost a decade later, I stumbled upon another coping mechanism: running. By this point, I was a few years into my dream job at a record label – where booze flowed at after-work drinks – and almost at the end of a tumultuous marriage. After one row with my soon-to-be ex-husband, I remembered a former doctor’s recommendation and laced up my trainers. Better than doing something that could harm myself, I figured.

After that first run – in which I jogged a mile from my flat in Whitechapel to Tower Bridge and back – I felt amazing, enhanced by the pint sipped at the end. From then on, whenever suicidal thoughts arose, I’d head out for a run – and my new-found passion saw me log 40 marathons and 17 ultramarathons over three years.

And yet, my admirable new hobby wasn’t all it seemed. My PBs were fuelled by alcohol. I’d drink before and during races, if I could get away with it, and always had a bottle of rosé ready in my kit bag. I dodged hangovers by resuming drinking upon waking.

While a high-functioning alcoholic, I secured an exciting new role at a race company, testing routes and promoting events around the world. In 2018, I even became the first person to run 100 miles over three days across a frozen lake in Mongolia, battling -45°C temperatures. I woke up the next day, necked a glass of wine and appeared on *Lorraine* at 7.30am.

The following year, I was running 135 miles across Panama carrying a 35kg bag – this time, containing no alcohol – when I first felt the pull to change. For those six days, I was sober – and, alone with my thoughts, I realised I didn’t have to believe everything my mind told me. Still, it was another two years before I found myself on my friend’s sofa, telling him everything. From that day, I was teetotal. I processed my emotions in the glare of sobriety, helped by an acceptance and commitment therapist. During our sessions, we identified my values – kindness was top of the list, something I’ve tapped into in my new role as a running coach.

I now have healthier strategies to manage my bouts of depression. One is how I run. I realised I used it purely as an escape before, but now I savour every step – moving slower, without times in mind, and focusing on enjoyment. Ironically, running has taught me that you can’t run away from your problems.

Top training tip
Use it to enrich your life, not punish yourself

Go-to race snack
Something I enjoy, like crisps or biscuits

Biggest running revelation
No one else can do it for you – just like changing your life

Speak to your GP if you are concerned about your drinking; if you’re experiencing suicidal thoughts, call Samaritans on 116 123

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOSEPH BRANSTON. ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: PAVEL DORNAK AT HEARST STUDIOS; ADOBE STOCK; GEOFF WARING. *ALLIE BAILEY’S BEST-SELLING MEMOIR, *THERE IS NO WALL*, IS OUT NOW

Wear Well

The locker room

Autumn might be autumning, but the season of 4pm darkness is the perfect excuse to treat yourself to kit worth climbing out of bed for. From innovative fabrics to eye-catching designs, consider this your AW24 athleisure cheat sheet

73 Zero fleeces range, from £69, Bam

ALL THAT GLITTERS

For the fitness fan who refuses to forgo her daily stack, sweatproof jewellery is here to raise your style game along with your heart rate. The UK-based brand By Rae offers durable, high-quality pieces designed to keep up with your active lifestyle (read: commendable commitment to throwing yourself around your local studio on the regular). Crafted from stainless steel and coated in 18k PVD gold, its pieces promise to endure as long as you can in a burpee finisher.

The Piha T-bar necklace, from £45, By Rae

PUT A RING ON IT

The days of bulky dumbbells piled in your kitchen or bedroom are long gone. Gym corners are an interiors trend and fit kit has had a glow-up – and style over substance, it ain't. Enter: Onyx, a brand intent on overhauling our perceptions of what fitness equipment should look like. Expect soft yoga mats, pastel hues and weights so aesthetically pleasing they could pass for a vase. We love the pistachio-green weighted ring.

Ring weight, from £24.99, Onyx

NEW KICKS

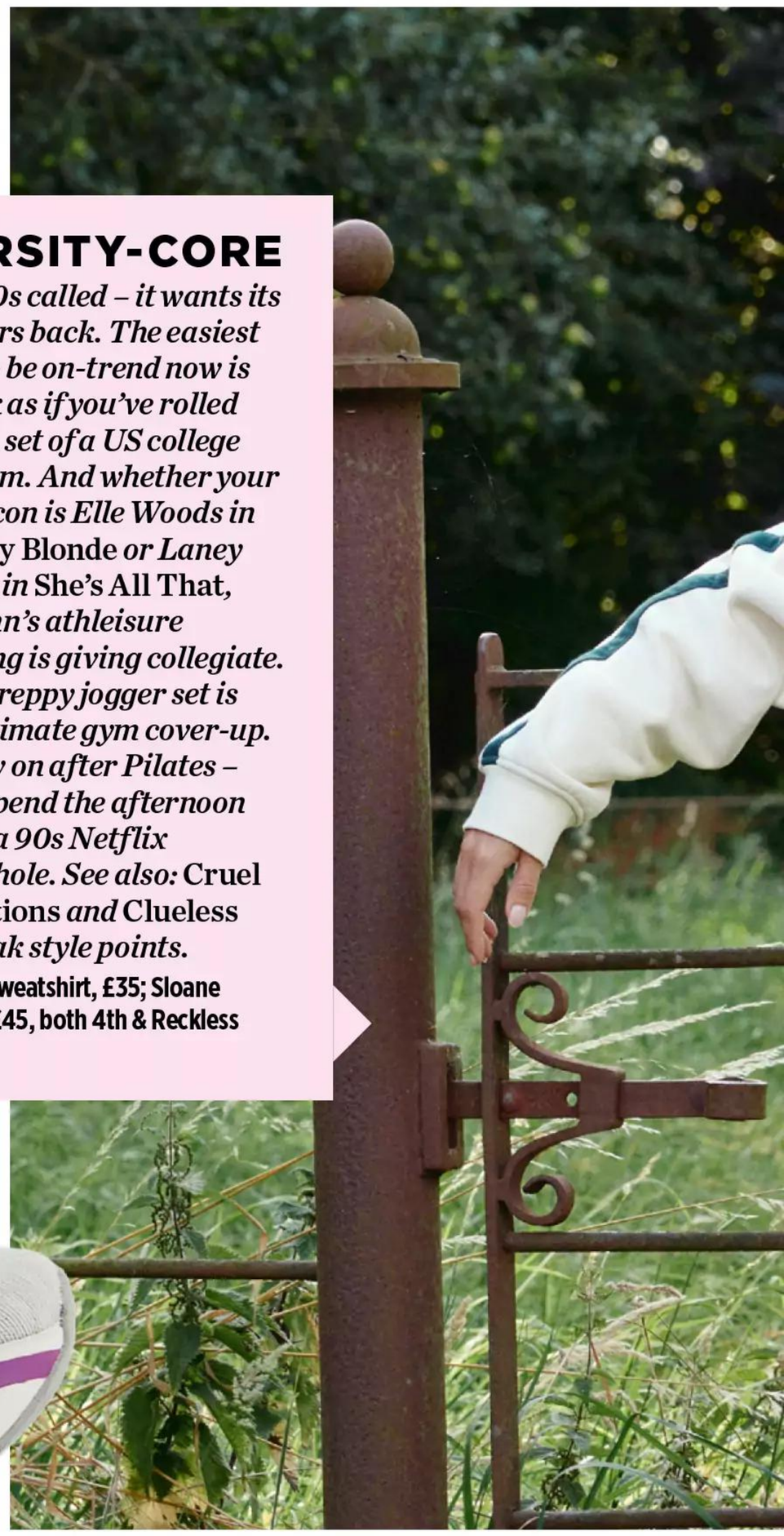
The latest iteration of New Balance's bestselling 1080 is a runner's dream realised. An enhanced midsole delivers a soft yet responsive stride, with cloud-like cushioning and improved durability thanks to forefoot stiffness and protective rubber in high-wear areas. And coming in at just 235g, it's incredibly lightweight, too. Race you.

Fresh Foam X 1080v14 shoes, £160, New Balance

VARSITY-CORE

The 90s called – it wants its jumpers back. The easiest way to be on-trend now is to look as if you've rolled off the set of a US college romcom. And whether your style icon is Elle Woods in Legally Blonde *or Laney Boggs in* She's All That, *autumn's athleisure offering is giving collegiate. This preppy jogger set is the ultimate gym cover-up. Throw on after Pilates – then spend the afternoon down a 90s Netflix wormhole. See also:* Cruel Intentions *and* Clueless *for peak style points.*

Sloane sweatshirt, £35; Sloane jogger, £45, both 4th & Reckless



HOME AND DRY

We've not fallen this hard for a rucksack since we were in year 9. Rains' latest offering does what it says on the tin (the signature PU fabric is precipitation-proof) and it's a commuter's dream, with an interior big enough to double up as a gym bag and a side-access laptop pocket. Cyclist? Check out the chest strap and the front D-ring for your lock. Nab the metallic option for peak AW24 vibes. Style, meet function.

Rolltop rucksack, £105, Rains

APRÈS CHIC

While you could borrow your ski gear for an upcoming sojourn to the snow from a friend of a friend, athleisure is in its cold era. And slope-core doesn't get much better than the latest offering from My Sunday Ski. Think faux fur, blizzard-proof prints and textures that meet the brief of keeping you both toasty and trendy. Our standout piece? The mink faux fur bucket hat (£45), made from a silky soft faux-ternative that will keep you cosy around the chalet.

AW24 collection, from £45, My Sunday Ski

FINISHER

Trying to focus on your reps and sets while preoccupied with sliding, non-breathable or uncomfortable hijab fabrics is one way to be deterred from finishing your workout. That's why this versatile design from Evolute is such a game changer. It lets you wear it your way, all while being one of the most affordable options on the market. Made from a sweat-wicking material that's secured down by the included jersey under cap, it'll let you lift, squat and sprint in peace.

Sports hijab, £20, Evolute

PURPLE TRAIN

That putting on your kit has been shown to aid motivation to train is reason enough to head to the checkout with your health in mind (if you ask us). Especially when the OG of gymwear, Sweaty Betty, drops something new. Made from a brushed, sweat-wicking fabric, this long-sleeve layer in seasonally-appropriate aubergine should get you out the door on even the most miserable of Monday mornings.

Therma running zip-up, £130, Sweaty Betty

SCULPTED TO PERFECTION

Adanola's cult-favourite leggings have taken the world by storm, with over a million pairs sold since 2020. To celebrate this iconic silhouette, the brand is back with its AW24 campaign starring 'It' model Tina Kunakey. High-waisted, sculpting and with zero front seam.

Ultimate leggings, £39.99, Adanola

TUNE OUT

Whether it's screeching foxes or snoring partners keeping you up, the latest drop from aesthetically pleasing earplug brand Loop may be the product of your dreams. Loop's first collection for troubled sleepers offers 27dB noise reduction, its highest yet – and aims to block low-level noise while staying put so you can crack on with your NHS-advised seven to nine hours. Dreamy.

Dream earplugs, £49.95, Loop

COMPRESSED FOR TIME

The athleisure trend of the summer is going nowhere for the year's final stretch. And, if anything, one-pieces were designed with autumn layers in mind. The breathable fabric and in-built bra make this compressive jumpsuit from trending brand Oysho your new gymwear staple – and the sartorial solution to the annual AW dilemma of how to get dressed in the dark. Chuck it on, then sweat it out.

Compressive jumpsuit, £55.99, Oysho

MARTIAL ARTS

Just when you think fashion is predictable, it surprises you – as evidenced by the latest shoes on every influencer's feet. Adidas's Taekwondo collection is designed with speed and agility in mind – and for shoes premised on combat, they're calmingly comfortable, with buttery soft leather and flexible traction on the outsole. The only fighting you'll need to do is at the checkout.

Taekwondo shoes, £80, Adidas

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

New Zealand-born, premium outdoor brand Kathmandu has unleashed its new collection, for those craving adventure. The Seeker jacket features cutting-edge insulation for 'breathable warmth' – so you can work up a sweat without getting too cold when you stop. It's a thumbs up from us.

Seeker PrimaLoft Active hooded jacket, £180, Kathmandu

ON YOUR HIKE

If summer's sartorial challenge is chasing down the perfect pair of shades, winter's quest is for a hero hiking boot. So it's about time Ariat was on your radar. Founded in the 90s as 'the new breed of boot' – with products originally designed for equestrian athletes – the brand means business. The DryShield waterproof construction keeps out even the most torrential of downpours while the brand's patented 4LR tech (translation: 'Four Layer Rebound') prioritises stability and comfort. Expect blister-free strides and warm, dry toes – no matter how tough the trail.

Moresby waterproof boots, £165, Ariat WH

Do your trainers need a health check?

Four decades after researchers first calculated the life expectancy of your average pair of running trainers, the industry still can't agree on what a healthy mileage looks like. From the material your foam is made from to the signs a shoe is 'dead', consider this your trainer MOT

The year is 1985, and researchers are using a combination of machines and humans to investigate shock absorption in a range of running shoes. The shoes retained about 67% of their initial shock absorption capacity after 150 miles, dropping to less than 60% between 250 and 500 miles. Almost 40 years later, it's this study that will appear when you ask Google how often you need to change your running shoes.

Since then, we've swapped thin wedges of hard, heavy EVA foam for soft, light, bouncy, nitrogen-infused superfoams; we've added carbon and nylon plates, alongside featherweight mesh uppers – and we have running shoes for every type of run. A stripped-back carbon racer built for speed is a different proposition to a max-stack daily trainer designed with long-haul comfort in mind. And yet the internet can't come to a consensus on if a pair of trainers can go the distance – beyond that distance being somewhere between 300 and 500 miles. But with running your trainers ragged linked with placing more stress on your body – and an industry rife with overconsumption – is it time you learned to spot the signs of another kind of burnout?

Finish line

An explanation of why the shelf life of your trainers is difficult to determine begins with the materials from which they're made. The most common foams break down into two camps: standard foams (EVA, TPE, TPU) tend to be more durable and more stable but offer lower energy return; premium foams (PEBA, PEBAX, TPEE) offer big energy returns, but may compromise on durability – or at least the durability of their performance benefits. Only now, we have supercritical foams, too. When combined with supercritical fluid – often nitrogen, exposed to a high pressure and temperature – the foam expands, creating bubbles. The result? Improved cushioning and energy return – benefits that come at the cost of being less hard-wearing.

In recent years, though, the performance and durability of all foams has improved. 'We tested an advanced compression-moulded EVA and saw next to nothing in the decrease in cushioning performance over 500km [310 miles],' says Andy Farnworth, co-founder of sustainable running shoe brand Zen Running Club, who works with major foam suppliers to all the big brands. 'I think up to 500km, you can pretty much say it's still good. And that's any foam.' But the diversification of foams, production processes and purposes has made it even harder to give blanket lifespan advice. 'A PEBAX foam made three different ways would offer different levels of responsiveness and durability, depending on whether they're created by compression, injection or supercritical gas injection,' adds Jorma Seabourne, product director at low-environmental-impact footwear specialists Hylo Athletics,

on why a worn PEBAX midsole that's past its best might still offer more energy return than new EVA foam.

Running on empty

Much like your productivity post-4pm americano, what makes super shoes so effective is also their weakness. Researchers at the University of Castilla-La Mancha in Spain compared modern superfoams with traditional EVA in a new and worn state. For the study*, 22 volunteers performed a running economy test in carbon-plated shoes. The only difference was one had a PEBA midsole, the other an EVA. After 280 miles, the PEBA shoe performed 2.2% worse, while the EVA shoe lost nothing; at 280 miles, there was no significant difference in running economy benefits between the EVA and PEBA shoes. In other words, the supershoe effect had disappeared.

This is where perception comes into the story. A pair of shoes that some runners would consider past their prime may feel great for others. 'I could probably get someone who's been running in a Nike Pegasus, give them a 1,000km-old pair of Adios Pros, and they'll think "these are good" because those shoes started on a different level,' explains Seabourne. But perhaps unsurprisingly, it depends on what kind of runner you are. 'For a racer looking for that 1% [improvement], if a shoe loses 5% after 300km, that's a massive deal. But if you're running a recreational parkrun, I don't think anyone's going to notice.'

In it to bin it

So, if a premium pair of running shoes stops delivering those marginal gains, is it time to bin them? Well, no. If the superfoam starts from a higher performance level but ends up on par with a more traditional EVA shoe, it could have a second life. Tony Piedade has seen more second-hand running shoes than most people; the founder of shoe recycling movement JogOn is on a mission to prevent some of the 30m pairs we discard each year from ending up in landfill by giving donated shoes to people who need them. 'Around 87% of the shoes we collected last year were reusable,' he says. 'Would someone run a marathon in them? Probably not. Or at least not comfortably, or maybe not competitively. But they could if they wanted to.'

What sees runners consign their shoes to the rubbish prematurely is the risk of injury. But according to Matthew Klein – a physical therapist, professor and founder of Doctors of Running – this risk is largely anecdotal. 'There's no hard evidence linking worn-out shoes with injury,' he shares, with the caveat that as shoes break down, they do have the potential to increase stress on your body. 'Most of us have unique loading patterns and so the longer you wear the shoe, the more you wear your unique movement pattern into them,' he continues. 'You begin to break down certain parts of the shoe to match your mechanics. As that goes past a certain point, you'll start to accentuate any movement abnormalities. Combined with compromised cushioning properties from increased wear, this may cause excessive loading in the focal parts of your body.'

On the signs that it's time to give your trainers the boot, Dr Klein is clear. 'Pay attention to what you feel underfoot,' he cautions. Common clues include the shoes feeling less cushioned than they did – often known as feeling 'dead'. Other signs include feeling stress more on one side of your ankle or foot that only occurs during or after wearing the shoe. Above all: 'If you're suddenly getting odd aches or pains, if the shoes don't feel as good and there's no reason you should be feeling this – you've been getting adequate rest, nutrition and balanced training – then it may be time to retire them.' We've said it before and we'll say it again: listen to your body. WH

How to get the most out of your running shoes

Fit for purpose
Shoes are built for a specific reason, so use as intended to get the longest life from them. Light carbon racers won't last long on the trails.

Rotate
This can make your shoes last longer, notes Dr Klein. Or, when you get a new pair, keep the old ones in your rotation, says Bret Schoolmeester, Nike's senior running footwear director.

Change lanes
If a shoe is past its best but not causing niggles, wear it on other types of run. 'You could use it as a lower-mileage shoe,' says Farnworth.

87%
of trainers collected from landfill by JogOn were found to be reusable

13%
of discarded trainers couldn't be used

WORDS: KIERAN ALGER. PHOTOGRAPHY: ROWAN FEE. *SOURCE: *SCANDINAVIAN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE AND SCIENCE IN SPORTS*

WARNING SIGNS

Spotting key indications of wear

Creasing up

With modern foams, midsole wear can be harder to see. 'Some people say creases mean it's worn out,' says Dr Klein. 'But new foams crease the second you put them on.' To spot problematic midsole wear, tune in to how it feels over time.

The heel deal

Heel collars are high-friction areas, and it's common for the material to wear away. In severe cases, that might leave the internal heel counter exposed, affecting comfort levels rather than anything biomechanical.

Losing your grip

Severe outsole wear is easily visible and can affect traction and performance, as well as increase your risk of slipping. But that's not all. 'If the material looks extremely chewed up and is wearing into the midsole, it may be time to change,' says Dr Klein. 'If you chew away enough of the outsole, it can create a wedge that holds your foot in an inverted or everted position.' That can put more stress on specific areas.

Getting ripped

Holes and tears occur in areas of high friction or repeated flex. These can often be patched, but be wary of any major damage that can affect 'its ability to hold the foot on to the platform', says Dr Klein.

Dead zone

'When a shoe feels "dead", think about a new one,' says Nikhil Jain, director at Brooks' BlueLine innovation team. 'It's not something you notice on one run, more a feeling over a couple of runs.'

Fit kit hero

On your bike

THE GUINEA PIG
Alice Barraclough, nutrition editor

If there's one thing every beginner cyclist is terrified of, it's making the switch to clipless pedals. For the uninitiated, they're a specific type of bike pedal that you 'clip' on to, wearing cleats (similar to the shoes they give you at a spin class), so you're literally attached to the bike. And the fear of toppling over in front of every traffic light is real. I should know – that used to be me.

But like most cyclists, I've found that with practice, clipping in (and out) has become second nature. So when an invitation landed in my inbox to cycle up Alpe d'Huez, ahead of the pros completing the final stage of the Tour de France Femmes avec Zwift, I knew the one piece of my cycling kit in desperate need of an upgrade.

So, out went my five-year-old (scuffed, battered) shoes, making way for a pair of Fizik Vento Omna road shoes. The most obvious point of difference is the closure system. While my old shoes had just three Velcro straps to tighten them, the Vento Omna use a BOA ratcheting dial to help pull the eyelets on the top of the shoe inwards. And when you're climbing 1,120m over 14km, this stuff matters.

From valley to summit, my feet felt secure and snug, without the shoes feeling like they were pinching – and the direct connection to the pedals was palpable. The wide vent inlet kept my feet well ventilated, while the stiff outsole made for energy-efficient pedalling.

The really good news? While you *can* wear them to cycle up a mountain in August, they're every bit as happy on country lanes on a Sunday in October.

MICRO TREND

CYCLING SOCKS

Designed for year-round riding

1

£14, Universal Colours
Available in an array of hues, there'll be a pair of Universal Colours' Mono socks to match your shoes (and your kit).

2

£16, Zwift
Stylish and fun, these limited-edition Zwift socks are breathable and moisture-wicking, so you can stay blister-free no matter how sweaty the cycle.

3

£20, Café du Cycliste
These retro-style socks from premium French brand Café du Cycliste are ultralight and fast-drying.

Crowning the winners of the Women's Health Healthy Hair Awards 2024

From innovative tools that get you out the door faster to product lines from the most carefully coiffed pop stars, your haircare routine just got a whole lot easier. We've teamed up with some of the UK's top hair experts for the *Women's Health* Healthy Hair Awards

The judges

CLAIRE SANDERSON

WH editor-in-chief is looking for products to help strengthen and nourish perimenopausal hair

PERDITA NOURIL

WH's beauty editor knows her haircare. If it works, you'll hear it from her first

LARRY KING

The owner of two prestigious salons in west London, King is the go-to stylist for editors and celebrities alike

BREE DAVIE

A distinguished stylist and co-CEO of the celebrity salon group Trevor Sorbie, Davie knows every facet of the industry

CHARLOTTE MENSAH

Inducted into the Hairdressers Hall of Fame in 2018, her west London Hair Lounge is the place to go for Afro and curls.

Best for curls

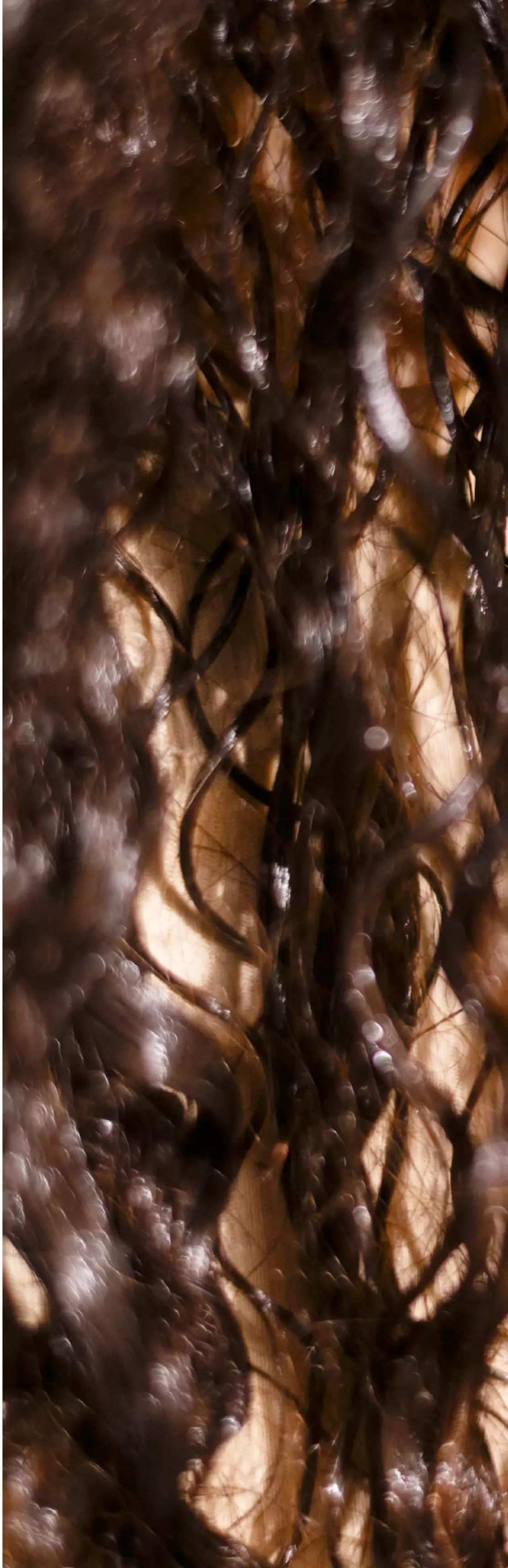
Meet the bounce-enhancers that bring out the best in your bends, boost your natural curl pattern and eradicate frizz

BEST SHAMPOO: Umberto Giannini Thirsty Curls Shampoo, £9.25

'This is a perfect entry-level shampoo for curly hair, thanks to a triple-hydrating complex of hyaluronic acid, snow mushroom and black oat extract. It moisturises the strands without weighing them down.' **LK**

BEST CONDITIONER: Umberto Giannini Thirsty Curls Conditioner, £9.25

'Containing the same triple-hydrating complex as the shampoo, the addition of glycerine softens and smooths the hair cuticle, giving a shinier, lustrous look and reducing the appearance of flyaways.' **LK**



Beauty Lab

BEST DETANGLER:
L'Oréal Professionnel Metal Detox Pre-Shampoo, £31.50
'Your hair's secret weapon against knots and tangles, this formula works to neutralise excess copper (found in water). Active Glicofiller also delivers up to 72 hours of hydration and smoothness.' **LK**

BEST CURL CONTROL:
JVN Hair Complete Leave-In Conditioning Mist, £21
'This hard-working mist beats the rest when it comes to replenishing thirsty curls, thanks to tremella mushroom and hyaluronic acid. The addition of squalane boosts hair health, too.' **PN**

BEST CURL ENHANCER:
Fenty Hair The Homecurl Curl-Defining Cream, £29
'Hydrolysed vegetable protein penetrates the hair fibre to increase moisture content, while upcycled jackfruit – derived from food-industry waste – packs a frizz-reducing punch. My hair never feels greasy, either.' **LK**

Best for special care

Whether your concern is thinning hair or an itchy scalp, these targeted buys tackle all the issues that stop your hair from living its best life

BEST HEAT PROTECTOR:

K18 Molecular Repair Hair Oil, £27

'This goes above and beyond when it comes to heat protection, and that's down to the key ingredient, avocado oil, which can withstand temperatures of up to 230°C. I noticed a huge improvement in frizz and flyaways after each use.' **CS**

BEST SCALP SCRUB:

Larry King Haircare Clean As A Whistle Scalp Scrub, £18

'This feels hugely satisfying to use; not only does it gently feed my scalp's microbiome with probiotics to encourage healthier root growth, the exotic coconut scent makes my shoulders slump (in a good way).' **PN**

BEST SCALP TREATMENT:

Living Proof Scalp Care Density Serum, £54

'This is a hard-working hero for hair shedding and scalp sensitivity from hormonal changes. Pea-sprout extract protects my scalp, while amaranth peptides aid thicker-looking locks.' **CS**

BEST HAIR SUPPLEMENT:

SISTERLY THE ELEVATOR, £107 FOR 30 SACHETS

'In an overcrowded supplement market, this powdered formula contains the ultimate blend of minerals, vitamins and collagen to help nourish and strengthen every strand.' **PN**

Best for coloured hair

From glossy grey and copper reds to balayage blonde, these clever formulas fight fade and restore damage so that your crowning glory shines bright

BEST BOND BUILDER:
Glaze Glaziplex Bond Repair Mask, £19.99
'Used weekly in place of conditioner, this has worked wonders at improving my overall hair strength and integrity from the inside out by targeting the chemical bonds. Strong bonds are the name of the game for colour, and mine is working harder than ever.' **CS**

BEST LEAVE-IN TREATMENT:
Color Wow Money Mist, £29.50
'This lightweight mist ensures even coverage, while adaptive technology means ingredients adjust to your hair's needs. Each fibre is nourished with the precise level of peptides and hydration it requires. My hair is cashmere soft.' **BD**

BEST HAIR DYE:
Garnier Good Permanent Hair Colour, £12
'This clever range removes the faff element as its thick, mask-like texture and non-drip technology makes application easy-peasy. Plus, nurturing ingredients such as shea butter leave hair soft and shiny.' **CS**

BEST HAIR OIL:
Ffør All:In Oil, £28
'Hair oil can be tricky if you've got fine hair, but this lighter-than-air liquid is easy to combine through strands so that nourishing ingredients are distributed evenly. There's no oily residue and the scent is *sublime*.' **BD**

BEST SHAMPOO:
Redken Acidic Color Gloss Shampoo, £26
'This shampoo is a game changer for coloured hair. It drenched my strands with moisture without weighing it down, meaning I could easily achieve volume when styling my hair.' **CS**

BEST CONDITIONER: Oribe Bright Blonde Radiance And Repair Treatment, £60
'While this has a higher price point, it did an outstanding job at supercharging coloured hair so it stays brighter for longer. Its violet tones aren't too strong for regular use.' **BD**

BEST CONDITIONER:
Cécred Moisturizing Deep Conditioner, £35
'This ultra-rich deep conditioner from Beyoncé's debut haircare line is teeming with shea butter, African oils and fermented keratin that transform dry and brittle strands.' **CM**

BEST STYLING HERO:
Bread Beauty Supply Hair-Cream, £16.99
'This silky-soft cream is fortified with quinoa protein and mango butter, giving curls bounce and definition without crunch or flakiness. Best of all, it doesn't leave any unwanted residue.' **BD**

BEST CURL DEFINER:
Trepadora Acai Berry Fix Defining Gel, £30
'Acai berry extract and Peruvian Inca Inchi oil – that's rich in fatty acid and protein content – work to prevent dryness. It gives a flexible hold that keeps curls soft and fuzz-free for days.' **CM**

Best for coils

Well-defined coils are no longer a distant pipe dream, thanks to this selection of dynamic haircare heroes

BEST SHAMPOO:
Fenty Hair The Rich One Moisture Repair Shampoo, £29
'Perfect for Afro hair types, this shampoo contains hard-working ingredients (green-tea extract and amino acids) that strengthen and protect. It works to gently cleanse and detangle – and a little goes a long way.' **CM**

BEST TREATMENT:
Fenty Hair The Comeback Kid, £34
'Another standout product from Rihanna's first haircare range, the lightweight formula is like CPR for damaged hair. It penetrates deeply, providing intense hydration that quickly breathes life back into curls and coils.' **CM**

Best hair tools

With their deft touch and exquisite control, these invaluable tools are the secret behind tousled waves and sleek strands

BEST WAVER: Hershesons The Wavemaker, £149.50

'The clever rolling barrel gently rotates and heats your hair, holding it in place while also cooling the hair, which ensures my waves can withstand a commute, gym session and day of work. Better yet, there's no user skill required.' **CS**

BEST DRYER: Babyliss Air Power Pro, £150

Not only does this ionic system eliminate frizz, the heat is directed to the section of hair you want to dry, rather than the surrounding strands, meaning It doesn't leave hair feeling 'overdried'. Best of all? It weighs as much as a can of Coke and is the quietest dryer I've ever come across.' **CS**

BEST MULTI-STYLING TOOL

GHD Duet Blowdry, £379

'As someone who's always found it hard to blow-dry my hair, this tool does the hard work for you. The styler combines the properties of a hair brush, straightener and dryer into one. It's genius – and a real time-saver.' **PN**

Best for straight hair

Locks looking limp and duller than dishwater? These weightless wonders dial up the volume, tame flyaways and keep strands looking and feeling strong

BEST VOLUMISER: Aveda Invati Ultra Advanced Thickening Foam, £31

'This claims to thicken the look of hair by up to 11% and makes you feel as if you have 11,000 more hairs. I can't claim to have counted, but they aren't wrong. It's a real mane changer (sorry).' **PN**

BEST TEXTURISER: Living Proof Full Texturizing Foam, £15

'My bob is full of bounce and texture thanks to amaranth (plant) peptides that plump individual fibres for a fuller finish. The salt-free ingredients give my hair grit and tousle without compromising on movement and swishability.' **PN**

BEST SHAMPOO: Grown Alchemist Hydra Restore Shampoo, £24

'The inclusion of phyto proteins works to fortify strands and help fight the fallout giving hair thickness and bounce. My hair feels stronger and bouncier, and has a mirror-like shine.' **PN**

BEST CONDITIONER: L'Oréal Elvive Glycolic Gloss Conditioner, £13

'Glycolic acid works wonders for hair by penetrating the strands and forming hydrogen bonds with the proteins. Perfectly reflecting the light, my hair's looking healthier than ever.' **PN**

BEST DRY SHAMPOO: Batiste 24H Active Dry Shampoo, £4.59

'Smart sweat-activated technology releases scent capsules upon contact with perspiration, giving a burst of freshness as you exercise. It instantly absorbs excess grease, too.' **PN**

BEST TREATMENT: Tresemmé Lamellar Shine Leave-In Cream Serum, £7

'Lamellar technology uses water to target damaged hair with active ingredients like hydrators and amino acids, while conditioners fill in damage. It gives instant softness and shine.' **CS** WH

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; STOCKSY; UNSPLASH+

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#SKINSHELFIE

Dr Anita Sturnham

Famed for her hard-working Decree skincare range, Anita Sturnham has become the go-to derm for beauty editors and skincare devotees alike. Here, she reveals the products she relies on

THE EXPERT
Anita Sturnham, dermatologist, founder of Decree skincare, and founder and medical director of renowned skin clinic Nuriss

A typical day

I start with a shower and do my skincare steps. Then, I get my daughter ready and feed our cats. Lunch is unpredictable in the clinic, so I'll have a big breakfast – smoked salmon and avocado on toast or a collagen-packed smoothie. During my commute, I'll listen to a podcast while doing emails. Once I get to my clinic in London's Marylebone, I'll catch up with the team and start seeing patients – teenagers with acne and those with inflammatory conditions such as rosacea, as well as general consultations. When I'm not seeing patients, I'll be in meetings for Decree. I'll be home between 8pm and 10pm, when I'll have dinner, catch up with my husband and head to bed. I'm guilty of reading emails at night, but I track my stress levels using a Whoop wearable device and if my health metrics are in an 'unhealthy zone', I'll switch off by listening to music.

Skincare philosophy

Support your skin's health holistically; hormone and gut health are integral to healthy skin. A simple skincare routine can give you results.

Skincare non-negotiable

Serums and SPF. I wear SPF religiously as UV damage is responsible for 80% of premature skin ageing.

Main skincare concern

Rosacea, which means my skin is prone to redness, dryness and sensitivity. My skincare regimen is focused on hydrating, barrier-supporting products.

Day

01
DECREE PREPARATORY MIST, *£55*
This antioxidant toner mist rehydrates, rebalances and prepares my skin for my serum. Serums absorb better when the skin is slightly damp, making this the perfect step after my morning cleanse.

02
DECREE PROTECT ELIXIR, *£110*
I describe this as the definitive, multitasking day serum. Packed full of antioxidants, it's like a facial in a bottle and gives my skin an instant glow.

03
TRINNY LONDON SEE THE LIGHT SPF50+, *£45*
This is my current favourite sun cream. The hybrid formula has a hydrating and moisturising base, thanks to white tea leaf and raspberry leaf extracts that replenish moisture and offer long-lasting protection. My sensitive skin tolerates it well.

Night

04
FOREO BEAR MICROCURRENT DEVICE, *£240*
Microcurrent devices stimulate muscle contraction and claim to leave the skin looking lifted and toned. I use this tool after doing my Weekly Decree exfoliation steps, using a water-based serum to lift and plump the skin.

05
DECREE TREAT TINCTURE, *£130*
This serum contains a next-generation retinoid and plant-based stem cells. Other ingredients include squalane (a botanical lipid) to help with skin barrier support and alpha arbutin, which works to target uneven skintone, reduce the appearance of uneven pigmentation and provide the skin with a brightening effect.

06
EPADERM OINTMENT, *£13.20*
Being a rosacea sufferer and having a history of atopic dermatitis, I'm prone to dry skin. Once a week, I'll apply a layer of this ointment, which is designed to hydrate the skin barrier, as an overnight treatment.

Mood-boosting make-up

07
DIOR FOREVER NATURAL NUDE FOUNDATION, *£50*
I don't wear foundation often, but this is my go-to for special occasions. It has a light texture and never feels drying or clogging.

08
YVES SAINT LAURENT VOLUME EFFET FAUX MASCARA, *£31*
I love eye make-up and prefer to use these products to primers and foundations. I love this one – not only does it make my lashes look longer and thicker, it's long-lasting, too.

09
VICTORIA BECKHAM SATIN KAJAL EYELINER, *£30*
I'm a big fan of these eyeliners and I have a few shades from this collection. The creamy textured pencil glides across the skin and lasts all day.

Signature scent

10
LOUIS VUITTON ROSE DES VENTS EAU DE PARFUM, *£225*
I love all things rose-based. Just as my skincare has rosewater in all the products, my fragrance choices tend to be rose-based, too. This subtle, fresh scent is perfect for daytime. WH

AS TOLD TO PERDITA NOURIL. PHOTOGRAPHY: PIXELEYES; PROPS COURTESY H&M AND SUPERDRUG

THE STATE OF MODERN GIRLHOOD

The word should invoke a sense of lightness and frivolity. Instead, those with a front row seat to how it feels to be a girl in 2024 are sounding the alarm. And our own data confirms that girlhood is not just in flux, but in crisis. From the influence of a culture of misogyny on coming of age to the harms inflicted by years-long waiting lists for appropriate care, *WH* gives this life stage a health check – and asks where it leaves a generation of young women and the people who love them

WORDS: LAUREN CLARK

GIRLHOOD

Walking into Gemma Knowles' office is rather confronting. It's not the softly spoken King's College London researcher herself, but the Post-it notes papering the walls of her corner of the university's south London campus. On each one are scribbled the words of some of the 4,000 teenagers in the capital taking part in a far-reaching study into young people's mental health. 'Friendship problems' and 'looking cool' transport you to a time when you, too, knew the spring of a Clarks shoe and the creak of a locker. But terms such as 'TikTok' and 'climate change' are stark reminders that adolescents today are coming of age in a different world.

Teenage mental health is in crisis. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), published in March, reveals one in five children is suffering from 'probable mental health disorders' – up from one in eight before the pandemic. 'We often hear that anyone can struggle with their mental health but, in reality, problems are not evenly distributed,' notes Dr Knowles, a lecturer in epidemiology and youth mental health. Dr Knowles coordinates the Resilience, Ethnicity and AdolesCent mental Health (REACH) study, which was set up in 2015 to understand inequalities in youth mental health by quizzing teens on their experiences annually. 'The most striking difference we have seen is gender,' she says.

Boys are experiencing record levels of mental ill health, but for girls, the story is darker still. Aged 11, the incidence of problems is similar; by 14 to 16, outcomes have diverged – with ONS research finding that one in three 17 to 19-year-old girls are still suffering, more than twice the proportion of boys the same age.

Certain issues are more prevalent – something that is echoed in research of more than 1,700 adults conducted by *Women's Health*. Anxiety was the most common issue highlighted, with 43% of teenage girls' family members polled noting that it significantly interrupted their loved one's functioning. Nearly a third of family members (31%) also told us that a girl in their lives had self-harmed (a behaviour evidence suggests is a predictor of those who go on to take their own lives), while one in five respondents told us their concerns over this generation extended to the immediate safety of a loved one. Indeed, girls are more than twice as likely as boys to make an attempt on their life, and suicide among young women is at the highest rate it's ever been – prompting health secretary Wes Streeting to describe the situation as 'a tragedy'.

‘SEEING PROM PICTURES FROM MY HOSPITAL BED MADE ME ANGRY AT THE SYSTEM’

Venus, 22, activist for YoungMinds, from Cheshire

‘I was eight when I saw posts online that glamourised self-harm and I started copying what I saw.

My teachers raised the alarm. I’d tell them, “Sometimes I do colouring to feel better, but other times I do this.” Their reactions were my first indication it wasn’t the normal behaviour I thought it was. They took it seriously, but a failed referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services [CAMHS] meant I was still without proper support.

By the time I was in secondary school, the feeling I now recognised as anxiety would bubble up on the way to school – and I knew of only one way to find release. Once again, I reached out – this time my school viewed me as attention-seeking and further referrals to CAMHS were rejected because I wasn’t “bad enough”. I stopped going to lessons and my friendships drifted, as parents kept their kids away from me.

It was in this lonely headspace that the local stables, where they had a programme for struggling children, became my safe place. The horses, which I’d ride and muck out, weren’t judging me.

My home life triggered a setback at 14. I was admitted to hospital and while other children on the ward were sent schoolwork, my school took me off the register – deeming me too “dangerous” to return.

My upset has evolved into anger. Just because I was unwell doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have an education. The injustice was compounded by seeing pictures of classmates at prom from my bed. I spent almost three years in hospital, balancing my recovery with studying. I’ve just finished my law degree at university, which I want to use to reform the Mental Health Act. I was determined to prove everyone wrong; now I want my story to give others hope.’

TOUGH CONDITIONS

For Guy Northover, a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist in Berkshire, it's a tragedy that belongs in Streeting's in tray – and that of other departments in the new administration. 'Governments often like to dismiss mental health issues as something beyond their control, but it's within their remit,' he tells *WH*. He points to Department for Work and Pensions research revealing that the percentage of children living in poverty – defined as 'lacking the material resources to meet minimum needs' – had increased to almost a third (with children from non-white backgrounds more likely to be living in poverty*). The impact of such conditions on mental health is more pronounced for girls: one study found girls from families in the bottom two quintiles of household income were 7.5% more likely to be depressed at 14 than girls from highest income families – the same pattern was not found in boys.

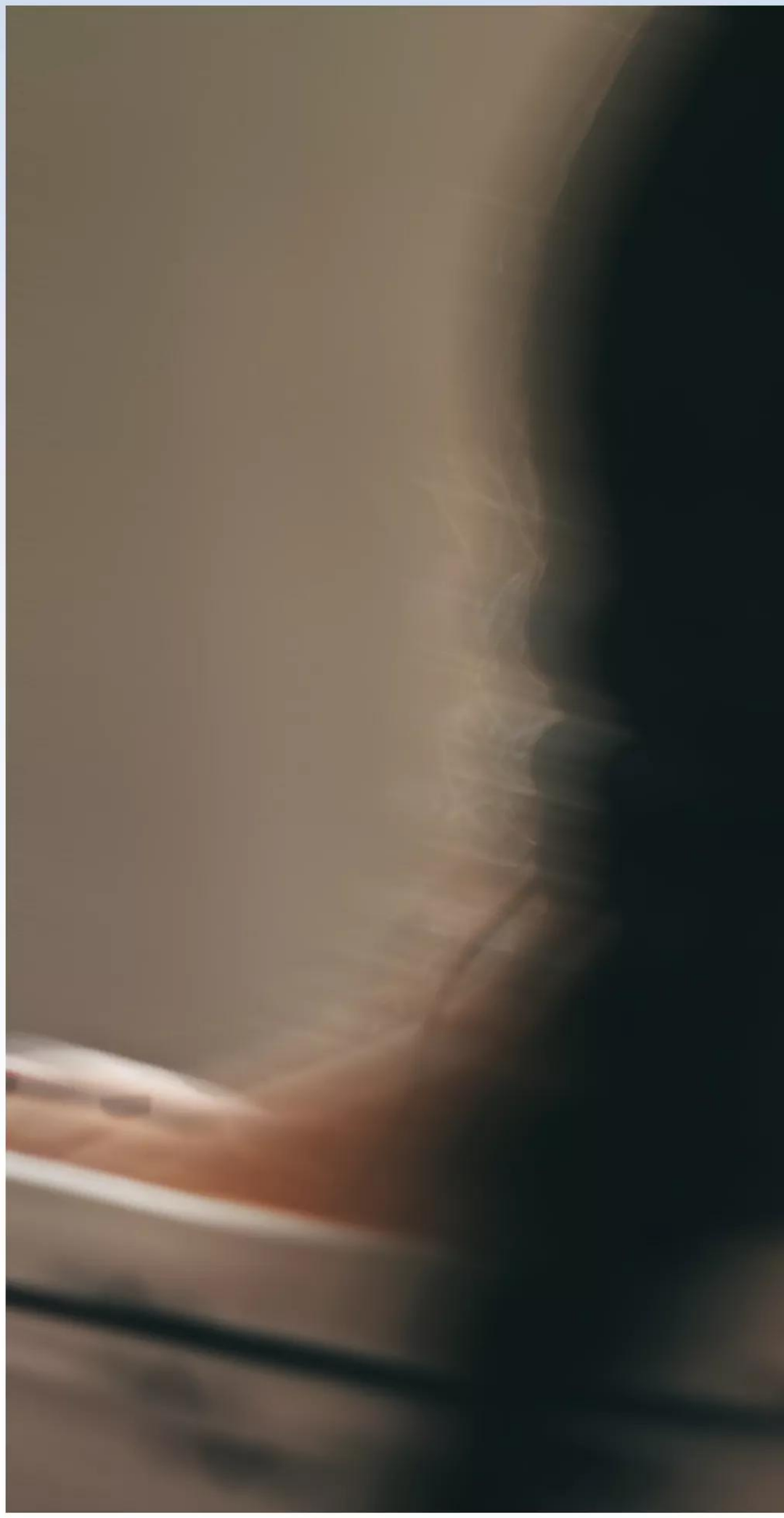
Getting help is a privilege, too. Families who can afford therapy at £50+ per session can go private, but more than 250,000 girls are languishing on the waiting list for support through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The bottleneck is multifactorial, says Ellie White, policy and public affairs manager at mental health charity YoungMinds. Experts point to a rise in referrals, historic underfunding and a shortage of psychiatrists – a role that takes about 13 years to train for. But the consequences are stark: 32,000 children are waiting more than two years for their first appointment with a mental health professional within CAMHS; 39% have their referral closed before accessing support; and just one in three with a diagnosable mental health condition get access to NHS care – with many reaching crisis point in A&E. It's a picture mirrored by our own research; one in five of those we surveyed told us a girl in their family has experienced a mental health crisis or hospitalisation.

Meanwhile, parents and carers are left to plug the gap – along with charities. Stevie Goulding is senior manager of the parents and carers services at YoungMinds, where common concerns include anxiety, depression, self-harm and eating disorders. 'They are often coming to us out of desperation, having exhausted all avenues,' she says. 'Of course, their main concern is their child, but we'll also provide them with emotional support, too,' she says. In our research, 45% of those with a teenage girl in their life told us their loved one's mental health struggles are affecting their own – rising to 60% among parents. Teachers shoulder the burden, too. A recent report by the charity Teach First linked the recruitment and retention crisis to teachers becoming de facto welfare officers, with 84% spending more time helping pupils with mental health issues over the last academic year. That's if they're in school at all; the number of children recorded as 'missing education' in the academic year 2022 to 2023 was up by 25% compared with the previous period – a hangover from the pandemic, which almost half of those we surveyed (45%) believe had a harmful or devastating impact on the mental health of girls.

'Parents are often coming to us out of desperation, having exhausted all avenues'

GIRLS WILL BE GIRLS

Intense confusion and insecurity: those are the feelings that loom large when Freya India recalls her teenage years – along with a punishing self-criticism for



CAUSE FOR HOPE

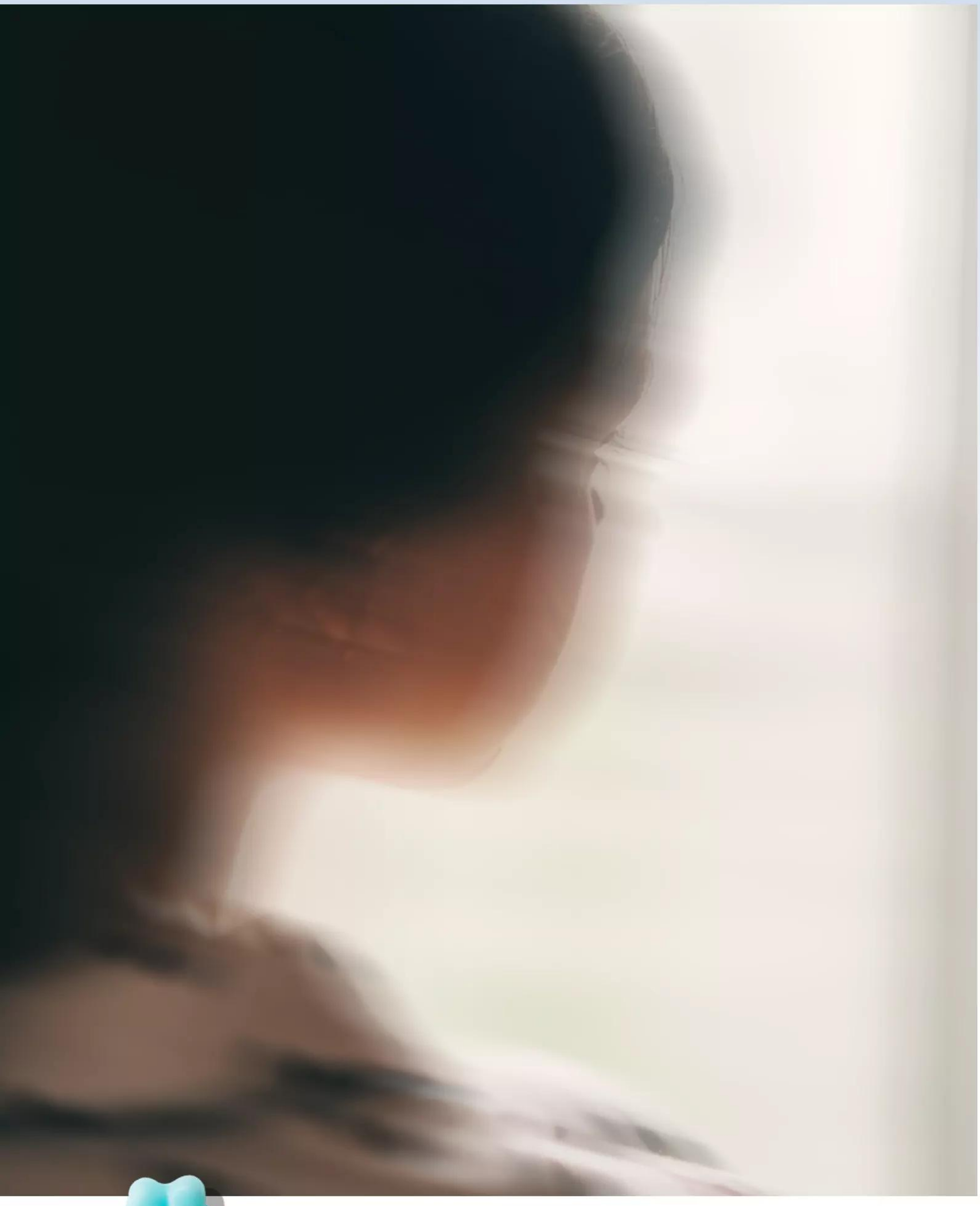
What's making those we polled feel optimistic about girls' futures?

47% Increased awareness about tackling misogyny and male violence in young men

68% Girls being open to conversations about their mental health – with 20% initiating those conversations

50% Girls being exposed to strong female role models in popular culture

66% Girls seeing different examples of what it means to be a successful, fulfilled woman



not coping as others seemed to be. It was only when she reached her twenties that she found a new perspective. 'Problems [looks, feelings, relationships, family] may be age-old,' the 25-year-old London-based writer tells *WH,* 'but each of these has been amplified to a degree that's unmanageable for the average girl. And we're balancing them with a lot of unprecedented challenges.' Such challenges are the inspiration behind her newsletter, GIRLS, which has a 27,000-strong subscriber list. Freya tells *WH* that appearance concerns have been intensified by digitally falsified beauty standards, while the relationships that might have represented a salve in the past are now both harder to forge and find solace in; platonic bonds are dictated by 'likes' and comparison culture, while romantic ones are influenced by porn and dating apps.

The idea that today's girls are coming of age in a particularly hostile environment is a sentiment that is underscored by our own findings, with respondents highlighting social media, body image-based pressures and misogyny as three key forces.

'One girl told me she had a make-up look for the daytime and a "no-make-up make-up look" for when she wanted to FaceTime or Snapchat from bed,' says Naomi Magnus, a psychotherapist at North London Therapy who specialises in helping teens, referring to the way alarming screen-time stats affect self-esteem – the average girl spends 127 minutes on TikTok and 40 minutes on Instagram every day*).

This is supported by a study from YoungMinds that found social media to have a negative impact on the self-esteem of almost half of girls. At the same time, these platforms are catalysing premature sexualisation. 'Girls in their early teens often encounter the trappings of sexualisation for the first time via their phones,' says Magnus. 'They're trying to make sense of a world they're not adult enough for.'

INDECENT EXPOSURE

Tied into mature influences is a rude introduction to sexual harassment, something over a quarter of 13 to 18-year-old girls experience. In our research, the threat of coming of age in a climate of misogyny and sexual harassment was a primary basis for concern about how this generation will fare as adults. Dr Knowles isn't surprised. 'Girls are already feeling an unfairness in standards of appearance, safety on the street, expectations in school and caring responsibilities,' she says. 'What they're trying to articulate is sexism and gender inequality.'

One of the Post-it notes in her office reads 'Andrew Tate'. The controversial influencer is one of many who are 'radicalising' boys into 'extreme misogyny' in a way that is 'quite terrifying', found a report from the National Police Chiefs' Council, published in July. And research into the impact of this culture makes for grim reading. A study in *The Lancet* has linked the sexual violence disproportionately experienced by girls to the large gender gap in internalising mental ill health. Dr Northover tells *WH* that it can even cause PTSD.

If misogyny and male violence sit at the sharper end of the scale, the girls of today are also enduring the amplification of that familiar source of anxiety: school. 'Levels of

SOURCES: *HOUSE OF LORDS LIBRARY; STATISTA. PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES; PIXELEYES. ILLUSTRATIONS: ALEX MURAVEV AT NOUN PROJECT

DAUGHTER

‘BOYS HAVE AN UNREALISTIC VIEW OF HOW GIRLS SHOULD BE – I WISH THEY’D BE KINDER’

Lottie, 14, from Leeds

‘I’ve been brought up by my mum to know that it’s okay to struggle, and the importance of talking about feelings – her reassuring words were reflected in school assemblies. If I’m not feeling great, I’ll lean on the support of family and friends, and exercise – I like PE lessons, walks and playing football.

We’ve had talks on social media use; it’s portrayed as a scary and negative place we shouldn’t be on too much. In my experience – using TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat – it’s not like that.

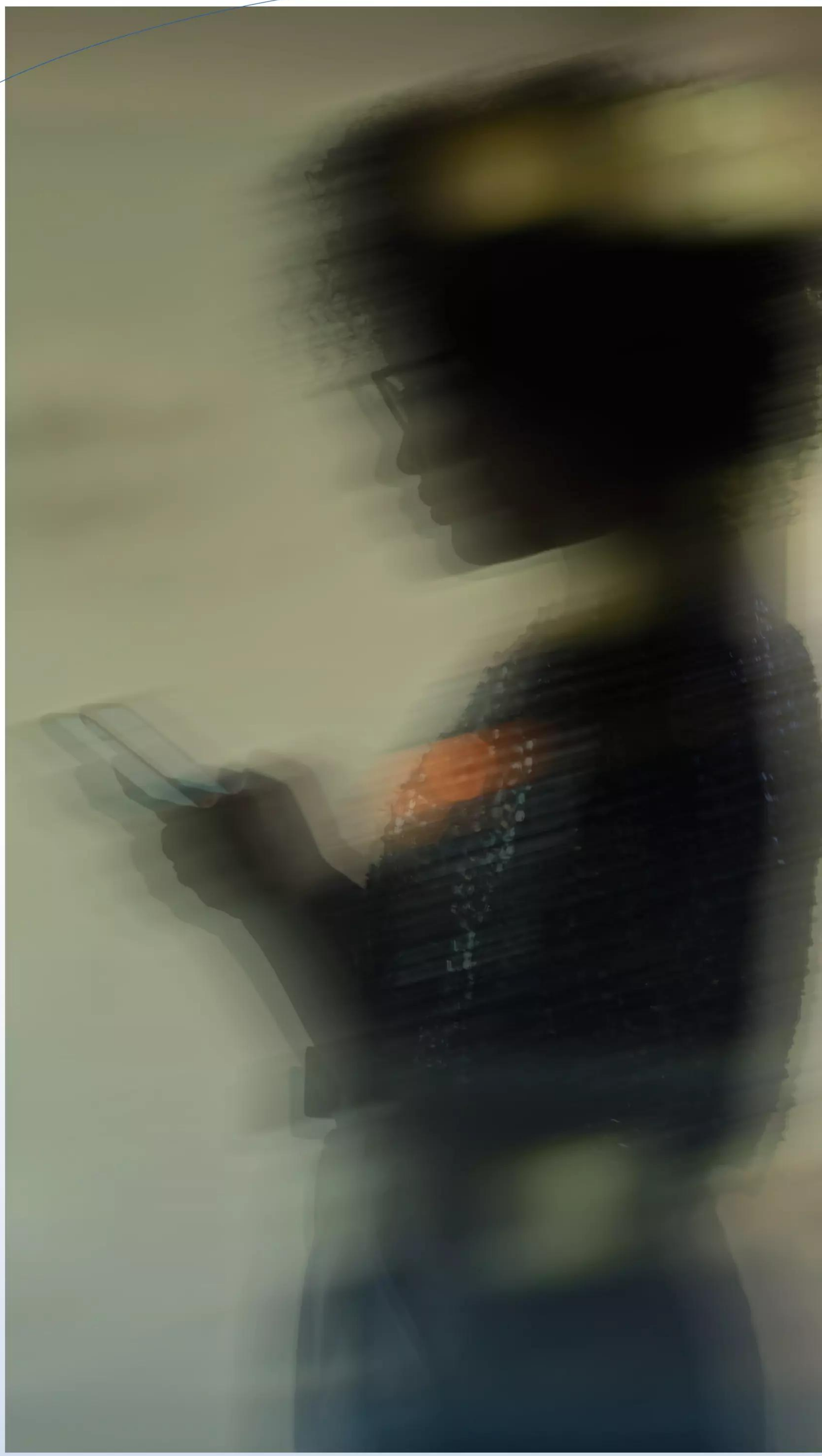
I follow people I look up to, like England women’s football captain Leah Williamson, and being able to connect with my friends during the pandemic helped ward off loneliness. We girls will all comment things like ‘you’re so beautiful’ under friends’ posts.

But in year eight I first noticed boys saying things that made me uncomfortable, including leaving negative comments on girls’ posts. They have a stereotypical “type” for how girls should be – with a “perfect” body, dress and how to act a particular way.

Some girls really feel the pressure of these unrealistic expectations, feeling they’re not good enough. Recently, a boy made a comment that really affected one of my friends, who doesn’t like her body.

If I could wave a magic wand, it would be for boys to realise that what they say can hurt. I think they should be taught how to treat girls and be more sensitive when commenting on someone’s appearance.

They’re not all bad – my boyfriend and his friends are really caring, which is just as well, as we’re now in year 10, working towards our GCSEs. I’m aiming to study psychology at A-level, which I’d like to maybe pursue as a career one day.’



MOTHER

‘IT’S TOO EASY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO CONSTANTLY BE IN EACH OTHER’S WORLDS’

Anna Shears (Lottie’s mum), a Leeds-based positive psychology coach

‘While wanting to fit in is timeless, it was nothing on the scale that Lottie is experiencing now – driven by social media.

While I see the way the connectivity benefits her, the ability children have to constantly be in each other’s worlds makes me uncomfortable. I think smartphone bans in schools are a great idea – I’m fortunate that Lottie’s school already has policies in place, so phones are turned off all day. They need boundaries and constraints in place.

It was wanting to be a more present mum to Lottie and her 12-year-old sister that saw me change careers. I’d been working in health and social care policy at the Department of Health for 17 years and had reached a senior position. But I struggled with work-life balance – trying to regain my pre-maternity leave career “identity” while raising two small children.

I retrained in positive psychology and started to help others. Something I’ve observed from my all-female client base is how many of the challenges they face as adults – perfectionism, imposter syndrome, fear of rejection, lack of confidence and self-doubt – stem from them not feeling “good enough” as teens.

It’s why I’ve prioritised having an open and honest relationship with my daughters. There’s no topic off limits and no problem we can’t work out together.

I also want to raise them with a strong self-belief to build their resilience against the challenges they’ll inevitably face.’

school stress among girls have been increasing,’ says Dr Joanna Inchley, a University of Glasgow researcher of adolescent mental health, who led a study that found rising sleep deprivation among teenage girls in Scotland, and that this, along with school work, may be contributing to mental health problems.

UCL research has even linked term-time exam worries to stress-related emergency hospital admissions among teenagers. For Linsey Lunny, founder of Hidden Strength, a free mental health app for teenagers that launched in May, the problem stems from perfectionism. When Lunny conducted a pilot for her app, she was struck by an overwhelming sense from girls of not feeling ‘good enough’ – from the way they should look to their friendship groups. Considered in the context of coming of age in a society with sky-high tuition fees and living costs, coupled with a threadbare safety net, and where success can feel essential for survival, this maladaptive pressure to choose and live a flawless existence can seem grimly logical.

‘If I’d been able to learn coping mechanisms, it might have stopped things escalating’

On the question of where we go from here, smartphones – and the limitless access to digital platforms they provide – loom large. ‘It’s the problematic use [of social media] that’s the issue,’ says Dr Northover, ‘which it can be if it has become addictive or if you’re using it to boost your self-esteem.’ It’s a point underlined in August by King’s College London researchers, who linked ‘problematic smartphone use’ with doubled anxiety rates.

SETTING LIMITS

If this generation were the smartphone guinea pigs (and bearing the scars), a pushback is happening. There’s the UK-based Smartphone Free Childhood campaign, which prioritises local collective action, such as its Parent Pact, connecting parents in the same region who pledge to not buy their child a smartphone until the end of year nine. And in Australia there are plans to bring in a minimum age for social media access, thought to be between 14 and 16, by the end of the year.

Intervention is something those we polled sympathise with: 31% believe regulating harmful content on social media platforms would make the biggest difference to girls’ mental health and 16% support banning smartphones for the under 16s, to that same end. ‘New measures designed to reduce the risk posed to young people online were introduced last year as part of the Online Safety Bill,’ says Dr Northover. ‘It’s essential that social media companies are held to account by this legislation.’

Used safely, social media can be a place for teens to maintain healthy connections – something girls are increasingly struggling with, given their rising rates of loneliness. For Lunny, harnessing the power of digital fluency can also reduce barriers to early mental health intervention – a goal close to her heart, following her own eating disorder as a teen. ‘If I’d been able to learn coping mechanisms sooner, it might have stopped things escalating,’ she says. Her platform has an intentional social media feel – indicative of her belief that schools withdrawing phones isn’t the answer – with an expert-approved ‘help zone’ of TikTok-style videos, Snapchat-type images and an Instagram-esque feed. Importantly, the ‘therapy hub’ can be accessed at a tap, allowing users to go straight through to a therapist at no cost.

But the friction to all kinds of care needs addressing, urgently. Labour has pledged 8,500 new NHS staff in its manifesto to treat

children and adults with mental health problems, as well as walk-in mental health hubs in communities and extra support in schools. White will be watching closely. 'The new government has our desired policies in its manifesto, and we'll be making sure they deliver on those big, bold steps, rather than the fiddling around the edges that we've seen for so long.'

And yet, with the Post-it notes staring down at her, Dr Knowles is all too aware that broader societal change is fundamental. 'There's such an emphasis on the solution being with the individual – that all we need to do is practise mindfulness or reduce the CAMHS waiting list,' she notes. While these things play a role, she wants to see a 'firefighting' approach, one that tackles the structural issues such as obsession with the female body and the mainstreaming of misogyny. As Freya puts it, 'I didn't feel like I fit into this modern world, because there are so many things wrong with it.' WH

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED FROM THIS GOVERNMENT, ACCORDING TO YOUNGMINDS

- **An education system that is about more than academic achievement – starting with mental health support teams in every school.**
- A mental health system that is more than just treatment – including setting up an open-access early support hub in every community, to give young people support before they reach crisis.
- **An effort to regain young women's trust. They're tired of talk and no action; they feel unheard and hopeless about the future. This government needs to earn their trust.**

'FEELING HELPLESS IN THE FACE OF HER STRUGGLES LEFT ME CRYING IN THE SHOWER'

Mother-of-two based in the North West

'My daughter was in year five when her difficulties became obvious. It was identified she had neurodevelopmental issues – specifically autism – which I've learned raise the risk of mental health issues. She went to classes as normal in year seven; then the pandemic hit and after that she refused to go.

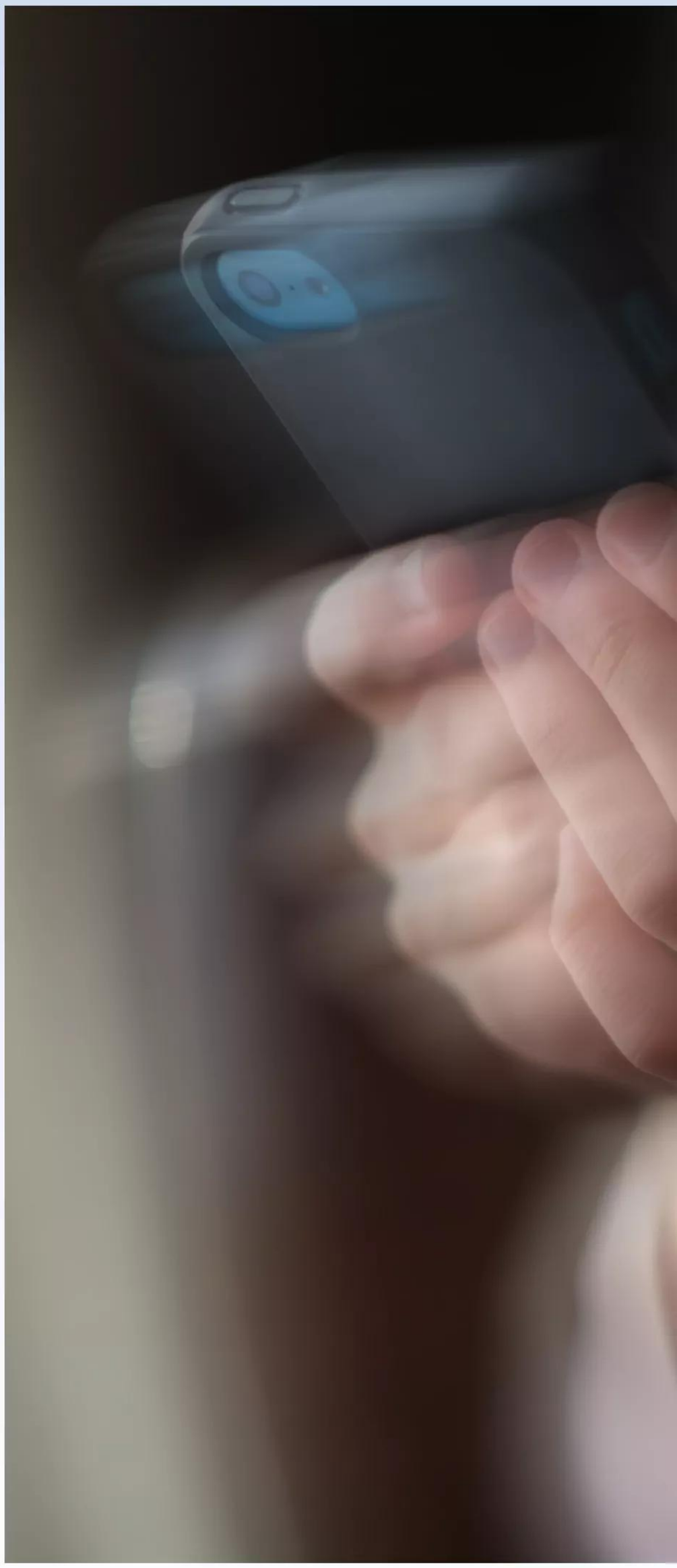
Staff encouraged us to push her and we did, but since her reluctance stemmed from total overwhelm, we were making things worse. In 2022, she refused to leave her room and began self-harming, but by early 2023 we were still waiting for support. We become increasingly frightened; it felt like we were losing our daughter.

Eventually, there was an at-home assessment, but CAMHS wanted her to travel for treatment, even though she was too poorly to leave her room. They said they couldn't make accommodations because of the demand they were experiencing. Advising us to search her room every day for instruments, to stop her harming herself, caused even more distress.

Things reached crisis point when she stopped eating – we were told to take her to A&E. There would be several more hospitalisations before I called YoungMinds. They took the time to listen, rather than blame, and advised us on how best to work with CAMHS. With their encouragement, we made the decision to stop searching her room – which proved pivotal.

My daughter is now 14 and has just started the school year with a new education healthcare plan. She has had a good CAMHS worker, a prescription for medication and has started making friends at clubs. She is still self-harming and I have to keep some items locked away, but this is our new normal – and we are focused on being a safe place for her.

I've turned a corner, too. For the past two years, I've been in survival mode – crying in the shower from the shame that I couldn't mitigate everything, and the heartbreak that her future will be difficult. I reduced my work hours and stopped working out – and our family life suffered. But, determined to set an example of positive mental health strategies, I recently hiked up a hill by myself. It felt significant. I did it for my daughters – and I did it for me.



The state of
modern
GIRLHOOD
Women's Health x YOUNGMINDS

Women's Health has partnered with the youth mental health charity YoungMinds to launch The State of Modern Girlhood, an ongoing initiative spotlighting the crisis in young women and girls' mental health. Together, we'll draw attention to the pressures girls are under – from misogyny and life online, to how economic and societal issues bear down on them. Look out for the Modern Girlhood badge across our platforms to hear from girls and the women who love them, plus the experts and changemakers demanding better for the next generation.

CONCERNED ABOUT A GIRL IN YOUR LIFE?

There are steps you can take if you're worried: remember, you are not alone

Trust your gut
'While behaviour may fall into the "typical teenage" kind, trust your instinct,' advises YoungMinds' Stevie Goulding.

Contact your GP
They should be your first port of call – able to point you in the direction of support while you wait to be seen by CAMHS.

Speak to their school
Most have safeguarding in place and someone should be able to direct you to local services.

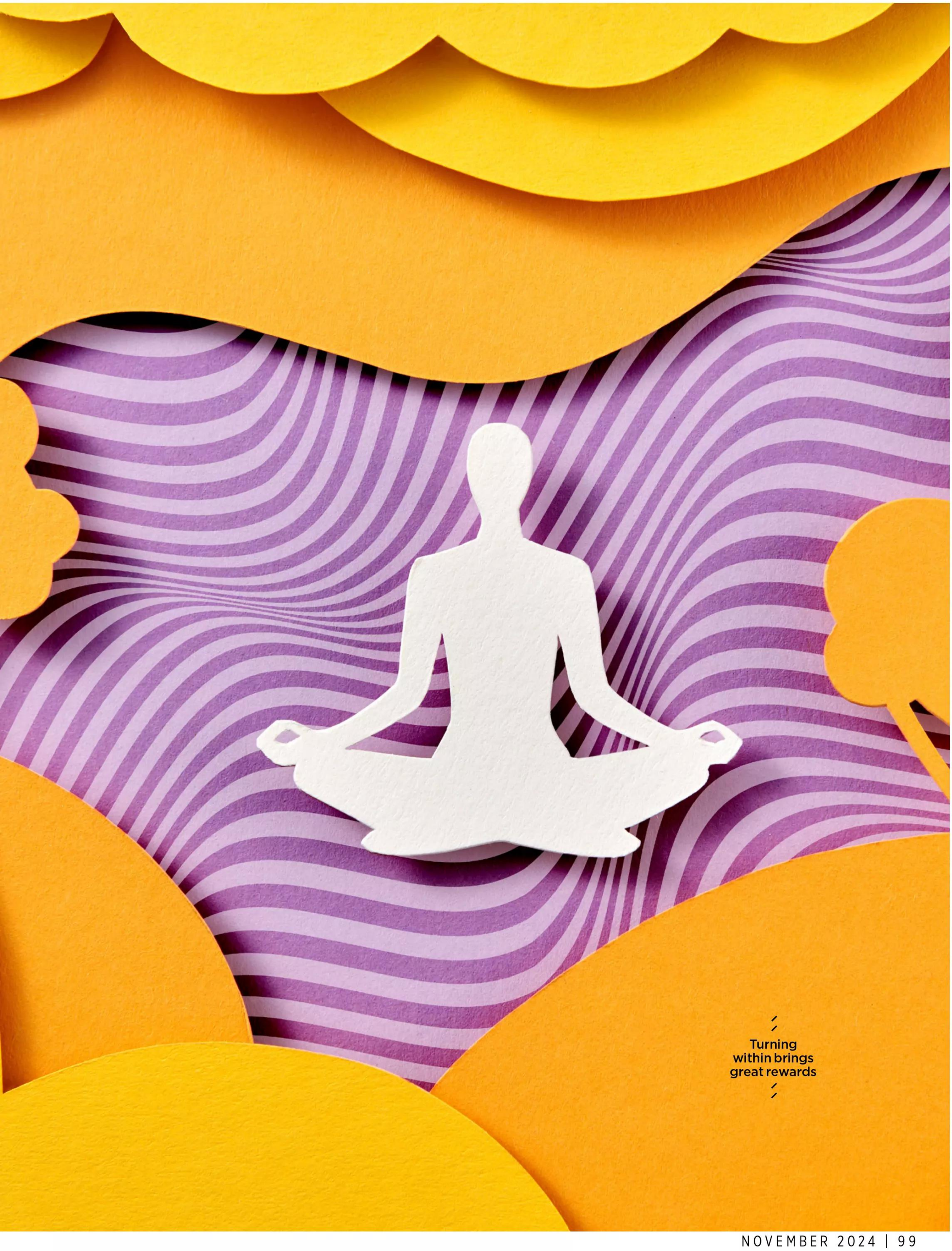
Explore therapy
If you have the funds, you can find a private therapist through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Access free support
Get in touch via the YoungMinds helpline: 0808 802 5544.

Deep state

Economic instability, climate change and unprecedented levels of mental illness have created fertile conditions for what researchers are calling the ‘third wave’ of meditation research. And with benefits ranging from ‘bliss states’ to an ability to silence your inner critic, it’s never been more alluring. One meditation-curious writer asks if it’s time to look beyond your mindfulness app...

WORDS: CLAUDIA CANAVAN


Turning
within brings
great rewards

On a meditation retreat earlier this year, in the gentle hippy beach town of Mazunte in Mexico, I experienced a pure, clear high that felt close to angelic. I was suffused with a boundless love that felt as if it was rolling through my body and out through my fingertips, flitting through the hot, thick air and into the people around me. The daisy chain of petty jealousies and grinding ruminations encircling my mind, it seemed, had been dissolved. I didn't realise I was crying, but I touched my face to find it sopping.

I'd come to this centre, with its water-drawn mosquitoes and 40-degree heat, in search of something like this. I'd had an experience that rhymed with this one sitting at home and tinkering with YouTube meditations over the winter, arriving here on the advice of a friend who's well versed in such matters, whom I asked for guidance. It worked. I reached this state after two days spent mostly in meditation of different strokes, eventually trying a practice in which I concentrated, hard, on the centre of my chest. It was this that caused the streaming ecstasy to erupt.

Like most euphoric experiences, this one didn't permanently shatter the bad stuff in my head. When my normality resumed, the daisy chain re-threaded itself – though a slightly more delicate version, looser, wound less tightly. The experience left a deep impression on me. If I managed to get to that place once, surely I could go back? What even was it? And where were the other people who'd had this experience? Days later, scrolling X, I found people talking about the jhanas.

State talking

The jhanas are a series of eight or nine – depending on who you ask – states of intense concentration, each one involving a deeper, more focused absorption. Some might enter a jhana and 'pop' out rapidly; advanced practitioners may be able to hold the state for longer, running through to the later stages.

Today, they're often associated with Buddhism, though some experts point to evidence of the states being described in writings that pre-date the religion. 'Some schools [of thought] teach a lighter version, which is easier to get into,' shares Michael Lifshitz, an assistant professor of psychiatry at McGill University, who's worked on a study of experienced jhana meditators, the results of which are pending. 'Others classify a jhana as necessitating not thinking about anything for many minutes or even hours, attention being completely stable on the object of meditation.'

Meditation teachers I consulted for this piece told me my own experience didn't sound like a jhana, but more a concentrated 'heart-opening'. But both could be described as 'advanced' or 'deep' meditation – and they're the subject of an emerging field of study. Over at Harvard University, the Meditation Research Program is working to demystify the brain on advanced meditation in an attempt to understand if claims of living a life more free from stress and worry stand up. 'We've heard stories from advanced practitioners about deep suffering and how they achieved radical healing [through] advanced meditation,' says Matthew Sacchet, a neuroscientist and the programme's director. 'I believe that if someone claims to have transcended suffering via these practices, we need to do our best to understand that.'

He isn't the only one who thinks so. At UC Berkeley, neuroscientist Kathryn Devaney is attempting to identify what the states look like in the brain. Last year, collaborative work between Professor Sacchet's Harvard lab and other institutions saw a paper published on *nirodha samāpatti*,

The brain can be rewired with a little practice

or 'cessation' – a bewildering psychological state in which a practitioner relays that they were able to 'turn off' their conscious experience, before coming back.

'Advanced meditation is deeper engagement with meditation that includes states that unfold with time and mastery,' says Professor Sacchet, on the question of how this line of inquiry differs from clocking up 10 minutes a day on your Headspace app. 'Common mindfulness programmes are focused on the reduction of stress, whereas advanced meditation includes ecstatic bliss states, deep insight into the mind and ultimately what we call "transformation" – lasting changes to one's understanding or way of being in the world.'

Deep impact

The study of meditation isn't new, of course. Sara Lazar, a Harvard psychology professor, has been using neuroimaging to detect the impact of the practice on brain structure since the 90s; Judson Brewer, a neuroscientist at Brown University, began investigating the neural mechanisms of mindfulness in the 2010s. There is, though,

'My experience of being a person in the world is different'

a sense of a new generation of deeper meditation research, says Dr Lifshitz. 'Researchers are getting more comfortable discussing [previously taboo] advanced meditation and asking how do those deeper stages of the contemplative path work? Can we measure these things; in doing so can we make them more widely available?' Professor Sacchet traces this 'third wave' of meditation research back to this current (gnarly) moment. 'I think with the pandemic, the incredible burden of mental illness, global political and economic instability and climate change, and also the rise of psychedelics in the mainstream, we are entering a new era of openness.'

It was her own openness that drove Dr Devaney's desire to study it. A devoted meditation practitioner and teacher, alongside her scientific work, she spent 15 years engaged in vipassana practice ('vipassana' translates to 'insight' – the practice focuses on cultivating deep attention and awareness), which resulted in benefits around concentration, but saw her progress plateau. In recent years, she started working with eminent teacher Michael Taft. Within six months, she experienced dramatic internal shifts. 'My experience of being a person in the world was markedly different than it had been at the beginning. I was less stressed and happier to be alive.' The number of hours of practice it might take to achieve this, she notes, is deeply dependent on you as an individual, as well as your style of practice. But entering rarefied states isn't necessarily the preserve of those who've racked up thousands of hours on the cushion.

Nadia Asparouhova is a US writer and researcher of digital anthropology – how we interact with tech in the modern era – living in Miami. Her meditative practice historically consisted of a few 15-minute stints here and there. But after writing a magazine article on jhana-curious Silicon Valley types, she found herself at Jhourney – a secular jhana retreat in California run by former software engineers. After following specific instructions on how to access the state, she slipped into the first jhana in under an hour; soon, she found herself running through jhanas two, three and four. 'Accessing the first jhana felt intensely euphoric,' she tells me. She compares the feeling to the flow states you slip into during intense periods of concentration and references a metaphor doing the rounds in jhana circles; that the state can be described as 'the opposite of a panic attack'.

Switch off

That those who've been there lean on such powerful language to articulate their

Blissed out

experience is one reason those contributing to meditation's third wave of research are so keen to understand the physiology involved.

'During advanced concentrative absorption meditation, we've observed a shift of activity from the anterior to posterior part of the brain, that is, from front to back,' shares Professor Sacchet. 'This mirrors a shift from a mind engaged with conceptual thought to one that is increasingly present.' When Dr Lifshitz's team recorded advanced practitioners getting into the first to fourth jhana, they found a flexibility to the way different brain areas communicate. 'Over the course of a retreat we measured people becoming more creative in their thinking and less constrained by habit,' he explains.

Their findings ring true for Nadia. Returning for a second retreat led to her accessing later states, including cessation, or *nirodha samāpatti*, a state in which consciousness is temporarily 'switched off'. 'I think general anaesthesia is the closest thing I can compare it to,' she tells

'I think general anaesthesia is the closest thing I can compare it to'

me. 'You've got this memory of going down, and then you only realise you were ever out because you come back.' (It's not like falling asleep, she says, noting that waking up from slumber feels very different.) When I ask Nadia how her life – with all its bills and emails – doesn't fall apart with this new knowledge, she says, 'The simplest way to describe it is like a loss of a narrative self, where you don't have this constant internal voice saying "what's going on? How do I feel about this thing?" It's not that I'm not thinking about things,' she adds.

Self-care

Of course, if you have experience of alarming mental-health incidents like derealisation – feeling like your surroundings aren't 'real' – then the idea of dampening your sense of self might sound familiar, and not in a good way. Indeed, some people do report scary experiences. Mandy Johnson is a relationship, family and recovery coach at Cheetah House – a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping people who've experienced distressing experiences born of meditation. A former mindfulness teacher, Mandy had a destabilising experience on day

Seek and you will find (hopefully)

six of a silent retreat in 2017, just before she turned 50. Childhood trauma resurfaced, her sense of self began to fray and she began experiencing severe tinnitus. After two years of professional help, she was able to touch the contours of reality again, eventually recovering.

Precise data on how many people might deal with adverse experiences is 'still rolling in' says Nathan Fisher, a postdoctoral fellow at McGill University, who also offers care to meditators in distress via Cheetah House. 'Asking how many people deal with adverse effects is difficult. Is it that somebody has had a bad session? Or a bad day? Or a challenging month?' He points to research from academics – including Cheetah House founder and Brown University psychiatry professor Willougby Britton – which found that, of people who had taken part in mindfulness-based programmes, 6% to 14% experienced 'lasting bad effects' from over a day to over a month. Another paper found that anxiety, traumatic re-experiencing and emotional sensitivity were the most common meditation-related adverse effects, with 'childhood adversity' leading to a raised risk.

Dr Devaney recommends that anyone with a history of serious trauma explores therapy before beginning meditation; then, if you do proceed, she suggests finding a trauma-informed teacher, focusing more on loving kindness or metta practice – which have less potential for unravelling one's sense of self – and trusting your intuition.

'Move slowly,' she cautions. 'If you imagine your psychological structure as a game of Jenga, you don't want to... start pulling out foundational pieces right away. Some people want to "speedrun enlightenment", but we want to gently explore our experience, not pull the rug out from under ourselves.'

Cheat code

For those for whom poking into hitherto untapped edges of how the mind works, the results can be profound – both on and off the cushion. 'I was working on a start-up and it imploded. I was living off savings. It was a time of massive uncertainty,' Dr Devaney tells me, of her life in 2018. 'But there was this noticeable lack of angst about any of it. I kept being like: "Okay, let's do the next thing."' For Nadia, the impact has been similarly enduring. 'Before, I'd fixate on negative emotions, causing them to grow. Now, I can shift my attention to something else and focus on that instead,' she explains, before reaching for a recent example. 'I had a big work meeting that I felt jittery about. But taking a few moments to move through the first few jhanas, I redirected that energy to a clear, calm place in my body, so that I didn't feel anxious any more. It felt as if I had reached out and "grabbed" all these scattered bits of energy and rearranged them in my body. It was astonishing to realise that I could control my mood so directly.'

It strikes me that jhanas could be something of a cheat code for life, one that's long gone unnoticed in our culture.

'Many westerners are aware that there's a "deep end" to the meditation pool, but it's often assumed to be inaccessible or perhaps incompatible with modern life,' says Professor Sacchet.

If findings are translated into practical applications, including tech, you might be able to get there even faster. 'A better understanding of the neural mechanisms of advanced meditation may help us develop neurofeedback or neurostimulation to potentially facilitate accelerated meditative development.' Indeed, the original plan for Jhourney was the development of a headset to help people get into the jhanas faster – tech the team are still working on, alongside hosting a growing number of retreats to meet what they describe as 'overwhelming' demand. While it's hard to say when such a device could be ready for the public, co-founder Stephen Zerfas tells me that five years is a closer ballpark than 15.

Four months on from the experience that piqued my curiosity, my interest in the jhanas has only increased. While my at-home experiments using instructions I've found online haven't yielded such states yet, my on-cushion hours have helped me to develop a pleasant full-body sensation – one which feels like energy is spooling down from the crown of my head and out through my fingers. Being able to access that on tap, alone, feels like a powerful tool to have in my pocket. I'm planning on attending an online Jhourney retreat soon. Besides, Nadia's reflections are plenty motivation to keep me trying. 'Life is the same,' she says. 'It's just effortless.' WH

ARTWORK: STOCKSY

Advance your practice

Taking your practice to 'advanced' status has more to do with the time and intensity with which you meditate as opposed to the genre. You could tinker with any of the concepts below for 10 minutes, without necessarily going 'deep'. Caveat: as with anything, you're likely to get better results in a meditation community or working with a teacher.

Jhana

While DIY-ing jhana practice, as opposed to hitting an intensive retreat, might take a little longer, some curious folk report entering the early stages – or at least accessing ecstatic feelings – by following online instructions. Find a practical guide to accessing the jhanas from Nadia at nadia.xyz/jhanas. Jhourney runs online, work hours-compatible retreats. Visit pages.jhourney.io.

Non-dual

Non-duality refers to the experience of ceasing to see the world and yourself as separate. You might imagine 'you' as a person in your head, controlling your body and interacting with other people. The purpose of meditation is to dissolve this – rather than looking at the ocean, you are the ocean. Search Michael Taft's Nondual Awareness Meditation series on YouTube.

Metta

This word comes from the ancient Indian language of Pāli – the tongue spoken by Buddha – and translates to 'loving-kindness'. The focus is on sending out warm wishes to all life, which can lead to big, euphoric experiences and days more suffused with good vibes towards other people. Try apps such as Insight Timer and search YouTube for deeper practices.

Matehood motherhood and me

WORDS: KIMBERLEY BOND

ILLUSTRATION: INMA HORTAS

That parenthood can irrevocably alter friendships has been well established – in column inches, Instagram captions and possibly even through your own experiences. But, asks one writer, are there ways for our relationships with our mates to survive this ultimate scene shift? And is that always the best outcome?

My best friend is sat across from me as we graze on a roast, her cheeks glowing, I assume, from a weekend of gardening and dachshund walking. 'I don't know how to tell you this,' Laura says, her eyes failing to meet mine, 'but I'm pregnant.' I stare at my plate as the news sinks in, spearing a slab of beef with my fork. I look up and see Laura's eyes swimming with tears. 'I was scared to tell you, in case you wouldn't want to be friends any more,' she says, wiping her face with her sleeve. 'We just seem to be on different paths.' I walk over to her and envelope her in a big hug. I hold her in my arms and assure her that this would never be the case, but already, just weeks into the pregnancy, I can feel her flat stomach beginning to protrude. The bump is already between us.

Since that day, I've been wondering, when it comes to friendships, how can we be sure they're going to last? After all, calling Laura my best friend does our relationship a disservice; she's more like a sister, who's picked me up and helped me survive when life threatened to overwhelm me. I will love her baby as if they were a part of my family, but, if I'm being honest, I understand why Laura was afraid her news would divide us. Already, since we met in our flatshare in Streatham six years ago, our lives have veered off in vastly different directions.

Back then, we were single girls in our mid-twenties, trying to navigate London's nightlife fuelled by the cheapest vodka our meagre wages could allow us. Now we're in our thirties and while I'm working in magazines (never the most bankable career path), she's on a chunky salary. But the gulf isn't just financial. It's 1pm on a Sunday and the sticky sweetness of sambuca is still coating my mouth. I'd set an early alarm to try to secure Glastonbury tickets. I'd failed. And I am also hungover.

She owns a three-bedroom house with a partner who's probably bringing her breakfast in bed right now. That life seems out of reach for me. My five-year relationship ended last summer and I'm still sharing a poky flat with said ex, unable to save for a new deposit.

Friendships, at the start, are bound by similarities. Workmates who bond over whip-cracking bosses, school friends who share stories of first kisses and heartbreaks. But as we get older, we make different decisions and reach the milestones of our lives at varying speeds. Life unfolds in complex and confusing ways, and when we can't relate to each other, cracks begin to form. A future without Laura is unfathomable to me. But for many, the death knell for a friendship sounds when lives take diverging paths.

Research conducted in 2023 shows friendship groups are getting smaller; the average Brit has 3.7 close friends, a 27% fall compared with the average of 5.1 a decade ago. Meanwhile, a 2022 survey* found we each fell out with, on average, four friends during the pandemic. And a 2021 US study* found 12% of Americans reported having no friends – a fourfold increase since 1990.

The latest available Office for National Statistics data found 27% of adults feel lonely always, often or some of the time – with women over-represented in the data. And the motherhood divide appears to exacerbate the picture. A Dutch study* found the intensity of friendships decreases when one of you becomes a parent, with the bonds being weakest when the child is three and only (maybe) returning to their former strength once the child turns five.

But data only tells us so much. I want to know what it feels like when the chasm presented by diverging paths becomes too wide to bridge. And what, if anything, we can do to keep our original chosen family close. And so, determined to ensure that my closest friendship – and possibly yours, too – doesn't fall into the motherhood gulf, I spoke to women who've been there to find out...

'I was scared to tell you, in case you wouldn't want to be friends'

*SOURCES: LIFESEARCH; SURVEY CENTER ON AMERICAN LIFE; DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

When you're a new mum

Priya, 35, was overjoyed when she realised she was pregnant. But, as the first woman in her friendship group to become a mother, she was left stunned when she saw some of her circle slowly phase her out of their lives

'You're not going to be one of those mums who bangs on about your kid all the time, are you?' I'd just announced my pregnancy to my closest friends at dinner and some of their comments left me wondering how supportive they'd be. Some of them want kids in the future, but I'm the first to have a baby.

My son is now four months old and my fears have been confirmed: I've not seen some of the girls since that dinner. It's hard, when having a baby is already so overwhelming – seeing your body change, the hormones and when you're panicking about what the future looks like. You feel isolated.

The birth of my son was traumatic but because none of my group had been through labour, I had no one to talk to about it. Things felt flat when some of my friends did visit. It felt almost like a box-ticking exercise: they'd shown their faces and seen my baby, but they didn't seem interested in how I was.

It's even harder when they pop up on Instagram. Sometimes, I scroll through and see the nights out they're on. It's like I'm in mourning for the life I used to have. I've nurtured new relationships with other women through apps for new mums such as Peanut and women I met in my antenatal classes. It has helped to have people who share the bond of motherhood, but I still miss my old friends and what we had.

Going through something similar?

Therapist and founder of Self Space Jodie Cariss says, 'If parenthood is dominating your life, there's no point pretending it isn't. Are you being distanced or are you feeling distanced because of the difference in life choices? If you can deduce what it is you're contributing to the experience, you'll have more power over how to change or shift that. Sit down with your friends. Try to be curious about how they're feeling and what might be happening between you. Have a resolution focus – set two or three objectives, such as meeting once every few weeks with no children, then doing something with children, or maybe learning something new together. This commitment to the friendship solidifies that you both care.' →

When you've decided that you don't want kids

After being diagnosed with an autoimmune condition in her mid-twenties, Shayna decided that she didn't want to pursue the path of motherhood. Now 31, she feels she's been pushed out of her university friendship group

I love kids: I have all the ingredients to make the best aunt. But when the doctors told me it would be more difficult to have children because of my diagnosis, I had this reckoning of, 'Do I want to have kids? Would I want to do this to my body?' And deep down, the answer was no. It's my university friends I've drifted from the most. We were best friends, but the physical distance – and the life choices – are what have separated us.

A lot of my uni friends are now parents. Before, we had things in common, but many are now solely interested in their children. And I love their kids, but there's only so much I can say about childcare and nappy changes. I feel we don't have a relationship I can have much input into any more. I'm still cordial with them, but I'm just not part of that core group. I can see in our group chat that they're planning play dates and sharing pictures of their kids. I could see myself being squeezed out and I felt I didn't fit in any longer.

When I was a child, my mum taught me that there are three types of relationships: reason, season and lifetime. I now realise my university friendship group was seasonal. It's sad and if I wasn't so strong-willed, I would feel upset at being frozen out. But as we're on different paths, I'm happy to step back for now.

When I meet new people, hearing that they don't want kids is a massive green flag. But that doesn't mean I won't get on with people who have children. My best friend is expecting a baby and I want to be deeply involved in that child's life. I know we'll be spending a lot of time together – but I've made it clear that while I'm happy for her, we still have to make time for each other, too. We have to be able to function as a unit away from her child. I'm lucky she understands that I'm child-free and I want to remain that way. I'm sad that I've lost friends, but I just try to see it as growth. I'm going to new places – but I just can't take everyone with me.

Going through something similar?

Cariss says, 'Helpful questions to ask yourself are, "Do I like or gain from being with their children?" And, "Is that something I want or do I want alone time with my friend, or a bit of both?" First, decide what it is you need from this friendship now and then ask what they need from you. And how can you meet in the middle? If you have agreed to once-a-month days out with your friend and the kids, then arrive for that without resentment and be present; otherwise, it'll feel draining and unfulfilling. Decide what a real yes and no is for you both and decide together: "Can we make this work?" You can then hope they will arrive with the same commitment.'

When you're juggling working motherhood

Felicity†, 41, forged a ride-or-die friendship with Kate† in her early twenties. At first, their bond survived Felicity becoming a mother, but as parenting pressures mounted, and her friend's resentment exploded, the divergence gave way to full friendship fallout

The chemistry was instant when I met Kate in the office in our early twenties; both single, we shared nights out and trips away. While I pursued a creative career and she went corporate – her salary soon dramatically outstripping mine – that didn't matter. She bonded quickly with the boyfriend who'd become my husband. Not even motherhood separated us; through my first pregnancy and during my daughter's early years, she was steadfast. Whether at the pumpkin patch or the pub, the friendship still flowed.

I couldn't have imagined how hard the transition to two would be – potty training a toddler with a clingy newborn was completely identity-changing. I'd confide in my best friend; she knew how broken I was from routinely working until midnight at my job after hours of caregiving.

Around that time, she began therapy – talking a lot about boundaries; pulling mutuals up when their behaviour didn't meet her expectations. She invited me over for brunch one Sunday to confront me about how inadequate a friend I was being. I was stunned by the insensitivity. I'd told her I felt like I was drowning, feeling like I was failing at the juggle of work and early motherhood.

As her high expectations and grudge-holding continued, I struggled to relax around her. I gravitated towards friends whose homes felt like places I could flop into – mess, baggage, imperfections. Many had children.

On group nights out, she'd drink heavily and rant about earning more and people expecting her to pay for drinks (not true). One night, her eyes went black and she screamed at me for being a bad friend. I was angry but empathetic: a relationship hadn't worked out, she was struggling being single.

She finally went too far when she told me mums get an easy ride at work; how child-free women like her have to overwork to compensate for all the mums who get to leave early. Given the states in which I'd called her, nearly broken from balancing work and mothering, this was unforgivable.

She messaged saying this wasn't about me; how she loves me; how she's sorry. There was a meet-up after and a lukewarm apology. But it had been over a year of this pattern; I'd grieved our friendship, slowly, for months. I didn't need to be her punching bag any more.

I've muted her on Instagram; our interactions are limited to a polite 'happy birthday'. I feel much happier: there are no nerves when I meet my friends: no fear of them judging me or blowing up. That friendship was real. But now? It's done.

Going through something similar?

Cariss says, 'It's important in any healthy, reciprocal friendship that people meet each other where they are. Friends should be there for us in our vulnerabilities, as well as our triumphs. If not, remember that friendships *can* end; treat yourself with tenderness as you may grieve losing that person and the version of yourself reflected in that relationship. Going forward, try to be honest about what you want from your relationships – therapy may help if you find this hard.' WH

'She went too far when she told me mums get an easy ride at work'

†NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

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Travel Well

Restinations

With one in three UK adults struggling to reach the land of nod, it's little wonder sleep tourism is bedding in. Here's our pick of the dreamiest breaks designed to catch you up on kip

➜

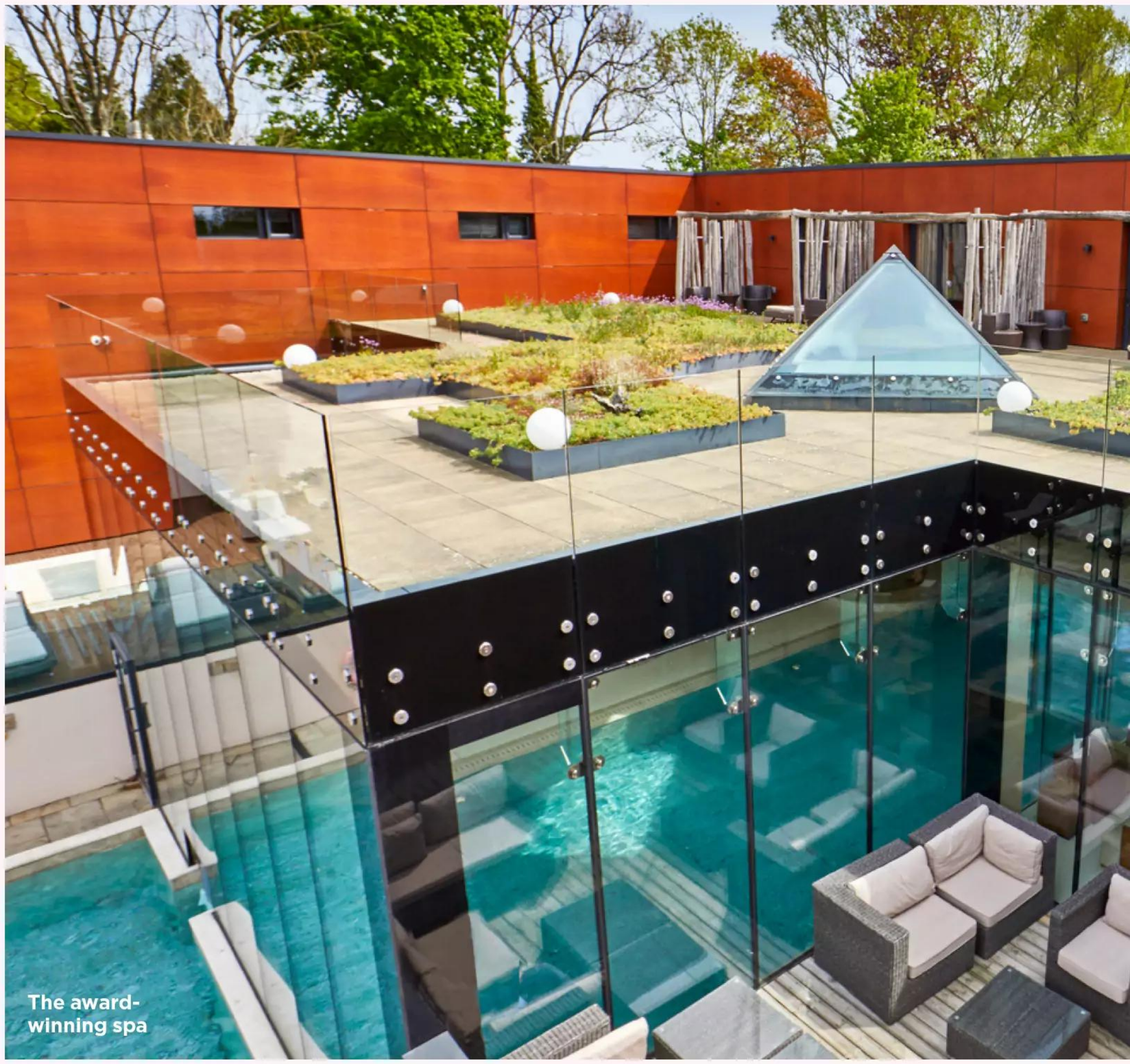
01

The Good Sleep Retreat, West Sussex

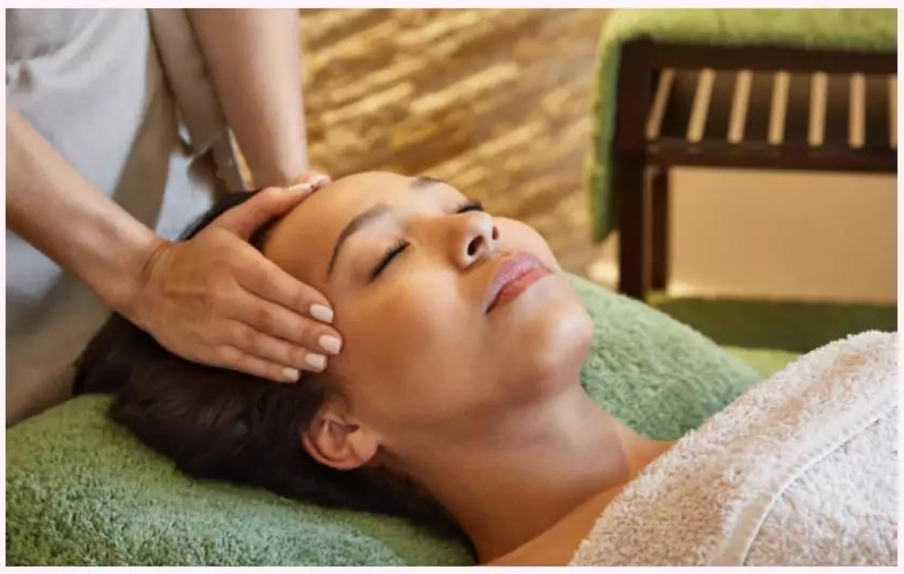
What: A snoozy stay in the South Downs
Where: Ockenden Manor Hotel & Spa, Cuckfield
How much: The Good Sleep Retreat package, from £999, including two nights in a spa suite, meals, full use of spa facilities and activities; pobhotels.com
Who: Priyankaa Joshi, senior health and wellness writer

A holiday where sleep is the goal? You had me at 'goodnight'.

A cortisol-calming break in the Sussex countryside, this isn't. Oh, fine, it is – but it's *so* much more than that. While the infrastructure of a good night's kip (pillow sprays, blackout blinds, eye masks) are fast becoming as mandatory in hotel-land as a minibar, The Good Sleep Retreat has taken the restination formula and run with it. Led by clinical psychologist Maja Schaedel, the three-day programme is designed to get to the root cause of your sleep issues and equip you with the necessary tools to help improve the quality of your Zs when you get back home. 'My main goal is to help people get to sleep and stay asleep,' says Dr Schaedel.



The award-winning spa



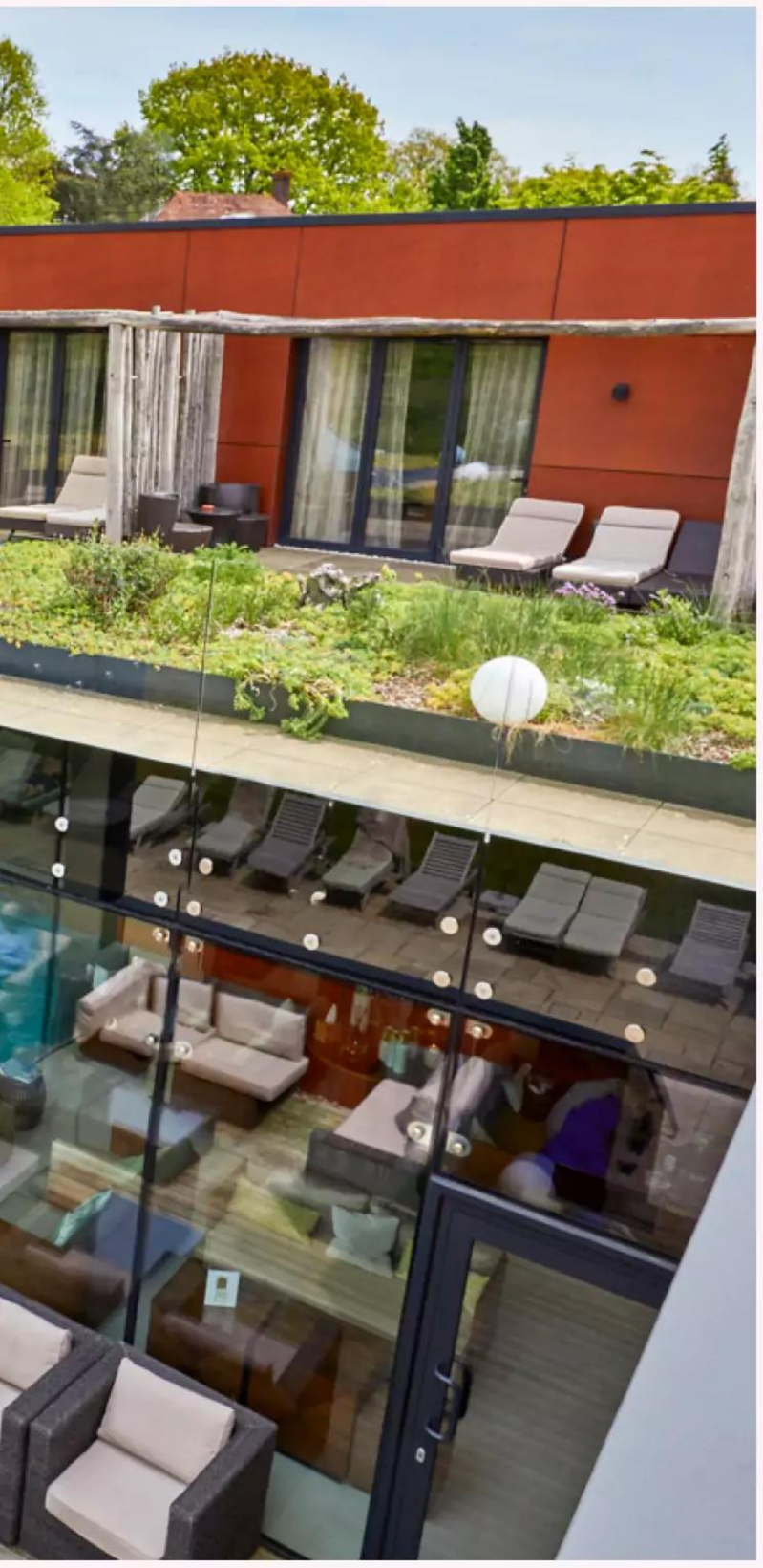
Lie back and get your head in the relaxation game

Who is it for?

You don't have to be an insomniac to stay here (but it helps). As someone who wakes up at least twice a night – every night – and struggles with sleep paralysis (the inability to move your body as you wake or fall asleep), I had high hopes when I checked in. But the 72-hour stay is for anyone who wants to reset their relationship with rest, whether you're adjusting to parenthood, dealing with chronic pain or do all your catastrophising between 2am and 4am. It will help you address specific issues (wake-ups, fitful sleep, taking a long time to drift off), as well as the stuff of good sleep hygiene.

So, what actually happens on a sleep retreat?

The retreat began with a workshop led by Dr Schaedel, who talked us through common sleep saboteurs, the health implications of not getting enough – it's linked to just about every modern disease and condition, from Alzheimer's to anxiety – and strategies to help us banish restless nights. It was in my one-to-one consultation, though, where we really got into my issues. After going through my sleep diary (you have to log your kip in the weeks leading up to your stay), I discovered stress, perfectionism and my pre-bedtime social media scrolling habit were the main offenders keeping me from quality rest. We discussed interventions – keeping a worry journal, limiting my screen time and working on my self-compassion with meditation



and breathwork – and just knowing I had tools that could help meant that I left the session feeling lighter.

What else is on the agenda?

Slumber aside, there's a big focus on movement, with yoga and breathwork sessions, group exercise classes and scenic guided hikes around the countryside. But don't panic, there's plenty of time in the itinerary for hanging out in the award-winning spa (complete with an indoor-outdoor swim-through pool, a steam room, a sauna and multiple relaxation rooms), curling up with a book in the drawing room or enjoying a glass of Sussex sparkling wine on the terrace overlooking the lawn.

How's the hotel?

In a word, gorgeous. We're talking a classic Elizabethan manor house set in eight acres of manicured grounds overlooking Cuckfield Park. In the main house, the vibe is cosy and old-world, with lattice windows, roaring fires and exposed beams, while the spa house has a more contemporary feel, with floor-to-ceiling windows. I stayed in a junior spa suite, complete with a giant free-standing tub and a semi-private sun terrace with views across the South Downs.

Anything else I should know?

The food: it's heavenly. It's led by award-winning head chef Stephen Crane and you can expect refined takes on classic British fare. On my first night, I was treated to a three-course affair. I started with celeriac soup and crusty sourdough followed by the lightest, fluffiest cheese soufflé I've ever tasted. Dessert was sticky toffee pudding drenched in butterscotch sauce.

The main house offers a perfect blend of luxury and heritage

The verdict?

The Good Sleep Retreat is the perfect mix of workshops, activities, food and relaxation. But the real test was what would happen after I checked out. In the weeks since, I've enjoyed consistent seven-hour nights, with significantly fewer wake-ups. I've put time limits on my social media apps, I keep my phone out of the bedroom and I try to do some breathwork after dimming the lights. Most importantly, I've stopped, well, losing sleep over it. Now that I'm no longer obsessed with optimising my sleep, I'm finding it's coming more naturally. A good sleep retreat, indeed.
Upcoming retreat dates: 27-29 November. ➜

02

A Room to Dream, London

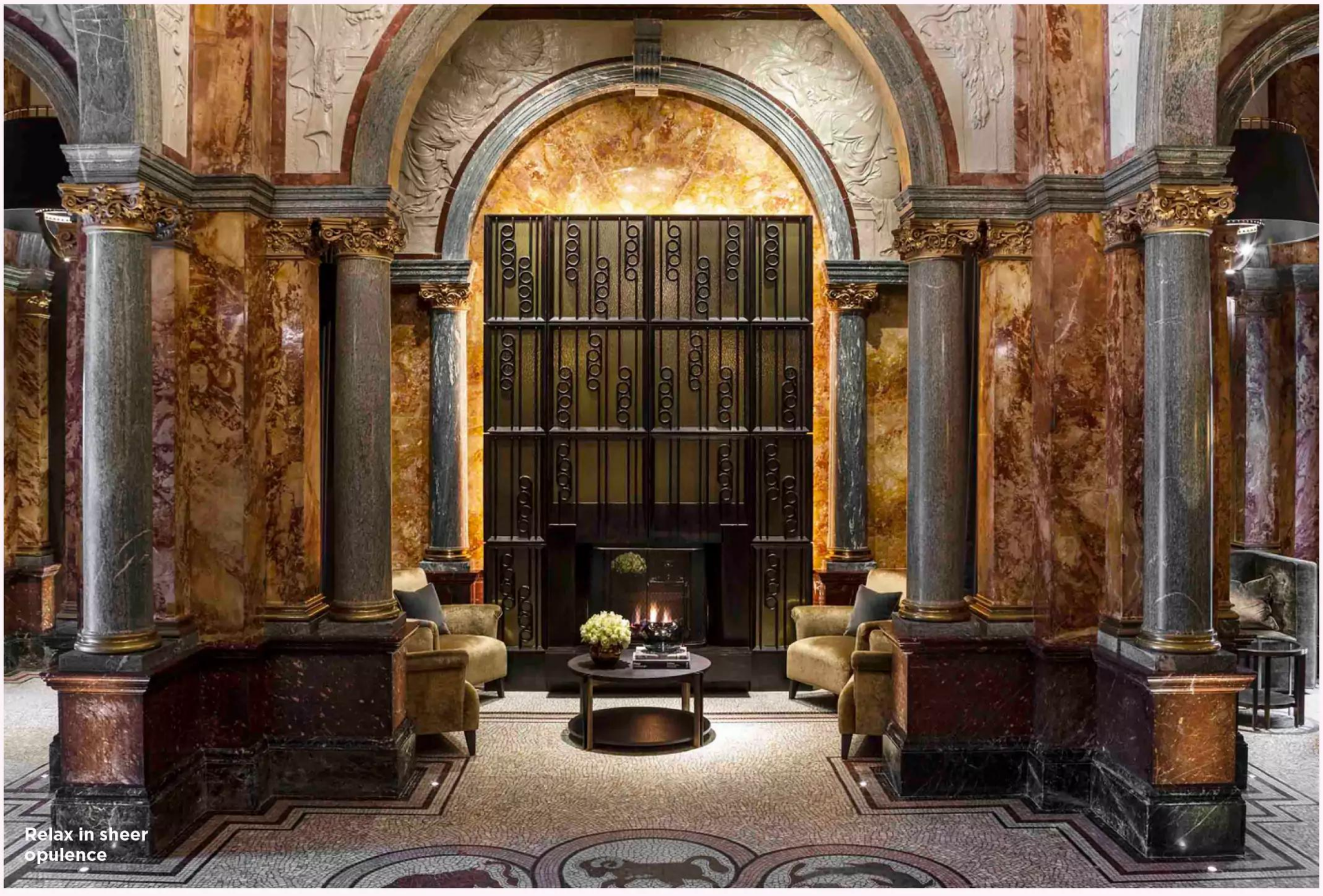
What: A dreamy 24 hours in the capital
Where: Fitzroy Kimpton Hotel
How much: The package can be added to your room price for £50; queen rooms from £300 per night; kimptonfitzroylondon.com
Who: Amanda Statham, travel editor

A peaceful night's sleep in... central London?

Stranger things have happened than an unbroken eight hours in WC1. If you're local to the capital and don't have the time to schlep to another part of the country to optimise your slumber, you've met your match. And fine-tuning your nocturnal habits is the very least of it. As well as promising to safely deliver you to the land of nod, the Fitzroy Kimpton's Room to Dream package gives you the chance to try lucid dreaming using artificial intelligence.

AI-enhanced sleeping? This all sounds a bit *Inception*...

It does. But reserve judgment while I tell you why it's an experience worth having. The world-first initiative, designed by lucid-dreaming teacher Charlie Morley, leads you into a hypnagogic state – the state of consciousness between wakefulness and sleep that aids lucid dreaming. If you're unfamiliar with the practice, it's a state in which you're aware you're asleep and you can control your actions. Buddhists have known about lucid dreaming for centuries, but the west is only just waking up to the benefits, which can include helping with depression, anxiety, PTSD, phobias, relationship issues, confidence and even sports performance. As someone who suffers from sleep issues (I'm not sure I've had a solid eight hours



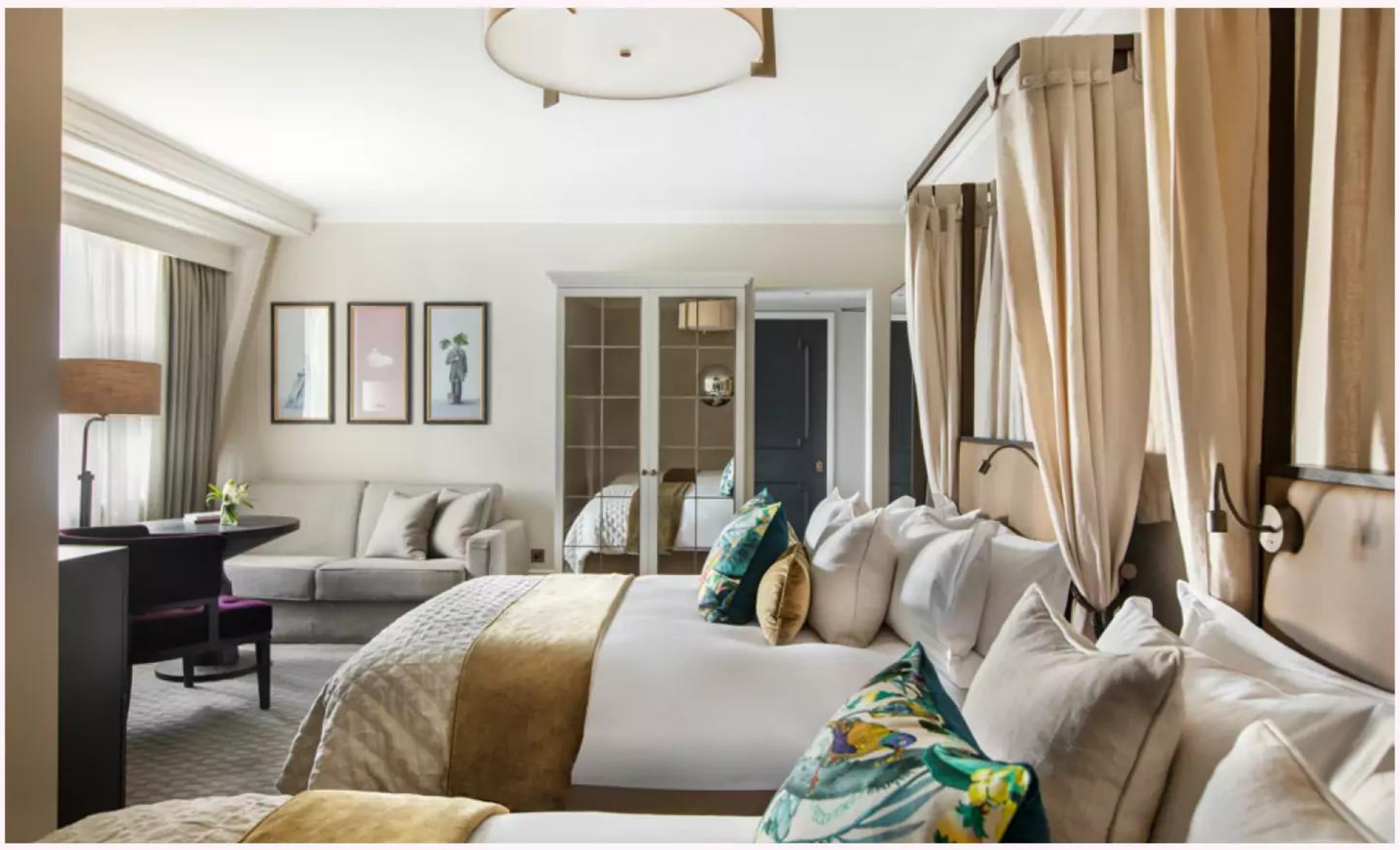
Relax in sheer opulence

since having kids and I *never* dream any more), I was intrigued.

So what happened?

Following an early dinner in Fitz's Brasserie (the charred miso hispi cabbage salad is plant-based heaven), I head to my low-lit room and find a box at the foot of a four-poster bed containing a VR headset, Lab Tonica sleep-enhancing goodies and a dream journal. Sipping a brew of Unplugged tea (camomile, hawthorn, linden, lavender and rose petals), I follow instructions to spritz my silk pillow with lavender mist, rub sleepy balm on to my pressure points and put five drops of a tonic containing valerian root and mugwort (thought to support lucid dreaming) under my tongue before writing a dream intention in my journal.

I climb beneath the covers and pull on the headset; colours swirl, flowers unfurl and clouds float across a sky. It's hypnotic and trippy – but I don't feel *altered* when I remove the headset and turn off the lights. And yet... Blame the comfy-as-a-cloud bed and the early hour or my pre-sleep 'trip', but I had the deepest sleep I've had all year – and the first dream in as long as I can remember. It wasn't the one I set out in my journal, but it was still a dream. This might sound the stuff of Silicon Valley dystopia, but as a sleep-deprived, yoga-loving parent – who emphatically doesn't speak tech – I can confirm the experience is *dreamy*. WH



Travel Well

4 more places to reset your relationship with rest

SLEEP-ENHANCEMENT PROGRAMME, THAILAND

Jetting off to the island of Koh Samui with your kip in mind might seem extreme (and pricey). But Kamalaya is an award-winning wellness resort that's worth the journey if you have a long-term sleep issue. From £2,014 for a five-night programme; kamalaya.com.

RESTORATIVE SLEEP BREAK, CORNWALL

The Scarlet Hotel's spa, which includes open-air cedar hot tubs overlooking the Atlantic, has always been a calming experience. Now the hotel has launched a sleep break. The two-night getaway includes extras such as yoga classes and sleep-aid gifts. From £490 per night (Sun-Thu); scarlethotel.co.uk.

SLEEP PROGRAMME, IBIZA

A good night's sleep in Ibiza sounds like an oxymoron. But Six Senses has employed a sleep doctor as part of its wellness programme to help guests improve sleep patterns, restore energy levels and establish a sleep routine they can stick to. Choose from three-, five- or seven-night programmes, which include massages, sleep aids and sleep tracking. From £927; sixsenses.com.

"TRAINING TO BECOME A HEALTH & WELLNESS COACH HAS COMPLETELY CHANGED MY LIFE, CAREER AND MY OWN HEALTH."

– Amanda | HCA Health Coach Graduate.

THE HEALTH &

After spending 15 years in a high-pressure corporate marketing role, Amanda suffered with high levels of stress and anxiety, rushing through life at 110mph with heart palpitations becoming the norm.

Realising that her career no longer aligned with her values and seeing other women facing similar challenges, she set out on a mission to find and become a part of a solution.

"*Discovering Health Coaching changed my life! Studying with HCA gave me the confidence, knowledge, and importantly the tools to think about a different way to engage with people on the topic of health and wellbeing – particularly on the side of sustainable behaviour change.*

I graduated earlier this year and am now in my dream job working for a company specialising in workplace wellbeing. I spend most days designing and delivering group coaching programmes for amazing companies like Nando's, universities and businesses in the US!

*Not only that, I've turned my own health around using learnings from the course, and after years feeling stressed and anxious, I've never felt better.***"**

WHAT IS A HEALTH & WELLNESS COACH?

Health Coaching is an extremely powerful process to reverse and prevent lifestyle-related chronic diseases. It involves working with people to help them re-model their life and create a whole new set of lifestyle habits that can lead to positive changes in diet, sleep, energy levels, exercise routines, stress reduction, time management, pain relief, life satisfaction and overall wellbeing.

Now clinically proven as an effective approach to enhancing health, health coaching offers promising avenues in various settings, including private practice, with doctors, chiropractors, psychologists, at health centres and clinics, within the corporate sector and at wellness retreats. It can also be the perfect additional skill set for those already working in healthcare, fitness, or nutrition.

It is a profession that offers genuine flexibility with the opportunity to work one-to-one, in groups, in collaboration, online, in-person, full-time or part-time.

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ENROLLING NOW

FITNESS EDIT

WANT TO STAY ACTIVE? TRY TURMERIC+

From gardeners and walkers to cyclists and workout warriors, so many people are discovering how Turmeric+ can help them stay active.

FutureYou Cambridge is offering you the opportunity to try a free 28 day supply of their leading joint supplement: Turmeric+.*

Based in Cambridge, the company works with some of the world's leading experts in science and nutrition, and is renowned for developing high-quality health supplements backed by cutting-edge scientific research.

'I thought I had nothing to lose by trying it. The difference it made was unbelievable.'

The key active ingredient in turmeric is called curcumin, but it's hard for our bodies to absorb from ordinary turmeric powder.

So Turmeric+ uses a patented curcuma phospholipid complex formulation with a unique phytosome delivery system to increase absorption. Pharmacokinetics studies show that it enhances absorption by 30 times, in an innovative and effective natural alternative to black pepper.

It's become the world's most scientifically documented curcumin formulation, featured in 45 human studies involving over 2,000 people. It's also been officially recognised and certified by Informed-Sport.

Turmeric+ delivers the full bouquet of curcuminoids, including high levels of demethoxycurcumin (DMC), the most powerful of all. This is combined with vitamins C and D which contribute to normal function of cartilage and normal muscle function.*

Turmeric+ has received numerous positive reviews since its launch, becoming the company's best selling product. 'I always liked to stay fit. Unfortunately, I began to slow down due to wear and tear,' says Sylvia, a happy Turmeric+ subscriber.

'I thought I had nothing to lose by trying it. The difference it made was unbelievable. I was able to work-out and can now continue with my fitness regime.'

'We're happy to offer people their first pack of Turmeric+ for free so they can experience it for themselves,' says Adam Cleevely, Chair of FutureYou Cambridge.

'Most people know if it's working for them within four to eight weeks – and if they like it, they will stick with it.'

HOW TO CLAIM YOUR FREE TRIAL PACK

*Just pay £.150 postage. To claim your free 28 day Turmeric+ subscription trial pack worth £20 visit **FutureYouOffers.co.uk** or freephone **0800 808 5740** and quote the code **TUF401**

*Your first box is free (just pay £1.50 postage) and you will be enrolled into a flexible subscription costing £20 (inc. postage) every 28 days, which you can cancel at any time, without obligation.

***Turmeric+ contains vitamin C which contributes to normal collagen formation for the normal function of cartilage and bones. Vitamin D contributes to the maintenance of normal muscle function.**

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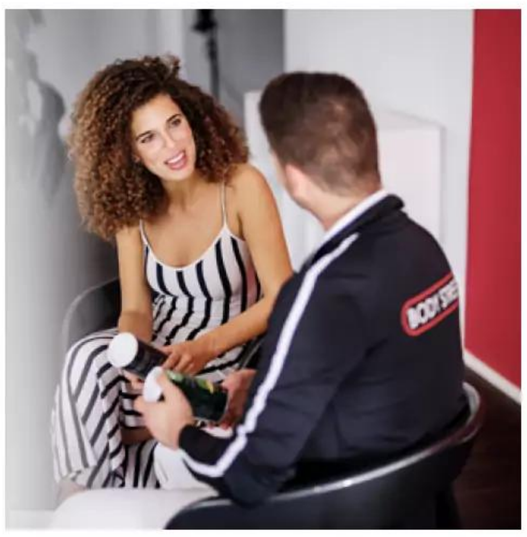
WH PROMOTION

TRANSFORM YOUR FITNESS WITH BODYSTREET: THE SMART WORKOUT

If you're seeking an efficient, effective way to achieve your fitness goals, Bodystreet might be the answer you've been waiting for. This innovative workout method combines state-of-the-art EMS (electrical muscle stimulation) technology with tailored personal training to deliver remarkable results in just 20 minutes a week.



Bodystreet's unique approach is ideal for women looking to tackle weight loss, prevent osteoporosis or support muscle growth. EMS activates your muscles more intensely than traditional workouts, making each session equivalent to several hours of conventional exercise. This means you burn calories and reduce fat faster, helping you achieve your weight loss goals more efficiently.

For those concerned about bone health, Bodystreet's workouts are a powerful tool for osteoporosis prevention.
The resistance training provided by EMS strengthens your muscles and bones, increasing bone density and reducing the risk of fractures.

Additionally, Bodystreet is perfect for supporting muscle growth. The precise targeting of muscle groups allows for a customised workout that supports your goal of building a stronger, healthier body.

Ready to see the difference for yourself?
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THE HEALTH &

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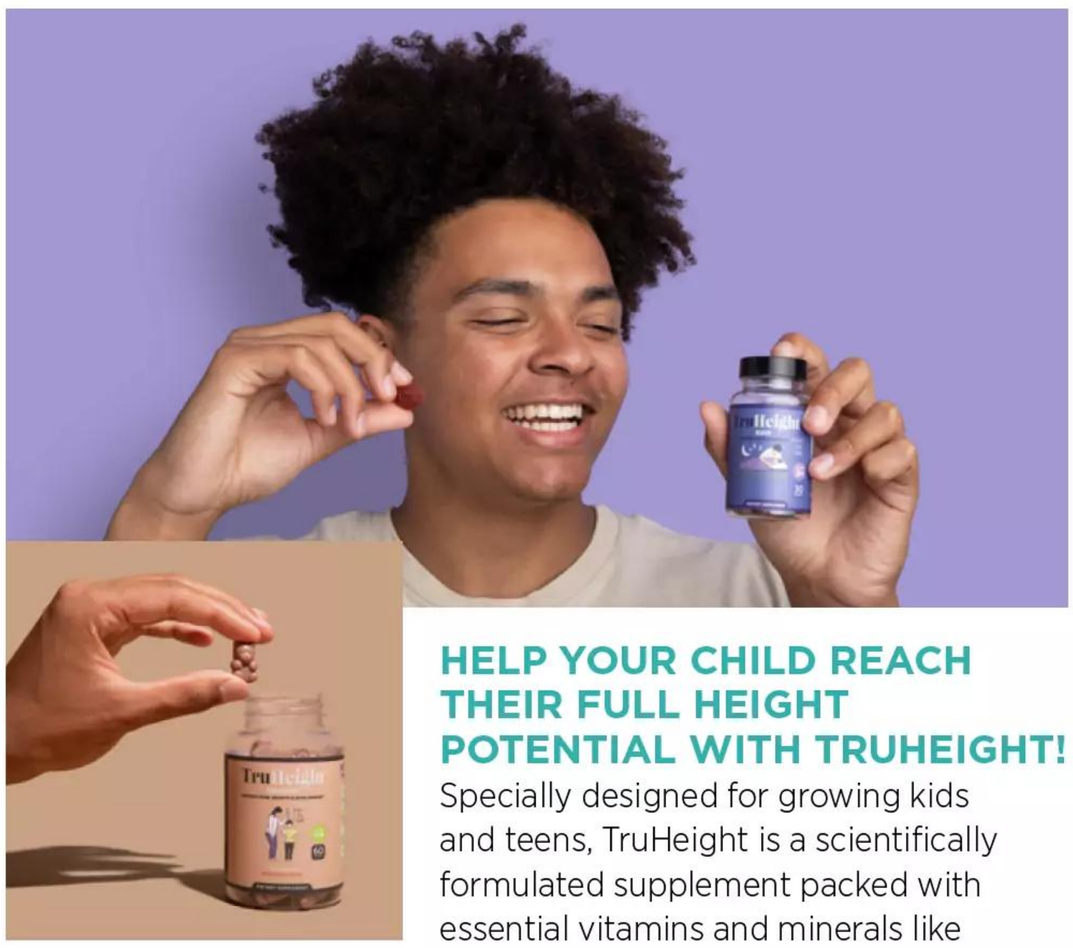
FITNESS EDIT



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WH PROMOTION

RIDE AND SEEK: DISCOVER OUR CAREFULLY CRAFTED BIKE TOURS

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THE HEALTH &

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FITNESS EDIT

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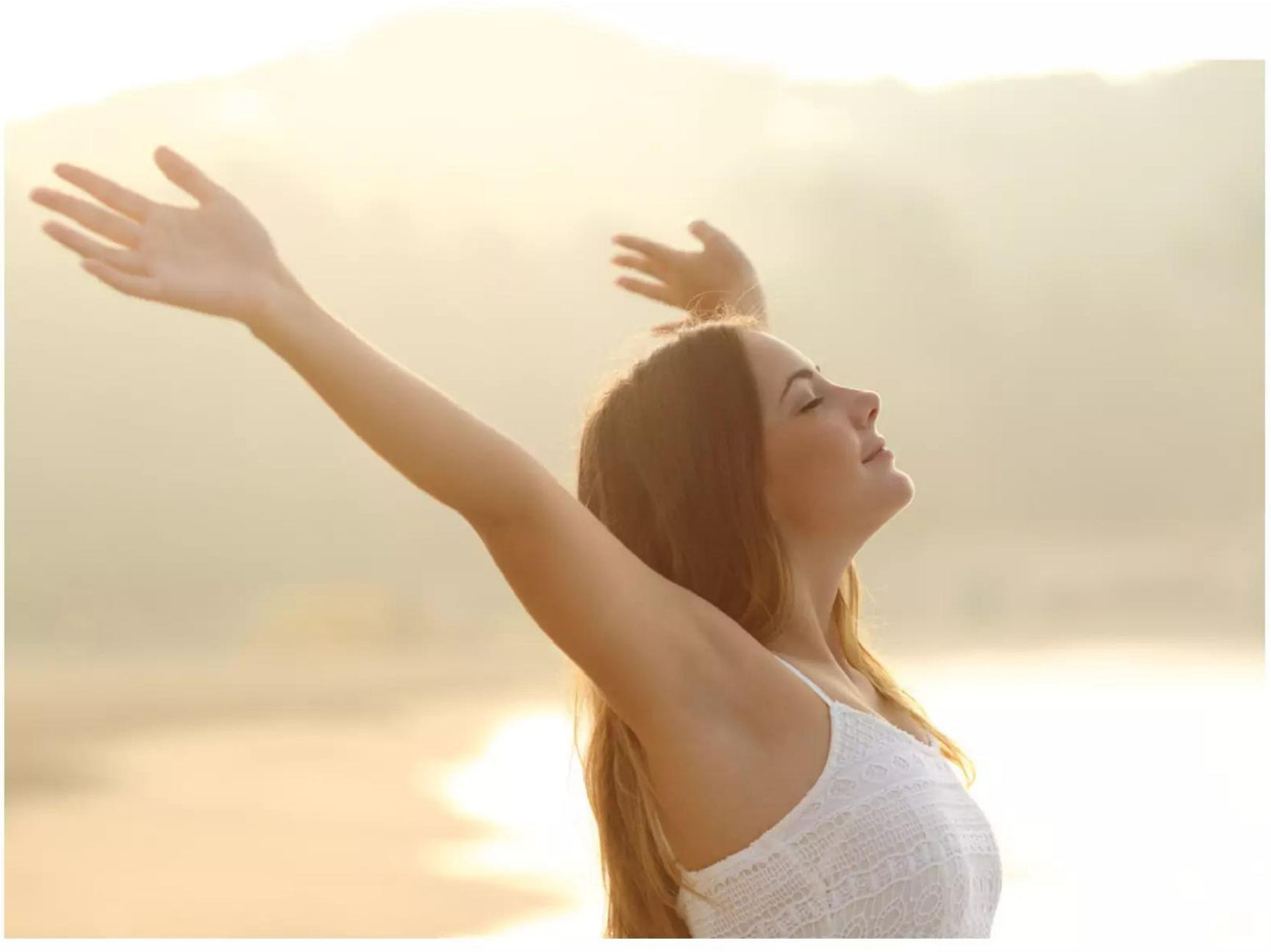


MY LIFE IN WELLNESS

Yasmin Le Bon

The model on taking up strength training in her fifties, curiosity as a form of longevity and the value of giving up on your goals

STATS

AGE: 59

JOB: Model

FITNESS MO: Weights and tennis

WIND-DOWN SECRET: The Headspace app

GROW

I think about being ageless in terms of spirit. Your spirit can remain young forever by being curious. I always cite my great friend, painter Albert Erden. He passed away in his mid-nineties, but he remained the youngest person I knew because his eyes were open every day and he was always in wonder. I learned a lot from that.

REFLECT

I'm 60 this year and it feels bonkers. There are days when I think, 'There's nothing good about getting older.' But then I'll stop and remember that's not true. I have great friends, a great family and I feel like I have a good perspective on life. I've learned that the best way to achieve something takes time and patience.

CONNECT

As a young girl modelling, I'd fly to places by myself and walk into a sea of strangers. Often, there'd be little time on jobs, so I learned quickly to connect with people. Now, I do a painting class on Friday mornings. The people are just fantastic. We all come from different walks of life and I go there because of the wonderful energy I get back from them. These are the people who inspire me.

MOVE

My grandchildren are little rascals and so fast, which is why I keep myself in good shape. Fitness is my armour and means I can be of value. Full-body strength training has been a revelation. When I used to train, I would imagine that if there was a burning building, I needed to be able to pick up kids and run. Having this kind of motivation in your heart feels important, rather than it just being about squeezing into your jeans (although that helps!).

RECOVER

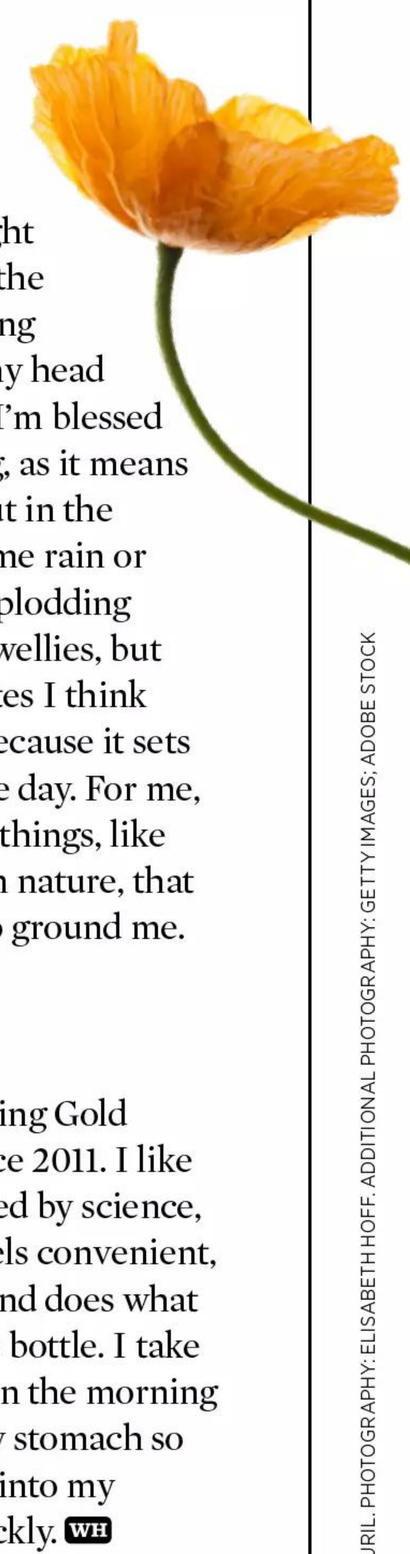
One thing about getting older is that you learn how to train for yourself rather than focusing on what others are doing. I no longer train as hard and my sessions are quicker, as my body has taken a battering. Just listen to your body and be kind to yourself.

AIM

I don't like to set goals any more. I used to make all these lists and then I'd find them years later and I couldn't cross anything off. It became depressing. Now, I like to be more spontaneous. If something appeals to me, then I'll go for it. I'm learning to say yes to things a lot more now because I can't mess around with time. Strike while the iron is hot.

RELAX

I put the Headspace app on at night to help with the anxious feeling I get when my head is churning. I'm blessed to have a dog, as it means I must get out in the morning, come rain or shine. I'll be plodding along in my wellies, but within minutes I think thank god, because it sets me up for the day. For me, it's the small things, like getting out in nature, that really help to ground me.



GLOW

I've been taking Gold Collagen since 2011. I like that it's backed by science, but it also feels convenient, tastes good and does what it says on the bottle. I take it first thing in the morning on an empty stomach so that it gets into my system quickly. WH

Gold Collagen Forte Ageless is available at gold-collagen.com and retailers nationwide (£59.50 for 10 doses)

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