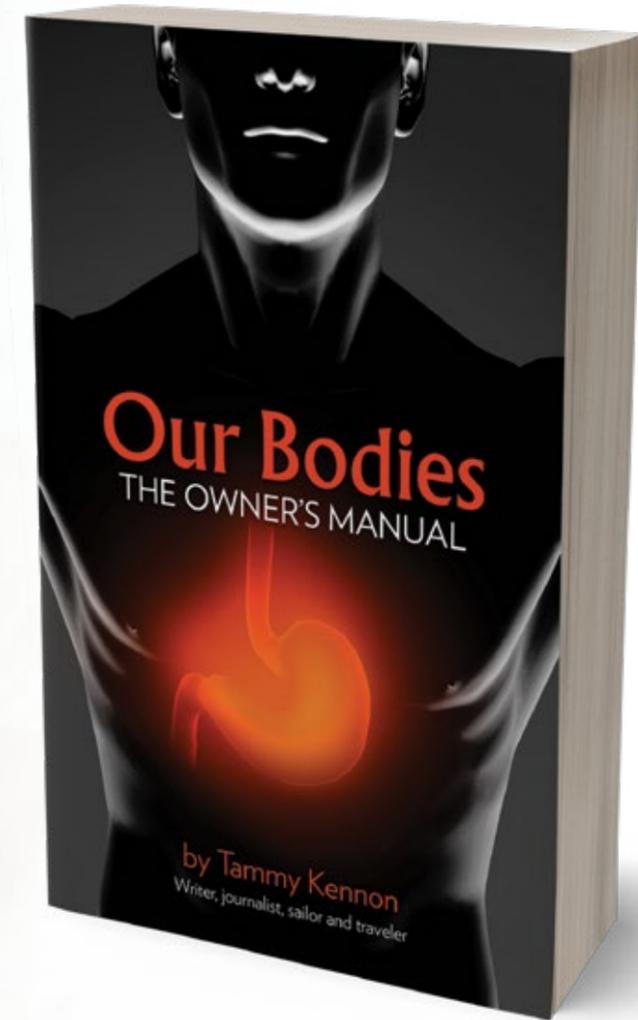




OUR BODIES



by **Tammy Kennon**

Writer, journalist, sailor and traveler

We all get just one body for this ride;
now researchers are helping us find simple yet profound
ways to flourish.

CONSIDER THIS YOUR “OWNER’S MANUAL” FOR LIVING YOUR BEST LIFE AT ANY AGE.



Our generation has entered a new frontier, where no generation before us has ever gone. We are living into our 70s, 80s and even 90s in relative comfort. In 1950, life expectancy worldwide was only 48 years, an age that is now too youthful to even qualify as midlife. A child born in the U.S. today can easily expect to live to almost 80. (World Bank Data, 2017)

This is all new territory for our human vessels. Advancements in science and healthcare are responsible for giving us these bonus years, and scientists have not abandoned us now that we're here. They continue to explore our brave, old world and are finding relatively simple, proactive ways we can keep our bodies well-tuned and flourishing.

GET SOCIAL

Social isolation has long been known to undermine our emotional health, but researchers have found that it takes a brutal physical toll as well. Lack of social interaction can be as damaging to our health as alcohol abuse, obesity and even smoking. Conversely, a strong social network increases the likelihood of survival by a remarkable 50 percent, regardless of age, sex or health status. (Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010).

It's undeniable: Isolation is bad, and social interaction makes us live longer, healthier and happier lives.

Technology has gifted us with new ways to build community and stay socially active — and the older population is increasingly adopting smartphones and other Internet-friendly devices. A recent Pew Research study revealed that four in 10 65+ seniors now have smart-

phones, and 67 percent of seniors use the Internet. But does online social interaction make us feel less isolated? Does it provide the same positive effects on our health as face-to-face contact?

Researchers in the U.K. decided to find out. They escorted 120 senior citizens into the digital age, giving them access to computers and Wi-Fi along with training on Facebook, Skype, email, and other online communication tools. Over the course of the two-year study, most of the newly active social media users reported feeling less isolated, and, more importantly, they performed better on tests of cognitive capacity. While the health of the control group without online access steadily declined, those interacting online exhibited improvement in both mental and physical health. (Morris, 2014)



GO FAST

Contrary to what Mom told you, skipping breakfast might be good for your health. Our traditional American diet of three meals a day, plus snacks, tends to overstuff our bodies with far more calories than we need. Unfortunately, that has translated into grim obesity statistics. More than a third of our population is obese, and the stats are even higher among the elderly. Obesity-related illnesses, such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and stroke, are among the leading causes of preventable death. We are eating ourselves to death.

At the same time, we are bombarded with a dizzying array of information about dieting and healthy eating, confusing and conflicting data about what we should and should not eat. Is what's "good" for us this week the same thing that was "bad"

last year? It's hard to keep up.

Science has provided at least one relatively simple step with scientifically proven benefits — fasting.

Apparently, it's all about the "mitochondria," which are energy-producing structures in our cells. These structures dynamically change in response to our body's need for energy. As with many of the body's processes, their agility declines as we age, but periods of fasting can return mitochondrial networks to a healthier, more youthful state. And the fasting period doesn't have to be extensive. Sixteen hours a day (the equivalent of skipping breakfast) or 24 hours once a week can bolster these energy-producing networks, promoting better health, infusing us with energy and maybe even increasing our lifespan. (Feldscher, 2017)



BE LIBERAL WITH THE ARTS

Help — and health — can come from unlikely activities. For instance, one study found that spending 15 minutes a day writing expressively about stressful or traumatic events can significantly reduce the occurrence of illness, lower blood pressure and improve liver function. That's a lot of benefit in the amount of time it takes to drink your morning coffee. (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005)

Other creative pursuits have similar health-boosting effects. One study sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts found that seniors involved in culturally enriching programs were less likely to experience depression, had fewer falls, and visited their doctors less often.

These programs have also documented lowered blood pressure, reduced levels of stress hormones, and increased levels of the same hormones that boost moods in long-distance runners — all for simply engaging in things enjoyable in their own right, whether it's writing, painting, acting or listening to music.



SAY AWE

Experiencing awe and wonder is often associated with children, but it's one childlike action we must never be afraid to embrace. Even the smallest experience of wonder, like gazing up into the trees, has been shown to lower the level of cytokines in our system.

Cytokines are the proteins in our bodies that run around screaming "the sky is falling" when they detect trauma, infection and disease. And the body responds with inflammation. Sustaining high levels of these screaming proteins over time raises the risk of depression, heart disease, arthritis, and so many other diseases common in the elderly.

Travel can provide a quick shortcut to experiencing awe, with new surroundings and foreign landscapes, but you don't have to travel far. Taking a fresh look at otherwise common sites can have the same calming influence. Enjoying the wonder of a full moon rising on the horizon or the beauty of a freshly opened daffodil can reawaken an innate sense of awe.



GO FOR THE DOUBLE DOSE

If experiencing awe is good for your health and travel is a shortcut to it, then there's even more good news. The Global Coalition on Aging did a meta-analysis of existing data linking travel with healthy aging, and the findings should get us all out on the road again. It does seem to be working for Willie Nelson.

For instance, these studies found that going on holiday regularly has resounding health benefits. Women who vacation twice a year have a significantly lower risk of having a heart attack. Similarly, men who take an annual vacation have a 20-percent lower risk of death in general and a 30-percent lower risk of death from heart disease. (Global Coalition on Aging, 2013)

Even the physical exertion of traveling can improve health. Older adults who are physically active are less likely to have heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes, diabetes and cancer. A more active lifestyle also brings better cognitive functioning and fewer falls.



Our bodies did not come with an instruction manual, but scientists are slowly trying to assemble one, especially for this new frontier. While aging is an unavoidable, one-way street, these studies have one encouraging takeaway: We can proactively nurture physical health as we age. We can be the first generation of superagers — to the 80s and beyond! ♦

Sources:

- Baikie, Karen A., and Wilhelm, Kay. (2005). "Emotional and Physical Health Benefits of Expressive Writing." Retrieved on December 11, 2017, from www.apr.rcpsych.org/content.
- Feldscher, Karen. (2017). "In Pursuit of Healthy Aging." Retrieved on December 11, 2017, from www.news.harvard.edu.
- Global Coalition on Aging. (2013). "Destination Healthy Aging: The Physical, Cognitive and Social Benefits of Travel." Retrieved on December 11, 2017, from www.globalcoalitiononaging.com.
- Holt-Lunstad, Julianne; Smith, Timothy B.; and Layton, J. Bradley. (2010). "Social Relationship and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review." PLOS Medicine, retrieved December 14, 2017, from www.journals.plos.org.
- Morris, Steven. (2014). "Study Finds Social Media Use Beneficial to Overall Health of Elderly." Retrieved December 14, 2017, from www.theguardian.com.
- World Bank Life Expectancy Data. Retrieved on December 12, 2017, from Google Public Data.