



BONUS #3

THE
7 PILLARS
OF LIFESTYLE
MEDICINE

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WHAT IS LIFESTYLE MEDICINE?



Chronic disease has reached epidemic proportions. Conditions like heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and autoimmune disorders are no longer rare—they now affect millions globally and are responsible for the majority of deaths worldwide. Lifestyle factors such as poor diet, stress, lack of physical activity, and environmental toxins play a significant role in this growing crisis. But here's the tough part: Many of these conditions are preventable. However, our current healthcare systems often focus more on symptom management than addressing the root causes.

But a revolution in healthcare is quietly taking root. Lifestyle Medicine offers a powerful alternative by addressing the root causes of illness through evidence-based lifestyle interventions. By replacing unhealthy behaviors with positive ones, we can prevent, treat, and even reverse many chronic diseases.

As a pioneering researcher, Dr. Stacy Sims has emphasized in her work that a one-size-fits-all approach to health and wellness fails to account for the unique physiological differences between individuals, especially between men and women. As she's famously quoted, "Women are not small men." Unfortunately, this is where traditional and

modern medicinal approaches often fall short. Studies are often male-based, failing to account for the female counterparts. This means many health recommendations are primarily geared toward men. Dr. Sims' research, however, reminds us that personalization (including by gender) is essential when implementing the seven pillars of Lifestyle Medicine in our daily lives.

In this ebook, I outline the Lifestyle Medicine approach, particularly the seven pillars it involves. These pillars can help you gain a better understanding of how to prevent disease and take a proactive approach in your own health journey. These involve the key lifestyle changes you can make to reduce inflammation and improve your overall well-being. And interestingly, many of these pillars play into one another (you'll know what I mean shortly...).

The truth is that good health isn't as complicated as we're led to believe, nor do you need tons of medication to feel good. Our body is surprisingly adaptable and resilient—at least when given the right tools to do so. So, let's get to the seven pillars and the super simple ways you can change the trajectory of your health and life.

THE 7 PILLARS OF LIFESTYLE MEDICINE



It's worth noting that each pillar is tailored to each individual. We all start somewhere; for instance, when beginning exercise, it's always best to take things slow. And the same goes for every pillar. If we try too much at once, we'll end up more stressed and more sick, which doesn't help ourselves or anyone else. Slow and steady wins the race; keep this in mind! So, what are the seven pillars?

1. Healthful Nutrition
2. Movement & Exercise
3. Restorative Sleep
4. Stress Management
5. Social Engagement
6. Cognitive Enhancement
7. Gratitude & Reflection

1. HEALTHFUL NUTRITION



Food is information, delivering powerful messages to our cells with every bite. This pillar revolves around the idea that good health is rooted in a predominantly plant-based, whole-food approach emphasizing anti-inflammatory ingredients while minimizing processed foods, refined sugars, and inflammatory triggers. Proper protein intake, particularly for women with increasing age, further supports muscle maintenance and growth—a factor often overlooked in conventional nutritional advice. And keep in mind when addressing this nutritional pillar that it's not about restriction but abundance. For instance, through our anti-inflammatory recipe book, you discovered various delicious and nourishing foods and recipes that support your health from the inside out.

With that in mind, here are some more tips to get you started:

- Focus on how you feel. If certain foods don't feel good afterward, it might be best to avoid them for now (such as until your gut is in a more resilient and strong position!).
- Add colors of the rainbow. This means more veggies, fruits, and whole foods. The more colorful your plate, the better.
- Start your day with protein. Most experts, like Dr. Stacey Sims, recommend 30 grams at each meal, especially in the morning.
- Practice mindful eating. Slow down, chew thoroughly, and eat without distractions. This supports digestion, helps regulate hunger cues, and fosters a more enjoyable relationship with food.
- Plan ahead. This comes back around to our meal prepping advice in the book.
- Read ingredient labels. Don't just read the nutritional info. The ingredients tell a whole other story. In fact, a long list of unrecognizable ingredients is a red flag. Choose foods with minimal, whole-food-based ingredients whenever possible.

2. MOVEMENT & EXERCISE



This pillar encompasses all forms of physical activity—from structured exercise to spontaneous movement throughout the day—recognizing that consistency matters more than intensity (Stanford Lifestyle Medicine, 2023). Our bodies were designed to move. And regular physical activity is fundamental to optimal health. Beyond simply burning calories (which many of us have been conditioned to believe that this is all exercise is good for), movement enhances circulation, regulates metabolism, strengthens muscles and bones, improves mood, and reduces inflammation throughout the body (Warburton, 2006).

As Dr. Stacy Sims has emphasized in her research, strength training is particularly important for women of all ages, not just for physical health but also for brain health and reducing the risk of conditions like dementia and Alzheimer's (Sims, 2024). But where can you start? Here are a few simple recommendations:

- If you're new to exercise, keep it simple: start with bodyweight exercises (like squats and lunges) and walking each day.
- Schedule it. Life is chaotic; thus, scheduling your exercise can count for a lot!

- Eat something before you workout—women's bodies work best when properly fuelled; this is important for hormonal and metabolic health. And interestingly, this may be less important for men.
- Find something you enjoy. This becomes particularly important when all else fails. If you find movement you love, you're simply more likely to do it.
- Listen to your cycle. If you menstruate, pay attention to energy fluctuations throughout your cycle. You might feel stronger in the follicular phase and need more rest or gentler movement during the luteal phase or menstruation.
- Lift heavy—when you're ready. Challenge your muscles using progressive overload. Over time, adding resistance helps build lean muscle mass, boosts bone density, and supports longevity.
- Rest! Recovery days are just as important as exercise itself. They help your muscles repair, reduce the risk of injury, and support hormonal balance—especially in women.

3. RESTORATIVE SLEEP



Sleep is your foundation. Without quality rest, we simply won't function well or even make good and healthy decisions. During quality sleep, your body conducts essential maintenance and repair work, consolidates memories, regulates hormones, and resets inflammation levels (Eugene & Masiak, 2015). Yet in our 24/7 society, restorative sleep has become increasingly elusive. But it's undeniably important.

As you move forward in your healing journey, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Have a set bedtime and wake-up time. Our bodies run on 24-hour clocks, but if we are going to bed and waking up at all different times, it's going to have a hard time keeping up (and you'll have a hard time feeling well rested).
- Stop eating three hours before bedtime. This gives your body time to wind down; it also prevents you from going to bed on a full stomach, which can lead to increased digestive symptoms and a lousy sleep.
- Create a wind-down routine. Dim the lights, read a book, stretch gently, or listen to calming music—these cues help signal your body that it's time to rest.
- Limit screen time before bed. Blue light from phones and laptops interferes with melatonin production. Try turning off devices at least an hour before bed or use blue-light-blocking glasses.
- Cool your room! Your core body temperature needs to drop slightly for optimal sleep. A cool, dark, and quiet environment supports deeper rest.
- Get sunlight during the day. Morning light exposure helps regulate your circadian rhythm and can improve both mood and nighttime sleep quality.
- Keep your bed for sleep (and sex) only! This helps your brain associate this space with rest.

4. STRESS MANAGEMENT



While acute stress can be beneficial, the chronic, unremitting stress that characterizes modern life becomes a powerful driver of inflammation and disease (Liu et al., 2017). While we can't eliminate stress entirely (it's a natural response that we all have from time to time!), we can transform our relationship with it and learn strategies to help calm it when needed.

So, how can you de-stress? Here are some tips to align with this pillar:

- Practice deep breathing. Even just 2-3 minutes of slow, diaphragmatic breathing can signal safety to the nervous system and quickly shift you out of a stress response.
- Try a brain dump. Write out your thoughts—especially before bed. It helps get racing thoughts out of your head and onto paper, reducing mental clutter.
- Limit your media intake, including news and social apps. These don't actually help our stress levels. Instead, they often increase them and deplete our energy resources. Try setting time limits on these apps to ensure you don't end up scrolling for hours on end each day.
- Say “no.” As women, we often try to do everything at once. But what we aren't taught is how to say “no.” Yet, “no” is a full sentence. And we can never do everything. So, when you're feeling overwhelmed and like it's all too much, say “no.”
- Connect with friends and family. Socialization counts for a lot when it comes to our stress levels. In fact, talking to a friend, therapist, or loved one can shift your perspective and lighten emotional burdens.
- Move regularly! Coming full circle back to pillar one, make sure you move your body. This can help combat stress in the best way.
- Spend time in nature. Try barefoot grounding or simply walking in a natural setting. It's likely you'll notice a wave of calm wash over you!

5. SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT



Humans are inherently social beings, and meaningful connections with others are not a luxury but a biological necessity. Our relationships impact our health in many ways, influencing everything from immune function to cardiovascular health to longevity (Martino et al., 2015). But maybe you're unsure how to be more social. Here are some ideas:

- Be the one to reach out! Don't wait for others; go ahead and initiate plans, such as a morning walk or hike, breakfast, a phone call, and more!
- Join a group, such as our women's healing circle. Alternatively, book clubs, fitness classes, and local events also offer wonderful ways to connect with like-minded individuals.
- Practice active listening when socializing. This means paying attention to what the other person is saying without interrupting with our own thoughts. It also means putting your phone away. Listen to understand. Stay present with the other person in the moment.
- Volunteer! This can be a wonderful way to connect with your local community and contribute.
- Spend time with people who bring you up. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people that can drain our energy. Notice this. Try to prioritize your time and spend it with those who lift you up.

6. COGNITIVE ENHANCEMENT

Brain health is integral to overall well-being. Interestingly, specific exercise protocols, particularly resistance training and high-intensity interval training, can significantly impact cognitive health and potentially reduce the risk of neurodegenerative diseases (and other chronic conditions) (Sofi et al., 2011). And this is particularly important for women. Surprisingly, about two-thirds of individuals living with Alzheimer's are female (Beam et al., 2018).

However, we have a lot of control here. What we do can either drive or hinder the development of new neural connections (known as neural plasticity), which are key for optimal brain health. This pillar addresses not just preventing cognitive decline but actively building these neural connections, which support creativity, problem-solving, and mental flexibility throughout life. So, here are also a few ways you can support your brain and cognitive function:

- Learn a new skill or hobby. Whether it's a new language, musical instrument, or hobby, challenging your brain with unfamiliar tasks keeps it sharp.
- Focus on quality sleep. Refer back to the sleep pillar above for this one.
- Try brain puzzles or games. Examples include Sudoku, crosswords, and memory games.
- Practice meditation and mindfulness. And avoid multitasking. Focus is a rarity today, but it's so important for our brains!
- Get creative. Practice music, art, brainstorming, writing, painting, and more! This can encourage the building of new neural connections and mental flexibility.

7. GRATITUDE & REFLECTION



The practice of gratitude and intentional reflection creates profound shifts in our physiology, psychology, and overall health. This final pillar explores how cultivating awareness of life's gifts—both large and small—can reduce stress hormones, improve heart rate variability, enhance sleep quality, and even modulate inflammatory markers (Redwine et al., 2018). Through simple yet powerful practices, harnessing the healing power of gratitude often brings about a greater presence, meaning, and joy to everyday life.

I recommend starting small here. Each day, spend about 5-10 minutes writing a list of what you're grateful for. And don't just write the list without feeling. You want to *feel* that gratitude and

immerse yourself in it. This is the important part. From there, once this feels natural, you can start expanding this into all aspects of life. For instance, instead of starting Monday with dread, try shifting your mindset to gratitude—for the work you're able to do and the opportunities it creates. Gratitude can be found in almost all aspects of life. But it's up to you to find it and feel it. Over time, this simple yet powerful practice can begin to rewire your perspective, transforming the way you experience life—and opening the door to deeper emotional healing and inner peace.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER...



These seven pillars are more than just habits—they're invitations to return to what your body and mind already know: that healing happens when we give ourselves the care, nourishment, and support we truly need. When you begin to align your daily actions with these principles—through movement, nourishment, sleep, stress management, connection, mental stimulation, and gratitude—you're preventing disease and paving the way toward real and lasting healing to take place.

At the end of the day, you have more influence over your health than you've likely been told. And by embracing these pillars—bit by bit—you're giving your body the environment it needs to thrive, heal, and flourish. At **Her Healing Circles**, our philosophy is rooted in the **seven pillars of Lifestyle Medicine**, enriched by the time-tested wisdom of the *blue zones*, and uplifted by the spirit of **Pura Vida**. Together, these form the foundation of our community's approach to healing and prevention.

The **blue zone lifestyle** offers a broad, holistic perspective on longevity and vitality, while the **seven pillars of Lifestyle Medicine** provide a clear, science-based framework for everyday health. Here, **science meets the soul**—empowering every woman to reconnect with her body, nourish her mind, and reclaim her spirit.

And the **cherry on top** is our embrace of the *Pura Vida* philosophy—a way of living that is not only central to Costa Rica's blue zone but woven into the fabric of the entire country. Just as *Ikigai* gives meaning and purpose in Japan, *Pura Vida* gives joy, balance, and gratitude in Costa Rica. Both philosophies offer unique pathways to a fulfilling life, rooted in simplicity, connection, and intentional living.

So here's to a future of **vibrant, resilient health**—one nourishing choice at a time!

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