

renaissance

RTOERO Magazine

Summer 2024



simple pleasures

A life well lived

Celebrating life's little delights

Five simple acts of kindness



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renaissance

Summer 2024
rtoero.ca

Volume 23, Number 2

Publisher RTOERO

Editor-in-Chief Stefanie Martin

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Creative Direction Hambly & Woolley Inc.

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RTOERO is divided into 51 districts and has over 84,000 members.

Renaissance is published quarterly by the RTOERO organization in Toronto, Ontario, and provides RTOERO members with content on topics of interest to the retired education community across Canada.

ISSN 1709-2736 (Print)
ISSN 2562-9751 (Online)

Views expressed in *Renaissance* are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of RTOERO.

Advertising Marlene Mignardi
Dovetail Communications Inc.
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Publication of an advertisement does not constitute an endorsement by RTOERO of any product or service.

Renaissance est également disponible en français. Si vous désirez recevoir la version française de ce magazine, veuillez communiquer avec le bureau.

Funded by the Government of Canada | Financé par le gouvernement du Canada | **Canada**



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Reader letters

All of the articles in the spring issue of *Renaissance* were relevant and informative, but what really made my heart smile was the story by Alison LaMantia on long-term care homes. The part that made my heart sing was that the RTOERO Summer Scholar, Amanda Bull, is young and is set on a career in gerontology. With the number of seniors increasing all the time, having young people research and work in careers that specialize in eldercare is a welcome and important story. We need them desperately, especially those of us whose health is compromised. I volunteer at Hospice Services in the City of Kawartha Lakes, and I am always thrilled when young university and college students join us for a work placement. Hopefully, more will specialize in this area.
—June Mewhort
(District 28 Region of Durham)

Just writing to say how very much I enjoy your stories every edition of *Renaissance*. They are always very

educational and newsy.
—Rose Dundass
(District 8 London, Middlesex)

Thank you for Renaissance magazine! Always so informative and beautifully displayed, with current topics to inform and enjoy!
—Adele M. Archer
(District 23 North York)

When I saw the article on wearable technology in the spring issue of *Renaissance*, I immediately thought of two companies that make quality apparel to enable one to stay active by providing support and pain relief. I am not affiliated with either of these companies — I just think that their products might be what someone is looking for.

I love downhill skiing, and when SI/L4/L5 pain [from the sacroiliac joint and the two lowest vertebrae of the lumbar spine] was starting to interfere with my enjoyment,



I decided to check out supportive apparel. I found Stoko, a company that makes high-quality, medical-grade, adjustable supportive tights. I bought the shorts, and my husband bought the K1 Summit full-length tights because of his knee issue. Wow! We love them. A game changer. We're 71 years old and look

forward to many more years racing down the slopes. Due to a shoulder injury, I also purchased a short-sleeve compression T-shirt from Enerskin. It provides great support and enables me to stay active. It feels like wearing a second skin.
—Sylvia Mitoraj
(District 27 Ottawa-Carleton)



WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

We welcome your feedback, so please send your letters to renaissance@rtoero.ca. Letters may be edited for length and clarity at the discretion of the editor.

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We honour our commitment by printing *Renaissance* on ethically sourced paper and using plant-based ink to

ensure the magazine is produced using materials that are environmentally sound; in addition, more than 10,000 RTOERO members choose to go paperless, receiving only *eRenaissance*.

Occasionally, we bundle other important information with your copy of *Renaissance*. We use a clear wrap made of a

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We asked RTOERO member Rob Thomas, Notable columnist Andrew Dobson and *Renaissance* editor-in-chief Stefanie Martin to share their favourite simple summer pleasure.



ROB THOMAS

These days, my summer pleasure is to get up early and resume work building the cottage. Then in the afternoon, it's "tools down," slip the canoe into the water and with Shep, the loyal border collie, take a leisurely paddle to enjoy the serenity and beauty of the river. When we return, it's into the screened-in porch with feet up in the La-Z-Boy and a tall glass of ginger ale on ice. Love retirement!
—(District 34 York Region)



ANDREW DOBSON

I grew up in Muskoka. My fondest summer memories are waking up to a calm and quiet lake. I'd sip a mug of coffee and nibble on a hot-out-of-the-oven wild-berry muffin on the dock before enjoying a morning paddle, where I'd sometimes see loons puttering about.
—Writer



STEFANIE MARTIN

Patios! Sitting outside on a patio on a summer day with snacks, a beverage and good company is one of the best summer experiences. While restaurant patios come with the perk of food service and no cleanup, impromptu backyard patio hangouts with friends have that extra bit of comfort that makes them feel special.
—Editor-in-chief, *Renaissance* magazine

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What's in a name?



by **Martha Foster**
RTOERO Chair

We're changing our name to better reflect who we serve now

It seems most odd to me, preparing this article for you, knowing that when you read it I will no longer be the Chair of RTOERO. I feel very lucky to have this opportunity to spend a few words explaining why we undertook a long, consultative process to change the name of RTOERO.

RTOERO is an amazing organization. From its very beginnings, when a group of teachers hand-wrote and mailed thousands of letters to all the retired teachers in Ontario inviting them to join this new organization that was starting up, their dedication was incredible. The dedication of RTOERO members is still incredible. Hundreds of members across this country volunteer their time to serve you in your districts and nationally on committees and the Board of Directors.

What has changed is who we serve. We have evolved from our roots as retired teachers who taught in Ontario to individuals retired and approaching retirement from the broader educational system across Canada. This now includes everyone who works in and retires from early childhood education, public and private schools, school boards, colleges and universities. If you had anything to do with education, we are the organization for you.

So, why change our name? Because we are changing. Not all of our members are retired or teachers or from Ontario. We need a name that represents who we are now.

But wait, there's more. Many people approaching retirement confuse us with one of our competitors. We need a name that accurately and positively encompasses all of our current members and welcomes future members from across the Canadian education community.

We will continue to be the organization we all know and care about. But now we have a new name that better exemplifies us all — proud of our legacy but embracing the present and preparing to move into the future. 🌱

Now please see Jim Grieve's accompanying article on the exciting outcome of our name search!
Martha

Revealing our true identity



by **Jim Grieve**
RTOERO CEO

We're proposing a new name that's grounded in our shared values

Last year, we resumed our search for a name that better sums up what our organization is all about. Our goal in renaming RTOERO was not to change who we are, but rather — as Martha Foster underlines in her article — to reflect how much we've changed.

We knew that our quest for a new name had to be highly consultative. Last September, we outlined our goals at the Presidents' Workshop and invited attendees to tell us what they felt RTOERO stands for. Then, at Fall Forum, nearly 200 corporate members took part in a workshop on defining the value we deliver to members.

We also consulted with our Board of Directors and the committees responsible for member services and marketing and communications. And we launched an online membership survey that sparked close to 4,000 responses.

In tying together members' diverse views, we identified several themes. One is *community* and the social connections we build. Another is *advocacy*: We're a voice for our members and all older Canadians. We're also a source of valuable *insights*. And lastly, *collaboration*: We work together to support our communities and one another.

These themes inspired the renaming team to explore a wide range of creative possibilities. And then we realized the solution was right in front of us. The new name we introduced for our group insurance program has been embraced by members — why couldn't it apply to the whole organization? And so, we're proposing that RTOERO become . . .

Entente. It's a bilingual word that sums up our relationship with the people we serve. An entente is an agreement, an accord anchored by shared values. And it's the spirit behind that agreement — one of collaboration and mutual support in a community of trust.

We feel this new name not only reflects where we are today but will serve us well as we continue to evolve. And when corporate members vote on its formal approval, we believe most will agree. Because that's the spirit of Entente. 🌱

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.
Jim

LEFT PHOTO: JASON GORDON, RIGHT PHOTO: PAUL LORENSTEIN

Brokering to older Canadians

Promises or policy? Follow the money

by **Alison LaMantia**



PHOTO: ZACK FRANK

Each summer, the RTOERO Board of Directors funds early-career practitioners to participate in research-based summer placements at the National Institute on Ageing as part of a five-year, \$100,000 commitment. This is part two of a three-part series to introduce you to the 2023 RTOERO Summer Scholars. Meet Xalima Ali, a master's student at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy specializing in health policy.

Promises are made every election, and often it seems that politicians are courting older adults. But elections are about getting elected, so brokering to older adults strategically makes sense. According to Statistics Canada, voter turnout increases with age — 83 per cent of 65- to 74-year-olds voted in the 2021 federal election. But do the promises made to older adults during elections ultimately turn into policy?

Not always, and not fast enough.

That's what Xalima Ali, a 2023 RTOERO Summer Scholar at the National Institute on Ageing (NIA), uncovered as she did a jurisdictional scan of pledges across Canada for home care, healthcare and long-term care. However, completing the scan was more challenging than she expected. "These things should be much easier to find, especially for the public. You should know how much money is being given to older adults or older adults with disabilities," Ali says. "Even that was a learning experience — just seeing how difficult it is to find this information."

After Ali had the financial information, it became clear that the ageist perception that older adults are "taking all the money" or are prioritized post-election is inaccurate.

"There's a disparity between campaign promises and the allocation of funds," Ali explains. "And no wonder things take so long: I was going through the budget plans, and they were five-year plans, 10-year plans." And, of course, we know the government can change in that time.

The jurisdictional scan helped to inform the NIA's report *Enabling a More Promising Future for Long-Term Care in Canada*, a third and final report in the NIA series outlining a road map for more sustainable, affordable and equitable long-term care systems. The report highlights challenges, including the mismatch between Canada's aging population and appropriate funding for care for older adults. It points out that Canada spends less of its gross domestic product on long-term care than other countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). And the portion of spending allocated to home and community care is trailing other countries, too: In 2019, 18 per cent was allocated to home and community care, compared to the OECD average of 36 per cent.

Until completing the placement, Ali hadn't considered working at a think tank like the NIA as a possible career option, but that door has been opened now. She learned about the RTOERO Summer Scholar program while completing her undergraduate degree in health sciences with a gerontology minor at the University of Waterloo. She had just applied for the master's program in public policy when one of her professors shared the opportunity — it seemed meant to be.

Beyond the jurisdictional scan, she spent a good portion of the summer researching home-care supports for immigrant older adults in Canada to inform another NIA report. That topic was personal for Ali, whose parents and grandparents emigrated to Canada from Somalia.

"It's very easy to categorize immigrants into one group, but there are cultural differences within the population," Ali explains. "Current policies don't consider the diversity within the immigrant population, which can lead to more barriers."

Providing more customized, individualized options that help older adults maintain independence can prevent people from having to move to an institution prematurely — a win-win-win since home-care supports are more cost-effective, long-term care homes are overburdened, and most Canadians, 96 per cent, want to avoid going to a long-term care home.

Ali also conducted a literature review focused on veterans' experiences of aging in Canada, which challenged her previous assumptions about the financial security of veterans.

"Overall, each project I contributed to highlighted the systemic underservice of older adults within the Canadian health and social systems, a situation exacerbated for Black, Indigenous, racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ populations, especially when these

identities intersect," Ali says. She says that sustained advocacy is needed to ensure equitable support for older adults to foster our independence and well-being as we age. The NIA's reports can help, as well as the work of RTOERO and its members and partners to advocate with all levels of government.

As we gear up for the provincial and territorial elections in 2024 and 2025 and the federal election in 2025, remember that it's unwise to trust that promises will become policy, even if they excite us about the possibility of change. We must keep the pressure on to create a system that allows everyone to age with dignity. 🦋



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Put caring into action

Simple ways to advocate for what matters

by Patricia Ogura



There are few more rewarding ways to spend your time and energy than advocating for change you believe in — and working within your community is especially fulfilling.

Advocating for change doesn't have to be complicated. You simply need a cause, and then you need a plan.

Identify the issue

Identify the issue — and its root cause — and pitch to a small group of friends for feedback. Did they understand the issue? Did your argument make sense to them? Their feedback will help you refine what is now your positioning statement.

Reconnaissance

Understand all stakeholders' points of view. Learn what your councillor thinks. The city hall clerk can tell you under what standing committee your issue falls, who sits on the committee and when it meets, and then explain the process for getting on a meeting agenda. Do your homework. Evidence-based research adds weight to your position; this could be as simple as a compelling story illustrating why your issue needs to be addressed and solved.

Strategy

Your strategy depends on the issue and where you are on the advocacy journey. For example, organizing your own town hall may be too aggressive at first but effective later on. Consider whom to approach first and work toward the decision-makers. Build momentum into plans and keep your strategy flexible to respond quickly to a changing landscape.

Petitions

Hand-signed petitions may be more effective than online ones because they reflect extra effort and engagement.

Emails and letters

Both are effective. Letters do have an advantage: They're rarer and associated with cost and effort. Keep the format straightforward and limit steps two through six below to two sentences:

To learn about RTOERO's advocacy programs and tips for advocating as individuals or groups:
rtoero.ca/vibrant-voices
rtoero.ca/how-to-advocate-for-issues-that-matter-to-you
rtoero.ca/how-to-engage-in-democracy-between-municipal-elections

1. Highlight your position statement at the top of the letter.
2. Identify yourself.
3. Describe the issue.
4. Describe the impact/benefits of solving the issue.
5. Create your call to action: What are you asking for?
6. Determine next steps: How do you want to proceed?

In-person contact

Presenting in person is highly effective. Be strategic. You want some supporters when addressing council or a company. Other opportunities might demand a much larger show of support.

Social media

Carefully executed social messaging is fast and highly effective. Make sure that your messages are clear and concise and that any information is accurate. Mistakes or misinterpretations on social media can go viral and shut down your advocacy efforts before you accomplish what you set out to.

Visuals

Visuals are effective and anchor messaging instantly. They convey storylines and emotion without being wordy.

Communication

Be clear, brief, simple and positive. Your voice should be personal, firm and polite. Test communications before you use them — honest feedback is invaluable. And remember to customize communication. To councillors, you're "voters"; to corporate representatives, you're "consumers."

Advocacy means taking action to improve a situation in your community. If you're already involved in advocating for change, you know the rewards. If you're not, a good time to start is now! 🐾

A PLACE TO

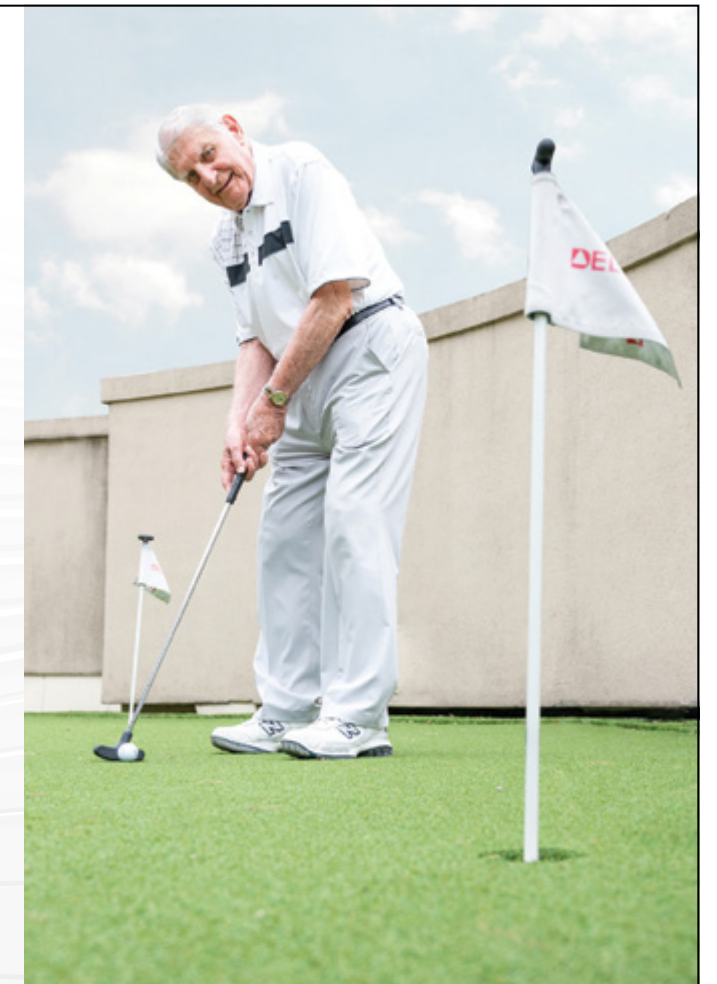
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PHOTO, LUIS ALVAREZ

Nutrition myths and misconceptions

How to separate fact from fiction

By **Fran Berkoff**, registered dietitian

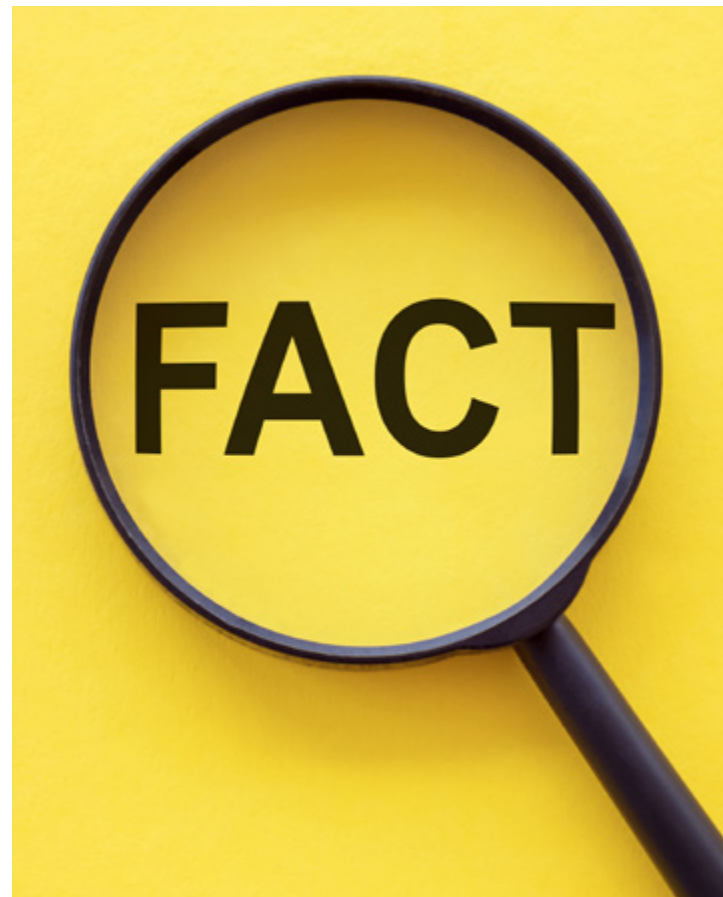
Social media has made everyone an expert, from self-proclaimed medical experts with no credentials who have discovered “miracle cures,” to food supplements promoted with unsubstantiated health claims.

So how can we separate what’s true from fake news?

- Watch out for claims not backed by reputable sources. When it comes to nutrition, everyone from neighbours to work colleagues to celebrities is happy to offer advice.
- Be wary of claims that point to a single food as good or bad, unless it’s referring to a food allergy.
- Just because two things happen at the same time does not mean a causal relationship, so be skeptical of claims that certain foods or nutrients “cause” a health problem.
- When you hear of a new study, read past the headlines and look at the details. Does the article claim a “quick fix”? That’s almost certainly either not true or an exaggeration.
- Beware of testimonials that promise easy fixes for weight management or other health problems. One person’s “success” doesn’t mean universal success.
- Be careful of reports that blame a single food or group of foods for causing our ills. Look for words like “may cause,” “possibly linked to” or “cause a health problem” before you move forward.
- As older people, we are often targets for articles that tell us how to reverse aging or prevent diseases associated with aging. Be careful!
- It’s not surprising that so many people go to Google for nutrition information. It’s fast and easy and, for the most part, free. Before you believe anything from Dr. Google, find out where the information comes from. Is it someone’s opinion or is it a scientific fact backed by clinical studies? Shop around, get a second opinion, be wary of miracle cures, and read the fine print.

Tread cautiously and don’t jump to hasty conclusions. Don’t change your lifestyle based on a single small study that seems to draw a broad, sweeping conclusion.

And, as always, if it sounds too good to be true (or false), it probably is. 🍷



Many of the best sites are associated with a health organization. They provide evidence-based health and nutrition information, and many will direct you to a health professional, as well as offer appropriate recipes.

- Dietitians of Canada: dietitians.ca
- Unlock Food: unlockfood.ca
- Diabetes Canada: diabetes.ca
- Health Canada: canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/contact-us.html
- Heart and Stroke Foundation: heartandstroke.ca
- Canadian Digestive Health Foundation: cdhf.ca

HEARD ABOUT THESE?

A detox diet will clean toxins out of your body.

There’s very little evidence that dietary cleanses do any of the things they promise. Your liver and kidneys do a good job of detoxing daily. You don’t need to spend money on something that doesn’t really help.

Certain foods, such as grapefruit or vinegar, can burn fat.

There are no foods that actually burn fat or increase your metabolism to help you lose weight.

Eating clean is important for good health.

What does that even mean? It’s washed properly? It excludes meat? It’s only organic? There’s really no answer because there is no definition for “clean.”

PHOTO, FOX ANA

Boosting bone health

Simple tips to strengthen your bones

by **Pauline Anderson**



Bones are built throughout childhood and adolescence, with peak bone mass typically achieved at about age 30. After that, bones get thinner and weaker, increasing the risks for osteoporosis; this is especially true for women, who have less bone mass than men to begin with and have accelerated bone loss after menopause.

But even in later life, women — and men — can take steps to preserve bone health.

For advice on how to preserve bone health, we spoke to Dr. Sandra Kim, head of endocrinology at Women’s College Hospital and assistant professor in the Department of Medicine at the University of Toronto, who helped develop new Canadian guidelines for bone health (published last year in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*).

Bone density tests

Canadian guidelines recommend that men and women get a baseline bone mineral density test when they’re 70 years old. However, if you’ve had a prior non-trauma fracture (from, say, just walking), which would indicate fragile bones, or have other risk factors, you should get this test earlier.

The test provides a “T-score” that determines the number of standard deviations you are from the average of a younger person at peak bone mass. Osteoporosis is defined as a T-score of -2.5 or lower, while osteopenia, a precursor to osteoporosis, is a T-score of between -2.5 and -1.

Your healthcare provider can do a fracture risk assessment that considers results of that bone density test, as well as risk factors such as age, medications, comorbidities and fracture history, and determine whether you’re at low, moderate or high risk of breaking a bone in the next 10 years. That assessment will determine how frequently you should get future bone density tests.

PHOTO, FER GREGORY

Diet

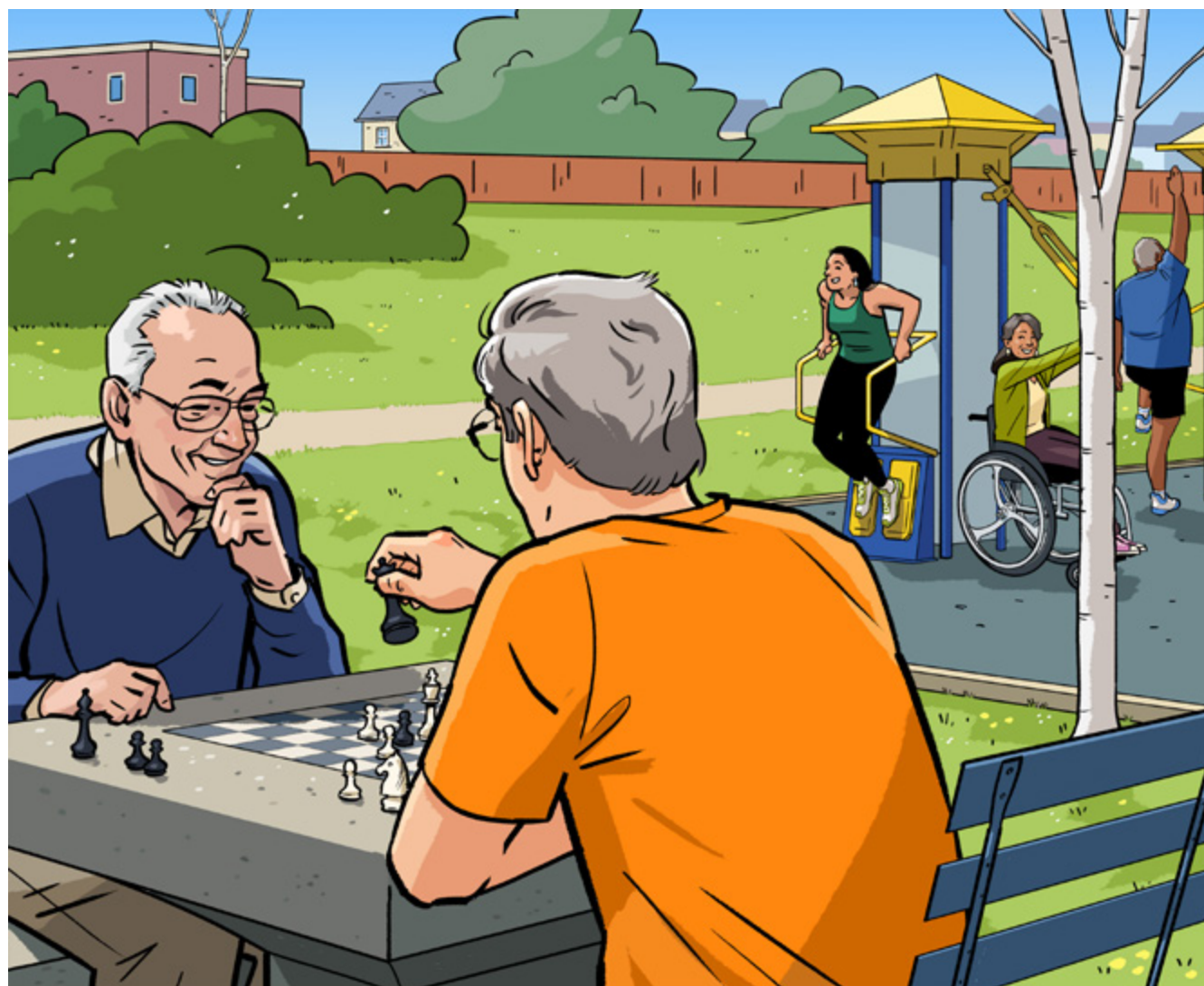
Better bone health always includes a healthy diet (think a balance of dairy products, fish and leafy green vegetables such as kale and spinach) that avoids salty foods and too many caffeinated beverages.

A diet low in calcium increases risks for bone loss and fractures. Women 50 and older, and men 70 and older, should get about 1,200 milligrams of calcium a day, while men 51 to 70 should get 1,000 milligrams a day. Milk products — including yogurt, cheese (especially firm choices such as cheddar) and canned fish with bones — are great sources of calcium. Some foods, including orange juice, are fortified with calcium.

The recommended daily allowance for vitamin D is 600 international units (IUs) per day from ages 51 to 70 and 800 IUs per day after that for both men and women. While vitamin D is found in foods like eggs, wild salmon and rainbow trout, and some milk and cereal products have added vitamin D, it’s very difficult for Canadians to get enough from diet alone. That’s partly because of a lack of exposure to the sun, a main source of the vitamin, Kim says. That’s where a supplement comes in. The guidelines recommend that adults older than 50 take a supplement with at least 400 IUs a day.

Protein, magnesium and vitamin K are important for bone health, too, but following a balanced diet should provide enough of these nutrients to prevent fractures, Kim says. And while potassium is important for cellular function, it’s not that crucial for bone health, she adds.

If you’re concerned about getting enough bone-boosting nutrients, talk to your healthcare provider about adding supplements. 🍷



Exercise for brain health

A fitness program can boost memory, improve thinking, even lower dementia risks

by **Ylva Van Buuren** Illustrations by **Jori Bolton**

You know that regular fitness activity is good news for your heart, muscles and bones. But did you know that a fitness program can reduce the risk of cognitive decline?

Lindsay Nagamatsu, an associate professor in the School of Kinesiology at Western University and a research associate at the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging, knows that being physically active improves independence and quality of life as we age.

Nagamatsu's research, which looks at how exercise affects the way older adults process and use information to think, make decisions, plan and remember things throughout the day, has shown that when older sedentary adults started exercising two or three times a week, "there were profound benefits in these individuals," she says. "And some of them already have mild cognitive impairment, so they're already on the trajectory towards cognitive decline."

"While all types of movement are important to supporting older adults as they age," she says, "my research has shown aerobic and strength training can impact cognition and brain health the most. The stronger we are, the more fit and able we are to perform a physical and mental task. And it's really never too late to start."

The Canadian 24-Hour Movement **Guidelines** for adults 18 to 64 and older recommend an accumulation of 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic activity every week and strength-training exercises twice a week. Adults 65 and older are encouraged to do physical activities that challenge balance, too.



EXERCISE YOUR BODY AND YOUR BRAIN

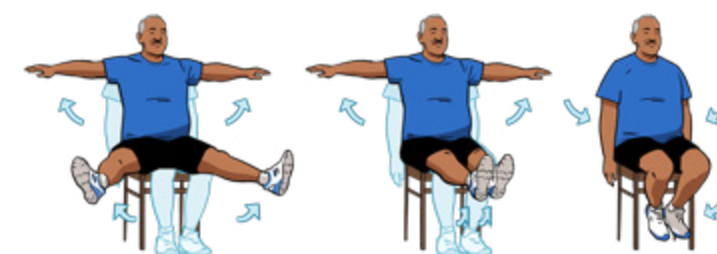
When Andrew Schindle leads fitness classes for seniors, he uses choreographed segments for the four important components of fitness: aerobic exercise, strength training, balance work and stretching. These days, he also sprinkles in coordination movements that force participants to think a little more about what they're doing.

When the arms and legs are going in different directions, for example, it can be a struggle to get the movements right away, says Schindle, who has a degree in kinesiology and teaches at six community centres in Winnipeg. "But after a few tries, something happens with the connection between the mind and body . . . and they're able to do it." He says that "challenging the brain like this during physical exercise is an excellent way to support brain health."

If you have mobility challenges, you're likely not moving your body as much as you should be, says Jill Moreash, a personal training specialist at Variety Village in Toronto. "If you're not strengthening your body, your brain is not getting strong and healthy too. Exercise is so important because blood flow to the body and the heart is blood flow to the brain."

Check with your physician before beginning a new exercise program. If you don't feel confident on a chair or using a wall, ask someone to stand close by for support.

CORE STRENGTH TRAINING



1. JUMPING JACK IN A CHAIR

Sit forward in a chair and keep the spine in a neutral position (soft, not rigid). In unison, slowly open up both arms and legs out to the side – like you're doing a jumping jack. Pause and return to starting position. Now, again in unison, slowly open both arms out to the side as you open legs out in front, pause, and as you return arms to starting position, bring legs back and tuck them in front of you and under the chair. Repeat those two motions (arms and legs out wide and back, then arms out wide and legs tucked under chair) for 30 seconds. Arms and legs are in the air the whole time.

MODIFIED: ONE FOOT ON THE FLOOR

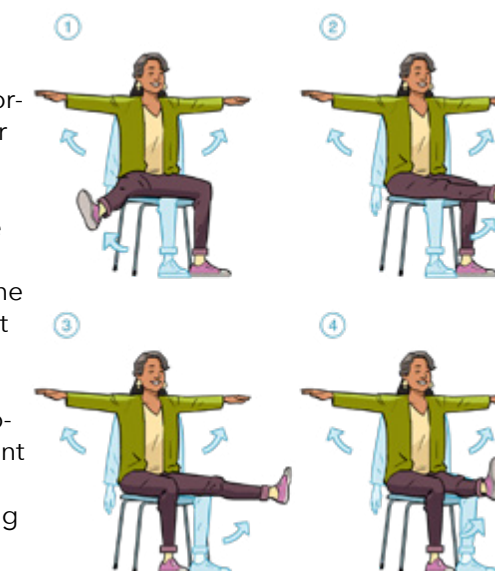
Using your wheelchair or a stable, firm chair, sit up with a tall chest and your belly button tucked toward your spine in a slight pelvic tilt. Try to stay a little forward in your seat so you are not leaning on the backrest if possible. Keep your knees bent at about 90 degrees and feet about hip-width apart on the floor, with arms down at your sides, and perform these movements slowly.

With your left foot on the floor, move your right leg out to the right side while lifting both arms up and out to the sides to shoulder height. Pause and slowly bring your leg and arms back to starting position. Now keep the right foot on the floor and move the left leg out to the left side while lifting both arms up and out to the sides. Pause and return to starting position.

Next, with your left foot on the floor, extend your right leg out in front while lifting both arms up and out to the sides again. Pause and return to starting position. Then, keeping your right foot on the floor, extend your left leg out in front while both arms open up out to the sides again.

Put the two moves together: both arms out and in while switching alternating legs to the sides and then alternating legs to the front.

Repeat for three to five sets. Focus on keeping your core tight and sitting tall.



AEROBIC EXERCISE

2. THREE STEPS AND TAP

Stand tall and take three steps forward and then tap your heel. Take three steps back and tap your heel. Repeat for 10 seconds.

Take three steps forward and tap to the side with your toes. Then take three steps back and tap to the side with your toes. (You're switching legs for the tap each time.) Repeat for 10 seconds.

Take three steps forward, lift up your knee and tap it with your hands. Take three steps back and tap the other knee with your hands. Repeat for 10 seconds.



Put all three together. Take three steps forward and tap with your heel, then tap to the side with your toes, then tap your knee with your hands. Take three steps back and tap with your heel, your toes and then tap your knee. Repeat for 10 seconds.

MODIFIED: MARCH AND TAP OR PUNCH IN A CHAIR

Using your wheelchair or a stable, firm chair, sit up with a tall chest and your belly button tucked toward your spine in a slight pelvic tilt. Try to stay a little forward in your seat so you are not leaning on the backrest, if possible, with feet about hip-width apart and knees bent at about 90 degrees.

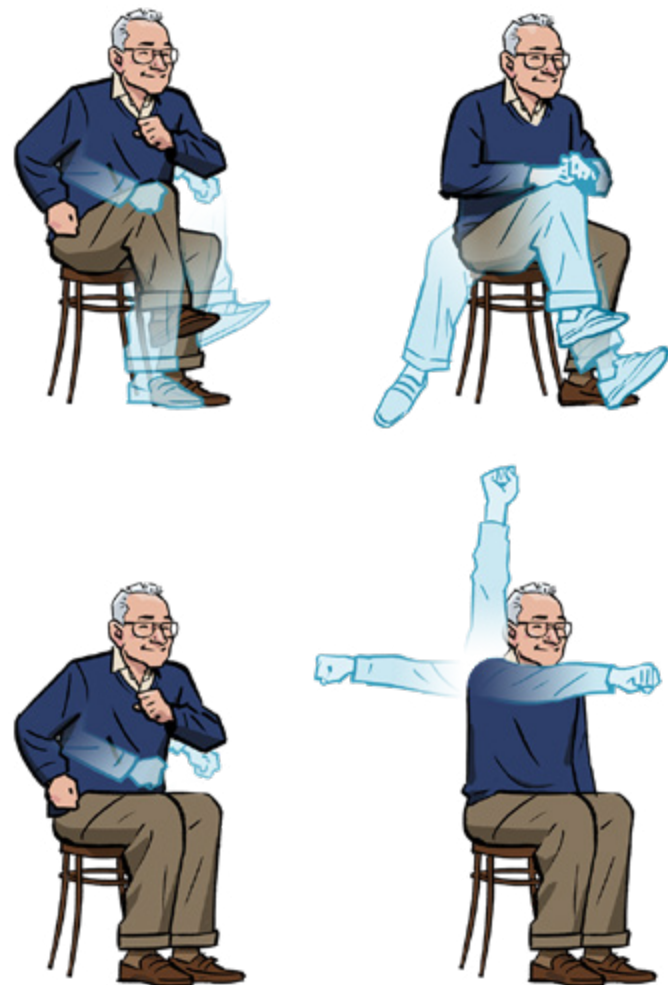
Using a marching motion with knees and arms, do three knee marches and then a heel tap forward, then three more marches with opposite heel tap forward. Switch starting knee each time. (If you cannot use your legs, concentrate on moving your arms only in a marching motion: three march movements, then a punch forward. Switch starting arm each time.) Repeat twice.

Do three marching knees, and then do a toe tap to the side. Then do three marching knees starting with the opposite knee and toe tap to the side with your other foot. Switch legs for the tap every time. (For those not using their legs, do three marching arm motions, then punch to the side. Switch starting arm.) Repeat twice.

Do three marching knees and then tap your raised knee with your hands. Repeat for three more marches and then tap your opposite raised knee. (For those not using their legs, do three marching arm motions, then punch up.) Repeat twice.

Now, put all three together: Do three knee marches and then tap forward with your heel, then tap to the side with your toes, then tap your knee with your hands. (Or do three marching arm motions, then punch forward, side and up.) Then, starting with the opposite knee (or arm), do three march movements and then tap forward with your other heel, side toe tap and then tap your raised knee. (Or punch forward, side and up.)

Repeat the entire sequence for five sets.



BALANCE TRAINING



3. ONE-LEG BALANCE SWING

Stand on your left leg to the right of a chair. Let both hands hang down at your sides but hold on to the chair for balance with the inside hand if necessary. Gently swing the outside leg back and forth like a pendulum. Go as far forward and back as is comfortable. Repeat for 30 seconds. Change sides.



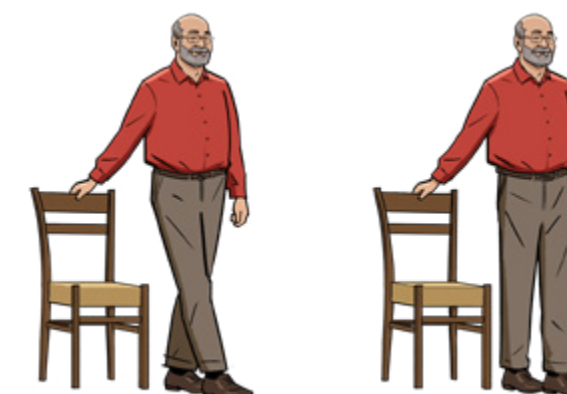
MODIFIED: SITTING BALANCE EXERCISE

Using your wheelchair or a stable chair, sit up tall with belly button tucked, with knees bent at about 90 degrees and arms resting at your sides. If possible, sit forward in your chair so your back is not against your backrest. Keep your feet on the floor about shoulder-width apart (for a more challenging version, place your feet together to narrow your base of support).

Keeping your chest tall and core tight, slowly lean to the right and reach toward the floor with your right arm. Squeeze the muscles on your left side while returning to your starting position. Slowly lean to the left and reach down with your left arm. Squeeze your right side while returning to starting position. Repeat three to five times.

Next, with a flat back and tight core, lean forward while reaching your right arm forward (as if you are being handed something). Squeeze your glutes (bum muscles) and return to starting position. Then lean forward again while extending your left arm forward. Repeat three to five times.

Put the two moves together. Lean right, then left, then lean forward with right arm, then forward with left arm. Repeat for three to five sets altogether.



MODIFIED: TANDEM STANCE

Begin standing near a stable chair or wall for safety and stability if needed. Place one foot directly in front of the other foot (as if on a balance beam), with the toes of your rear foot almost touching the heel of your front foot. Stand tall, knees slightly bent, with more weight on your back leg. Keep your feet as straight as possible, rather than toes turned outward. Your hands can be out for balance or on your hips. Try to hold for 30 seconds. Repeat with the opposite foot in front.

BRAIN GYM

Brain Gym, a program developed in the 1970s to exercise the brain, includes memory exercises, mind fitness and physical movements to increase brain function and prevent possible memory loss.

“While reading and puzzling are good ways to exercise the brain,” says Jill Hewlett, a Toronto brain fitness and wellness authority who’s an accredited Brain Gym instructor, “my main training is to teach people integrative movements that will help their brains’ functioning.” For example, while research shows that walking 15 to 20 minutes at least once a day is good for the brain, Hewlett recommends walking on uneven ground, if possible, because the brain has to adjust more to that footing.

In Brain Gym specifically, many activities for adults copy movements done by infants as they learn to coordinate eyes, ears, hands and the body. For example, the cross crawl — alternately moving one arm toward the opposite leg and then vice versa — helps to support balance within the body. While these activities improve physical abilities, Hewlett says, they also help improve mental abilities such as focusing, attending to something and making better choices.

Visit jillhewlett.com for more information. 📧



Drawing on mindfulness meditation

This art therapy practice reduces stress and enhances relaxation and focus

by **Brooke Smith**

Zentangle is a method for drawing that not only promotes focus, concentration and creativity but also increases your sense of well-being.

Invented by Rick Roberts, a longtime meditation practitioner, and artist Maria Thomas, Zentangle combines meditation principles with creative inspiration to draw structured patterns called tangles with combinations of dots, lines, simple curves, S-curves and orbs.

But it's not doodling. "It's not just whatever comes out of your pen," Thomas says. "It's all about patterns, which doodling is not."

And it's not colouring. "It's not like a colouring book where it's all laid out," Roberts says. "No disrespect to that world, but with Zentangle, you're creating as you're going along instead of copying something or filling something in."

Materials are simple: 3.5-inch (9 cm) pieces of paper (called "tiles"), black pen, pencil and tortillon (a paper blending stump).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZENTANGLE

A tile can be completed in roughly 30 to 45 minutes, Thomas says, and there are eight steps:

- Step 1:** Breathe and appreciate the paper and tools — and the opportunity to create something.
- Step 2:** Add a dot in each corner of the tile.
- Step 3:** Connect the dots to make a border (typically a square).
- Step 4:** Within the square, add a "string" to divide the square into different sections.
- Step 5:** Draw the tangles, "a predefined sequence of simple strokes that make up a pattern."
- Step 6:** Add shading to create a 3D effect.
- Step 7:** Initial your work on the front.
- Step 8:** Appreciate your mini work of art.

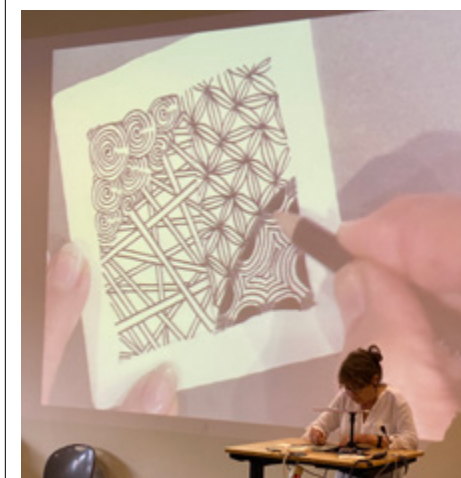
Before you think you're simply drawing a patterned work of art, there's more.

Deborah Lawton, now a certified Zentangle teacher, taught herself to Zentangle after reading about it in a magazine. At the time she was teaching high school students and taught the method to them. "I didn't know the process of teaching it," she says, "but there was this calm that would take over in the room."

That's not surprising. "Something happens when you're putting your pen to the paper," Roberts says. "There's a sensation of creativity, and there's a stillness of the mind." In meditation terms, you're eliminating the chatter in your head and focusing mindfully on putting the ink on the paper.

Thomas and Roberts originally saw that Zentangle was beneficial for children, but as time went on, adults became their audience. "We found that people were looking for a way to sit and be mindful," Thomas says. "Not everybody can sit down, close their eyes and think about nothing. That's a very difficult thing to do. We reach the same place that the practice of meditation does in minutes."

Thomas and Roberts are partnering with UMass Mind, part of the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School, working with individuals with serious mental health issues. According to "Exploring Zentangle as a Virtual Mindfulness-Based Art Intervention for



Maria Thomas and Rick Roberts

People with Serious Mental Illness," a study of six participants who completed an eight-week Zentangle program, "preliminary data suggest that the use of Zentangle for participants with [serious mental illness] may have a positive impact on overall psychiatric symptoms and mindfulness. Moreover, the Zentangle Method encourages positive emotions like gratitude and self-accomplishment to counteract negative feelings of self-criticism and failure in participants."

In another study, "The Effects of Zentangle® on Affective Well-Being among Adults: A Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial," 38 participants from a nonclinical population participated in a two-hour Zentangle class. Those who practised Zentangle for more than 80 minutes per week had a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms and an improvement in self-compassion.

There has also been some anecdotal evidence of pain management.

Lawton, who taught a Zentangle

course at a nursing home, talks about an elderly woman who was in a wheelchair and experienced chronic pain. "The class was two hours, and after the first hour, the woman exclaimed that she couldn't feel her pain," Lawton says. In fact, according to the nursing home that hired Lawton, the woman continued Zentangling because when she practised, she wasn't in pain.

Thomas calls Zentangle a "forgiving" art form because there are no "mistakes."

"The metaphors we get from the Zentangle method — no mistakes, doing things one stroke at a time, not focusing on what it should look like but being able to respond to each step along the way — have really translated into our life, and how we face problems or the unexpected," Roberts says. "It has really given us a great tool kit for the larger canvas of life."

For more information on Zentangle or to find a teacher in your area, go to zentangle.com, and for more in-depth instructions, go to zentangle.com/pages/get-started. ☺



A life well lived

Why simple pleasures matter

by **Stuart Foxman**
illustrations by **Kate Traynor**

W

hen the day is filled with must-dos, with rush-around busyness, it's easy to take the little joys that come our way for granted — or forget they even happened.

And if we do, or don't make time for them, we're missing out on the simple pleasures that give life real meaning. Getting together with old pals for lunch. Watching the sun slowly sink behind the horizon. Exploring a corner of town you've never visited before. Losing yourself in a good book. Sending a birthday card — an actual card — to your friend who lives across town.

Simple pleasures are personal. They're different for everyone, but they have elements in common. We can access them easily and experience them frequently, they cost little or nothing, and they're critical to our happiness. "I think of them in categories. What are the top five non-negotiable things I need in a day to be well?" says Diana Brecher, a clinical psychologist on the faculty of Toronto Metropolitan University.

Those categories, and what fall under them,



are different for everyone. Maybe your buckets are “social connections” (a call with an old friend or getting together with a group), “exercise” (hitting the gym or playing a game of pickleball), “nature” (going for a walk or gardening) and “leisure” (watching a movie or taking time for a favourite hobby).

Whatever those pursuits, “they’re yoked to specific needs. They affect mood. And they’re just what you need at the moment,” Brecher says.

At every stage of life, you have major goals, like studying for a career, landing the job of your dreams, buying a home or planning for retirement. Achieving these milestones can be incredibly satisfying, but pleasure often comes from simple experiences.

In a study published in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*, researchers examined what we treasure most, what adds to our sense of what matters. Participants were asked to recall their most consequential events of the past week. What stood out weren’t grand achievements but relatively small and

routine joys. One author commented that “people who value the little things tend to have a high sense of meaning in life.”

We can forget that. Too often, we’re not intentional enough about incorporating these delights throughout the day, says Nicole Mead, an associate professor of marketing at York University who has researched the benefits of simple pleasures. She says people can sometimes view simple pleasures as a reward, adopting this mentality: “Get the utilitarian stuff done, and then you can enjoy life.”

Yet simple pleasures, she says, “connect you to your identity, to other people and to your core purpose, and can change the trajectory of our day.”

In other words, savouring simple pleasures isn’t an indulgence.

Think of it this way. For a well-balanced diet, we eat nutritious meals and maybe then consider cookies or a bag of chips as a treat. In a well-balanced life, simple pleasures aren’t the treat; they’re the main course.

Along with making time for simple pleasures, we have to consciously appreciate and make the most of them, says Anne Wilson, a professor in the Department of Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University. “The concept of savouring is important,” she says.

Much of what we do, whether for work or fun, happens on autopilot or amidst distractions. You want everyday delights to have more of an impact? “Pause to enjoy the moment, and pay attention to what you’re doing and the pleasure it’s bringing

you,” Wilson says.

Sometimes, that requires a conscious choice of what we place in the foreground or background, Brecher says.

Consider a family gathering. It’s easy to dwell on petty family squabbles, the cousin who gets on your nerves or the sister-in-law who didn’t offer to help. Will that be in your foreground while someone is telling a wild story that has everyone howling? If so, you’ll miss out on the simple times that make for immediate joy and lasting memories.

“Whenever possible, we need to get the most out of every moment,” Brecher says. “It’s about being mindful.”

Another obstacle to latching on to simple pleasures is the fallacy that going “big” makes us happier. Buying a new car, taking a fancy vacation or splurging at a shop can give us a jolt. But only temporarily. That’s the nature of what’s known in psychology as “hedonic adaptation.” After a positive (or negative) event, and a temporary change in our feelings, we quickly return to a baseline level of happiness.

What happens to the initial buzz? “It fades,” Brecher says. When it comes to stuff, she says, “we start to take it for granted, see its flaws or don’t think it matters anymore.”

Eventually, the new wheels become an old car with a ding. But you know what gives you joy? The song on the radio that has you belting the lyrics with the car windows down.

We need to jump off the hedonic treadmill, Wilson says. “Big events are often very pleasurable but don’t have sustaining power. You can think of daily pleasures as a lot smaller, so you don’t value them as much, but they accrue over time.”

The value is enormous. Ipsos surveyed more than 20,000 adults in 30 countries about what does or could make them happiest. Having good physical and mental health were numbers one and two. But respondents also said that having friends is as important as having more money and that hobbies are as important as basic food and shelter.

Another survey by Leger asked Canadians to rate their level of happiness and what influences it. Higher scores

“Pause to enjoy the moment, and pay attention to what you’re doing and the pleasure it’s bringing you.”

—Anne Wilson

are connected to a way of life where people are “more in the moment,” explained Dave Scholz of Leger. In the survey, 44 per cent of people aged 18 to 54 reported high happiness scores, but that jumped to 61 per cent for those 55 and up. The ability to seek and enjoy simple pleasures as we age may be part of it.

A series of studies from researchers at Dartmouth College and the University of Pennsylvania examined the experiences that people recall, plan, imagine and post on social media. Past research has shown that experiences bring greater happiness than material possessions. But which experiences?

These studies involved participants aged 18 to 79. The researchers found that younger people gain more happiness from “extraordinary experiences” — the uncommon and infrequent. However, as we get older, “the ordinary experiences that comprise daily lives” and that “are emotionally satisfying in the present” become increasingly associated with happiness.

Simple pleasures also play a functional role, Mead says. That was a conclusion of one of her studies, published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*.

Mead and her fellow researchers asked a group of participants to track their days for a week. Each morning, participants committed to goals they wanted to work on that day. Five times a day, the researchers reached out to ask whether participants were experiencing a simple pleasure (something brief, personal and positive), a small annoyance or neither. Each night, participants wrote down how happy their day was and what progress they had made on the day’s objectives.

On days when people experienced high numbers of simple pleasures, they were better able to meet their goals. And on days with few simple pleasures, their daily hassles loomed larger and they made less progress on their to-do list. Looking at it another way, Mead says that having tunnel vision around big goals can prevent us from experiencing simple pleasures.

So curl up with popcorn and binge a favourite show. Sing in the shower. Make someone laugh.

Mead says that her study underscores how simple pleasures, beyond being gratifying, can energize you, act as a buffer against small annoyances and daily stresses, and help you reach your aspirations.

“There’s nothing simple,” she says, “about simple pleasures.”



Celebrating life's little delights!

Members share their simple pleasures

by **Sue Horner**

From laughing with friends to enjoying the sunset to snuggling with grandchildren, small experiences spark joy.

“A happy life is a sum of small joys,” says scientist and happiness researcher Gillian Mandich, who conducted a behavioural science experiment for Interac in 2021. The study found that during the difficult times of the pandemic, Canadians increasingly made small, non-essential “feel good” purchases. “Even something as simple as buying your morning coffee can add a burst of happiness to your day,” Mandich points out.

RTOERO surveyed members last summer, asking for your simple pleasures. For many, the heartwarming pleasures were time with children, grandchildren and partners. Others enjoyed gardening or reading by the fire on a cold day. Several mentioned friends, travel and historical research. Sparkling bathrooms and butter tarts also made the list.

PHOTO, AMRI PHOTO



Positive angle-r

Linda Gaboury
(District 5 Cochrane, Temiskaming)

Linda Gaboury has a number of simple pleasures, and all have to do with being active outdoors. “We’re not couch potatoes,” she says. She and her husband, Guy, love camping and bought a “fifth wheel” camper in 2017, the year she retired. One week later, they set off on a two-month adventure, visiting her brother-in-law and his wife in Nanaimo, then travelling Vancouver Island right to Tofino. Since then, their time has been highlighted by smaller camping trips in Northern Ontario.

Another simple pleasure is fishing, which she finds relaxing and peaceful. “My father fished and hunted, and I was Daddy’s girl, so I always tagged along,” Gaboury says. “Guy and I eat fish all the time, especially walleye [pickereil] and northern pike. If we’re at our camp on the Mistango River in northeastern Ontario, we can sit in our lawn chairs and fish right off our dock.”

In the winter, you’ll find the Gabourys snowmobiling. Their camp is accessible only by boat or snowmobile, and they spend a lot of time there, especially in winter.

“Retirement really is the best job ever,” Gaboury says. “When you’re working, you have a schedule. When you’re retired, you can still get up at the same time, but the schedule is your own and you don’t have to rush. You can have that second coffee relaxing in your pyjamas.”



Cross-country bliss

Louise Mitchell
(District 39 Peel)

Louise Mitchell and her husband, Neil, both retired early so they could enjoy time together “and do what we like.” That includes reading two or three books a week (history, murder mysteries, spy novels) and watching the turkeys, fox, deer and other wildlife on their rural property north of Ottawa.

But what happened at Mitchell’s retirement in June 2018 reflects one of their favourite simple pleasures. “At the end of my last day, I was escorted by all my bike friends to dinner,” she says. “I was also offered a job teaching dirt-biking skills. I took it! And I’ve been teaching dirt biking and adventure-bike riding May to October since then.”

Mitchell’s “bike friends” ride dirt bikes and adventure bikes, which are larger than dirt bikes and can go on- or off-road.

It all started when Neil, who was into motocross racing and riding dirt bikes when he was young, asked if she’d like to get her motorcycle licence. She said yes. “I was in my 40s when I got licensed on a sport

bike,” she explains. “I rode for five years but found the bike so uncomfortable that I couldn’t go far. Then we saw the *Long Way Round* series documenting the 19,000-mile journey of Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman riding motorcycles from London, England, through Europe, Asia and Alaska. We looked at each other and said, ‘We could do that.’”

So they transitioned from sport bikes to larger, more comfortable adventure bikes. That meant they could ride for a whole day, which led to day trips. That led to meeting other bikers, which led to attending bike rallies over multiple days, following a leader or a specific route on a GPS. With experience following GPS routes, the couple added travel to the mix.

Since then, the Mitchells have biked in Ireland, England, Portugal, Spain, across the United States and beyond — and they rent their bikes wherever they go. “Each time, we improve our skills as riders and we expand our horizons,” Mitchell says. “But the most exciting thing is meeting so many new people.”



Enjoying the view

Dawn Macleod
(District 9 Huron-Perth)

There’s a reason Dawn Macleod has truly simple pleasures: coffee, her backyard and her chickens. For 10 years, Macleod has been in and out of surgeries and treatments for cancer.

“I officially retired from teaching in 2015 because of the brain fog that goes along with chemotherapy,” she says. “I knew I wasn’t thinking clearly enough to supervise a group of children. And the amount of time I spent at appointments made me unreliable.”

Now 59, Macleod appreciates having a house in a small town. Last year, she and her husband, Neil, installed double doors on the outside wall of their second-floor bedroom, overlooking the backyard and empty lot next door. “The view is amazing,” Macleod says. “I can sit up in bed, sip my Kicking Horse coffee (roasted in Canmore), soak up the sunshine and laugh at the antics of my hens.”

The Macleods got their first

chickens in April 2023 when their nephew renovated the shed into a chicken coop with an outdoor run. “Chickens really are quite entertaining,” Macleod explains. “We’re now up to five hens and one rooster I call Steve.”

Macleod is especially grateful to have had almost a full year without any treatment or surgery. “I had strength, clarity and appetite. I could work out in the garden or walk around the yard. We also got new neighbours whose children have kept me entertained and brought a whole new energy level to our street.”

She adds, “It sounds cliché, but it really does take some hard times to learn how to appreciate the good times. And, if you have work and health, treasure that.”



Keep rollin’

Connie Davis
(District 49 The Prairies)

Roller skating does it for Connie Davis. Retired for just over three years, she also enjoys nature walks with another retired teacher, coaxing chickadees to feed on her hands. She’s making up for getting kicked out of art in high school by dabbling in water-colour painting. But roller skating is a 20-year passion.

Like ice dancing, professional roller skating demands a certain sequence of steps to music on a large, arena-type floor. Davis has competed at a high level in figures, solo dance and team dance sponsored by USARS, the US national governing body for competitive roller sports, filling a display case with medals.

Davis also teaches roller skating and has been a roller-skating consultant for movies filmed in Winnipeg, where she lives.

Her former dance partner has been in a nursing home with dementia for about two years. “Our last competition was 2017, so not that long ago,” Davis says. “That woke me up to the need to live every moment of retirement. Retirement is fabulous, and it is what you make it!” ☺

“A child’s sense of wonder, solitude at a mountain lake, a dog’s grunt as you rub its belly.” —Bill Elman (Actively employed)



Be happy

Nancy O’Grady
(District 37 Oxford)

Travel also played a large role in the life of Nancy O’Grady, although that resulted in a “frenetic” first stage of retirement.

She and her husband had travelled extensively while

they were both working, trying to get to every country in the world; she stalled at 137. After retirement, they ramped it up. Eventually, they reached a point where the only countries left were either deemed unsafe or too difficult and expensive to get to.

So on the cusp of her 65th birthday, O’Grady is ready for a calmer life. High on her list of simple pleasures is a trifecta of “B”s: Bordeaux wine, big band music and buddies. “A connoisseur would say that Bordeaux blends are medium- to full-bodied red wines with bold aromas,” she says.

Big band music evokes memories of her parents, which brings O’Grady joy. “The music of the Glenn Miller and the Benny Goodman orchestras, the Dorsey Brothers and others filled our home over the radio

during the week and through the console stereo in the living room on Sunday afternoons. These days, the sound of big band music continues to fill my home through Alexa, iTunes and Spotify.”

O’Grady considers herself blessed to be part of a circle of dynamic, clever, adventurous, interesting, supportive and kind buddies. Some are travel buddies; others, coffee buddies, walking buddies, phone-only or text-only buddies. Some are childhood friends, former colleagues or former students; others have come into her life more recently.

“My buddies form the richest part of the tapestry of my life,” O’Grady says. “C’mon over. Nothing special, no fuss, just a glass of Bordeaux, a big band playlist and immense gratitude for life’s simple pleasures!”

LEFT PHOTO, COURTESY OF LINDA GABOURY
RIGHT PHOTO, COURTESY OF LOUISE MITCHELL

TOP LEFT PHOTO, COURTESY OF DAWN MACLEOD. TOP RIGHT PHOTO, COURTESY OF CONNIE DAVIS
BOTTOM PHOTO, COURTESY OF NANCY O’GRADY



FIVE SIMPLE ACTS OF KINDNESS

PRACTISING

KINDNESS CAN

BENEFIT YOUR

HEALTH AND

WELL-BEING

by **Erin Pehlivan**

illustrations by

Erin McPhee

Last October, I started volunteering for Kids Help Phone. As I extended kindness, warmth and compassion to youth in crisis, I discovered that my own mental health began to improve. Not only does it feel good to help those in need; it also gives me perspective on my own problems — and while it doesn't solve them, I've found that sitting in the darkness

listening to young people has increased my resilience in my day-to-day life.

Showing kindness, whether toward yourself or someone else, is known to make us feel good and is an often-unrecognized element of well-being. Scientific research has shown that those warm feelings we get when practising acts of kindness are linked to health benefits, like reduced stress levels and better heart health.

"I think kindness is a quality of being genuine, well-intentioned, and I'd consider it requiring courage," says Jennifer Irwin, a professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Western University. It's often confused with "niceness," which can include giving joy or being polite or friendly.

Katie J. Shillington agrees. She's an adjunct professor in the Department of Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University and a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Neurobiology at University of California San Diego. "Kindness can be understood as a benevolent and helpful action intended towards another person and is often motivated by a desire to help someone," she says. "It's bettering the lives of others, one's own life and the world, through genuine acts of love, compassion, generosity or acts of service," which all fall under the umbrella of prosocial behaviours.

From author George Saunders's graduation speech ("Err in the direction of kindness"), to recent books like Rutger Bregman's *Humankind: A Hopeful History* and Jamil Zaki's *The War for Kindness*, to Pope Francis's TED Talk about "the revolution of tenderness," kindness is everywhere. In fact, it's part of the human condition, Irwin says. If we get in touch with that part of ourselves, we can see its many advantages.



1.

BEING KIND IS A NATURAL BUFFER FOR STRESS

Chronic stress can lead to a slew of health problems, like increased cortisol (the stress hormone), blood pressure, pain, sleep problems and a weakened immune system. A study from Stanford University showed that when our bodies are fuelled by our non-stop adrenaline-filled lifestyles, we have a harder time coming out of “threat mode.”

Regular acts of kindness, compassion and prosocial behaviour have been shown to combat this stress by improving resilience and reducing cortisol (by up to 23 per cent, according to Shillington) – especially when used in combination with other tools such as exercise, healthy eating, therapy and mindfulness. It can even influence your neurological system, according to Irwin. Engaging in kind acts releases oxytocin, a hormone that reduces feelings of stress and fear, as well as dopamine, the happy hormone. While practising regular kindness doesn't eliminate stressors, it improves our ability to cope better with challenges.

2.

BEING KIND CAN IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH IN MYRIAD WAYS



“If we just dedicated our lives to kindness, to the qualities of friendliness and care,” writes Tara Brach, in her book *Radical Acceptance*, “we would be directly serving peace on earth.”

Irwin's research on students participating in random acts of kindness also shows the mental benefits of kindness: “Deliberate acts of kindness caused reductions in anxiety and negative moods, and improved resilience. Participants reported improvements in their mental health and an increased connection to others.”

“High levels of resilience have been associated with positive mental health outcomes,” Shillington says. Kindness can even stimulate the production of serotonin, the feel-good chemical that increases happiness and heals wounds, which can be linked to having a greater meaning in life and enhanced self-worth and self-esteem. “When you engage in kind acts, your brain produces endorphins, which is known as a natural painkiller,” she adds.

3.

KINDNESS IS GOOD FOR THE HEART, BODY AND SOUL



Kindness even has an impact on inclusivity, Irwin says, as it boosts positive social connection and belonging in groups. It's also an important component of equity. Shillington notes that it's a great way for older adults to reduce feelings of isolation. “There's science behind why engaging in such kind acts actually makes us feel so good,” she says. “When you're kind to another person, your brain's pleasure and reward centres actually light up.” This is known as the “helper's high.”

Practising regular acts of kindness as simple as holding the door open for someone, phoning a friend or saying good morning to a neighbour can be one way to measure psychological well-being, which includes having purpose in life, being optimistic and feeling a sense of happiness. According to research from the National Library of Medicine in the United States, people who fit this profile are less likely to develop cardiovascular disease, protecting the heart and metabolic health.

One study from the *Diabetes Care* journal researched people with type 1 or 2 diabetes, concluding that an eight-week self-compassion program helped temper their depression and blood sugar dysregulation. Soothing compassionate activities made a positive impact on the nervous system and mood and taught participants the importance of being patient in healing. (If you want to learn more about self-compassion exercises, professor and author Kristin Neff offers free resources on her website: self-compassion.org.)

4.

BEING KIND BOOSTS HAPPINESS, EVEN WHEN WE'RE MOST VULNERABLE

Kindness helps both the giver and the receiver function better, even when serious illness is involved. The *Journal of Positive Psychology* released a study where patients with early-stage breast cancer performed random acts of kindness and reported stronger social support and a connection with others in their growing social circles. The evidence shows that kindness kills negative stress brought on by disease or other challenges and provides grounding experiences that contribute to life perspective.

Irwin's own experience reflects this: While in the hospital for cancer, her cousin Deb “did little acts of kindness seemingly all the time,” Irwin says, “from bringing her physical therapist her favourite brownie” to “listening to her oncologist tell her how her daughter was doing” and even touring treatment rooms to write messages of support for patients. “Deb let people know that she saw them and that they mattered . . . and it made her feel better.”



5. KINDNESS CAN INCREASE YOUR LIFESPAN



So, does kindness help you live longer? “There's research to support that engaging in kindness can protect your overall heart health twice as much as aspirin protects against heart disease, which is one of my favourite kindness facts,” Shillington says. People who regularly engage in kindness have been found to “age slower than the average person,” she adds. “The bottom line is, yes, kindness can actually increase one's life expectancy.”

What's the ideal dosage of kindness? Shillington says it's difficult to quantify, and it's even tough to say which types of kind acts provide the most benefits. “Kindness is so individual and specific in the sense that it's different for everyone. Some people may want to engage in many small acts, whereas others may find it more impactful to engage in a few large-scale acts of kindness during the month. It's important that folks find variety.”

“Kindness is an evidence-based, low- to no-cost endeavour that's accessible to everyone,” Irwin says. She emphasizes that establishing boundaries is an important part of self-kindness so as to not deplete your own resources.

After all, the kindest thing you can do is take care of yourself before helping others. It's a lesson I've learned at Kids Help Phone as I handle text messages about everything from suicide to relationship problems to chronic mental health issues. It's crucial to check in with your own needs. For me, that looks like decompressing through rest and movement, chatting with my husband, having a snack or distracting myself online. On a larger scale, it means living according to my own values or doing what's right – even if it feels difficult.

Through my volunteer work, I'm constantly empathizing with others and thinking about how I'd want to be treated if I were in someone else's shoes. Volunteering gives me something to look forward to every week, and it's an instant mood boost.

That much-needed serotonin boost is also why, as I write this, I'm preparing to deliver humanitarian medical luggage to a hospital in Havana, Cuba. I recently reached out to my *casa particular* host to see what he and his community needed. In a place experiencing medicinal and food shortages, putting together luggage filled with things I know other people need more than me, and preparing to give it without strings attached, is one of the most meaningful, and kind, things I can do. ☺

Idyllic Îles de la Madeleine

Known for their warm hospitality, the islanders are also recognized chefs, artists and artisans

by **Doug Wallace**

Located in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, Îles de la Madeleine is a green archipelago of seven small inhabited islands, each rich in its own history and culture.

Route 199, the main road crossing the Îles de la Madeleine, often called the Magdalen Islands in English, is only about 85 kilometres long, so you can choose your home base and take day trips to explore each island.

ABSORB THE CULTURE

Visitors quickly discover why the Acadian and Scottish ancestors of the Madelinots were drawn here more than 200 years ago: lush hillsides, long stretches of beach, calm lagoons, red sandstone cliffs and diverse flora and fauna. This is a natural environment nonpareil.

Add in the Magdalen maritime cultural heritage and traditional foodways, and your agenda fills up as you taste your way around the countryside, comb the artisans' workshops for original painting and photography, and enjoy all manner of water sports. Evenings bring local, traditional music and more than a few stories. It's a rich heritage of shipwrecks and wildlife, mixed with peace and quiet. You may not get acquainted with all 12,000 people on this serene archipelago, but you will likely do your darndest.

PHOTO, COURTESY OF TOURISME ÎLES DE LA MADELEINE



INDULGE YOUR PALATE

Yes, there will be lobster. No, you will not tire of it — nor the smoked herring, scallops, mackerel, clam chowder or fancily shaped croquignoles pastries. Îles de la Madeleine is a definite food-lover's dream. New businesses are continually cropping up to augment the list of local delicacies, and summer's outdoor markets are filled with farm-fresh goodness. Even the little, out-of-the-way snack shops tantalize visitors in a variety of ways.

Traditional tastes are always worth a try, particularly the multitude of cheeses, made with raw sheep's milk or from Canadienne cow milk. Pot-en-pot is the Acadian version of a meat pie. It is most commonly filled with chicken or rabbit but can also be a seafood casserole with a pastry top. Seal meat can often be found on restaurant menus, as well as salted meats or fish smoked over a maple-wood fire. Be sure to try the traditional "la bagosse" — a homemade berry-wine concoction that Grandad used to make — along with craft beers and crisp ciders. You'll also find herbalists busy with their aromatic oils, honey houses offering up sweets, and tea rooms on hand for a brief respite from a day of exploring.



GET OUTSIDE

Îles de la Madeleine has an abundance of outdoor pursuits — and local tour operators that share your enthusiasm. You can book cycling and hiking tours, horseback riding, golfing, paddling, boating and sailing, fishing and marine wildlife-watching tours. The lagoons are perfect for learning all the wind sports, high speed and otherwise, if that's on your bucket list.

Wildlife reserves lure naturalists on the lookout for the more than 300 species of seabirds, shorebirds and waterfowl on the islands. Birders head to the Pointe-de-l'Est National Wildlife Area, the cliffs of Île d'Entrée and the trails of Parc des Buck, among others. And the monumental, pastoral beauty of each quadrant of the archipelago is icing on the cake. Summer is beach season, of course, with plenty of sand to go around.

PHOTOS, MATHIEU DUPUIS

HIT THE TRAILS

The Route Verte is a 100-kilometre stretch of cycling, from one end of the islands to the other — Havre-Aubert to Grande-Entrée — along the main road. The sea view is practically constant, with many opportunities to veer off the main path — something, in fact, encouraged by the locals. You get some exercise, see the sights, meet the people, enjoy the food — you're exercising, so you need fuel! — and experience local island life. There are five panoramic routes in total, including a jaunt through the villages of the more inhabited Cap aux Meules Island or a cycle around the panoramic Havre Aubert Island, where you can stand at the Anse-à-la-Cabane Lighthouse atop the famous red cliffs.



WHEN YOU GO

While there are quite a few options for boutique hotels and small-apartment stays, you're staying at Le Domaine du Vieux Couvent, a former convent with gorgeous views of the sea. From \$230. domaineduvieuxcouvent.com.

Air Canada offers flights to the islands through Montreal during the summer months. Off-season, consider Pascan Aviation or PAL Airlines from Quebec City. The five-hour ferry crossing from Souris, Prince Edward Island, allows you to bring your car, or you can rent a car, provided you book in advance. Taxi cabs are also readily available. Cruises by Voyages AML sail from Montreal down the St. Lawrence River through Quebec City and around the Gaspé Peninsula to the islands. It's not fancy, but it's fun — and very French. QUEBECMARITIME.CA TOURISMEILESDELAMADELEINE.COM

PHOTOS, MATHIEU DUPUIS

How to ride shotgun, no sweat

“When we head out on a road trip, I’m usually in the passenger seat. What tips do you have for the navigator?”



Truthfully, the navigator is an essential part of the equation, operating as trip captain, driver’s assistant and grandchild back-seat referee all at once. You are also the calming influence, should the weather or the route become difficult.

Consider the dashboard of the car your domain, particularly the GPS, air conditioning and music. It’s much safer to leave the driver to the driving. You also need to be prepared with a pre-planned route, and it’s helpful to load your phone with the right apps — things like Bathroom Scout, GasBuddy, Yelp, Waze and Google Maps. [Roadtrippers.com](https://www.roadtrippers.com) is also quite useful. Bring a paper map in case you experience technical difficulties or poor reception.

Be organized with items like charge cords, toll-road money, water bottles and a mess kit that includes wet wipes, paper towels, plastic bags — and poo bags, if Bowser is along for the ride.

Remember that you are also head waiter, dishing out snacks on the fly. Stock a small insulated bag with finger foods that aren’t too delicate or messy. This can include protein bars, fruit and vegetables, chips and tacos, beef jerky and string cheese, bananas, even hard-boiled eggs if you’re old-school enough.

Maybe you’re always the passenger because you don’t speak up about wanting to drive? Offer to share this responsibility, so your skills don’t atrophy and the regular driver can enjoy the scenery.

COTTAGE COMFORT: HOW TO BE A GOOD GUEST

“Don’t come a-callin’ with your hands by your sides.”

My grandmother’s voice rings true every time I think about visiting cottage country. Just as you would never show up at someone’s home for dinner without some wine and a gift, so should you always bring things to the cottage that will make your host’s life easier.

- Pack at least a few bottles of something: wine you know they like, a special (read: expensive) spirit they wouldn’t normally splurge on, a brandy for the fire or a six pack of ready-made cocktails for the dock. The trick is to bring at least as much as you yourselves will drink.
- Offer to cook dinner for everyone at least one of the nights, and bring breakfast staples you know will come in handy. Send your hosts a list of the food you plan on bringing in advance, so there’s no doubling up (potluck is always a bad idea). If you can’t cook, offer to take everyone out for lunch or dinner to the local inn or roadhouse.
- Bring your own towels and beach towels. And offer to bring your own bed linens or sleeping bags to save your hosts a ton of washing, but respect their wishes if they say no, thank you.
- If you visit this particular friend more than once a season, bring a bundle of paper towels, toilet paper or napkins, or all three. Tea towels, gourmet preserves, a fancy pie, a board game — throw in something special, too. ☘



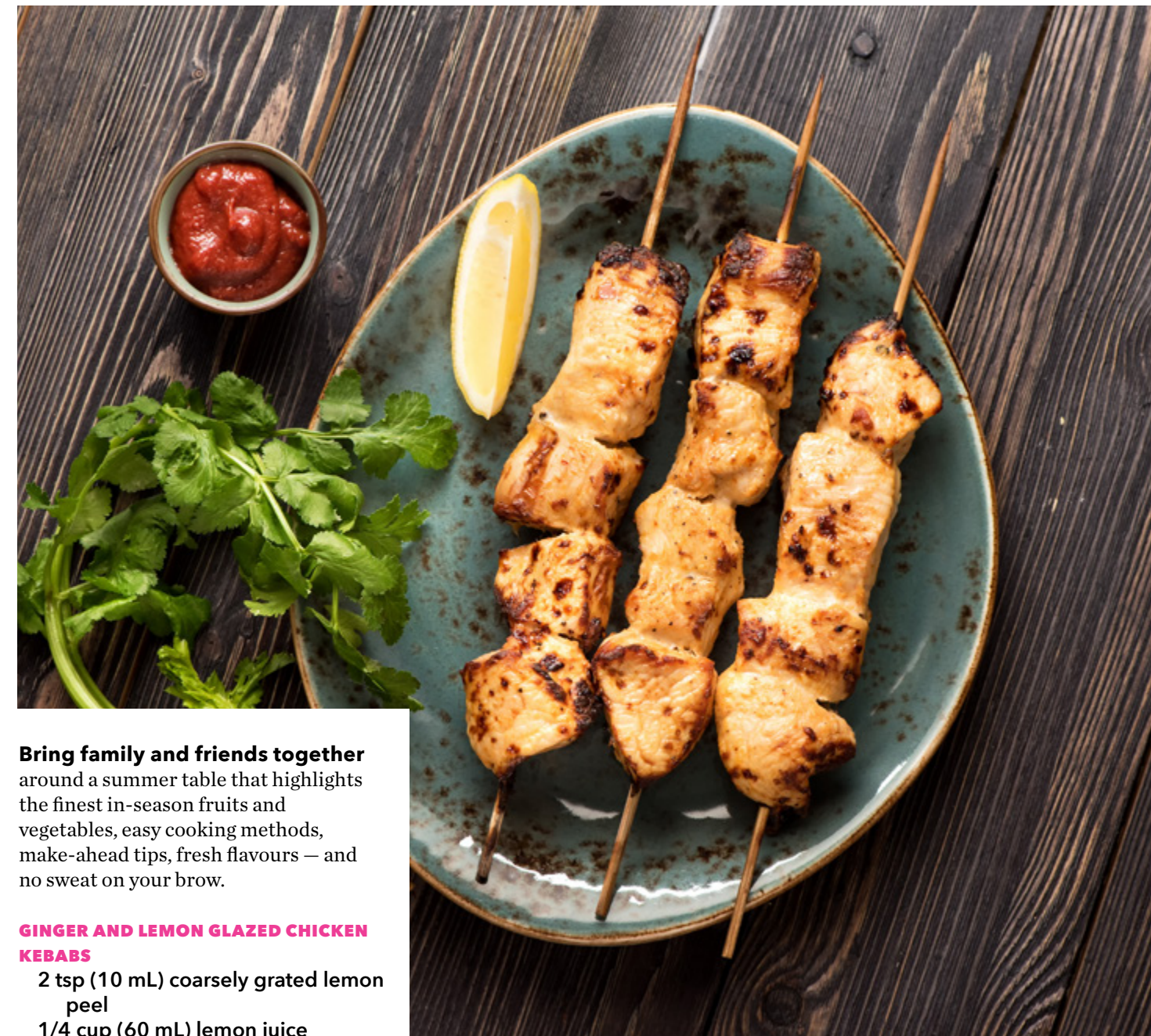
Doug Wallace
Editor & publisher,
TravelRight.Today,
and your in-the-know
friend for travel tips
and trends.

TOP LEFT PHOTO: WAVEBREAK MEDIA

Simple summer suppers

These fuss-free dinners make the most of seasonal ingredients

by **Elizabeth Baird**



Bring family and friends together around a summer table that highlights the finest in-season fruits and vegetables, easy cooking methods, make-ahead tips, fresh flavours — and no sweat on your brow.

GINGER AND LEMON GLAZED CHICKEN KEBABS

- 2 tsp (10 mL) coarsely grated lemon peel
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) lemon juice
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) canola oil
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) dark sesame oil
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) grated fresh ginger
- 2 tsp (10 mL) Dijon mustard
- 2 tsp (10 mL) liquid honey
- 2 tsp (10 mL) fresh thyme leaves, or 1 tsp crushed dried thyme leaves
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) each salt and pepper
- 4 boneless and skinless chicken breasts, about 1 lb (455 g) total
- 8 green onions, trimmed

In a large bowl, stir together lemon peel, juice, canola and sesame oil, ginger, mustard, honey, thyme, salt and pepper.

Add the chicken. Marinate in the fridge for 30 minutes or up to 12 hours.

Brush the green onions with a little of the marinade.

Grill green onions and chicken, covered, on greased grill over medium-high heat, turning occasionally until the onions are grill-marked and tender, about 12 minutes, and for the chicken, until no longer pink inside, about 15 minutes.

Makes 4 servings.

PHOTO: MARINASHANTI

GOLDEN BEET RISOTTO

- 3 large or 5 small golden or red beets with leaves
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) butter
- 1 cup (250 mL) diced onion or shallots
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) pepper
- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) arborio rice
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) sherry vinegar or lemon juice
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) white wine or chicken stock
- 4 cups (1 L) chicken stock, approximate
- 3/4 cup (175 mL) freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- Salt
- Crumbled blue cheese, optional

Trim the beets, reserving the small inner beet leaves. Trim off any coarse stems. Peel the beets; cut into 1/4-inch (.5 cm) dice. You should have about 2 1/2 cups (625 mL).

Shred enough of the tender inner beet leaves to make 1 cup (250 mL); set aside.

In a medium-size shallow saucepan over low heat, melt the butter. Add the onion, garlic, beets and pepper. Cover and cook, stirring often, until beets are slightly softened, about 10 minutes.

Stir in the rice, aiming to spread this flavourful base through the rice, then stir in the vinegar.

Begin adding the wine and stock to the rice mixture, 1/2 cup (125 mL) at a time, stirring after each addition until the rice has absorbed the liquid. This will take about 20 to 25 minutes.

The beets should be fork-tender and the rice creamy.

Don't worry if the risotto is rather loose; the rice will continue to absorb stock.

Stir in the beet leaves and half of the Parmesan. Season to taste with salt.

Serve immediately in warmed pasta bowls with remaining Parmesan and a few nubs of crumbled blue cheese, if desired.

Makes 4 to 5 servings.

Make it vegetarian: Replace the chicken stock with vegetable stock.

Substitute: White balsamic vinegar or apple cider vinegar for the sherry vinegar. You can also replace some or all of the butter with good olive oil.

NAAN PIZZA WITH ASPARAGUS

Replace a from-scratch pizza base with a flatbread such as naan or focaccia. Here are two bases and two combos of toppings: one with seasonal asparagus and one with all-season pantry ingredients.

- 2 naan flatbread, 250 g package
- Olive oil
- 8 thick asparagus stalks
- 2 cups (500 mL) shredded and lightly packed mozzarella cheese
- 1 cup (250 mL) thinly sliced roasted red pepper
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) pitted sun-dried black olives
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) minced fresh oregano, or 1 tsp dried, crumbled
- 3/4 cup (175 mL) freshly grated Asiago or Parmesan cheese

Line a large rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Place the oven rack in the bottom position; preheat oven to 425°F (220°C).

Place the naans on the baking sheet.

Brush tops lightly with olive oil.

Meanwhile, snap off the tough ends of the asparagus; slice stalks in half lengthwise. Brush with olive oil; set aside.

Sprinkle half of the mozzarella cheese evenly over the oiled naan.

Arrange the asparagus, cut-side down, on the mozzarella.

Lightly press the asparagus, pepper slices and olives into the mozzarella. Top with the oregano, remaining mozzarella and all the Asiago.

Bake until the asparagus is crisp tender, the cheese melty, the edges golden brown and the naan nicely toasted, about 12 to 15 minutes.

Makes 4 servings.

Variation: All-Season Artichoke Pizza: Slice a focaccia lengthwise. Brush the cut sides with olive oil and place cut-sides up on the baking sheet. Replace the asparagus with 2 cups (500 mL) thickly sliced marinated artichokes and top with thinly sliced red onion.



PHOTO, AERIAL MIKE



PANTRY-FRIENDLY PASTA SALAD BOWL

A canny cook keeps a pantry that includes favourite convenience items: canned beans and pasta, for example, and no matter the season, a freezer that holds no-prep frozen corn or peas. Do enjoy fresh vegetables according to season, and up the salad's ante with extra protein such as quartered hard-boiled eggs, canned salmon or tuna, leftover chicken or shrimp, or firm tofu. An avocado? Why not.

- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) small pasta such as farfalle, rotini or orecchiette
- 1 can (19 oz/425 g) black beans
- 1 1/2 cups (375 mL) cherry tomatoes, halved
- 1 cup (250 mL) freshly cooked (optional) corn kernels, or thawed frozen corn
- 2 thinly sliced green onions
- 1 sweet red pepper, cored and diced
- 2 inner stalks celery, diced
- 3/4 cup (175 mL) coarsely crumbled feta cheese
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) minced flat-leaf parsley
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) shredded fresh basil

PHOTO, FROM MY POINT OF VIEW

Classic Dressing:

- 1 large clove garlic, sliced
- 3/4 tsp (3 mL) salt
- 2 tsp (10 mL) Dijon mustard
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) pepper
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) red wine vinegar
- 1/3 cup (80 mL) olive oil

In a saucepan of boiling water, cook the pasta until tender but firm to the bite, usually about 8 minutes.

Drain, reserving 1 cup (250 mL) of the cooking liquid to moisten the salad, if needed.

Place pasta in a large bowl or airtight container.

Meanwhile, drain and rinse the beans; add to the pasta with the tomatoes, corn, green onions, red pepper, celery, feta cheese and parsley.

Classic Dressing: With a fork, mash the garlic with the salt. Combine with remaining dressing ingredients in a jar and shake well to combine. Pour over the pasta mixture and toss well.

Make-ahead: Cover and refrigerate for up to 8 hours. Taste and add a splash of cooking water if the salad looks dry, and then sprinkle the basil over the top. Makes 4 supper "bowls."

ROASTED TOMATO TART

Celebrate the summer harvest with gloriously delicious tomatoes.

- 5 Roma tomatoes, about 1 1/2 lb (680 g)
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tsp (10 mL) fresh thyme leaves, or 1/2 tsp dried
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) pepper
- 1 10-inch (25 cm) square sheet all-butter frozen puff pastry from 450 g package
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2 tsp (10 mL) Dijon mustard
- 1 cup (250 mL) shredded aged Cheddar cheese
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) snipped chives

Line 2 large rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Place an oven rack on the bottom position. Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C).

Cut tomatoes crosswise into 1/2-inch (1.25 cm) slices; arrange in single layer on 1 of the lined baking sheets.

In a bowl, stir together the oil, garlic, thyme, salt and pepper. Brush over both sides of tomato slices.

Roast until tomatoes are somewhat shrivelled and a little charred, about 20 to 30 minutes.

Place the square of puff pastry on remaining baking sheet; prick all over with fork. Bake until puffed and pale golden, about 12 minutes.

Brush pastry with egg, then mustard. Sprinkle the Cheddar overtop.

Arrange the tomatoes, overlapping as necessary, over the cheese. Bake until crisp and golden, about 12 to 15 minutes. Sprinkle with chives.

Serves 2 generously or 4 modestly.

Variation: Replace the Roma tomatoes with 1 1/2 lb (680 g) heirloom or other large field-grown local tomatoes. 🍅



Homemade ice cream (sort of)

Turn pretty much anything into a creamy dessert

by **Andrew Dobson**

The Ninja Creami has officially gone viral on TikTok, beloved by food bloggers, especially content creators in the health and wellness niche. The affordable \$200 Creami transforms frozen solid bases into soft-serve-like ice cream, sorbets, milkshakes and more at the touch of a button.

The Creami — not quite a traditional ice cream maker because you don't cool in it, and not quite a blender — uses technology based on the \$10,000 Pacojet, which is famous in Michelin-starred kitchens around the world for making perfectly smooth ice cream and sorbet. Simply add liquid (milk, cream, yogurt, oat milk or nut milk) to the container along with your favourite flavourings, like mint extract, peanut butter or fresh fruit. Freeze for 24 hours, then lock into the Ninja Creami and watch your frozen ingredients transform into perfectly creamy frozen yogurt or gelato in less than 10 minutes!

You can easily make healthy ice cream in the Creami by adding a protein shake, flavoured protein powder, fresh fruit, yogurt or low-fat milk.

Available at Amazon, Best Buy and Bed Bath & Beyond.

Eatable Popcorn

Looking for a new grown-up snack? How about Eatable Popcorn, indulgent gourmet popcorn infused with the flavours of classic wines, spirits and cocktails?

Eatable Popcorn is made by hand-sifting non-GMO corn and adding all-natural ingredients, no artificial colours, flavours, sweeteners or preservatives — and virtually zero alcohol. Try Whisky on the Pops (Scotch Infused Caramel Popcorn), Pop the Salt & Tequila (Añejo Infused Caramel Popcorn) and Poppin' Peach Bellini (Candied Peach Wine Popcorn).

Available at gourmet food stores, online at Chapters Indigo and eatable.com.



Ototo Spaghetti Monster Colander

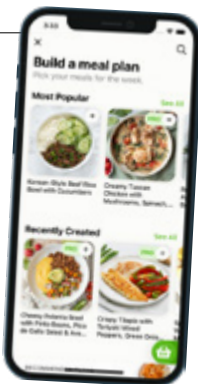
We're always on the lookout for quirky kitchen gadgets that make us smile. And the Ototo Spaghetti Monster Colander fits the bill. The bright-yellow BPA-free plastic strainer is all you need to drain pasta and rinse fresh fruit and vegetables — and it makes a great wedding shower gift, whether the bride-to-be is a foodie or not.

Available at Amazon.ca.



Mealime

Eat healthy, home-cooked meals, save money and reduce food waste with this easy-to-use meal-planning app. Here's how it works: Download the app and get a brief walk-through. Then you're asked to answer some questions about allergies and food preferences. When you're finished, you're taken to recipes that match your preferences, you build your meal plan and generate your shopping list. Designed for an iPad; download free at the Apple App Store.



The Side Gardener

The Side Gardener: Recipes & Notes from My Garden is the latest by bestselling Canadian cookbook author Rosie Daykin. Follow Rosie's journey as she turns a neglected patch of land into an informal working garden. You'll find simple recipes for sides and snacks, salads and soups, mains and desserts, all created to let the can't-be-beat flavour of freshly grown produce shine. Available at Chapters Indigo.



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT, COURTESY OF NINJA; COURTESY OF EATABLE; COURTESY OF OTOTO DESIGN; COURTESY OF MEALIME; COURTESY OF CHAPTERS INDIGO

Lazy summer day sippers

Trendy tequila and mezcal each bring something unique to cocktails

by **Charlene Rooke**



This summer, join the craze for spirits distilled from agave plants (Weber blue agave for tequila, and mezcal from espadin or other varieties that are often cooked over smoke). Although tequila and mezcal are both protected names for Mexican spirits, agave spirits are being made around the world, from South Africa and Australia to Texas, Arizona and other agave-growing US states.

Mezcal and tequila, especially barrel-aged tequila varieties like reposado, añejo and extra añejo, can be enjoyed like whisky: neat or over ice. In Mexico, mezcal is consumed with a side of orange wedges and savoury salt — not to toss back in a shot-taking ritual, but as a palate cleanser between sips. Blanco (unaged) tequila and mezcal can both star in the ever-popular Margarita or the Paloma (a highball with bubbly grapefruit water, juice or soda).

Many imbibers have the (mistaken) idea that agave spirits are “better for you” or don't cause hangovers. All spirits contain distilled ethanol, which has the same effects on the body. However, since an estimated 70 per cent of tequila contains additives, selecting certified additive-free brands (find the list at tastetequila.com) may give you a clear mind — and brand choices that are transparent: Try Código, Siempre, Ocho or Volcan de Mi Tierra.

Try the **Tequila Matchmaker** app, which is loaded with information and reviews to help discover new brands to suit every palate. Download from the Apple App Store.

Margarita

Make single cocktails or pitcher drinks using a ratio of 2 parts tequila or mezcal to 1 part each of fresh-squeezed lime juice and sweetener. Orange liqueur, like triple sec or Cointreau, is classic; Grand Marnier makes a Cadillac Margarita; agave syrup creates a Tommy's variation. Shake individual drinks over ice to chill and dilute, or stir a batch together, adding 3/4 oz cold water for each serving. For blended drinks, use about 6 oz ice for each drink and amp up the sweetener slightly, as freezing dulls flavours. Experiment with black-, sea- or lime/chile-salted (Tajín is the beloved brand) glass rims, and garnish with a lime wedge.



Picnic days

When you're packing a cooler for the backyard, park or beach, include sophisticated non-alcoholic alternatives.

Asahi Super Dry 0.0% is among the best of the non-alcoholic beers, with the same creamy foam and crisp refreshment as the original (upsidedrinks.ca, costco.ca).

Ontario-made, award-winning Novara Aperitivo (barkandbitter.com) is an all-natural non-alcoholic alternative to mixers like Campari or Aperol. Try it spritzed with sparkling water or make a lower-proof version of a Mezcal Negroni (one part each mezcal, Novara and red vermouth).

LEFT PHOTO, EDWARD-HOWELL; RIGHT PHOTO, COURTESY OF ASAHI SUPER DRY

A retirement dream come true

Building our cottage taught us more than construction how-tos

By **Rob Thomas** (District 34 York Region), as told to Martin Zibauer



“Building our own cottage had always been one of those ‘Wouldn’t it be nice?’ things. Then, in 2020, all the fear and uncertainty of COVID hit. My wife, Anna, and I decided it was now or never.

“We started searching for lots where we could build our cottage. We put offers in, without success, but then Anna found a property online. I went up to look, and we put in an offer the same day. We probably overpaid — everyone overbid at that time — but it’s a big, very private property on a gorgeous, quiet lake near Haliburton. And it’s only about a two-hour drive from home.

“At the kitchen table, Anna and I began discussing what a cottage should look like and roughing out a layout.

“I pictured a small one-storey, while Anna wanted a bigger place with a loft. We threw that back and forth and came up with a medium size with a loft.

“I had no real experience drawing formal plans, but in Ontario, owners can draw their own building plans, and I learned from YouTube. By March 2021, after we had made a number of changes, the building inspectors approved our plans.

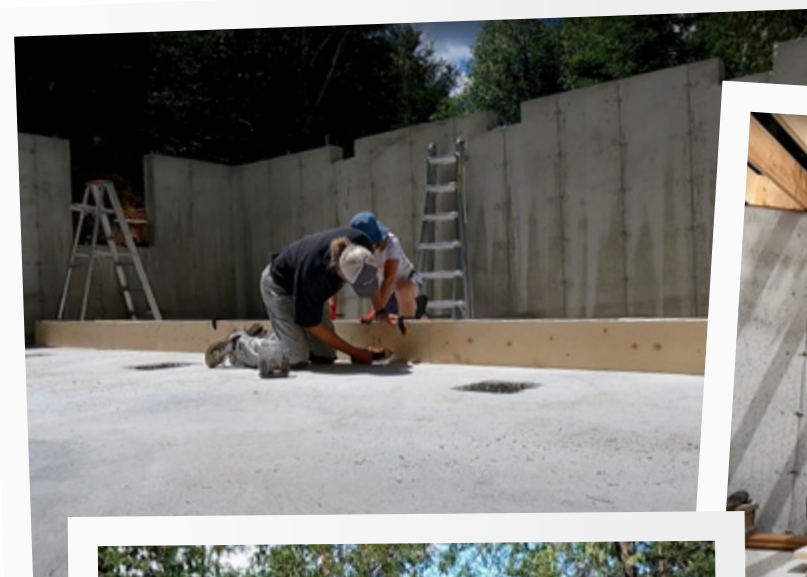
“It’s much, much easier to draw ideas than it is to actually build them. We thought we could do all the work — we had the time, even if we didn’t have the skills. Our vision was naive, and it became apparent that we’d need some help, at least for pouring the foundation, installing the electrical and sheathing the roof.

“To expand our little path into a driveway for the concrete trucks, I had to cut some trees. It broke my heart, but that’s when the project began to feel real and when we learned our first lesson: Don’t clear trees in May. Anna and I supported future blackfly colonies for years to come — we had hundreds, maybe thousands of bites.

“Then one morning at six, we were woken in our tent by the sound of trucks coming down the drive. We weren’t expecting them that day, but cottage-country contractors are so busy in summer, they operate on their own time frame. A few hours later, the concrete was poured. It was all a little overwhelming because we knew then there was no turning back.

“It took us two more years to build the cottage.

Rob Thomas pictured a small one-storey cottage, while his wife, Anna, wanted a bigger place with a loft. They threw that back and forth and came up with a medium size with a loft.



It took the Thomases two more years to build the cottage — about 90 per cent is their work.

About 90 per cent is our work. Our standard operating procedure was to build something, realize it was wrong, take it all apart and build it again. Where my MO was ‘We need to redo this,’ Anna’s MO became ‘That’s good enough — I’m sure it’ll be OK.’ Most of the time, she managed to persuade me to keep moving forward and fuss over things much less.

“We learned, from building inspectors, how incredibly strict and precise the Ontario Building Code is. The inspectors knew we were rookies, of course, so they had a good look at what we did. And they were helpful.

“Beams, especially, challenged us. Installing the main 40-foot beam — four two-by-tens — to support floor joists might have taken a few hours for a contractor. It took us two days. We were proud of ourselves, but then we stood back to look at the finished beam. It had a banana curve like a Bobby Hull hockey stick. So as usual, we took it apart and redid it.

“I would often take chances and circumvent the safe method. Anna was always on me, reminding me to do it right — especially things involving height, ladders, dangerous tools.

I listened most of the time to the safety inspector. But I did manage to send a nail into my hand with the nail gun. I was reprimanded. (Anna’s a retired nurse, so that helped.)

“Challenges like that reminded me of back-country canoe trips Anna and I used to take — the toughest trips, which make you wonder, ‘Why are we doing this?’ But at the end, all you remember is ‘Wow, we kept going — what a fantastic trip.’ So I knew we wouldn’t give up.

“This project reinforced for me that Anna was strong and not shy of hard physical work. She would do any job and see it through no matter how difficult — I started calling her the ‘bulldog.’ At first, she was afraid of the big tools, especially the chop saw. But it wasn’t long before she was working them all like a pro. As time went on, she’d be cutting wood and passing it up to me on the scaffold, and I had learned not to comment on the ‘neatness’ of the cut, that it was ‘close enough’!

“As well as becoming pretty good on the construction site, Anna took care of the tent and outdoor kitchen. With just a Coleman stove and two coolers, we ate really well. Anna made

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROB THOMAS



channel called 'River Rock Cabin.' I had to learn how to shoot, edit and upload videos. Creating and uploading videos has been good for my old brain.

"At first, I expected a few friends might check out our channel. Who else would be interested in an old couple — I'm 73 now — stumbling and bumbling along? To our surprise, we started to get comments and followers from Australia, Korea, China, the UK and more. We're up to about 110,000 views and 860 subscribers now. I believe people wonder if maybe they could also do something like this. Either that or they're wondering what the heck these two old idiots are doing!

"Anna and I actually make a really good construction team. I was head of phys ed at Unionville High School and Anna was a nurse, so we had our own, separate careers. When we retired, we started to spend a lot more time together. Through three summers in a tent, building and rebuilding, I didn't hear a single death threat. I did wonder occasionally if I should really be letting her hold the ladder for me! She was fantastic to work with.

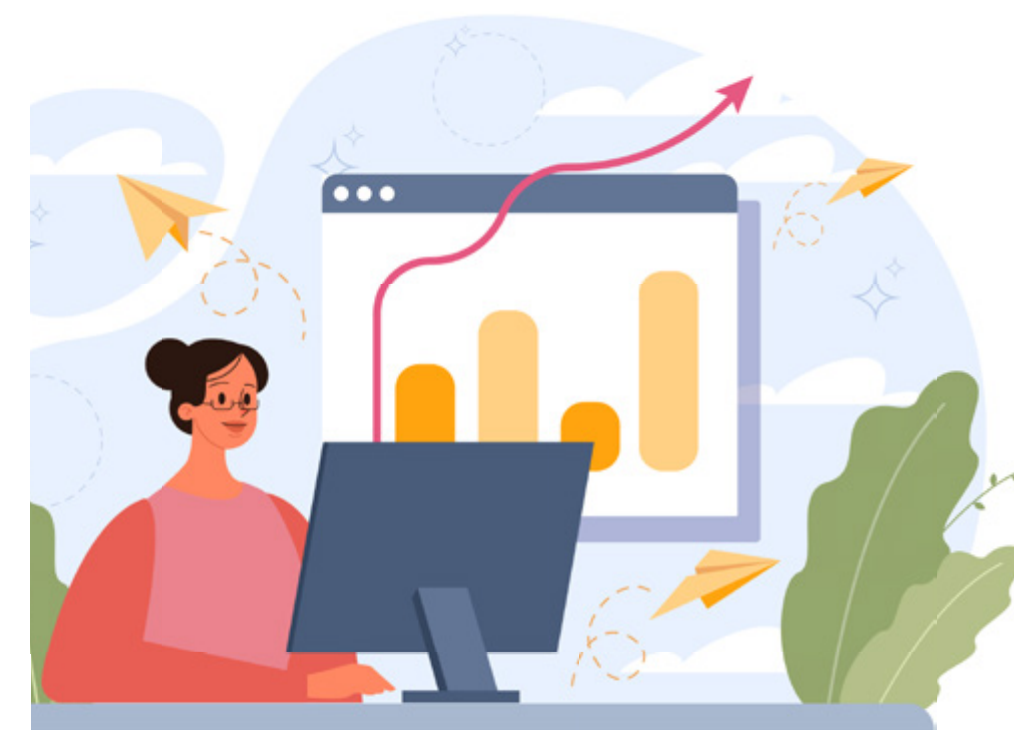
"There were highs and lows, and great satisfaction in living outside, building together and watching the cottage slowly come together. When we're there, Anna builds a campfire every night. Those are the best moments: sitting by the fire, roasting potatoes, rolling them in butter and reflecting on what we've accomplished that day." 🍷

sure meals were nutritious for the 12-hour, seven-day-a-week schedule that we tried to keep. She made the best campfires almost every evening, complete with fire-roasted potatoes.

"While we built, we lived very simply in a tent. We tented even into November. When the overnight low hits minus 11, you hate being there, but like a canoe trip, later you look back with satisfaction: 'Yeah, we did it.'

"Anna was always positive. I would get really low some days when things weren't going well, but she'd always have suggestions and see the good stuff.

"I decided to document the process, just for Anna and me. Then a friend suggested putting videos on YouTube so he could see what we did, too. And that's when I started a YouTube



Feel financially fabulous

How to take concrete steps to protect and grow your finances

by **Lesley-Anne Scorgie**

Depending on which psychology magazines or research you read, or mindset podcasts you listen to, the general consensus from the well-being community is that at least 70 per cent of our financial decisions are made emotionally. The trouble here is that if you're not in a healthy and strong state of mind, your emotions can drive poor financial decisions. If you're not feeling your financial best, apply these three money tips to your life.

Give yourself a break

Your past financial mistakes belong in the past. Treat today as the first day of your financial transformation. Learn from your past mistakes, but forgive yourself. As an example, did your passion or your moral compass get you into this financial pickle to begin with? Okay, well, you'll need to draw on both that passion and dedication to doing the right thing to get out of this financial pickle, too.

With this step you're also trying to interrupt any unhelpful comparisons you might be making consciously or subconsciously. Pump the breaks on scrolling social media, too.

Form stronger money habits, and put your own spin on them

Money mindsets improve only if you take smart financial actions. The three systems I recommend are budgeting, spending and net-worth tracking.

Budgeting: Whether it's a template you download from Google or an app like YNAB (ynab.com), budgeting is a mindful, monthly practice of identifying the money you have coming into your accounts and planning where it needs to go. The goal is to ensure that your cash inflows equal your cash outflows, and nothing more. Otherwise, a trimming exercise has to happen. My pro tip: Ensure that you have money allocated for joyful activities too. That's what spurs motivation to stick to your budget, long-term.

Spending tracking: This means keeping tabs on all your expenses; automatic payments, cash or debit/credit purchases. Every dollar needs

to be accounted for. Some banks offer a notification system or transaction downloads to help you monitor, or you can keep a spreadsheet. I have a student who uses voice memos on her phone to track, and it works for her.

Now, compare your budget to the spending that actually happened. Did you stay on track or fall off your plan? Can you identify opportunities for improvement and celebrate what went well?

Net-worth tracking: This is an accounting of all your assets and liabilities. The individual accounts, loans, investments, mortgage; all the balances need to be noted on a monthly or quarterly basis. When the liabilities are subtracted from assets, that's your bottom line. When that bottom line is improving — even just a little — each month, it means your budgeting and spending tracking systems are working. If it's going down, your budget and/or spending behaviours are broken and require fixing (pssst — a money coach can help with this).

Saving is the magic ingredient to a mindset transformation

Saving money for your future and for short-term emergencies is an act of self-love. It's got the power to help you overcome overspending habits and get you excited about what's down the road.

Even a small amount of money — five dollars a week — saved into a rainy-day fund is better than nothing. The same goes for investing consistently into a well-balanced portfolio. Consistency with saving supports great long-term habits, which will make you feel financially fabulous quickly. 🍷

ILLUSTRATION: INSPIRINGTEAM



A few of your favourite things

We asked: What are your simple pleasures?

Teaching sailing and restoring/building sailboats.
Mark Boon
(District 50 Atlantic)

A hot shower in the morning, a cup of coffee and holding a grandchild.
Phil Little
(District 47 Vancouver Island)

My wife, reading, golf, curling.
Douglas G. Maunder
(District 34 York Region)

Laughing, looking out over the water at the cottage, cuddling a dog.
Elaine Warner-Laxton
(District 48 Leeds and Grenville)

Laughter, being useful, seeing new places.
Mary-Anne Kenney
(District 14 Niagara)

Nature — water in lakes, rivers and the ocean; flowers; birds.
Janice Wasik
(District 42 Mainland British Columbia)

Playing jazz guitar, fishing for bass.
Ralph Le Fevre
(District 13 Hamilton-Wentworth, Haldimand)

Connecting with former students to see where life has taken them, volunteering in a math class to continue connection with helping young people.
Kathy Mack
(District 50 Atlantic)

Family, health, Corvette.
Ralph Rainford
(District 31 Wellington)

Black coffee — one only, first thing in the morning while it's quiet and everyone else is still asleep.
Judith Mulvihill
(District 27 Ottawa-Carleton)

Snuggling with my grandson, walking in the woods.
Simone Serra
(District 15 Halton)

Love, compassion and friendship.
Marie-Paule Landriault
(District 45 EstariO)

Read a good book, please the people around me.
Anita Corriveau
(District 44 Franco-Nipissing)

Sitting under a covered deck during a rainfall.
Mildred Gremontprez
(District 41 Elgin)

Travel in Canada, photography, historical research.
Don McQueen
(District 8 London, Middlesex)

A walk in the woods, a full moon, a swim.
Charlene Gramada
(District 13 Hamilton-Wentworth, Haldimand)

Sitting on my dock by the lake, making meals for friends, watching my wife sleep in the morning sun.
Dave Szollosy
(District 34 York Region) 🍷

ARE YOU PLANNING TO TRAVEL?



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