



A Happiness MANIFESTO

2020 got you down? We know how you feel. With an unprecedented pandemic, worldwide social unrest, and a high-stakes election determining our fate for the next four years, fear and anxiety have taken root on a grand scale. But don't lose hope; finding joy, even in the darkest of times, is possible if you know where to look.

by **AURELIA D'ANDREA**

Kristin Lajeunesse remembers when the COVID-19 lockdown orders went into place. The self-employed 37-year-old, who works from home as a freelance marketing and copywriting specialist, thought confinement in her Las Vegas studio apartment would be a breeze. After all, she already identified as an introvert and relished her alone time.

“But then, as the media rolled out its updates about the number of infected people, deaths, and the rate of spread, I began to panic,” remembers Lajeunesse. “I definitely had a hard time with the collective grief, anxiety, and fear that swept the nation and the world. I was feeling it deeply, and it put me in a very dark place.”

Lajeunesse wasn't alone. Studies show that nearly half of the US population experienced coronavirus-related depression and anxiety. The racial injustices and civil unrest playing out in real time on the 24/7 newsfeed only added fuel to the fire.

Yet humans were struggling with maladies of modernity long before COVID-19 came to town. As we grow increasingly more attached to our devices, spend less time in nature, and privilege screen time over IRL interaction, our wellbeing pays the price.

The silver lining is that the building blocks to happiness—resilience and fortitude—are skills we can acquire with practice. And like any seed we sow, we'll reap the benefits—and not just in times of crisis, but whenever and wherever we need them. With inner strength as our compass, charting our path to joy is a walk in the park.

NURTURE WITH NATURE

If you've ever stepped outdoors after a rainstorm and revelled in the damp air's earthy aroma, you've experienced petrichor—the scent molecules created when raindrops mingle with parched soil. Petrichor smells good because it *is* good; science confirms that exposure to this unique natural perfume lowers inflammation and evokes a relaxation response in our bodies. This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to nature's incredible power to support us on our quest for comfort and joy.

For the better part of the last decade, Lucy Jones has studied the myriad ways nature affects our mental, physical, and emotional health, prompted by a hypothesis formed after her own healing experiences in the great outdoors.

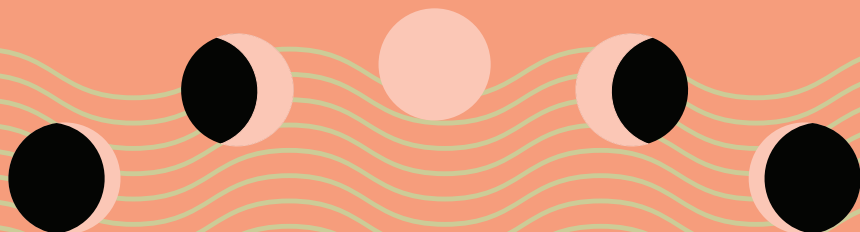
“What I found was a rich, diverse, and broad variety of pathways which suggested that time in the natural world affects us from our heads to our toes,” says Jones. Her book, *Losing Eden: Why Our Minds Need The Wild*, provides compelling evidence for how being outdoors supports human health, from decreasing stress and bolstering our immune function to lowering levels of rumination and overthinking that lead to depression.

“I find the whole picture exciting,” says Jones, “and profoundly urgent in terms of how disconnected and estranged we are from the natural world.” And never have we been more disassociated from nature than when instructed to shelter in place for months on end.

“If we can't get outside, studies show that even looking at pictures or images of nature can have mental health benefits,” says Jones, whose research revealed that

Blueprint to Bliss

We asked vegans around the country to share their strategies for bolstering happiness, and discovered there are many ways to invite joy into your life, every day.



Riding the wave

“My saving grace has been going to the beach. I’ve gone more times this year than in the entire time I’ve lived in California. Sometimes I don’t even get in the water, other times I body surf, other times I do headstands and just watch the surf come in. It’s just the perfect way to put things in perspective in these chaotic times.”

—Ayinde Howell, Los Angeles, CA

Great outdoors

“I run outdoors six days a week, usually along one of our two rivers. Seeing the trees, the water, and even other people serves as essential nutrients for my mental health. I think seeing greenery is crucially important when you’re a city dweller, even more so during quarantine.”

—Dylnise Balcavage, Philadelphia, PA

Selfless service

“Caring for our community is part of how we all can lift ourselves out of this challenging time. The Black community is more negatively affected by COVID-19 and especially with systemic racism. It’s not time to simply care for our own needs; it’s time to unite and provide support more than ever before.”

—James Koroni, Brooklyn, NY

Plant power

“Tending to my houseplants has really helped keep me grounded during these last few months. As someone who struggles with anxiety, it’s always important for me to focus my time and energy on positive activities that make me happy and less stressed, and plant care has been an outlet that does just that. My plants help me clear my mind and focus on one thing rather than 10 things at once. It’s kind of like my daily yoga, and it’s my favorite way to end my day.”

—Jasmine Briones, Vancouver, WA

The fruits of love

My fiancée and I are growing food in abundance; I’m super excited about our two feet of avocado plants and six mango plants we’re growing. When we’re not loving up on each other and planting food, we’re advocating for a happier and more just future for all by joining protests and fighting for the arrest of the cops that killed Breonna Taylor.”

—Omwale Adewale, Brooklyn, NY

merely looking out at trees or watching birds at a bird feeder has the power to heal.

When time outdoors is off limits or restricted, you can bring nature indoors and benefit from its wellness-supporting properties. “I like to bring, especially in the colder months, sprigs of holly or seed heads or winter greenery inside,” says Jones.

And when you *can* get outside, walking through a park or other greenspace can offset the stresses of urban life and usher in a sense of contentment, something that will become more vital as humans worldwide continue their mass migration away from rural environments toward cities.

“The global pandemic has shown the stark inequalities of access to nature in our societies,” says Jones. “If many of us are stuck inside, it shows how important it is to build future communities and housing with trees and the rest of nature incorporated, for both human health and planetary health.”

FEEL-GOOD FUEL

Bread had a moment in 2020—a very big moment. Google searches for “how to make bread” reached record highs in mid-spring, while global shortages of yeast and flour further underscored our collective preoccupation with baking.

We turn to baking in stressful times not just for its therapeutic value, but because eating the fruits of our labor is a soothing reward. And while it may feel good popping a slice of still-warm banana bread slathered with vegan butter into our mouths, for our long-term wellbeing, we’d be better off obsessing about sauerkraut instead.

The foods we eat directly affect our gut microbiome—that mini universe in our intestines teeming with microorganisms that influences our entire biological system. Plant-based diets offer the best fertilizer for the good bacteria, but fermented foods including sauerkraut, tempeh, and miso create an especially hospitable environment for not only healthy bacteria to thrive, but also for the all-important mood regulator, serotonin.

“Serotonin is the hormone that elevates our mood, reduces anxiety and depression, improves sleep, increases libido, and even supports bone health,” explains Heather Lounsbury, a nutritionist, doctor of Chinese medicine, and author of *Fix Your Mood with Food*. “Approximately 95 percent of our serotonin is manufactured in the gut, so healthy digestion is key to mental health.”

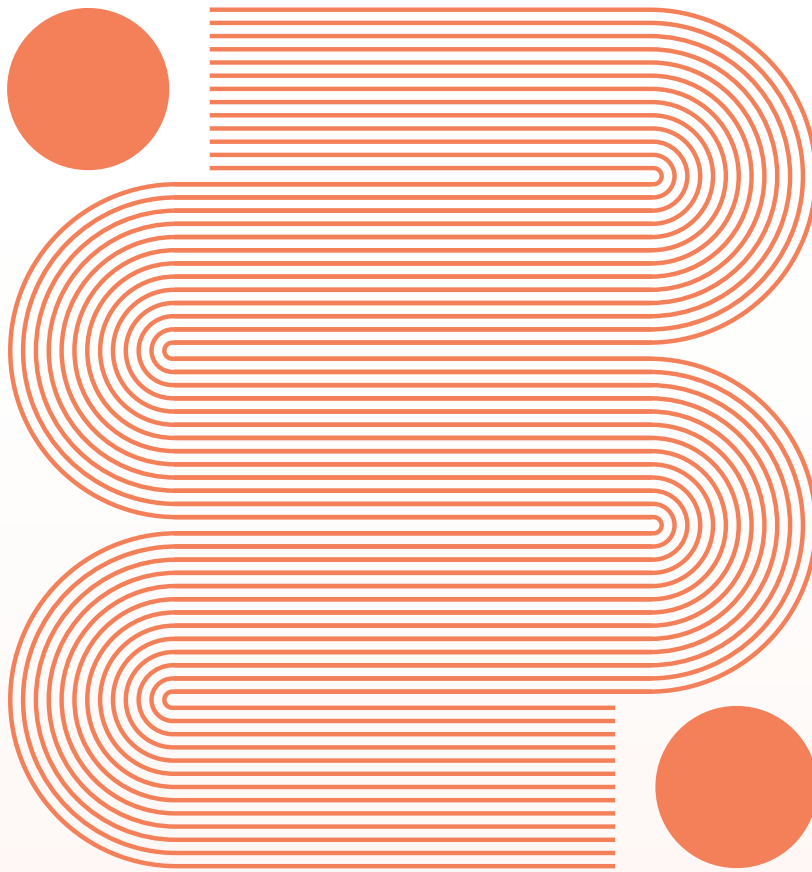
Lounsbury has seen plant-based diets rich in fermented foods transform her patients’ health in ways that border on miraculous,

The NATURE CURE

There's a good reason why people bring us flowers when we're feeling blue, convalescing from illness, or grieving a loss: they make us feel better. Studies even show that people recovering from surgery heal faster when their rooms look out onto trees.

Taking advantage of the healing power of the natural world doesn't require a subscription flower service or a room with a view, though. When you need a feel-good lift, try these all-natural tools for wellbeing.

- **JOIN** a community garden and get your hands dirty planting herbs and other easy-to-grow edibles.
- **VOLUNTEER** as a dog-walker at your local shelter and have fun in the fresh air with an animal in need.
- **BUY** a potted plant and enjoy nurturing it as it nurtures you (peace lilies are great air purifiers, too).
- **INVEST** in a pair of binoculars and explore the awe-inspiring natural world at a distance.
- **BRING** a conifer tree inside during the holidays and benefit from the spirit-lifting plant oils.
- **INSTALL** a hummingbird feeder outside your window and delight in the birdlife magic.
- **READ** up on mushrooms and how to identify them, then hone your skills while foraging in your local park, forest, or other greenspace.
- **STROLL** outdoors after a rain for a whiff of petrichor, the feel-good scent released when rain meets earth.
- **GET** a pocket microscope to explore the scaled-down universes that exist right outside your door.



including eliminating chronic panic attacks, increasing energy, and imbuing a sense of calm. But for peak wellness, Lounsbury advises kicking caffeine and sugar, too.

“Caffeine triggers the production of stress hormones,” she says. “Sugar reduces immunity and feeds bad bacteria in your gut. Both sugar and caffeine give you an energy crash, which makes you feel worse emotionally.” Giving up both might be a bigger ask than most of us can manage at once, but introducing fermented foods into our diets is an easy starting point for fostering good moods and sparking joy.

SLEEP FOR SELF-CARE

If you've hit your Zoom meeting threshold, you're in good company. Adult Americans spend an average of 11 hours in front of their screens every single day, which might be the very definition of “too much of a good thing.” During the day, blue light emitted from our phones, tablets, and computers keeps our minds active and alert, but at night, it disrupts our circadian rhythms by inhibiting our body's ability to produce melatonin, setting the stage for a poor night's sleep.

This is important because restful sleep defines not just our moods and ability to deal with everyday pressures, but our over-

all life satisfaction. Put simply, it's hard to live our best life when we're exhausted. Creating nighttime rituals that promote relaxation is one strategy Lajeunesse has employed for optimal rest, with positive results.

Every evening before bed, she adds lavender essential oil to a diffuser to calm her central nervous system and encourage deeper sleep. She also puts her devices to rest at 8pm sharp and writes out her to-do list by hand for the following day. “This helps ease my mind so I'm not running through everything while trying to go to sleep,” she says.

Laying the foundation for happiness isn't a one-size-fits-all proposition; there are many paths we can take that will lead us to the doors of joy, but we have to begin the journey to reap the benefits. Whether starting the day with a morning walk in the woods or ending it with a sleep-supporting mug of chamomile tea, nothing is more important than taking the step to say yes to yourself, so you can feel good about saying yes to others. This is where the journey to joy really begins. **W**

*The hummingbird feeder outside **AURELIA D'ANDREA's** (aureliadandrea.com) living room window brought endless joy during lockdown.*