



# ‘HOW CAN I MAKE POSITIVE LIFESTYLE CHANGES?’

If you're wondering how to spruce up your life for the new year, here's advice from three wise women with answers from a nutrition, fitness and mental wellbeing perspective.



## NUTRITION – PAULINE SAYS...

Pauline Cox is a functional nutritionist. Her latest book is *Hungry Woman: Eating for Good Health, Happiness + Hormones* (Ebury). She also runs health food store and café Sow and Arrow near Bristol ([sowandarrow.com](http://sowandarrow.com)). Follow her at [instagram.com/paulinejcox](https://www.instagram.com/paulinejcox).

### THE DOPAMINE EFFECT

When it comes to what you eat and when you eat it, even if you have a will of iron, you can find yourself wolfing down a bag of crisps after vowing to ditch ultra-processed foods for good. What's interesting about motivation and food, is much of it is governed by an intricate dance of brain hormones designed to keep you motivated to stay alive. There is a very powerful brain hormone at work, pulling the strings on your eating behaviours and it has great influence on your daily actions. Dopamine is the motivation hormone, which drives you to undertake certain behaviours. It is produced when you do something that ensures your survival, such as eat, have sex, get moving and learn something new. When dopamine is produced, you feel immense pleasure. Remember, you are still a hunter-gatherer at heart!

### HIGHS AND LOWS

The problem is the dopamine pleasure-reward system was not designed for modern life. When you have a healthy-reward bump in dopamine, it's followed by a small drop. This feels uncomfortable. However, if dopamine levels rise dramatically, then the drop is experienced with greater intensity. This is not a physical pain, it's more of a wanting, a craving for more and your brain wants to avoid this feeling at all costs. Modern food manufacturing has taken advantage of this knowledge, ensuring the foods you consume send dopamine levels to dizzying heights... and with that comes the great dopamine drop, driving you to eat more of that specific food. Alcohol, drugs, gambling, smoking, gaming, porn addiction, phone addiction, they all



tap into the delicate dopamine system and spike it to unnaturally high levels. The problem with having such high dopamine spikes, is you then find little pleasure in the small bumps of dopamine in day-to-day life, such as going for a walk, connecting with friends, eating fresh berries and yoghurt. Nothing feels as heady as the high from fast food or a big bag of sweets.

### PROTECT YOUR DOPAMINE

To make dopamine, your body needs the amino acid tyrosine, found in fish, chicken, eggs, chia seeds, almonds, and pumpkin seeds. It also needs iron, B-vitamins and vitamin C and D. If you are not making enough dopamine then your brain seeks out foods or actions that drive dopamine levels up. This dopamine-seeking behaviour, such as craving sugary

foods, smoking, alcohol, or gambling, is destructive to your short-term and long-term health.

### RESET YOUR DOPAMINE

To rebalance dopamine, you need to remove the high-spiking activities and foods by minimising anything that gives you a huge surge in dopamine. This can be anything from highly sweetened foods and binge drinking to unchecked phone use or gaming. When your dopamine system becomes re-sensitised, you'll find pleasure in small things as they start to return. A blueberry tastes incredible; a walk in the woods feels joyous. Food becomes a pleasure, and gone is the love-hate relationship that evolves when you feel a lack of control over your eating behaviour.

WORDS: PAULINE COX, KATE ROWE-HAM AND SUZY READING. IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK.

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### FITNESS – KATE SAYS...

Kate Rowe-Ham is a PT specialising in helping midlife women get strong and feel good. She's the founder of app *Owning Your Menopause* ([owningyourmenopause.com](http://owningyourmenopause.com)) and a patron of the Menopause Mandate. Follow her at [instagram.co/katerh\\_fitness](https://www.instagram.com/katerh_fitness).

### START SMALL TO SUCCEED

The new year is ideal for addressing your fitness routine without feeling overwhelmed. These straightforward tips will empower you to build solid and lasting habits. Big goals can be intimidating and are often unrealistic. Instead, focus on small, achievable changes. Commit to a

10-minute walk or two weekly strength-training sessions to kickstart your journey. Perfection isn't the goal – what matters is that you show up regularly. A few weekly light workouts will yield better results than sporadic, intense sessions.

### MOVE MORE EVERY DAY

Integrate fitness into your daily routine. Take the stairs, park further away, or do squats while waiting for the kettle to boil. Every bit of movement counts. Do you need more time? High-intensity interval training (HIIT) or quick 10–20 minute bodyweight workouts can be efficient and effective on the days you feel pushed for time. Try making everyday habits into fitness wins. Do calf raises while brushing your teeth or stretch before your morning coffee.

### MAKE IT FUN

Working out should be fun, not a chore. Engaging in activities you love, such as dancing, hiking or trying a new fitness class, especially with a friend, is much more achievable. Plus, you can hold each other accountable. You make appointments for other things in life, so why not treat workouts as essential appointments? Block out time in your calendar. This is also another good way to hold yourself accountable. Forget hefty gym memberships, instead why not equip your home with resistance bands, kettlebells, dumbbells and a yoga mat? Then you have a convenient and accessible fitness environment. This set-up will reduce excuses and help you stay committed to your fitness goals.

### JOURNAL YOUR IMPROVEMENTS

Write down the improvements you feel. Is your mood lifted? Are you sleeping better? Are you more energised? Use these as markers to monitor your progress and activities. Writing can be a powerful motivator. Then, look at how far you've come. Focus on the small wins, the times you show up, and always look at how far you've come, not how far you have left to go.



## MIND – SUZY SAYS...

Suzy Reading is a chartered psychologist and author of *Self-Care For Tough Times* and her latest book *Self-Care For Winter* (both Aster). She specialises in helping people create sustainable healthy habits. Find her at [suzyreading.co.uk](http://suzyreading.co.uk) and at [instagram.com/suzyreading](https://www.instagram.com/suzyreading).

### BE KIND TO YOURSELF

When energy flags, be gentle with yourself. No one has infinite capacity. This is a demanding time of year coupled with the real impact that winter has on your mind and body. It's ok to feel tired – it's not you, it's winter! Take a moment to tenderly cradle your chin in your hands and extend some of that kindness that you give so generously to others, towards yourself.

### MAKE HEADSPACE FOR CHANGE

You can also give yourself an opportunity to tweak plans, ideals or expectations of self. What corners can you cut? What can get dropped? Feel how this gesture helps you

soften into this moment, resourcing you to keep going, with a more compassionate pace.

### AVOID SOCIAL MEDIA

Scrolling social media in the new year might have you feeling poked and prodded. Dial down the noise by getting clear on what matters to you. As you embark on a fresh new year, it's alright if you don't feel fresh – there's a more natural resurgence of energy in spring.

For now, think about what your personal priorities are. What healthy habits support that purpose? What do you give yourself permission to do? Notice how this helps you feel less pushed around by any external messaging.

### TRY AN AWE WALK

Mindfulness can help manage your stress and emotions – take it to the next level with an awe walk. This harnesses the antidepressant properties of physical exercise with the mood-boosting impact of awe at beautiful natural surroundings. Winter provides you with unique joys to savour. So, look out for things that cultivate a sense of wonder, such as fractal patterns in frost, misty cobwebs, which are like nature's tinsel, maybe even nacreous clouds, which look like mother of pearl. Even better, take a friend or family member and amplify the experience. A beautiful activity to bridge the generations.

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