

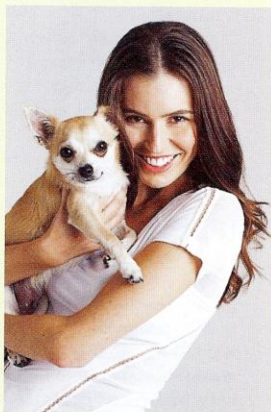
# 7 Healthy habits FOR LIFE

Here are some ideas to help you beat stress and give your health and happiness a kick-start this summer

## 1 Volunteer

Lending a helping hand is a sure-fire way to boost your own wellbeing. "Research shows people who help others are happier people," says Marie Rowland, director and therapist of Sydney-based counselling service Talking-Matters. Helping with a charity or a conservation project can instil a sense of satisfaction and achievement. "The therapeutic benefit to the helper means they feel worthy and useful," Marie adds.

And volunteering generally shows us how fortunate we are. "It allows us greater perspective," explains Marie. "We turn the looking glass onto others where we can feel more compassion and, inevitably, more humility."



## 3 Hug a pet

The benefits of owning a pet are endless, but if owning one isn't an option for you, why not become a pet-sitter?

Looking after friends' pets while they're on holidays, volunteering at the RSPCA, or walking a few neighbourhood dogs are just a few of the ways to get more pet love in your life.

Pets are a proven de-stressor and depression buster, a cuddly distraction from the daily grind. Cortisol, a stress hormone, is lowered after 30 minutes in the company of a dog or cat, while serotonin, a happiness-boosting hormone, increases. Plus, dog walking can give you all the benefits of regular exercise.

Recent discoveries show pets can also help lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels. So whether for a few years or just a few days, it's worth grabbing all the benefits a furry friend can offer.

## 4 Be direct

When was the last time you asked for what you really want? Many relationships and careers would greatly benefit from a bit of clarity in conversations but, as Marie points out, it's hard to be direct. "You don't want to upset or appear to be pushy or aggressive, so it's easy to use all sorts of ways to avoid directness, such as email, texting, or just not talking about it."

Being direct is basically about being understood, which is important to everyone. "By being clear with what you want, you actually avoid misinterpretation and ongoing disappointments," says Marie. "It doesn't mean you can forfeit being polite, just that you use definitive language to get your message across."

A direct approach makes us happier, more confident and improves our feelings of self-reliance, according to Marie. "You feel you've accomplished something, plus it reduces anxiety and stress. If it's done well, you also gain the respect of the other person."

## 2 Argue more

Fair and respectful arguments can lead to improved communication and therefore a better relationship. The first rule? Don't hold back. "I think it's always better out than in," says Marie. "Anger, frustration and resentment will inevitably leak or burst out, and usually to an innocent victim." It's best if

they're dealt with calmly otherwise it can upset a relationship.

"Anger is usually a mask for hurt or disappointment, and sometimes when we show anger, our partner thinks we're just venting; they cannot actually see the pain that is driving it," she explains. "The problem with 'losing it' is that anger, rather than the issue, becomes the focus."

So be honest with your partner, but wait until the feelings have settled and you can clearly explain how you feel. Discover what the real issue is and address it so the other person can understand what it is you need. Focus on the problem, not the person, and in the end you'll have greater contentment within yourself and your relationship.



Spend some time with your pooch and watch the stress disappear.

## 5 Accept the love

We all know how we should react to a compliment, with a smile and a "thanks". Yet some days, this isn't so easy, especially if we're feeling down or we're just in the bad habit of deflecting praise or flattery that comes our way.

"Compliments are quite disarming. They often take us

by surprise," says Marie. "We live in a society where it's natural to be critical of ourselves and others. That's why compliments need to be treasured. A genuine compliment comes from the heart and should be accepted with the same spirit. In this way, you respect the person offering the nice words."

Learning to accept compliments will give you immediate benefits. "You just feel better," Marie explains. "Compliments can carry you for the rest of the day and give you confidence and a sense of achievement, which has an ongoing effect. You're sense of wellbeing is completely fortified!"

## 6 Have sex

Getting intimate with your partner has an abundance of health benefits, from improved collagen and more supple skin to getting a better night's sleep and lowering the risks of heart disease and certain cancers.

We now also know the feel-good factor that comes from sex isn't fleeting. Dr Sonia Davison of the Women's Health Program at Monash University led a study of 295 women aged 20 to 65 who were sexually active more than twice a month. They found women who rated themselves as being sexually satisfied had higher overall scores for psychological wellbeing, positive wellbeing and vitality, compared with sexually dissatisfied women.

## 7 Eat well

A healthy, balanced diet will help you stay well and can help relieve the effects of stress. Foods rich in B vitamins, C and E, and the minerals calcium, manganese, selenium and zinc are helpful in stress busting.

Beneficial foods include dark-green vegetables such as broccoli and spinach, fruit such as blueberries, oranges and kiwifruit, whole grains such as brown rice and bulgur wheat, and soy, yoghurt and skim milk.

For more intense help, Stephanie Hamilton, an advisory naturopath for Blackmores, recommends herbal supplements. She says passionflower, St John's wort and lemon balm are calming, while Korean or Siberian ginseng and Withania can improve resistance to stress and help people cope better with change.

It is wise to consult your doctor before beginning a new herbal supplement as they may interact with other medication.

➤ Turn over for more *Stress-less Special*