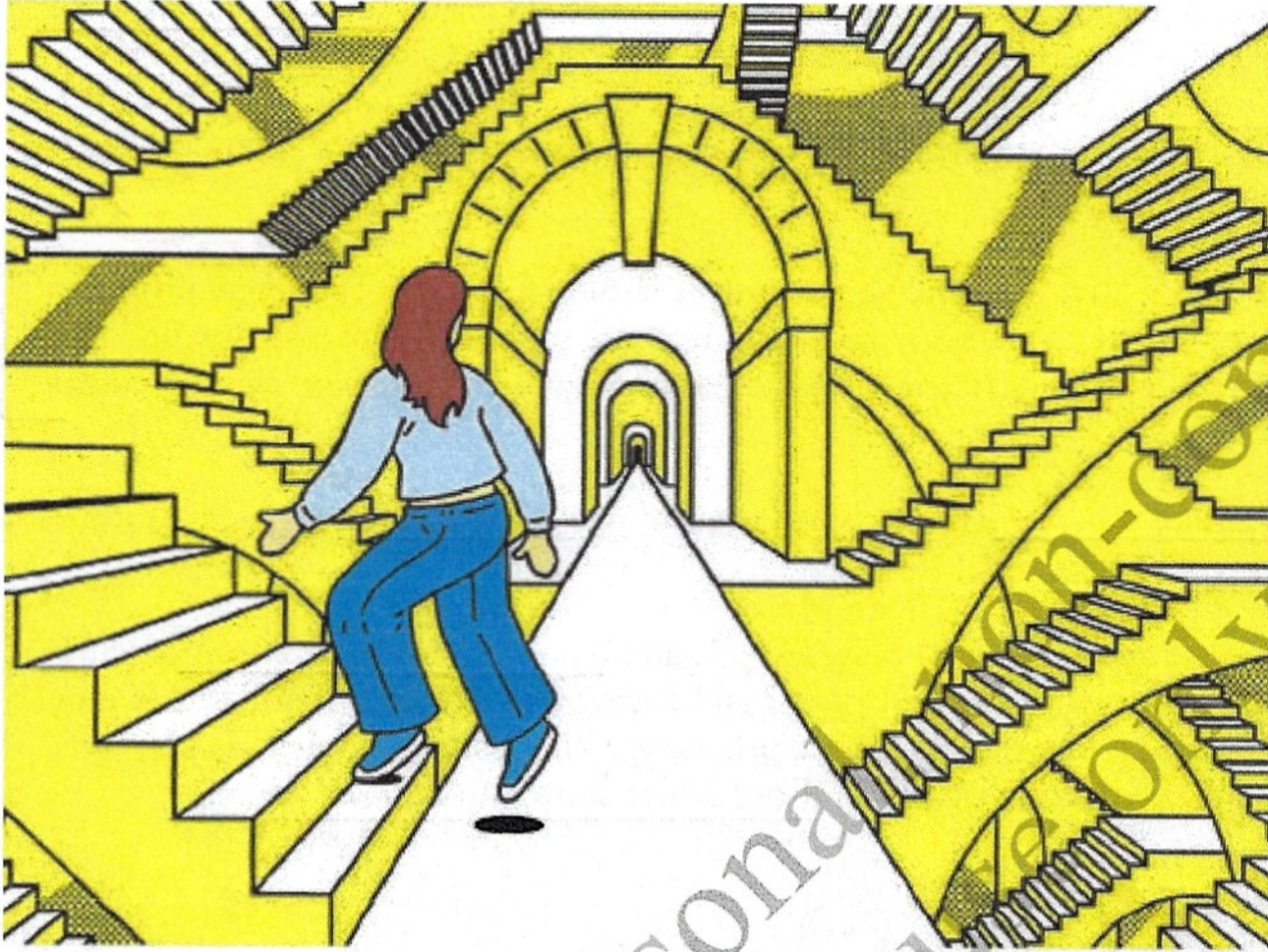


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Very Good Article

SAM ISLAND FOR WSJ



Don't Get Too Comfortable. Your Quality of Life Depends On It.

Research shows that vitality is improved by challenging avoidance, stasis and soothing habits—and instead leaning in to uncertainty and discomfort

BY MOSHE BAR

We've built a world that can numb discomfort instantly, and we're surprised that we feel less alive.

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As artificial intelligence makes life frictionless, we risk removing the very frictions that keep humans healthy: effort, challenge, learning and forward motion. The next public-health crisis may be stagnation, not stress. The fix isn't another pleasure. It's progression.

Progression is not simply about moving forward, constant achievement or relentless productivity. It is about adaptation: the way a muscle grows stronger when challenged or a mind becomes more flexible when it explores. Progression is engaging in challenges that expand our future capacity. When we do this consistently, as research conducted in my own labs (as well as many others) shows, we improve mood, strengthen resilience, enhance health and slow many processes associated with aging.

Humans thrive when they grow. This matters biologically. Sustained engagement with manageable challenge produces a condition scientists call vitality: a functional state in which the body and brain become more resilient and flexible, and stress-regulation and brain plasticity systems operate efficiently and in coordination. People in this state show greater long-term health.

Over time, vitality influences many of the biological processes that drive aging and age-related diseases, including chronic inflammation and loss of cellular repair efficiency.

Today, six in 10 young adults, eight in 10 in midlife and nine in 10 older U.S. adults report one or more chronic diseases, according to analysis from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Roughly half have two or more. Progressively active, engaged lifestyles help regulate many of these processes. The result is not necessarily a longer maximum lifespan but a slower decline and a lower disease risk. Progression shows up in three domains.

Move Your Body Forward, Boost Your Life

The most familiar form of progression is physical. Aerobic exercise improves mood, cognition and cardiovascular health while reducing inflammation and stress. But the benefits do not come from movement alone. They emerge when endurance, strength or skill expands over time. The body adapts to challenge, building capacity that remains after the workout ends.

Advance With Small Actions, Gain Big Momentum

Progression also operates in daily behavior. In clinical psychology, behavioral activation helps people recover from depression by re-engaging with meaningful activities. Setting a goal or increasing activity volume is not enough. Forward movement is the ingredient that rekindles energy.

Explore Uncertainty, Improve Your Mood

Thoughts can progress as well. The mind can become trapped in narrow loops of worry, or it can move outward, imagining multiple possibilities. Our research shows that broad, exploratory thinking can improve mood, cognitive flexibility and creativity.

Thinking that is instead repetitive is linked to depression, anxiety and diminished vitality. When thought moves forward, it recruits the brain systems involved in learning, motivation and future planning, and this helps energize the very physiological systems that support resilience and wellbeing. Nature, in its ingenuity, built an incentive system to guide us toward these benefits. Yet reward alone is not enough. Many pleasurable habits, from sugar to passive entertainment, can soothe without strengthening.

Progression is different. It may involve effort, uncertainty and discomfort, but it leaves us more capable than before. This may help explain why achieving a goal produces only fleeting satisfaction, while sustained engagement in challenging pursuits predicts longer-lasting well-being and reduced mortality risk. The key is not the final reward. It is the accumulation of forward movement along the way.

In an era marked by burnout, sedentary lifestyles and rising mental-health struggles, we do not need to overhaul our lives overnight. Progression begins with manageable challenges: walking a little farther than usual or allowing the mind to move beyond its usual loops by exploring a new idea or perspective. The question should not be "does this feel good

Note
right now?" but "does this move me forward?" When we move forward, vitality follows. And over time, vitality protects what matters most: our capacity to adapt, endure and remain fully alive.

Algorithms optimize for efficiency. Humans are optimized by effort. Moshe Bar is a neuroscience professor at Bar-Ilan University and at Massachusetts General Hospital, and the former director of the Multidisciplinary Center for Brain Research at Bar-Ilan University.

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