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HEAL YOUR BODY & MIND

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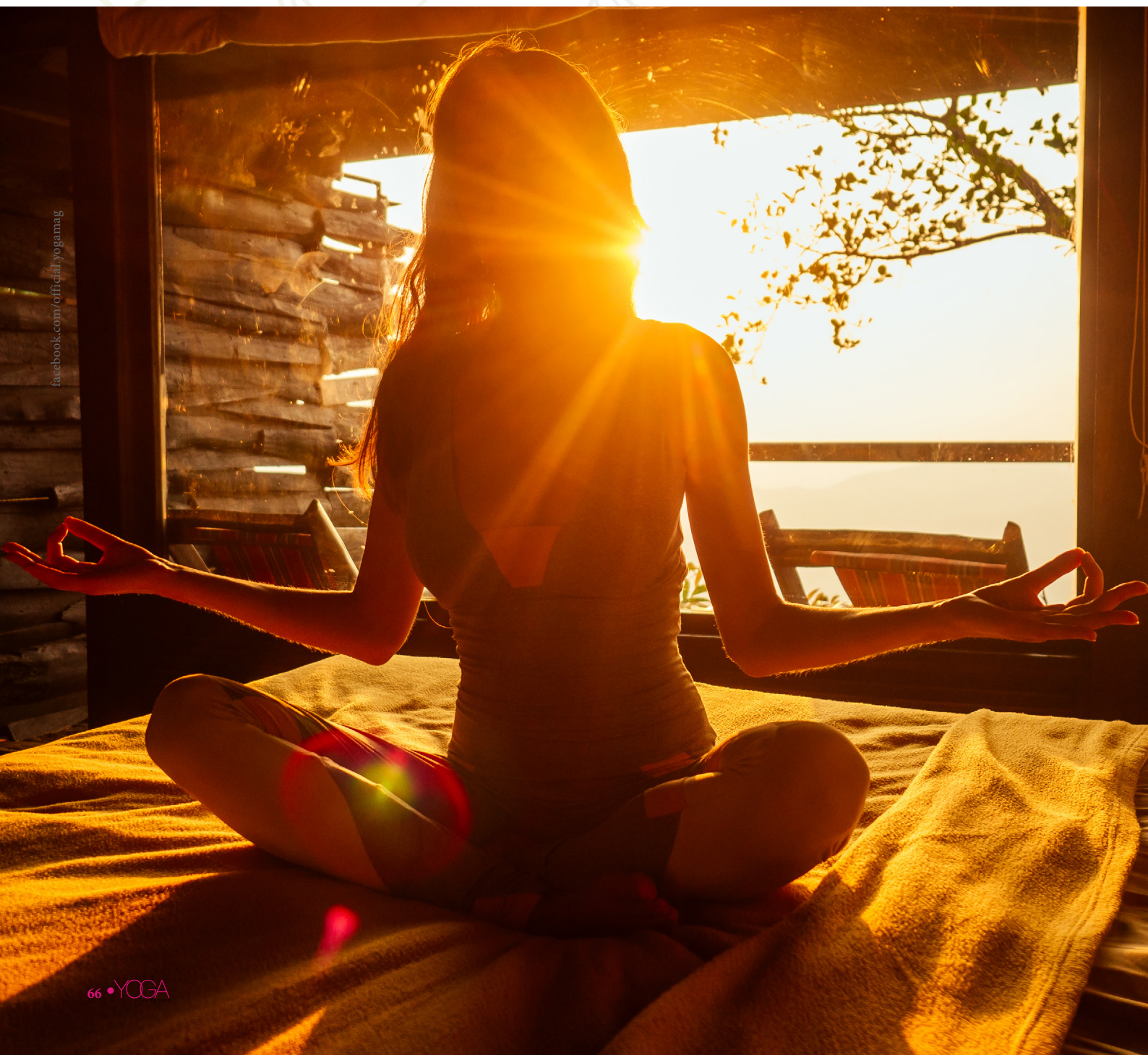
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HEAL THE BODY & THE MIND FOLLOWS

How the Big Rocks of Healthy Living Build Holistic Wellbeing

Words: Dr Luke Sniewski



Did you get enough sleep last night, or were you burning the candle at both ends trying to catch up on work projects? What did you eat for breakfast? Was it a coffee and pastry on the run, or did you savour a wholesome breakfast full of healthy fats and vital micronutrients? Finally, did you spend the entirety of your day at a desk, or did you find time and space to give the gift of movement to your body?

We already know that the answers to these questions – especially if these choices are consistent over time – can accurately predict our physical health. What most do not understand or consider, however, is that these very same lifestyle choices also impact how we think and how we feel. That's because when we focus on the health of the body, what we also get is holistic well-being, a solid foundation of mental clarity, and emotional resilience on top of physical health benefits.

The challenge for many is not that they do not want better health. It is that choosing lifestyle choices that are actually healthy for their body is both confusing and complicated. Every philosophy, modality, and approach asserts its superiority. The endless stream of seemingly-contradictory information never stops trying to claim the valuable real estate of your mental landscape. This is precisely when knowing about the big rocks of healthy living turns the perplexing challenge of living healthily into something easy, straightforward, and sustainable.



The Big Rocks of Healthy Living

There is an anecdote about a professor who puts large rocks in a glass until they reach the top of the glass. When he asks his students whether there is any space in the glass for more, they reply no. He then proceeds to add small pebbles to the glass to fill the space between the big rocks. The professor again asks the same question and receives the same answer, only to pour sand into the glass until it is filled to the top again.

The lesson the professor was teaching his students related to the choices that fill our daily lives. He told his class that the glass was analogous to life and that we should first fill each day with Big Rocks – the most meaningful and important things to us. Only then do we fill the remainder of our glass of life with less important things, the pebbles and, lastly, the sand. If, however,

the glass is first filled with sand and pebbles – the things in life that are not as important or do not hold significant meaning for us – there will not be any space for our big rocks.

With this metaphor in mind, it is the food we eat, how we move, and how we balance our stress equation with rest and recovery that represent the big rocks of healthy living. When the big rocks of healthy living – real food, movement, rest and relaxation – guide daily lifestyle choices, the body responds by cultivating energy, strength, and vitality. These qualities impact every aspect of life.

1) Real Food

Real food does not need advertising claims to prove it is healthy. In fact, it is just the food groups every child learns about in elementary school: fruits, vegetables, meat, nuts, dairy, whole grains, and legumes. We might also ask ourselves other questions



when looking down at the plate in front of us, such as: How was it grown? Where did it come from? How was it prepared? Is it best consumed raw, fresh, soaked, cooked, or fermented? Is this food choice healthy and appropriate for my specific bodily needs, goals, and intentions? Generally speaking, however, whole and unprocessed foods, as close to their natural state as possible, represent a great starting point for a healthy diet.

When we eat real food, our body gets more essential vitamins and minerals, nutrient density, fibre, and water than when we eat processed alternatives. This, in turn, impacts energy levels, mental focus, emotional state, behavioural choices, and even our susceptibility to illness and mental health disorders. Lastly, when our diet is primarily comprised of whole food, we end up stressing less about our food choices because the need to log, weigh and track food choices disappears, especially as we learn to connect to the body and its response to the food we eat.

Interestingly, according to a Forbes Health survey, one of the most popular 2023 New Year's Resolutions was improving food choices and diet. Why is eating healthy so difficult for us that dietary changes consistently end up near the top of many resolution lists? The answer might be surprisingly simple. The starting point for making healthy eating a regular habit is to create an environment that makes healthy food quick and easy. At home, you could try doing a kitchen and pantry detox. Get rid of the low-quality, unhealthy options in the house and replace them with healthier options. This does not mean you will never be able to eat your favourite snacks again. Rather that you'll choose healthy food more often because it's more convenient.



2) Movement

Another prominent yearly resolution is improving fitness levels. And for a good reason. Movement is vital to holistic well-being, so it is a great intention to move towards it. To stay healthy, we need to move every day. Our bodies evolved to move as the circulation provided by movement supports pretty much every single one of our body's physiological functions.

Daily movement impacts not only our physical health on our emotional health. When the body moves, it releases powerful endorphins that improve our mood and support us in dealing with stress. Moreover, various forms of exercise help us think more clearly and boost mental activity since it creates new neurons and increase blood flow throughout the body.

How to start incorporating movement into everyday life? Start with small choices rather than big expectations. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Park rather away from the supermarket so that you get extra steps during your food shop. Commit to doing five push-ups when you walk through your

bathroom door. Most importantly, choose movement and exercise activities that are fun because if you do not enjoy them, they will not last.

As you make movement a daily habit, you can start listening to your body. Pay attention to the body's needs, as it will let you know if it needs more strength, flexibility, or cardiovascular conditioning. Can't touch your toes? Maybe flexibility is lacking and would be an excellent point to start. Are you feeling puffed after taking a flight of stairs? Cardiovascular fitness and conditioning might take priority for some time. Do you experience difficulty doing a pushup? Strength training could be the right choice for you.

3) Rest and Recovery

Finally, all the magic of our health and well-being intentions are activated when we give our body time to rest and recover. That is why the third big rock of healthy living is rest and recovery. Without giving the body conscious and intention time to recover, even our workouts can become a source of stress rather than



the healthy-promoting lifestyle choice that it should be.

It is during the recovery phase that all the benefits of healthy lifestyle choices – like healing, fat loss, and muscle gain – actually happen. For example, we burn fat and build muscle between workouts when we rest, not during the workout. This is because exercise breaks down muscles and connective tissue. As the body restores itself following intense exercise, it has to expend energy to heal the damaged connective tissue, thus making it stronger.

The best starting point for rest and recovery is focusing on nightly sleep hygiene. Good quality sleep is essential for holistic well-being because of its link with nearly every mental health symptom and concern. In other words, the better we sleep, the better we think and feel. Unfortunately, sleep is also a lifestyle choice many people struggle with. But if we create and commit to maintaining a sleep routine, it's the lifestyle choice that impacts every aspect of life.

Start with the Body. Learn to Listen

Oftentimes when we face physical or mental health issues, we struggle to find the answers and solutions in our minds, unaware that our greatest teacher, doctor, and guide is within us. The answers we seek are found within the body. If we learn how to listen to the body's subtle language, it becomes our compass and guide, helping us thrive in everyday life.

Every day, our choices are either supporting or resisting the body's natural inclination toward health. Every lifestyle choice either moves us toward or away from well-being. That is why the best gift we can give ourselves is taking care of the body with healthy lifestyle choices. When you heal the body, the mind will follow.



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