

The Little Rituals That Keep Us Going

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/well/live/wellness-rituals.html>

Reading Nancy Drew. Watching the birds every day. Counting yellow doors. Thousands of Times readers shared their wellness “non-negotiables.”

Sam Chaim’s wife hates the smell of bananas, so he takes one out of the house with him for a daily morning walk. For Margaret Clerkin, the five minutes she spends reading Nancy Drew before bed are essential. One Times reader dresses up her breakfast with fancy plates; another makes it a rule to do a handstand when thinking through a difficult problem.

These were just a few of the responses to the Well desk’s question for Times readers: [What are your wellness “non-negotiables?”](#) Nearly 2,000 people shared practices that anchor and animate their days. Below is an edited selection of some of our favorites — ways to stay grounded, become healthier or just a little bit happier. Read through to get inspired, and tell us about your non-negotiables in the comments.

Make your mornings better.

I use different plates for breakfast on the weekends. Rather than the grab-and-go-shovel-in-the-food weekday morning routine, my bright blue and yellow plates with bread, jams and fruit are a reminder to enjoy life, slow down and savor.

— Daniela Reik, Manhattan

In honor of my grandfather, I enjoy a pastry with my coffee every morning while reading the day’s news. He survived World War II, fighting for the Polish army. He began each day by heartily eating a danish with his coffee. As a little boy, I loved and admired him, and throughout my life I have embraced his morning ritual and think about him with each sweet bite of *bałabuch* (his nonsense word for that morning pastry). I wouldn’t give up this ritual for anything, even though eating a sweet in the morning may not be the best. It provides a sense of calm satisfaction with which to begin the day.

— Mark Mumford, Tacoma, Wash.

Most mornings before work, I swim for 45 to 60 minutes. I do miss some mornings, but it is non-negotiable that I get back in the pool eventually. This prevents me from starting the day distracted. When you’re swimming, all you can do is think your thoughts. It’s cathartic. Plus, it feels really good to have done something productive before 7 a.m.

— Alex McNally, Arlington, Va.

Image

Walk this way.

I talk to my best friend before the day begins. We recently shifted our non-negotiable morning talk to be a non-negotiable morning walk, and the benefits are amazing. We feel like we are seen, heard and connected before we go out into daily life, and the walk makes us feel like we have succeeded before we even go to the office.

— *Heidi Schmidt, Roanoke, Va.*

Every morning I walk around our town for what I call my Banana Walk. My wife dislikes the smell of bananas in the house, and I love her, so I take my banana and spend the next hour figuring out the universe, life, and while I'm at it, my work day.

I watch the shops and restaurants open up, and see others walking with their dogs or strollers. I am grateful and my blood pressure thanks me too.

— *Sam Chaim, Delray Beach, Fla.*

Count ... something.

My non-negotiable is counting yellow doors out loud. Whenever I leave my house, I make a point to look for and count every yellow door I see. I adopted this habit as a way to help myself stay more present. It's like a game — seeing how many doors I can count that day. (Thirty-two is my record to date!) All of my friends know not to be offended I stop midsentence to yell “10!” Most of them will shout out if they notice a yellow door before me.

One of my friends plays her version of this with her husband; they count dogs. My mental health, like many others, took a significant hit throughout the pandemic and one of the biggest issues I have struggled with is staying present and not letting my thoughts spiral. This habit has been very helpful for helping me find joyful moments every day.

— *Kris Aldous-Traynor, Boston*

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Find your alternative to scrolling.

Every morning — all year — my husband and I do a “bird sit,” a 20- to 60-minute phone-free time when we watch the birds from our patio. The first time I did this practice was at a weekend workshop; it was the first time in over 10 years that I'd been by myself, sitting quietly without my children and without my phone. I thought I was going to burst it felt so long. Now, the practice is just as important to my day as eating breakfast and getting to work. Our 7-year-old often joins us. In the winter, we get bundled in sleeping bags. We have a family of sharp shinned hawks we've been watching, and hummingbirds come so close we can hold them in our hands.

— *Heather Campbell, York, Maine*
Image

I used to read all the time when I was younger and wanted to get back into it. For the last few months, it's become a non-negotiable for me to read for at least half an hour a day. It usually ends up being more than that, but on days when I'm exhausted or busy with other things, I cut it off at my mandatory 30 minutes. Since I started reading every day, I've become more productive overall. I feel like my imagination has improved since I'm watching less TV and spending less time scrolling on my phone. My mind is moving more, and I feel more present in my life.

— Jennifer Blaney, Centereach, N.Y.

Be with your people ...

Having tea with my 11-year-old son after school. He likes iced mint tea with some honey; I go for English Breakfast with a splash of soy milk. It's our time to connect, joke around and chat about the day. It doesn't have to last long — maybe 15 to 20 minutes. I cherish this mom-son teatime and look forward to it every school day!

— *Kamal Kapadia, Berkeley, Calif.*

At 6 p.m. every day, my husband of 39 years makes popcorn, I make tea, and then we sit down and play gin rummy, five hands, so there has to be a winner. Our competition is fierce, we play avidly to the last moment. The winner gloats and cheers. Five minutes later, neither of us can remember who won.

— *Winifred Creamer, Eureka, Calif.*

... and your animals.

My dog — now a 90-pound Bernedoodle — was very sick as a puppy. The vet gave me I.V. fluids and needles, and wished me luck. So I had him sit on my lap on the floor every few hours to give him fluids. Thankfully he got better, but it created a morning habit — me drinking my coffee and giving him back scratches.

— *Vanessa Hill, Cary, N.C.*
Image

I know it sounds crazy, but a highlight of my day is sitting in my recliner after dinner and having our cat, Buffy, sit on my lap while I watch TV with my husband. One of the

benefits of being an empty-nester is being able to do things that you love on a consistent basis. Spending time with the cat on my lap ticks a lot of my boxes. It is lovely.

— *Cristie Carlisle, Arlington, Va.*

Take a break.

Three p.m. siesta with my legs elevated on a stack of couch cushions and laying on my back for 30 to 60 minutes.

— *James Lasley, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico*

I take a very hot bath in the early evening. If family is looking for me (and I'm not in the garage), I'm in the tub. It's relaxing and washes away the dirt of the day, not just on my body but in my head. Hot and soapy, Bluetooth radio, a book — it's all welcome.

— *Kenneth Setzer, Miami*

Find joy in the small stuff.

At least once a day, I choose to savor a moment of joy. The occasion might be a taste of delicious food, a laugh with a loved one, finding a prize parking spot, discovering my next library book, catching a glimpse of the moon through my upstairs window. It's amazing how these wonders multiply when I come to see them as ubiquitous gifts, not rare anomalies.

— *Caroline Molina-Ray, Austin, Texas*

Turn upside-down.

While not a daily habit, I have, when dealing with a challenging issue, closed my office door and done a handstand. Going upside down reminds me there are other perspectives I may not be aware of. If nothing else, it makes me smile, which always helps the situation. I'll also walk outside barefoot in the morning when I need to get grounded before a busy day. (It's particularly energizing in the winter.)

— *Jennifer Ashlock, Sylva, N.C.*

I have a list of conditions, any one of which could be categorized as serious. And I have a long list of non-negotiables in terms of eating well, no alcohol, limited sugar, walking, breathing and such. But I found that the one absolutely positively essential item strikes people as trivial and mundane: touching my toes. Every damn morning when I wake up I feel like I've aged 20 years, and it doesn't seem like I'll be able to touch my toes, but I hang there for whatever time it takes for the muscles to loosen up. I'm 63 years old and that really makes a difference.

— *Anne Lazarus, Reno, Nev.*

Practice your passions.

I started an art practice a while ago — 15 minutes painting in a sketchbook first thing in the morning before I've even finished a cup of coffee. There is much less pressure if I know I only have 15 minutes. I can easily experiment, but mostly I'm just happy to go into the world having exercised my creativity a bit.

— *Mary E. Lee, Minneapolis*

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End the day well.

My non-negotiable is five minutes with Nancy Drew before I fall asleep. After a long day of accumulated stresses, Nancy Drew makes me feel like there is justice in the world, women are powerful, your friends and family know what's important to you and support that — and you can always spot bad guys by their beady eyes.

I discovered an old box of Nancy Drews in the attic at the beginning of the pandemic. Years ago my daughters and I read them to each other whenever we were experiencing anything scary and out of our control. We would laugh hopefully at the absurdity of the story line or the willingness of any bad guy to spill the beans when caught by Nancy. My sister read these same books to me when we were kids.

At the beginning of the pandemic my sister had a recurrence of breast cancer. We knew it was bad, and I could not be with her. I was racked with worry and grief. When I found the Nancy Drews, my sister's name scrawled inside the cover, I started reading when I couldn't sleep, clutching the book that her hands had held. They somehow made it possible for me to let go of my waking world. Through it all, the girl detective has helped me deal with my grief and stress by lulling me into a world where girls rule and bad guys never win.

— *Margaret Clerkin, Middlebury, Vt.*

I take a shower right before bed. Even if it's one minute long. Even if the water is cold. Even if I don't wash anything. I just need to stand under the water to reset and find a moment of calm, totally alone, before falling asleep.

— *Caitlyn Burford, Redmond, Ore.*