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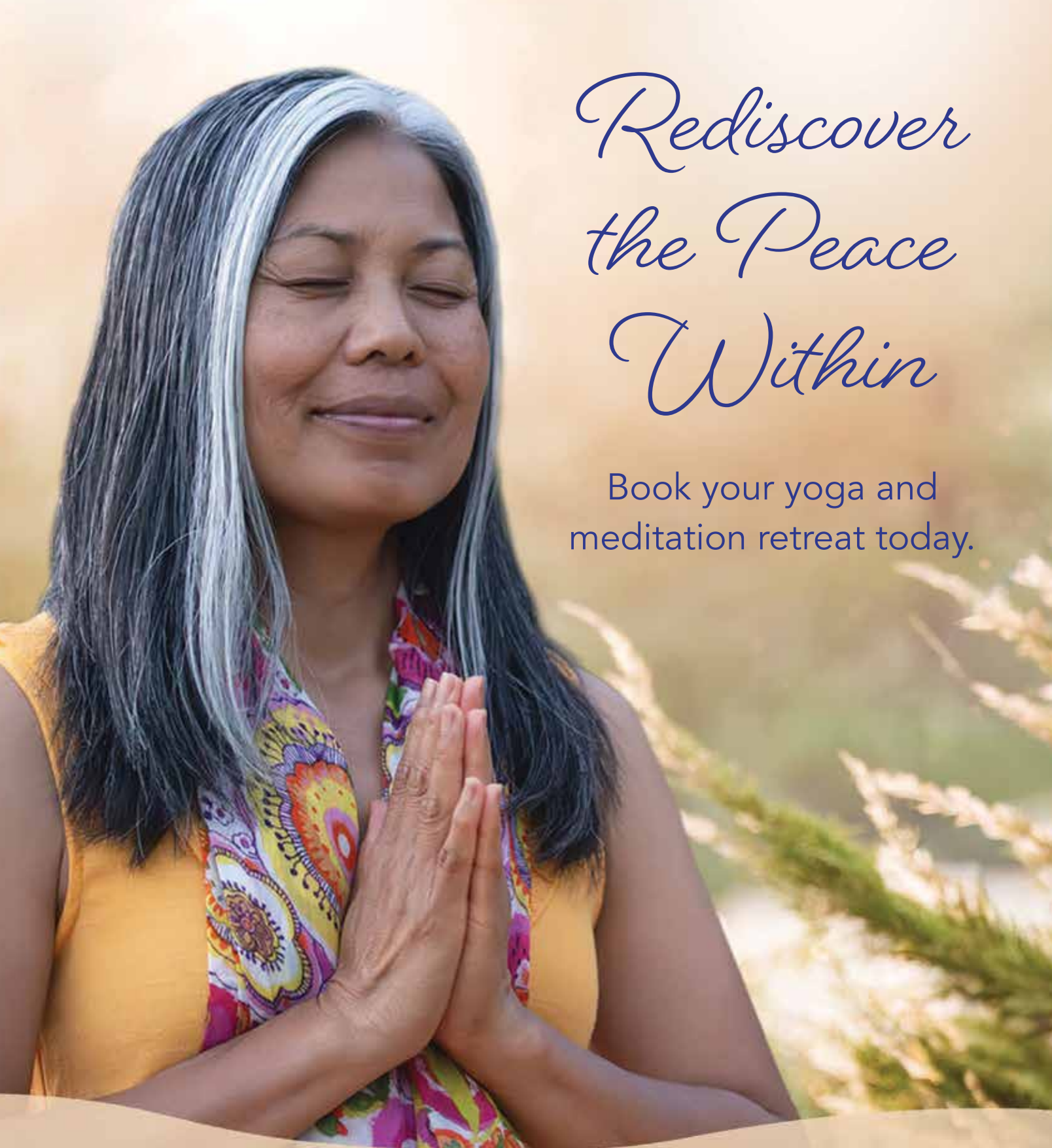
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Your Brain Wants to Change

What modern neuroscience confirms about meditation, habit, and the human potential for growth

By Peter Van Houten, MD

How would you like your life to be different six months from now?

You are going to change in six months no matter what you do. The only question is whether you let habitual patterns determine that change, or make it a more conscious process. Thanks to advances in brain imaging over the past few decades, we now have scientific evidence that the brain will actively cooperate with whatever goals you set, even goals that seem well beyond your present capabilities. The brain, it turns out, does not recognize limits the way we assume it does.

Of all the tools available for directing that change deliberately, meditation is among the most powerful and the most thoroughly researched. I know this not only as a physician but as someone who has practiced and studied meditation for nearly fifty years.

What the brain does with a new intention

When people first decide to take up a new behavior, the brain begins changing before they take any actual steps toward their goal. With the setting of the intention alone, the brain starts to mobilize.

For most people, the first two weeks of any new practice are the most challenging. But at around the two-week mark, something shifts. The changes the brain has been making begin to manifest in outward behavior, and progress that felt effortful starts to feel more natural. After six months, those changes show a significant degree of permanence.

I experienced this firsthand when I took up skiing in medical school, returning each season to find my skills had not only held but improved, even without practice in between. The explanation is neuroplasticity, the brain's remarkable capacity for structural change in response to behavior. The same process is at work when someone begins a meditation practice: the brain registers the intention and starts rewiring itself to make the practice easier, deeper, and more accessible over time.

This is why starting matters more than starting perfectly, and why the first two weeks of any meditation practice deserve particular patience and commitment.

What the research shows about meditation specifically

Early in my career I was fortunate to participate in one of the first scientific studies on meditation, conducted at the University of California at Irvine in the late 1970s. I served as both a researcher and a subject, and that is where I first learned to meditate myself. That experience ultimately led me to Ananda Village, the intentional community near Nevada City where I have practiced and taught ever since.

The central scientific debate at the time was whether meditation was simply a form of napping. Well-known physiologists argued that meditators were just getting a little extra rest and would naturally feel better as a result. The studies showed otherwise. Meditation produces a state distinct from both normal waking consciousness and sleep, with measurable and unique effects on the body, brain, and nervous system.

Since then, research has confirmed that regular meditation promotes calmness, emotional resilience, and mental clarity, and is particularly effective in addressing anxiety, depression, and addictive behavior patterns. These benefits reflect actual structural changes in the brain, the same neuroplasticity at work in any learned skill, but directed inward toward the quality of awareness itself.

Paramhansa Yogananda, the Indian yoga master who brought meditation to the West in the 1920s, understood this long before brain imaging existed. He explained that during deep meditation, life force accumulates in the brain

“
The brain you have today is not the brain you are stuck with. It is an extraordinarily responsive instrument, shaped by what you give it to do.
”

and permeates its cells, gradually replacing harmful negative tendencies with constructive ones. What he described intuitively, neuroscience is now confirming systematically.

How to build a meditation practice that sticks

In my medical practice in Nevada County, I have incorporated meditation as a core element of treatment for patients dealing with anxiety, chronic stress, depression, and addiction. What I have observed over decades mirrors what the research shows: the people who benefit most are not those who meditate longest or most intensely, but those who practice consistently.

A few principles that make the difference:



Start before you feel ready. The brain begins changing with the intention, not just the action. Beginning, even imperfectly, initiates the process.



Expect the two-week threshold. The initial period of any meditation practice is the most effortful. If you persist through those first two weeks, the brain's own momentum begins to carry you.



Consistency matters more than duration. Ten minutes of meditation every day produces more lasting change than an hour once a week. The regularity of the signal is what prompts structural change.



Your environment shapes you. The brain is influenced not only by what we deliberately practice but by the environments we inhabit and the people around us. Seeking out calm, supportive settings is not a luxury. It is part of the practice. Meditating with others or taking time for a dedicated retreat, like those offered at Ananda Village, can provide the kind of sustained, supportive environment that accelerates what solo practice alone cannot always achieve.

Meditation: A tool available to anyone

What I find most compelling about meditation, after decades of practice and observation, is how democratic it is. You do not need special equipment, a particular belief system, or unusual circumstances. You need only a few minutes, a quiet space, and a willingness to show up consistently.

The brain you have today is not the brain you are stuck with. It is an extraordinarily responsive instrument, shaped by what you give it to do. Meditation gives it something worth doing, and the brain, as science has confirmed, will meet you more than halfway.

If you are curious about beginning or deepening a meditation practice, Ananda Meditation Retreats at Ananda Village offers two distinct campus experiences just outside Nevada City, both designed to support exactly the kind of immersive, consistent practice the brain responds to best. Whether you come for a weekend or stay longer, the setting and the guidance provide a focused start that is hard to replicate at home.

Learn more at meditationretreat.org or call (800) 346-5350.

About the Author

Peter Van Houten, MD, is a family physician based in Nevada City who has incorporated meditation into his medical practice for decades. An Ananda Minister and long-time meditator, he has co-authored several books on the use of yoga for health problems and lectures on the effects of relaxation and meditation on the brain and behavior. He practices and teaches at Ananda Village in Nevada City.



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CONTENTS

On The Cover

ERIK VON RUDEN TAKES A MOMENT TO ENJOY THE SCENERY.

Discover on page 19 why spending time in nature boosts our health and well-being

Healthy Attitudes

7
A POSITIVE OUTLOOK
When Dealing with Visual Impairment

8
ENTER TO LEARN, LEAVE TO SERVE
Mentoring Teens to Serve and Thrive

Healthy Lifestyles

10
LIFESTYLE MEDICINE:
The Most Powerful Prescription May Not Be in a Pill Bottle

15
USING MACRONUTRIENTS TO TELL THE STORY OF BODY STRENGTH AND HEALTH

17
BREASTFEEDING:
Benefits, Challenges, and Finding Your Support

Healthy Spirit

19
CAN NATURE HEAL?

21
THE HEALING POWER OF FAITH, COMMUNITY, AND BELONGING

22
THE TIMELESS SEARCH FOR PEACE IN AN ANXIOUS WORLD

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By Vital Health Medical Group



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A Positive Outlook

When Dealing with Visual Impairment

By *Hollie Grimaldi Flores*

One conversation with Sarah Souza and you will likely have made a new friend. The married mother of two spent her time as an active volunteer when her boys were in school, and is tech savvy, (something not all can claim) helping anyone with a need. With her boys now grown, she and her husband spend the bulk of their time and resources attending any number of baseball games or taking extended cruises to far off places around the globe. None of this may sound all that remarkable until you understand Sarah is legally blind. Born with Retinitis Pigmentosa, a rare genetic eye disorder that progressively deteriorates the retina, Souza has been rendered legally blind for some time, but she simply adjusts and moves forward.

that freedom was hard, but risking the lives of others was not worth it.

She explained she still has very limited vision from the side of her eyes, but no peripheral vision and some days are better than others. She uses a mobility cane for guidance and protection consistently, though she was shocked to learn not everyone recognizes the purpose of the white cane! “It does amaze me how many people don’t know what it is. If you have a California driver’s license, that is a question they ask, maybe it’s



Enjoying the evening on the town.

“I cannot control this, but I can control how I feel about it and how I handle it.”

—Sarah Souza

Souza got her first pair of glasses at age three and was later part of a pilot program utilizing hard contact lens to improve her vision for most of her youth. She was able to drive until she was in college, but a failed renewal test made a difficult decision for her. She understood that letting go of

a question you missed,” she remarked with a laugh.

Her first pregnancy resulted in a significant loss of vision as did her second. With two small children at home she struggled until her father (who is also blind) found and helped her attend a five day retreat for the visually impaired.

She learned to ask for help as well as social life skills, cane training, and how to navigate daily living activities. “It was the largest life changing event in my life,” she said.

Her attitude is a positive one and not seeing the world the way most people do has only made her more determined to live a full and happy life. Souza, who grew up in Nevada County, does not let her lack of vision deter her from saying yes to anything she cares to attempt. “If you want to live, you have to make the effort to live,” she said adding her

father was that example for her and it was simply “what you did.”

Early on she decided that while she could not stop the progression of her condition, she could control her attitude around it. “There’s a lot of stuff I can control. I cannot control this, but I can control how I feel about it and how I handle it. It sucks to be blind! But it would suck more to be mad and upset about it because then I am letting it control me.”

Sarah strives to keep her lack of vision from becoming

an excuse. Like any challenge thrown her way, she worked to find resources to keep her and her (at the time) school age children active, “I volunteered at school because I felt that was important to be involved. I found early on I could be useful,” she said. And now that her kids and husband are at work most days, she finds herself learning new ways to remain independent while home alone. “I’m retraining myself. It’s an adjustment but I know I can do things. I can be successful.”

And she is not one to waste her time. She and her husband are huge baseball fans. She said she loves going to the games because she can utilize a radio to hear what is going on and feel the crowd around her.

They tend to go on cruises because most ships in a cruise line layout the same, so once she becomes familiar with one, she can usually navigate them all. “Life is short,” she exclaimed! “Some of my greatest memories have been from



Sarah Souza (center) at a tropical family vacation.

anything to give – maybe you aren’t looking too closely. You have a set of skills you are given, and you can utilize them or

“You have a set of skills you are given, and you can utilize them or not.”

—Sarah Souza

travel. I like to stay active.”

She wants people to know if you see her, say hello Sarah, and please tell her who you are! She may not easily place a voice, even if she has known you for a long time. Secondly, she is adamant that people should focus on what they can do no matter what their age.

Souza concluded, “The older I get; I am starting to realize we are all different flowers in the same bouquet. We serve our purpose. I think it’s silly if you don’t think you have

not. I’m still living. I understand I live differently. I can’t see. But I am still alive and I am going to keep living.”

~~~~~



*Hollie Grimaldi Flores is a freelance writer who writes regularly for The Union and it’s affiliated publications.*

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# ENTER TO LEARN, LEAVE TO SERVE

## MENTORING TEENS TO SERVE AND THRIVE

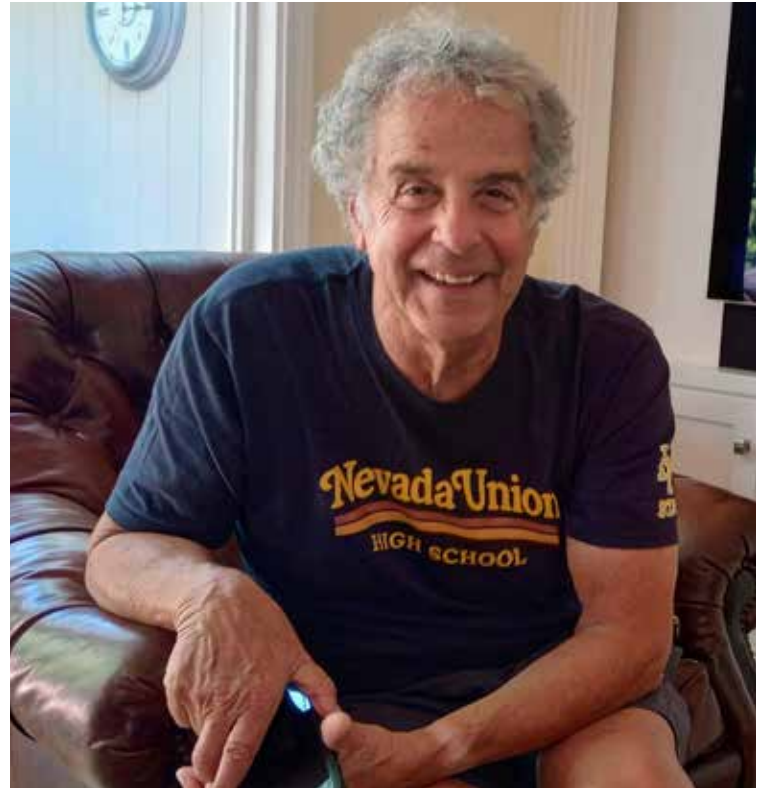
*By Hollie Grimaldi Flores*

**I**n 2013, Nevada County received a gift of immeasurable worth when Marty Lombardi and his wife, Kathleen, moved into the Grass Valley home they had purchased years earlier, knowing the community would one day become their retirement home. The modest former banker is on a mission to help teens understand their value; that they matter, that they are important, and that they are here to serve others. By all accounts, that mission is going well.

Lombardi grew up in the

North Beach community of San Francisco, the child of immigrant parents. He attended Sacred Heart High School where “Enter to learn. Leave to Serve.” is etched in the entrance of the building. Lombardi saw that message and it became ingrained within him as well.

After a less than inspiring career in international banking, he eventually took a position in Mendocino County for which he was vastly overqualified, but he saw the opportunity his position as a



Marty Lombardi. Photo by Hollie Grimaldi Flores.

**“You develop a relationship with them, and you can give them your advice... I tell them ‘we (in school) are practicing. Don’t put yourself in a box. You can accomplish anything.’”**

**—Marty Lombardi**

banker would afford him in caring for a small community. Looking beyond the bottom line, he spearheaded unusual banking practices to help members withstand economic uncertainty. He was effective.

Luckily for all who reside here, Lombardi said he knew Nevada County was where he was meant to retire, and becoming part of the fabric of the high school was what he was meant to do.

He came with the intention of earning the trust of faculty and stu-

dents and soon became a reliable figure on campus. At the same time, he began joining the boards of several nonprofits to discover and understand who, where, and what resources were available. Showing up with donuts, candy, or other treats quickly endeared him to students and community leaders alike.

Soon, it seemed, everyone in town had met and loved Marty Lombardi. But that is not where he would like to focus. His focus, his adventure, is with the youth.

Just by being present, Lombardi has established credibility with hundreds (if not thousands) of students



Festive students serve as elves to help young children “shop” for gifts.



Lots of students gather early in the morning for some heaving lifting at the Firewood project.

**“You have to weave it into the fabric of your life, the greater good. If you do that, something little, even, it will be great for your self-esteem.”**

—Marty Lombardi

over the years. He is an ear to listen; a friendly person to hug or to fist bump. He is a place to turn when they are feeling dark. He is a place to shine when they are feeling accomplished. And he is someone they respect; someone they want to be around and someone they want to emulate.

Knowing the learning was taking place, it was time for Lombardi to model the second half – to serve – and soon he was helping with the high school arm of Rotary, called Interact. Making a few structural changes, the club expanded from a dozen or less active students doing one or two projects to over 160 students participating in nearly

30 service projects in a school year (and counting). Community leaders come in to speak. Interact students are now leaders in community events, reaching out to organizers and coordinating volunteers where needed. Their service projects range from helping at the Food Bank and Turkey Trot to serving as elves who help children “shop” for gifts for their parents. Students also volunteer at the Red Light Ball, the Penn Valley Egg Hunt, Daffodil Run, Armed Services Day celebration, Meals on Wheels, and the Senior Services Firewood Program. And the list of events in Nevada County goes on. “My truth is that I can always feel a little better about

myself, for any wrong I have done, or whatever, if I help somebody. So, my message to them is that fundamental,” Lombardi explained.

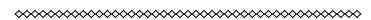
His second message is about relationships. “Everything is about relationships,” he said. Schools need to prepare kids for when they are out of their comfort zone to invest a little bit of themselves by asking about others, to reach out, and to build genuine connections with people.

“You develop a relationship with them, and you can give them your advice. I talk to them on their level. I tell them ‘we (in school) are practicing. Don’t put yourself in a box. You can accomplish anything.” He said he used to hear that and didn’t believe it, but he believes it now. And he is committed to making sure today’s kids hear it and believe it.

He said just saying something as simple as “I am here for you” — and meaning it — is what many kids need to hear. And whenever they are feeling

down, he lets them know the antidote is simply doing something kind for someone else. “You have to weave it into the fabric of your life; the greater good. If you do that, something little, even, it will be great for your self-esteem.” he said.

“All any of us needs is kindness,” the 79 year old concluded. “And I get to do this for the last years of my life.”



*Hollie Grimaldi Flores is a freelance writer who writes regularly for The Union and it's affiliated publications.*



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# Lifestyle Medicine

## The Most Powerful Prescription May Not Be in a Pill Bottle

By John Seivert

A few years ago, while flipping through one of my physical therapy journals, I came across a continuing education course titled *Lifestyle Medicine*. As I read through the course description, I had to laugh a little because it sounded remarkably similar to many of the health and wellness columns I've been writing over the past several years.

Turns out, the healthcare world has finally given an official name to something many of us have intuitively known for decades: how we live profoundly affects how we feel.

Lifestyle Medicine is now one of the fastest-growing areas in healthcare. Rather than focusing only on treating disease after it develops, Lifestyle Medicine emphasizes preventing and even improving chronic illness through daily habits. In other words, the choices we make repeatedly — what we eat, how much we move, how we sleep, how stressed we are, and whether we feel socially connected — directly influence our health and longevity.

As a physical therapist working with aging adults for more than 40 years, I see the effects of chronic disease every single day. Heart disease, diabetes, obesity, chronic pain, respiratory disease, osteoporosis, and neurological conditions often develop slowly over decades. While genetics certainly play a role, lifestyle behaviors strongly influence how these conditions progress.

The encouraging news? Small changes made consistently can dramatically improve quality of life.

Lifestyle Medicine is built around six major pillars of health. None is more important than the others, and they all tend to work together like spokes on a wheel. When one area improves, the others often follow.

### 1. Physical Activity

You knew this one was coming.

Exercise remains one of the most powerful medicines we have. Regular movement improves cardiovascular health, strengthens muscles and bones, improves balance, reduces chronic pain, improves mood, enhances sleep, and lowers the risk of countless diseases.

The current recommendation for most adults is at least 150

minutes of moderate exercise per week along with two days of strength training. That sounds intimidating until you realize it breaks down to about 30 minutes a day, five days a week. And no, you do not need to become a triathlete. Walking counts. Gardening counts. Dancing counts. Chasing grandchildren around the backyard absolutely counts. As I often tell patients: motion is lotion.

### 2. Nutrition

Nutrition may be the area where people overcomplicate things the most. Every week there seems to be a new miracle diet promoted online by someone with six-pack abs and questionable credentials.

Most evidence-based nutrition advice is actually pretty simple:

- Eat more whole foods
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Eat less ultra-processed food
- Drink more water
- Reduce excessive sugar intake

The healthiest dietary patterns in research studies tend to be Mediterranean-style or plant-forward eating plans emphasizing vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, fish, healthy fats, and minimally processed foods. I also like one simple rule: eat foods with shorter shelf lives more often than foods that can survive a nuclear winter in your pantry.

### 3. Sleep

Sleep is the body's recovery and repair system. Unfortunately, many adults wear sleep deprivation like some strange badge of honor.

Poor sleep has been linked to chronic pain, depression, obesity, impaired immune function, memory problems, increased injury risk, and cardiovascular disease. Most adults need approximately seven to nine hours of quality sleep per night. And yes, scrolling social media at midnight while eating tortilla chips probably does not count as a healthy bedtime routine.

Consistent sleep schedules, reduced screen time before bed, limiting caffeine late in the day, and regular exercise all improve sleep quality.

#### 4. Stress Management

Modern life is stressful. Between work, finances, politics, family responsibilities, traffic, and 24-hour news cycles, our nervous systems rarely get a break.

Chronic stress affects nearly every system in the body. It contributes to elevated blood pressure, muscle tension, poor sleep, anxiety, depression, digestive problems, and increased inflammation.

Managing stress doesn't mean eliminating all stress — that's impossible. It means creating regular practices that calm the nervous system. For some people that may be meditation, prayer, yoga, deep breathing, or mindfulness. For others, it's exercise, music, photography, hiking, gardening, or simply walking the dog in the woods. Personally, a long bike ride through the Sierra Nevada foothills works wonders for my mental health.

#### 5. Social Connection

One of the strongest predictors of long-term health is surprisingly simple: meaningful human connection.

Research consistently shows that loneliness and social isolation negatively affect physical and emotional health. Humans are social creatures. We do better when we feel connected to family, friends, community, and purpose. This is one reason group exercise classes, cycling clubs, hiking groups, church communities, volunteer work, and neighborhood gatherings can be so beneficial. They improve both physical and emotional well-being simultaneously.

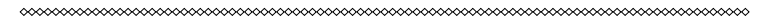
#### 6. Avoiding Harmful Substances

Lifestyle Medicine also emphasizes reducing behaviors that increase disease risk, particularly smoking, excessive alcohol use, and substance abuse.

Now, before anyone panics, I am not suggesting your occasional glass of wine with dinner automatically places you on a medical watch list. Moderation matters. But it is worth honestly evaluating habits that may negatively affect long-term health. The beauty of Lifestyle Medicine is that it empowers people. It reminds us that our health is not determined solely by prescriptions, surgeries, or genetics. Daily choices matter — often more than we realize.

The goal isn't perfection. The goal is building sustainable habits that allow us to remain active, independent, engaged, and joyful as we age.

*After all, most of us don't simply want to live longer. We want to live better.*



*John Seivert, PT, DPT, OCS, FAAOMPT, member MINT, has been a Physical Therapist for 42 years and has written health and wellness columns for The Union Newspaper since 2016. Former owner of Body Logic Physical Therapy in Grass Valley from 2001–2023, he now works part-time as a consultant, teacher, and writer while gradually transitioning into retirement in 2027.*



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# NATIONAL HEALTH AWARENESS CALENDAR

## January

Cervical Health Awareness Month

National Blood Donor Month

National Glaucoma Awareness Month

## February

American Heart Month

National Cancer Prevention Month

National Eating Disorders Awareness Week

## March

National Nutrition Month

National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month

Brain Injury Awareness Month

## April

National Minority Health Month

Alcohol Awareness Month

National Stress Awareness Month

## May

Mental Health Awareness Month

Women's Health Month

National Stroke Awareness Month

## June

Men's Health Month

Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month

PTSD Awareness Month

## July

UV Awareness Month

Juvenile Arthritis Month

National Park & Recreation Month

## August

National Immunization Awareness Month

National Breastfeeding Month

Children's Eye Health and Safety Month

## September

Suicide Prevention Month

Childhood Cancer Awareness Month

Healthy Aging Month

## October

National Breast Cancer Awareness Month

Domestic Violence Awareness Month

National Depression and Mental Health Screening Month

## November

National Diabetes Month

Lung Cancer Awareness Month

Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month

## December

Crohn's and Colitis Awareness Month

World AIDS Awareness Month

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) Awareness Month

## January

### **Cervical Health Awareness Month**

Promotes cervical cancer prevention through HPV vaccination, Pap tests, and regular screenings to encourage early detection, treatment, and improved women's reproductive health outcomes.

### **National Blood Donor Month**

Encourages blood donation during winter shortages to support surgeries, emergency care, cancer treatments, and patients requiring lifesaving blood transfusions nationwide.

### **National Glaucoma Awareness Month**

Raises awareness about glaucoma, emphasizing regular eye exams and early treatment to prevent irreversible vision loss and blindness, especially among older adults.

## February

### **American Heart Month**

Promotes heart disease prevention through healthy eating, exercise, blood pressure management, smoking cessation, and awareness of heart attack and stroke symptoms.

### **National Cancer Prevention Month**

Encourages healthy lifestyle choices, regular screenings, and preventive care to reduce cancer risks and improve early detection and long-term survival outcomes.

### **National Eating Disorders Awareness Week**

Raises awareness about eating disorders, promotes early intervention, reduces stigma, and encourages access to mental health treatment and supportive recovery resources.

## March

### **National Nutrition Month**

Encourages healthy eating habits, balanced nutrition, hydration, and physical activity to support overall wellness and reduce risks of chronic diseases.

### **National Colorectal Cancer Awareness Month**

Promotes colon cancer screenings and early detection while encouraging healthy lifestyle habits that may reduce colorectal cancer risks and improve survival rates.

### **Brain Injury Awareness Month**

Educates the public about brain injury prevention, rehabilitation, and support services for individuals living with cognitive, emotional, or physical challenges after injury.

## April

### **National Minority Health Month**

Highlights health disparities affecting minority communities and promotes equal access to healthcare, preventive services, education, and culturally competent medical support.

### **Alcohol Awareness Month**

Educates communities about alcohol misuse, addiction risks, prevention strategies, and treatment resources while encouraging responsible drinking and healthier coping habits.

### **National Stress Awareness Month**

Promotes stress management techniques such as exercise, mindfulness, healthy sleep, and emotional support to improve mental and physical health.

## May

### **Mental Health Awareness Month**

Raises awareness about mental health conditions, encourages seeking support, reduces stigma, and promotes access to counseling, therapy, and wellness resources.

### **Women's Health Month**

Encourages women to prioritize preventive healthcare, screenings, exercise, nutrition, mental wellness, and healthy lifestyle habits throughout every stage of life.

### **National Stroke Awareness Month**

Educates the public about stroke warning signs, emergency response, prevention strategies, and lifestyle habits that reduce stroke risks and complications.

## June

### **Men's Health Month**

Encourages men to schedule preventive checkups, maintain healthy habits, address mental health concerns, and seek early treatment for medical conditions.

### **Alzheimer's and Brain Awareness Month**

Raises awareness about Alzheimer's disease and dementia while supporting brain health, caregiver education, early diagnosis, and ongoing medical research efforts.

### **PTSD Awareness Month**

Promotes understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, encourages mental health treatment, and reduces stigma surrounding trauma-related conditions and recovery support.

## July

### **UV Awareness Month**

Educates people about ultraviolet radiation risks, including skin cancer and eye damage, while promoting sunscreen use and sun safety practices.

### **Juvenile Arthritis Month**

Raises awareness about arthritis in children, encourages early diagnosis and treatment, and supports families managing chronic autoimmune and joint conditions.

### **National Park & Recreation Month**

Encourages outdoor activity, exercise, and community recreation to improve physical fitness, mental wellness, and healthy social connections.

## August

### **National Immunization Awareness Month**

Promotes vaccinations for all ages to prevent infectious diseases and protect vulnerable populations through safe and effective immunization practices.

### **National Breastfeeding Month**

Highlights breastfeeding benefits for infants and mothers while promoting education, lactation support, and family-friendly workplace accommodations.

### **Children's Eye Health and Safety Month**

Encourages early vision screenings, eye safety practices, and healthy habits to protect children's eyesight and support academic success and development.

## September

### **Suicide Prevention Month**

Raises awareness about suicide prevention, mental health support, crisis resources, and recognizing warning signs while encouraging open and supportive conversations.

### **Childhood Cancer Awareness Month**

Supports pediatric cancer research, raises awareness about childhood cancers, and encourages community support for affected children and their families.

### **Healthy Aging Month**

Promotes healthy aging through exercise, nutrition, preventive healthcare, social engagement, and wellness habits that support independence and quality of life.

## October

### **National Breast Cancer Awareness Month**

Promotes breast cancer education, mammograms, early detection, survivor support, and fundraising efforts to improve treatment outcomes and awareness nationwide.

### **Domestic Violence Awareness Month**

Raises awareness about domestic violence, supports survivors, promotes prevention education, and encourages access to counseling, shelters, and legal assistance.

### **National Depression and Mental Health Screening Month**

Encourages mental health screenings, early treatment, and emotional wellness while reducing stigma surrounding depression and related mental health conditions.

## November

### **National Diabetes Month**

Promotes diabetes prevention and management through healthy eating, exercise, blood sugar monitoring, and regular medical care to reduce complications.

### **Lung Cancer Awareness Month**

Raises awareness about lung cancer risks, smoking cessation, early screening, and research efforts to improve treatment and survival outcomes.

### **Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month**

Promotes pancreatic cancer awareness, supports research funding, encourages recognition of symptoms, and advocates for improved early detection and treatment.

## December

### **Crohn's and Colitis Awareness Month**

Focusing on expanding public education, supporting patients, and raising vital funds to find cures for inflammatory bowel diseases.

### **World AIDS Awareness Month**

Commences globally on December 1st with World AIDS Day. It is dedicated to showing support for people living with HIV/AIDS, commemorating those who have passed, and promoting testing and education to reduce the spread of the virus.

### **Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) Awareness Month**

December is characterized by shorter daylight hours and colder temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere. This month highlights the mental health challenges related to winter-onset depression, encouraging individuals to seek therapies, light treatments, or counseling.

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# Bridging the Gap

## Between Rehabilitation and Fitness

Many people believe they have to choose between rehabilitation and fitness. You're either recovering from an injury, managing chronic pain, or trying to stay active in a fitness environment that may not always support how your body moves and functions.

But movement doesn't have to be divided that way.

One of the most important concepts in rehabilitation today is that healing does not mean stopping movement altogether. Even while protecting an injury or recovering from pain, it is still possible — and essential — to focus on what the body can do. Maintaining strength, mobility, balance, and confidence during recovery can help people stay connected to their health while safely progressing toward their goals.

The most effective approach combines protection with progression respecting what needs to be healed while continuing to strengthen the body as a whole. Rehabilitation, post-rehabilitation training, and fitness should work together — not exist as separate stages.

That philosophy is the foundation of The Pilates Place, which has been helping clients move better for the past 20 years. Founded by Roxanna Cohen, PT, Board Certified Orthopedic Clinical Specialist, Fellow of Movement System Impairments, Senior Educator for Polestar Pilates, and Adjunct Faculty for Nevada Union High School

Dance, the studio offers both physical therapy services and Pilates-based fitness training, creating a seamless transition from rehabilitation to post-rehab conditioning and long-term wellness.

Education and mentorship are central to the studio's approach. The entire instructional team participates in weekly mentoring sessions, combining clinical reasoning, movement analysis, and Pilates education to continually refine how they support clients at every level.

The Pilates Place team includes Jose Romero, Pilates Instructor, who brings more than 10 years of rehabilitation experience and has been recognized as Best Personal Trainer two years in a row. Jacqui Michaelson, a Pilates instructor and former studio owner in Chico for over a decade, brings extensive teaching and movement experience to the studio. Sofia Palacios, a dancer and aerialist who recently completed her Polestar Pilates certification under Roxanna's mentorship, represents the next generation of movement professionals trained in the studio's philosophy of intelligent, individualized movement.

The studio also continues its long-standing connection with instructor Lisa G., who teaches online mat Pilates classes from Washington state. A former Jazzercise franchise owner, Lisa completed her Polestar Pilates certification under Roxanna and taught in person at the studio for

many years. She remains actively involved in the studio's weekly mentoring program and continues to enjoy working with her longtime Grass Valley clients.

Together, the staff works with a wide range of clients — from individuals recovering from injury to athletes, performing artists, and clients seeking lifelong strength and mobility.

Unlike many fitness environments that take a one-size-fits-all approach, Pilates can be adapted for nearly every body and every stage of movement. As the area's most comprehensive full service Pilates studio, The Pilates Place offers private sessions, duet sessions, and small group classes utilizing the full range of Pilates equipment — not just reformers. This allows instructors to create more individualized experiences while helping clients improve mobility, stability, coordination, posture, and strength.

At its core, Pilates is not simply about exercise. It is about understanding movement, supporting recovery, and building resilience for life. Joseph Pilates famously said, "Change happens through movement and movement heals." That philosophy continues to guide the work at The Pilates Place today.

The Pilates Place ... "where **how** you move... matters."



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**FITNESS**  
Perform. Prevent.  
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### YOU DON'T HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN REHABILITATION AND FITNESS.

At The Pilates Place, we focus on what you CAN do while protecting what needs to be protected. Our integrated approach combines physical therapy, post-rehabilitation training, and Pilates-based fitness to help you move better today and build a stronger tomorrow.

For 20 years, we've helped clients of all ages and abilities move with less pain, greater freedom, and lasting confidence.

*“Change happens through movement and movement heals.” — Joseph Pilates*



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# BREASTFEEDING

## BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND FINDING YOUR SUPPORT

By Mercedes Ricciardi

**B**ecoming a new mother is one of the most exciting and often overwhelming experiences in a person's life. There is no shortage of advice, opinions, and information coming from every direction especially for new moms today. Breastfeeding is no exception. Understanding the real benefits of breast milk, anticipating the possible challenges, and knowing where to turn for support can help families feel more confident in whatever their feeding journey might be.

### What the Experts Recommend

Both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, with continued breastfeeding alongside complementary foods for two years or beyond. Breast milk adapts in composition as a baby grows offering benefits that cannot be fully replicated.

### Benefits for Baby and Mother

The benefits of breastfeeding reach both baby and mother. For infants, breast milk provides optimal nutrition, immune protection, and a reduced risk of infections. Breastfed babies also have lower long-term rates of obesity, asthma, and type 2 diabetes.

Breastfeeding provides significant physiological and

emotional benefits to mothers, aiding in postpartum recovery in the release of hormones that both help the uterus to contract more quickly after delivery and that help support bonding and emotional well-being. Breastfeeding is also associated with lowering the long-term risk of chronic conditions like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer.

### The Village We've Lost

For much of human history, breastfeeding knowledge had

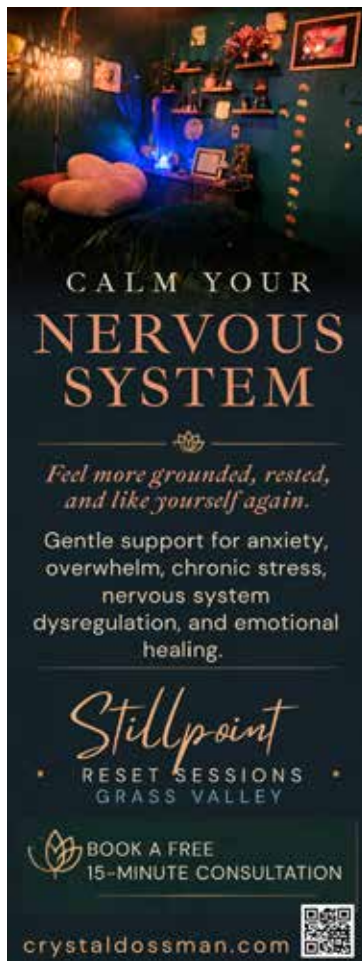
been passed down through generations of women living closely together. A new mother had her own mother, grandmother, sisters, and aunts nearby able to offer hands-on guidance, reassurance, and help in those earliest days. This close, shared support made a meaningful difference.

Today, families may be far more spread out. Many mothers find themselves navigating new parenthood without the familiar presence of those who have been through it before.

Without that readily available familial support, the early weeks of breastfeeding can feel isolating and uncertain. Building a support network before baby arrives whether through community resources, local groups, or healthcare providers can help fill that gap.

### Knowing What Challenges May Come

It's important to understand that breastfeeding can come with challenges. Common ones include latch difficulties, sore or cracked nipples,



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Mother breastfeeding.

concerns about milk supply, engorgement, plugged ducts, mastitis, and issues with oral function that can affect how a baby feeds. Many mothers also simply feel uncertain and overwhelmed in those early days and weeks.

Many of the challenges mothers face early on can be managed with the right support. Having an understanding of breastfeeding before baby arrives and knowing what potential challenges might be can make a difference in your feeding journey. Getting support early is key.

**Setting Up for Success**

For mothers who would like to breastfeed, taking a prenatal breastfeeding class before baby arrives can be truly beneficial. Understanding

the mechanisms of lactation, good positioning, and how to support a proper latch gives mothers a foundation before the intensity of those first days sets in.

Equally important is knowing who can support you in those first few days and weeks. Finding your support team before baby arrives means one less thing to figure out in those tender and often tiring early days. Our community has a strong network of lactation professionals, midwives, doulas, and pediatric specialists, as well as several newborn feeding support groups available to families. Taking the time to build those connections before baby arrives means families feel supported from the very beginning.

**Returning to Work**

Returning to work or school is one of the most common reasons mothers stop breastfeeding earlier than they had planned. Pumping at work requires time, a private space, and a supportive environment, and access that is not always available, particularly for mothers in hourly or service jobs. Managing a pumping schedule alongside the demands of a job or classroom is genuinely hard, and mothers should not be made to feel that struggling with this reflects a personal shortcoming.

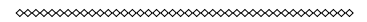
Planning ahead, understanding workplace rights around pumping breaks, and talking with a lactation specialist before returning to work can help ease that

transition.

**Support for Every Feeding Journey**

Perhaps the most important thing for families to know is that breastfeeding does not have to be all or nothing. Some mothers breastfeed exclusively. Some combine breastfeeding with pumping or supplementation. Some breastfeed for a few weeks, and others for a year or more. All of these paths are valid.

The goal of support is not to pressure families into a single approach. It is to meet mothers and families where they are, understand what matters to them, and help them reach their own feeding goals. Whether that means troubleshooting a latch, finding a pumping solution that works, or simply having someone to talk to without judgment, support is available.



*Mercedes is an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) and registered nurse of 20 years, who spent a large part of her nursing career in the NICU. Her goal is to offer compassionate, evidence-based lactation support that honors both your baby's needs and your instincts as a parent. Mercedes is a longtime community member of 18 years and mother of two.*

# Can Nature Heal?

By John Seivert

**S**cience says yes — and Nevada County may be one of the best prescriptions around.

As a physical therapist, cyclist, photographer, and someone who spends an unhealthy amount of time staring at weather apps before outdoor adventures, I've long believed that time spent in Nature is good for us. Fortunately, science is beginning to catch up with what many of us have felt instinctively for years.

**And here in Nevada County, we are surrounded by one of the greatest wellness resources imaginable — the outdoors.**

Whether it's hiking the trails around Scotts Flat, walking along the South Yuba River, riding a bike through the pines, kayaking on Rollins Lake, or simply sitting quietly beneath towering cedar trees, spending time outside appears to have profound effects on our physical and mental health. Researchers have now spent more than two decades studying the effects of Nature on the human body and brain. The findings are remarkably consistent: people who spend regular time outdoors tend to be healthier, happier, less stressed, and more emotionally resilient.

One of the landmark studies came from researcher Mathew White at the University of Exeter in England. His team studied approximately 20,000 people and found that individuals who spent at least two hours per week in green spaces reported significantly better physical health and psychological well-being than those who did not. Interestingly, the benefits appeared regardless of age, income, occupation, or existing health conditions.

And the two hours didn't have to happen all at once. It could be spread throughout the week in small doses. That's encouraging news for those of us who occasionally think, "Well, I only have twenty minutes, so why bother?"

Apparently, it still counts.

The research on Nature and health has exploded in recent years. Richard Louv, author of the influential book *Last Child in the Woods*, coined the phrase "Nature Deficit Disorder" to describe what happens when modern humans become discon-

nected from the outdoors. Louv notes that hundreds of quality studies now support the idea that Nature is not simply pleasant — it is essential to healthy human functioning.

Many of these studies compare people living in highly urban environments to those with greater access to parks, trees, trails, or wilderness. While researchers acknowledge these are often observational studies rather than gold-standard randomized controlled trials, the consistency of the findings is difficult to ignore.

**So what exactly does Nature appear to do for us?**

Research suggests spending time outdoors may:

- Lower blood pressure
- Reduce stress hormone levels
- Improve mood
- Reduce anxiety
- Improve sleep quality
- Enhance immune system function
- Improve attention and concentration
- Increase feelings of calm and emotional well-being

**...people who spend regular time outdoors tend to be healthier, happier, less stressed, and more emotionally resilient.**

Some studies even suggest that children who spend more time outdoors demonstrate improvements in focus, emotional regulation, and attention.

And honestly, after watching kids spend six straight hours staring at screens, this probably isn't shocking news to any parent or grandparent reading this column.

One of the more fascinating areas of research comes from Japan, where the practice of "forest bathing" — known as Shinrin-yoku — has become widely studied. Forest bathing doesn't

involve hiking fast or exercising intensely. It simply means immersing yourself in a forest environment using all five senses.

Researchers have found that time spent in forests may reduce cortisol levels (our primary stress hormone), lower heart rate, and improve feelings of relaxation. Some scientists believe aromatic compounds released by trees, called phytoncides, may even contribute to immune system benefits.

**In simpler terms: trees might actually help us chill out.**

As a photographer, I've also noticed how people emotionally respond to Nature imagery. My work place, is filled with large landscape photographs from places like Yosemite, Iceland, the Sierra Nevada, and the deserts of Utah. Patients frequently comment that the images make them 'feel calmer' and more 'relaxed' before treatment even begins.

**Nature is not simply pleasant — it is essential to healthy human functioning.**

There's actually science behind this too. Studies using brain imaging have shown that viewing scenes from Nature can activate areas of the brain associated with empathy, emotional stability, and positive feelings.

Nature also has a remarkable ability to shift perspective. Problems that feel enormous indoors often become more manageable after a walk outside. Something about moving through forests, rivers, mountains, or open skies reminds us that we are part of something larger than our daily stressors, deadlines, and news feeds.

The beautiful thing is that Nature therapy doesn't require elite athletic ability. You don't need to climb Half Dome or mountain bike down technical trails to receive benefits. A short walk through a local park, gardening in the backyard, sitting beside a creek, or quietly watching birds from your porch can all help reconnect the nervous system to a calmer state.

And perhaps that's one of the reasons so many of us feel drawn outdoors in difficult or stressful times. Nature slows us down. It engages our senses. It interrupts the endless mental chatter that modern life constantly feeds.

So this week, give yourself permission to step outside for a little while. Leave your phone in your pocket. Listen to the wind in the trees. Watch the light change across the hills of Nevada County. Take a walk without turning it into a fitness competition.

Your heart, brain, nervous system, and maybe even your soul will likely thank you for it.



Man walking the dog on a trail in Lake Wildwood.



John Seivert, PT, DPT, OCS, FAAOMPT, member MINT, has been a Physical Therapist for 42 years and has written health and wellness columns for The Union Newspaper since 2016. Former owner of Body Logic Physical Therapy in Grass Valley from 2001–2023, he now works part-time as a consultant, teacher, and writer while gradually transitioning into retirement in 2027.

# The Healing Power of Faith, Community, and Belonging

By Father Seth Kellerman

I was seventeen years old and my life looked pretty good by most metrics. I had great friends, was healthy, enjoying academic success, and some achievements in sports. But I was miserable. I had no sense of purpose, identity, or hope. In fact, I found that each of those successes in my young life came with a feeling of a new weight being put on my shoulders as the expectations for me grew. I had hoped that these victories would satisfy me and make me feel complete inside, but I felt increasingly empty and adrift with my general sense of wellbeing in the dumps.

It was during this time of emptiness that I started attending a church. Not for a good reason, but because the girl I was dating (she is now my wife) went there. At that church I heard a message which changed my life. Through faith in God, I could have hope, peace, identity, and life. All of those things which I had been searching for in success were freely mine and did not depend upon my achievement. Along with this spiritual transformation and peace came an instant community and a sense of belonging.

We live in a world of information and technology, much of it offering to make our lives easier, safer, and cure our problems. In the midst of this, it can seem arcane to look to something so ancient as faith and the community it provides



Prayer Circle. Photo from Metro Media.

for addressing our modern challenges. Yet the Department of Health and Human Services, in its Social Determinants of Health tells us that “people who have strong social connections have a lower risk of health conditions like heart disease, stroke, dementia, and depression. They’re also better able to cope with stress and the challenges of daily life.” In addition, according to the Nation Alliance of Mental Illness, “research suggests that religiosity reduces suicide rates, alcoholism and drug use.”

I must confess that I am not entirely equipped to define how this happens, but I am thankful that I am able to observe it. I enjoy the tremendous blessing of being able to see people welcomed into community and relax into connection and friendships. These relationships span from the casual comfortable recognition of one another in worship to

the more profound manifestations where people become the closest of friends. These relationships become like shock absorbers to the challenges of life, helping people to cope with suffering without being crushed.

Similarly, the rites and ceremonies of the church assist us to make sense of inexplicable things like illness and death and share in the joys of birth and marriage. In like manner, the content of the teaching of the church can bring peace in an uncertain world. As we hear of the hope in the message of God’s mercy, it allows us to let go of the petty entanglements which seek to hold us down. The pride, greed, judgment, fear, and hopelessness that we are often confronted with both from our own hearts and from the world are mitigated by the life which God has revealed to us and invites us into. In holding fast to this

new life, we are invited to live with mercy and compassion to all, which is a tremendous stress relief.

After listing all these benefits of faith and community, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that faith communities do not always function in a healthy and supporting manner, and many have been wounded by the church. As a church leader I want to apologize for this. My hope is that despite the weaknesses which even the best of congregations struggle with, that all people can experience the hope and peace that I have found in my faith and in the church community.



Seth was raised in Nevada County, but moved away for college, a stint as an Airborne Ranger in the Army, semi-nary, and serving his first two churches in Dallas, TX. He has been serving as the rector of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Grass Valley since 2009 when he and his wife and their four daughters moved back to town. He enjoys working on hopeless cars, welding, and being outside, especially as an assistant coach for the alpine ski team at NU.

# The Timeless Search for Peace in an Anxious World

By Gregory Ingram, MDiv, MA, Executive Director from Anew Day

More than 2,500 years before modern psychology, the ancient Greeks were already wrestling with stress, anxiety, despair, and emotional suffering. Today, amid the extraordinary technological advancements, medical progress, and material comforts of the modern Western world, many of those same inner struggles remain remarkably familiar.

Perhaps that is because human beings are not built merely to consume, achieve,

often not the patient nearing the end of life, but the loved ones gathered nearby trying to process uncertainty, exhaustion, grief, and the painful reality that they cannot control everything.

Over the years, many people have asked me essentially the same question: How do you deal with stress and anxiety? How do you keep going when life becomes emotionally heavy?

As a person who has genuinely tried to live accor-

struggle to endure hardship. Modern psychology wrestles with them through therapy, research, medication, and evolving theories about the mind. Both, in their own way, reflect humanity's enduring search for peace and stability. Yet despite all our advancements,

dens. In my experience, people endure stress and suffering far better when they remain connected to something larger than themselves.

I do not believe stress and anxiety can be permanently eliminated from human life. The Greeks could not elimi-

**...people under stress often search for highly complicated solutions while neglecting surprisingly basic things.**



Photo from Metro Media.

entertain themselves, and then somehow feel fulfilled. At some deep level, people seem to need meaning, purpose, connection, and love. Whether religious or secular, many eventually discover that a meaningful life almost always involves loving something or someone beyond the self.

As a volunteer and professional hospice chaplain for more than 27 years, I have spent a great deal of time around people under stress. Interestingly, the most anxious person in the room is

ding to my faith, I believe spiritual life matters deeply. Faith can provide meaning, hope, perspective, and a sense that suffering is not entirely without purpose. At the same time, even deeply faithful people still have to live through ordinary human reality. Stress still affects the body. Anxiety still interrupts sleep. Grief still hurts.

The ancient Greeks wrestled with these questions through philosophy, reflection, and tragic plays centered on fear, suffering, grief, and the

suffering and anxiety remain familiar companions to human life.

Over time, I have noticed that people under stress often search for highly complicated solutions while neglecting surprisingly basic things. When my own life feels overwhelming, I try to return to what I think of as the elementary foundations of being human: eat, sleep, walk, and love.

Eat decent food consistently. Sleep enough. Walk outside. Spend time in nature. Put the phone down occasionally. None of this sounds revolutionary, but these simple habits matter profoundly when stress begins pulling people emotionally and physically out of balance.

And then there is love. Not merely romance or emotion, but genuine care directed beyond oneself. Faith. Purpose. Family. Friendship. Community. Service. The willingness to will the good of the other even while carrying your own bur-

nate them, and modern society has not eliminated them either. But I do believe people can learn to carry life more steadily through healthier rhythms, meaningful relationships, spiritual grounding, and a deeper sense of purpose as they continue onward through an uncertain world.

.....



*Gregory Ingram, MDiv, MA is a former hospice chaplain and construction executive whose lifelong commitment to compassionate service and spiritual care now guides his leadership at Anew Day which offers affordable counseling for individuals, couples, families, & groups.*

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 G V P P S O C I L Y F U N C T I O N L U  
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Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

## Words

ATTENTION  
 BRAIN  
 CLARITY  
 COGNITION  
 EMOTIONS  
 EXECUTIVE  
 FLEXIBILITY  
 FOCUS

FUNCTION  
 INFORMATION  
 LEARNING  
 MEMORY  
 MINDNESS  
 NEURAL  
 NEUROPLASTICITY  
 PERCEPTION

PROBLEM SOLVING  
 PROCESSING  
 REACTION  
 RESERVE  
 RESILIENCE  
 SLEEP  
 STRESS  
 SYNAPSES

## Activities that exercise the brain

Mental health is an important topic to acknowledge and discuss, and such recognition is vital for all people, including the aging population. The World Health Organization indicates 57 million people had dementia worldwide in 2021. The National Institutes of Health reports the global prevalence of dementia in individuals under the age of 70 increased by 122 percent in recent decades, rising from roughly six million people in 1990 to more than 13 million in 2021.

Although many factors are involved in the development of dementias and cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease or other neurodegenerative illnesses are not inevitable as one gets older. But it is understandable why so many adults make brain health a priority. People of all ages can benefit from incorporating activities that exercise the brain into their daily lives.

- Learn a new language
- Learn new skills
- Take dancing classes
- Use all of your senses
- Work on puzzles
- Socialize with others

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# Recognized as a Top Rural Hospital.

Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital has been recognized by The Leapfrog Group as a Top Rural Hospital for a third consecutive year. This distinction by the nation's leading safety reviewer is a reflection of our team's commitment to patient care—built on compassionate listening, a personal connection to provide comfort and hope, and a steadfast belief in the healing power of humankindness. Learn more about us at [DignityHealth.org/SierraNevada](https://DignityHealth.org/SierraNevada).

**Hello humankindness<sup>®</sup>**

