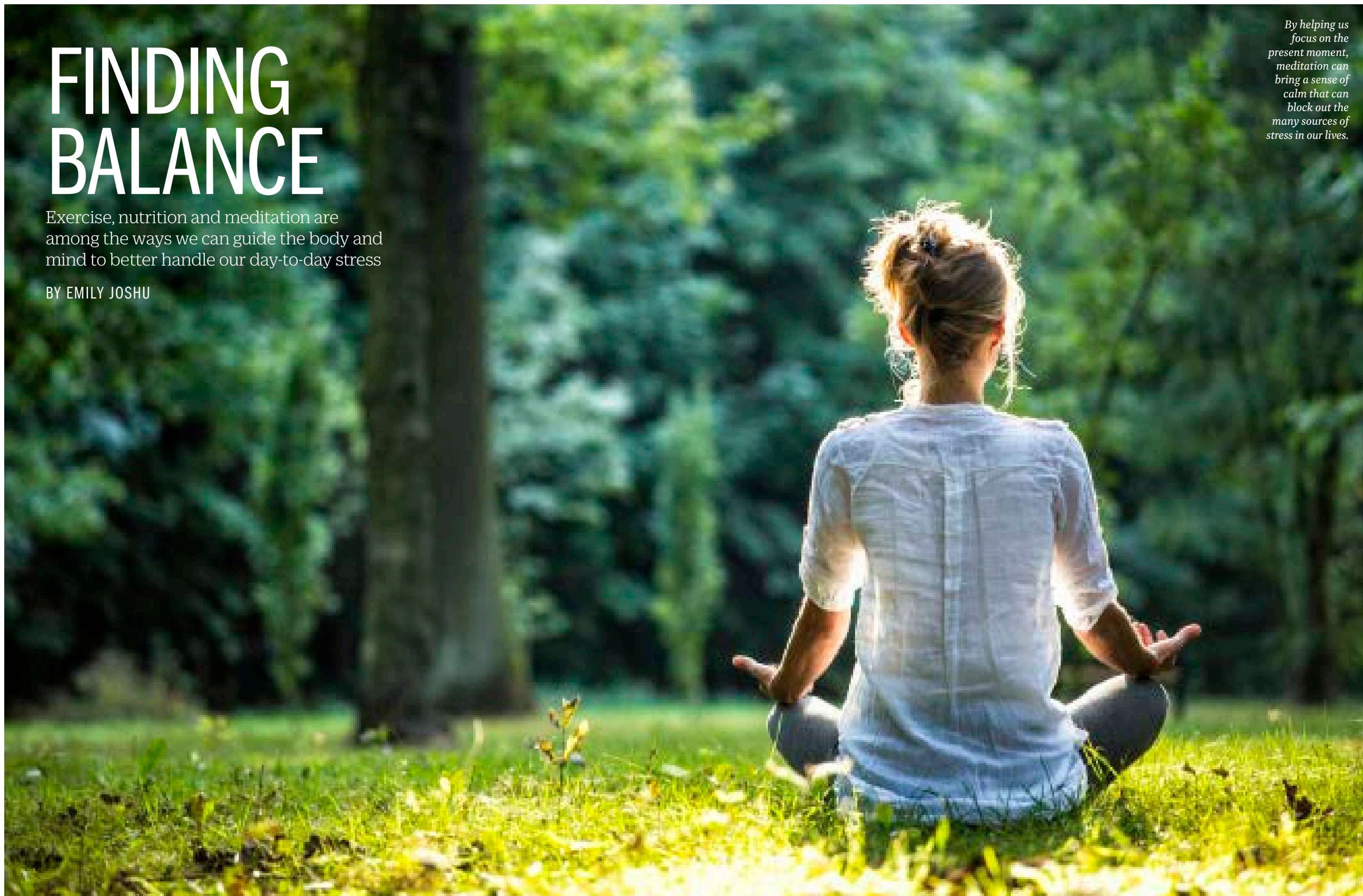


FINDING BALANCE

Exercise, nutrition and meditation are among the ways we can guide the body and mind to better handle our day-to-day stress

BY EMILY JOSHU

By helping us focus on the present moment, meditation can bring a sense of calm that can block out the many sources of stress in our lives.



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AYBE YOU WERE LAID OFF from your job without a back-up plan. Maybe you were suddenly diagnosed with a serious medical condition. Or you have scanned through the day's headlines and your

thoughts have become entangled in a web of uncertainty. Stress is everywhere—and it's getting worse. John Denninger, director of clinical research at the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, says we are in “a constant state of alert” and are “more chronically stressed than people used to be.”

While the causes and the severity differ from person to person, the sensation of stress itself is far from abnormal or even exclusively negative. “[Stress] is our body's natural reaction to changes in our environment that require us to respond or adjust our behavior,” says Alice Figueroa, a nutrition coach in New York City and the founder of the website Alice in Foodieland, which focuses on wellness and nutrition. “It allows us to overcome challenging situations, and it provides us with the motivation to get through rough times in our life or to achieve our goals. But when it becomes excessive, stress can be very detrimental to our health.”

One of the biggest misconceptions surrounding stress, Denninger says, is that you can't do anything about it. From diet to exercise to mindfulness to finances, there are several paths you can take to identify and manage these ever-present feelings.

NUTRITION

WHILE WAITING TO GIVE A SPEECH, YOU MIGHT feel nauseated. Before a test or a job interview, your appetite might completely disappear—or you might

find yourself eating an entire pint of ice cream in one sitting. It turns out that there is a direct correlation between stress and digestive and nutritional health, often shown by symptoms such as upset stomach, nausea, diarrhea, stomach cramping or changes in appetite. These biochemical reactions are regulated by the gut-brain axis, a system connecting the brain, central nervous system and gastrointestinal tract. Cognitive and emotional centers of the brain communicate with elements of the gut microbiome, including bacteria and fatty acids. Additionally, the enteric nervous system, found in the lining of the intestinal tract, controls digestive function and the production of neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and serotonin. When stress amps up, it causes disruption in the digestive system, so a diet that supports gut health can calm those physiological stress responses. “That's a really powerful thing, to understand this connection,” Figueroa says. “It becomes important to realize that eating foods that promote our digestive health can also lead to improved well-being that can help us manage stress long term.”

To boost gut health and stress relief, Figueroa points to a balanced, plant-based diet filled with fiber- and prebiotic-rich foods, such as garlic, on-

38%

Adults who say they have overeaten or eaten unhealthy foods because of stress*



53%

Adults who say they exercise to manage their stress*

ions, asparagus, bananas and berries. “It's a food pattern that you can imitate throughout all your meals, making sure that you always have half of your plate [contain] either fruits or vegetables,” she says. Probiotic-rich foods like sauerkraut, kefir, miso, yogurt and kombucha are other mood-boosting options that can ease digestion and protein absorption.

Fixating on losing weight and adopting fad diets (like keto and Paleo) can be additional sources of stress. Diet culture, Figueroa says, often focuses on the idea of reduction, whether it be gluten, sugar or carbs or outright fasting. Instead of obsessing over these cuts, however, it's better to focus on health-supportive foods. “It's about learning what foods you like and learning what nutrients those foods have and finding ways to seamlessly incorporate them into your diet rather than having it be something that causes additional stress,” Figueroa says.

EXERCISE

IN 2018, THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND Human Services updated its Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans. Recommendations for adults are currently to do at least 150 minutes, or two and a half hours, of moderate aerobic exercise (walking or swimming) or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity such as running each week, as well as incorporating strength training twice a week. “Yoga and other forms of physical activity are crucial for main-

taining our mental health,” says Figueroa. Exercise can alleviate stress by boosting a person's outlook through a meaningful activity and sense of accomplishment. In a 2019 study published in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, researchers found that acute habitual exercise had significant stress-buffering effects on the activation of the primary stress hormone cortisol. And in a 2018 study of 52 women published in the *International Journal of Preventative Medicine*, those who participated in 12 sessions of regular yoga practices showed significant reduction in stress, anxiety and depression.

Integrating exercise into your routine could be as simple as going for a bike ride a few times each week, taking a walk after work, running on a treadmill or regularly attending a yoga class. Figueroa also points to yoga's ability to train the body to cope with overactive fight-or-flight reflexes in people with chronic stress and anxiety.

Exercising produces many of the same physiological reactions that ignite the stress response, as noted by Joseph Ciccolo, an assistant professor of applied physiology at the Teachers College of Columbia University, who has monitored these responses in patients living with post-traumatic stress disorder. The reactions to a high-intensity resistance activity such as weight lifting—breathlessness, rapid heart rate, increased perspiration—mimicked the physical responses to extreme levels of stress. Exposing

*Source: American Psychological Association



72%

Americans who reported feeling stressed about money at least some of the time during the past month*

such as heart disease, high blood pressure, kidney disease or diabetes.

FINANCES

IN NEARLY EVERY ASPECT OF DAY-TO-DAY LIFE, from our morning cup of coffee to the reality of keeping a roof over our heads, thoughts about money weigh heavily on our minds. According to a 2018 survey by the insurance company Northwestern Mutual, money was the dominant stressor for 44% of Americans. Additionally, a recent report by financial firm John Hancock showed that 69% of workers were stressed about finances.

In 2017, Andrew Abeyta, an assistant professor of psychology at Rutgers University–Camden, published a study in the *Journal of Social Psychology* based on the idea that, from an existential perspective, financial insecurity threatens psychological health by undermining one’s sense of purpose. “People certainly derive a sense of importance or a sense of purpose from their career,” Abeyta says. “When it comes to financial insecurity, that sense of pride and purpose that people get from earning money and putting food on the table and pursuing career goals is threatened.”

A constant fear of being unable to provide can cause perpetual activation of the stress response. For a workaholic who may have lost his or her job, this can lead to feelings of meaninglessness. From a motivational-psychology perspective, Abeyta says, it’s easy to internalize blame and question whether you have what it takes to be successful. A 2017 Australian study in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* found that financial stress can drive people to develop a smoking habit, and a 2015 survey for the American Psychological Association (APA) by Harris Poll showed that nearly 1 in 5 Americans ignore health-care needs due to an inability to afford it.

Financial insecurity can differ from other sources of stress because of the necessity surrounding the problem. “It taps these very primal worries,” Abeyta says. A compromised sense of meaning resulting from unemployment or from living paycheck to paycheck can also negatively affect sources of emotional support and interfere with personal relationships. “We don’t want to be around another person who constantly [brings the conversation] back to money,” Abeyta says. “When you lose those avenues for social support in your everyday life, it

patients to the same sensations they would experience during a high-stress moment—but in a more positive, self-controlled context—can help them handle other stressors. “With exercise, your body is adapting to that physiological stress response,” Ciccolo says. “When you experience that again, you have a reduced response to it cognitively.”

Despite these findings, hitting the treadmill or taking up weight lifting is not a guaranteed cure-all, especially for someone unaccustomed to such activity. “Exercise can be a stress reliever for people who think of it [that way],” Ciccolo says. “For some people, exercise is a stressor. It’s a task. It’s often considered to be painful, or you’re spending time doing something that you don’t necessarily have enough time to do.” For those who are venturing into fitness-fueled methods of de-stressing, the Mayo Clinic suggests starting small and gradually increasing demand. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends consulting with a physician first if you have a pre-existing condition



31%

Workers who saw a decrease in stress after adopting a program that included meditation*

sends you down a further spiral.”

To cope with financial stress, try to make only one significant monetary decision at a time, track spending daily with a list and remain mindful of ways to reduce spending wherever possible, the APA recommends. Abeyta says it’s important to derive a sense of purpose from sources other than a paycheck, especially for people whose personal sense of meaning is wrapped up in work and money. “Try to think about other things in your life that give you a sense of purpose,” he says, “and spend some time fostering them to avoid this tunnel vision on money, success, financial earnings.”

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION

THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION estimates that from 2012 to 2017, the practice of meditation increased significantly, from 4.1% to 14.2% of American adults. Connected to the broad idea of mindfulness, this popular practice can be particularly effective for stress relief. “[Mindfulness] is a way of approaching life with a present-centered awareness of purpose, paying attention to what’s happening in the present moment instead of being lost in what’s happened in the past and what’s going to happen in the future, as we so often are,” Denninger says.

Meditation unites the body and the mind in a method of relaxation, quelling the physical response

the body feels in moments of stress. This can be as simple as becoming aware of your body’s reactions to stress, such as tension in the shoulders or rapid breathing. Physiologically, blood pressure is lowered and the heart rate is slowed. “The meditative state enables you to go from the stress response into what we’ve always called the relaxation response, so actually achieving a state where your body is not always on alert,” Denninger says.

When first embarking upon a regular meditation practice, start small, with two or three minutes per day, rather than trying to tackle a larger goal like 20 minutes or more, advises Joy Rains, the author of *Meditation Illuminated: Simple Ways to Manage Your Busy Mind*. For those new to the practice or self-conscious about meditating alone, group classes can provide a sense of predictability and support. “There’s something about being in community that can be very healing,” Rains says. “You’re not alone with your stress. Anytime anybody is in community with others that is right for that person, it can be a tremendous source of stress relief.”

Try integrating mindful moments throughout the day, including taking a walk or breathing deeply. Accepting the unavoidable anxiety of daily life and moving forward with centered awareness, Denninger says, brings you to “the place you always have to be in to do any kind of meaningful change.” □