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10 ways to get your groove back

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1 Go veggie or vegan

You don't have to jump in the deep end of vegetarian/vegan pool to reap benefits from a lower-fat, higher-fiber diet. Just sticking your toe in can do the trick.

To wit: It might surprise local foodies that George Formaro the chef who peddles a foie-gras-topped burger at Django and enormous piles of cream-sauced pasta at Centro is now at least one-third vegan (no animal products at all, including dairy and eggs), if not by birth, then by adoption: He eats one vegan meal per day.

Formaro had what Oprah would call an aha moment one evening last winter. "I went home with a huge cheeseburger to eat for dinner, and I sat down to eat it and watch 'The Biggest Loser.' And then I thought, I'm *not* going to do this. I threw the cheeseburger away and got on the treadmill."

After deciding he wasn't getting any younger and needed to get healthy, Formaro had to figure out a way to make that happen while keeping a crazy schedule and eating on the go. His solution: Eat one vegan meal per day and stay away from white bread. He also began walking. He has lost weight and says he feels better than he did 10 years ago.

"Even if I don't always make the healthiest choices at other times, planning one vegan meal keeps the idea of eating healthy in my head. I'm always aware of what I'm eating. That vegan meal is my anchor," Formaro says.

2 Vacation with a purpose

Sure, sitting on a beach with an umbrella-ed drink can take the edge off a long winter. But travel can also be a great way to jump-start a logy brain and do some good at the same time. Elderhostels, "eco trips" and do-gooder trips abound and feature destinations from Ethiopia to Vermont.

Cheryl Long of Johnston doesn't have much interest in vacationing if she can't learn something along the way. "Lying on a beach is boring," she says. A self-

described lifetime "archeology nut," Long has gone on two archeology-based trips, most recently to a "field school" in Bowman, N.D., run by couple who were "just as crazy" as Long about the subject.

"We'd show up each morning - it would be hotter than Hades - and hike over rugged terrain for a full day of digging," Long says. They made casts of prehistoric poo, crawled around examining microfossils and the highlight excavated the backbone of a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

"There's just nothing like the experience of uncovering something that no one has seen for 65 million years," Long says. "I'm interested in learning something, in doing something new when I travel."

3 Add some color

While "builder beige" is good for home resale, it might not be good for the soul. The blah kitchen with an outdated ivy border in Laurie Brugger's townhome in Des Moines was a soul-killer.

On Halloween day this year, Brugger got a wild hair. "I thought, 'I spend most of my time in this kitchen. I want something bright and cheery.'" So she hit the paint store, called a painter friend and eight hours later, the hall leading into the kitchen was bright orange and the kitchen itself was bright red. And while he was at it, the painter did the bathroom, too, in a coat of red (now accented by zebra-striped towels). It was quick, it was cheap, and Brugger's soul lives again.

The color scheme came from a bright print given to Brugger by her sister. "I love the print, and I wanted a space to hang it that would do it justice," Brugger says. "And now when I walk in my kitchen, it actually makes me smile."

4 Tune up your technology

Des Moines attorney Larry James claims the 106-inch theater screen, an upgraded sound system and a device for downloading Netflix was all done for his growing brood of grandchildren.

Sure, Larry. A former Air Guard "avionics guy," James said he has always been fascinated by gadgets — although he admittedly can see the big picture and not know how to actually wire it up. For that he hired the crew at Audio Labs on Ingersoll Avenue to do the installation.

"It's going to be fun to sit and watch movies with my grandchildren," James says. "That is sincerely what I am excited about."

James and his wife, Barbara, put in a whole-house sound system when they moved into their Des Moines home more than two years ago. Last fall James decided it was time to upgrade for the sake of entertaining his grandchildren. "My wife says it's

focused on me," he says.

The next project on the horizon?

"I think I'll have to cool my jets for awhile," he says.

5 Shake up your routine

Embracing an improved approach to anything is potentially transformative, says certified professional organizer and life coach Pam N. Woods of West Des Moines. And starting small is a good idea.

"Drive a new route to work or get off the bus a half a mile before your stop and walk the rest of the way," she says. "Or, examine some of the mundane things we all have to do, like laundry, bill paying, cooking or running errands ... and see if a few tweaks here and there won't make life more fun and easier."

Woods says it surprises her clients to see the difference it makes just to change the way they keep track of all their to-dos.

"Instead of writing things on sticky notes or a plethora of lists, I encourage them to corral all their tasks in one trusted place," she says. "That means using a planner, whether it be digital or paper, to record everything they want to accomplish. They find they budget their time better, tasks don't fall through the cracks, they don't miss deadlines and they're less likely to overbook themselves."

Woods also recommends eliminating "schedule clutter."

"It could be a group meeting that has lost its appeal, or it might be a role that no longer suits you," she says. "Eliminate these items from your life and replace them with a new joyful activity or routine."

6 Learn something new

Steve and Rosemary Eden, both 60, of Clive have discovered that expanding their knowledge actually can be recreational.

"It's more a situation of curiosity or wanting to gain some knowledge in an area," says Steve.

Rosemary has taken classes with friends and attends "Smart Talk" lectures each year, while Steve has taken classes in conversational Spanish.

"I've also taken the Mini Medical School at Des Moines University," Steve says. "That's a fabulous program. You learn so much in a great setting."

A recently completed kitchen remodel piqued their interest in cooking more at home, so they enrolled in Culinary Arts Classes at Ador Kitchens and Baths in Urbandale.

"I love to cook. I make a mean Chex mix," Steve says.

"We learned about some new foods and new ways to fix them," Rosemary says. "One example is that the chef fixed black rice. We had never had that. We're always interested in healthy foods and healthy ways to fix them."

Many of the participants in the classes at Ador are couples, Steve says. "It's like a night out dining. Chef Terrie Kohl does all these great dishes, and you actually get to participate in preparing them. Then you eat."

7 Find an old friend

Tom Murray, 48, of Urbandale wasn't paying much attention to a TV program on the Travel Channel – until he recognized the voice of an old college acquaintance. To his surprise, she was an "expert" commenting on exotic beaches.

"So I looked her up on Facebook and found that she had spent a lot of time in Italy and Europe doing travel writing," says Murray, the manager of the Country Inn and Suites in Clive. "She's out in L.A., and she covers the Oscars and the MTV awards. She's rubbing elbows with a lot of celebrities now. It was fun to catch up with her."

The advent of Facebook makes finding old friends much easier, Murray says. Using it, he's able to keep in touch with a college roommate in Phoenix and one in Tennessee. "It's not so easy to catch up with them face-to-face when they're that far away," he says.

Murray views connecting with long-lost friends online as fun and rewarding. "However, you need to manage the time you spend on it and not let it get out of hand," he says.

Probably 75 percent of the time, he's the party that initiates contact with old friends.

"I do it because I'm curious about what they're doing," Murray says. "Nobody has ever turned me down."

8 Be a joiner or a starter

Connie Bever and Michele Weston had both been part of civic groups and other organizations in the metro, but they were looking for something more personal and empowering. The women formed Babes & Bags, a group that meets once a month and combines learning and socializing.

"It's really about wine, women and friendship," says Bever, the owner of a small business that makes wellness videos.

The first half hour of the meeting features a guest speaker. Educational topics include nutrition, filing taxes, boosting self confidence and other issues. During the rest of the meeting, women break into small groups to share ideas or talk about what is going on in their lives, Bever says.

"It can range from needing to find wallpaper to dealing with aging parents," she says. "It's always good to have a sounding board."

The women also can participate in a service project four times a year, which could be painting a home for someone in need or volunteering at a local women's shelter, she says.

Women who join the group — there's a fee to cover expenses — also are asked to bring along a used purse to put in a bin. On their way out, women can then take home a different purse.

"It's been fun to meet new people," says Bever. "It's a fun girls' night out."

The group has been meeting at the Hy-Vee on Mills Civic Parkway but may change locations in the new year.

9 Fix up your finances

Cleaning up debt and boosting retirement savings is always a good idea, says Kent Kramer, a West Des Moines financial planner.

"Make sure you have all your debt retired before you retire," he says. That could include a home mortgage, home equity loans, student loans you may have taken on from children, credit card debt and others.

The plan of attack for clearing debt is to put as much available cash into reducing outstanding bills, with a priority being credit cards, he says.

"You want to have the flexibility of having a good cash flow once you retire," he says.

10 Change your look

When Jaime Michele Donner, owner of Des Moines Image Consultants in Urbandale, works with clients who want to update their look or be more fashionable, she witnesses first-hand the effect a change can have on them.

"It definitely increases their self-esteem," Donner says. "It's a huge difference, and it's not changing the person physically (with) surgery or anything so dramatic."

Finding well-fitting clothes that look nice on them makes clients feel good, she says.

"Feeling more confident lends itself to a whole different aspect of their personality," she says.

"There are people who feel confident about looking

for a job again or dating.”

Donner has these tips for women who are around age 50:

- Wear clothes that accent your waist and are fitted. Clothes that are a boxy cut make you look heavier.
- Do not wear a mid-calf-length skirt. It doesn't accent any figure and ages you.
- Stay up to date with fashions or use an image consultant.
- Wear some makeup, but don't cake it on. Heavy makeup settles into fine lines and wrinkles and ages you.
- Avoid frosted eye shadows or glitter. Nothing says, "I am trying too hard to look young" than glittery eye shadows.

And for men:

- Stay away from pleats on trousers; nothing says 1990s more than pleated trousers.
- Embrace the hair that you have or don't have and speak with your hairstylist about a new stylish hair cut. Comb-overs are never OK.
- The khaki "Dockers"-style pants are not in style.
- A new tie or dress shirt can update a wardrobe quickly.
- Stay away from golf tees in the work place.