



17

ways to live
your
Best
Life

Cutting out gluten, learning a new skill, working out more... What if you finally made those lifestyle shifts you've been putting off? We challenged ourselves—and 15 brave other women—to make one simple change and stick to it for 30 days. Here's what happened...

What if I... Only did things out of choice, not obligation?

Yi-Hwa Hanna, Editor in Chief of WHME
 You may scoff when you read the above—many friends did, too—but when you’ve been raised to be a person that always strives to keep their word, prioritises good manners, and just hates letting people down when you prefer to just try and help instead, this is harder than it sounds. Add to that a tight-knit family, loyal friendships spread across numerous different “friend groups,” constant work commitments, and you’ve got a recipe for feeling stretched thin, all the time. I failed twice during the 30 days, finding myself in places I didn’t want to be, with people who frankly don’t care about me enough to warrant a sacrifice on my part. But for the rest of it, I politely but firmly declined things I didn’t want to be a part of—and had every right to—and found myself not only with more time to do the things I do love, but also reconnecting with friends I hadn’t seen in far too long. Another great side-effect? There were some activities I always moan about that I had to admit that I secretly enjoy, and I now get even more out of them, guilt-free. I was afraid to hurt people’s feelings—which I’m usually loathe to do—but I’ve learned that sometimes, putting myself first is just as key. Life sometime requires obligations, otherwise we’d wind up hugely selfish—but now I’m better at distinguishing when it’s for a cause I deem worth it rather than “just to be nice” to my own, very real, detriment. As with most things, it’s about balance.

What if I... Switched off electronic devices 2 hours before bed?

Courtney Trenwith, Journalist
 I’d heard about numerous benefits of avoiding electronics before bed, so I was intrigued to take on my challenge and even decided to push it further by adding the first hour after waking up—I didn’t want all those new benefits to disappear as soon as the alarm went off! I don’t watch a lot of TV but it always seems to be on as background noise. To be faced with silence was disconcerting at first. Without being able to fill it with a Facebook news feed or WhatsApp messages, I was left to entertain myself with more traditional activities. I chose reading, and I quickly appreciated the

time to return to a lifelong pleasure that had been neglected to make space for social media. While the quiet took a bit of getting used to, I started looking forward to the moment I could switch my phone off. It was liberating. Before, answering messages that had accrued overnight (I’m Australian so my friends and family contact me while we’re asleep) had been the first order of the day, often making me late for work. I enjoyed the disconnectedness so much I found myself dreading addressing the pile-up of messages. Within a few days, the shortened window of time I had to correspond with friends and family, coupled with my newfound love of being disconnected, meant I often replied several days



late. Eventually, that created anxiety, as I worried about my friends and family being upset. Back in the real world, I’ve become far more balanced. I rejoice in going offline as far ahead of bedtime as possible. If I’m home, I’ll pick up a book, which is much more relaxing before sleep. The TV has remained off and now if I feel the need for some background chatter, I choose online news channels or Ted Talks on my iPad as it doesn’t feel as invasive as a blaring television set.

What if I... Learned a new skill?

Eileen Lee Connor, Makeup Artist
 I’d always thought of meditation as something I could easily do if I put my mind to it. I mean, how hard can it be to simply sit and be quiet? But I never really committed to it despite kind of believing that it would transform me for the better somehow. So I started by downloading the MeditateMe app to my phone, to make mediation-on-the-go easier. Settling in with my earphones just before bed, I let the narrator’s voice wash over me and eventually drifted into a dreamlike state. By the end of the week, I decided to add the Attract Wealth meditation to my roster to see how it could help me. Listening to these affirmations made me realise that I tend to self-sabotage. So I vowed to be more confident with money matters and the idea of success. By Week Two, I was finding it difficult to carve out the time to focus on myself and do something as simple as listen to a meditation. I rationalised my lack of self-discipline as because of my excitable



toddler, but it’s something I need to be selfish about making time for. I switched my meditation time to the morning instead.

By the end of Week Four, I felt energised and could feel the power of positive thinking starting to reflect back to me in my relationship, since my husband started suggesting activities for us to do together without me nudging him! My thoughts when I settled down for a daily meditation fell into place more easily than in the beginning, and I felt more reflective about life. I found myself drawn to the Faith and Attract Wealth meditations—listening to them reminds me of the core reasons we are building our careers here.

Although I had to force myself into a rhythm so I could drown out noise for a moment each day, it’s been a great confidence-booster to have positive affirmations in my life—like a personal cheerleading squad that I assemble depending on my mood! I’ll continue to turn to meditation at least once a week.



What if I... Gave up caffeine?

Zahirah Variawa, Founder of Think Liquorice, Presenter at Physique TV
 While I’ve never been a triple espresso drinker, I do enjoy caffeine injections to kickstart my day or pick me up during the afternoon lull. One thing really stands out from my challenge: Caffeine is in a lot more food and drink than I thought—including chocolate! Lack of food usually won’t affect my mood, but I got frustrated seeing chocolate bars staring up at me from the fridge and being unable to eat any of them. I missed caffeine most in the mornings. It’s habitual for me to sit down with my laptop and a cuppa while getting set for the day ahead. Rooibos and orange juice just doesn’t cut it. My gym routine was also slowed as my pre-workout contains caffeine. And touching down in Melbourne, the city best known for its coffee shops, was the ultimate test of my restraint! But my takeaway was that the social and practical side of avoiding caffeine was more challenging than actual withdrawal.



What if I... Did a good deed a day?

Natasha Hatherall,
Managing

Director of TishTash
Marketing and Public

Relations and TishTash Talent

I've always enjoyed random acts of kindness and doing nice things to brighten other people's days, so I jumped at the chance to do this challenge, seeing it as a way of becoming some type of fairy godmother—who wouldn't fancy that?

It was surprisingly easy to find good deeds to do. There was no shortage of people who could do with a little support and help, and social media was a great source for inspiration. Anytime I saw someone struggling with an issue, I stepped in and offered to help. I sent flowers to someone I didn't know very well who was having a bad day. When someone was made redundant and asked for help on Facebook, I introduced them to five relevant people. I helped someone pack up their whole apartment, and I even babysat someone's child in an emergency—and usually I run in the opposite direction from kids!

I didn't limit myself geographically either. I did some random good deeds for people back home in the UK. I sent a pick-me-up parcel of goodies to a girl I used to work with who seemed liked she needed something to brighten her day. The reaction was simply lovely—she was shocked anyone would do such an unexpected thing, yet alone from Dubai!

One thing that struck me—and that I found a little sad—is that people are so overwhelmed and disbelieving when something unexpectedly nice is done for

them. I can only assume that very few of us are doing good deeds for others as people just aren't used to being on the receiving end. Some people even seemed suspicious of my motives!

I felt great doing this challenge. I felt like I had a new purpose each day—putting a smile on someone's face. In the past when I was feeling down, I went shopping. After a month of good deeds and random acts of kindness, I firmly believe that if I ever want to cheer myself up I'll just find something good to do for someone else. It doesn't have to cost anything at all and that warm, fuzzy feeling lasts much longer than a new dress fix! It may sound like a cliché, but there really is no greater feeling than giving.



What if I... Stayed off social media?

Vicky Wright, Operations Manager

I realise how sad this sounds, but I found it embarrassingly hard to go 30 days without social media. I thought I'd only find the first few days really tough, but I must admit that 30 days without keeping up-to-date with what any of my friends and family are getting up to back home in the UK, or even checking any of the news forums I follow on Facebook, was really hard going. I would constantly click on my phone with the intention of flicking through Instagram! I noticed that, once I'd deleted the apps, I actually used my phone a lot less. It didn't take long to feel the benefits of not being on social media: I was a lot more work-focused, and I stopped looking at my phone while stuck in traffic—which has to be a good thing! I noticed how much people mention social media in day-to-day conversation. A few times I was asked, 'Have you seen this on Facebook?' or, 'Did you see the pictures that got posted from the weekend?' Having finished the challenge, I still flick through social media, but now I do it more consciously and don't let it take up so much of my day.

What if I... Took up yoga?

Nadine du Toit, Founder of GloryGirl Fitness

There's no other way to put it: I've failed miserably at this challenge and discovered that I really don't like yoga as an activity! I've always enjoyed sports where there was an end goal, but yoga is a completely different flow.

I sought the help of Jessica Olie and her *Let's Start Yoga* e-book, as well as my friend ActiveFlow Yoga; I even purchased my own eco-rubber yoga mat from Lorna Jane, and downward dogged my way into the 30 day challenge.

I had a breakthrough on Day Eight. I've never been able to touch my toes with straight legs, but finally I accomplished it! But on Day 16 my yoga instructor friend got sick and I didn't schedule in my own sessions. I take full ownership of the fact that I lost interest as I find yoga to be painful, tedious and something that I don't look forward to do. I just don't connect with it like so many other women do.

But, by trying a new activity and discovering I don't have a passion for it, I've learned that it's ok to admire people who do excel in it and move on!



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What if I... Went gluten-free?

Tiffany Eslick, Group Editor of Etihad Inflight Magazine Portfolio

I've dubbed this challenge Gluten for Punishment. At the same time as going gluten-free for one month, I also signed up to an 8-week intense personal training programme: Both odd choices for someone who likes to whip up chicken pies and chocolate cakes on the weekend and do nothing but flop on the couch and load up on TV series.

But there was method to my madness: Cutting out gluten (which I know I have an intolerance to, yet can't stay away from) would no doubt make me shed excess weight faster, thus making my gruelling morning runs somewhat easier. And, vice versa, starting an intense fitness regime would hopefully steer my cravings away from warm, wheaty wonders and encourage (or force) me

to choose healthier options.

It all seemed as easy as... well, one of my mid-week, quick-fix dinner pies. And, surprisingly, it was. I'm not going to pretend that I didn't cheat. But, out of 30 days, I was officially gluten-free for 25 of them. And the reason for those five "failures" was simply not being prepared—which, besides having a huge amount of willpower, is the most important aspect of embarking on a new diet.

There are so many gluten-free products on the market such as quinoa, buckwheat, and a variety of flours and breads. There are also hundreds of recipes online. If anything, I baked more during the challenge. All it took was a bit of research, exploring a couple of new stores, stocking up on the right ingredients and, most importantly, planning meals in advance.

Over the 30 days, I noticed a reduction in bloating and my digestion improved. I swapped my sloth-like status to that of a sporting enthusiast thanks to my high energy levels, and I lost 6 kg. Some of the credit for this will have to go to my PT, but I do believe a lot has to do with going gluten-free. I know that promising to cut it out for good is a tall order, but I'm so happy with the results that it's worth a try.

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What if I... Gave up alcohol?

Laura Holmes, Event Manager

Being a 23-year-old British girl who likes to party, this was a difficult challenge for me. But I was exhausted from travelling and entertaining friends all summer, and needed a break. The first week was the easiest—I felt better with every early night. People noticed differences in my skin and mood. But after a while it became socially crippling—as I have no self-control, I just couldn't be around the stuff. However, it meant that I focused more on work and the gym, and rather than throwing away my hard-earned money in bars, I was spending it on more worthwhile experiences, such as paddle-boarding, skiing, and exploring Dubai. I feel so much better without consuming it—in the weeks where I managed without a drop, I'd never felt so alive.

What if I... Went without makeup?

Chorcha Harper, PR and Comms Manager

I am not a make-up addict and generally prefer the barely-there natural look (although I will admit I had my eyebrows tattooed recently—the best decision of my life!) so I thought this would be a breeze. But since I started my career in Dubai, it's been drilled into me that appearance matters. Going for meeting with beautifully coiffed women, in heels as high as I would wear for a night out, I found myself apologising for my bare face but, even if they were just being polite, it didn't affect business at all. However, I hated going to brunch or on girls' nights out without makeup—I felt uncomfortable, withdrawn, avoided photos and felt like I looked like the lazy one who didn't make an effort, despite my dress and heels! I never thought of myself as image-obsessed, until now. But on date night (which usually involves an hour of pampering beforehand) my fiancé filled me with confidence, saying how great I looked, and at a Friday breakfast out I wondered why I'd even bothered with makeup for casual occasions before—it felt lovely to go au naturel. Make up does not make me who I am, but it does give me a confidence boost. I'm now wearing minimal makeup to work and focusing on skincare—I'd like to still be able to get away without makeup in 10 years!

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What if I... Worked out five times a week?

Hannah Ruth Gilbert, Freelance Writer

I'll admit, I started this challenge three times. The first attempt was scuppered by work. The second time around, I had a health issue that stopped me in my tracks. But third time's a charm! I was determined to get back into fitness after a few months of on-off training. I eased myself in with a Pilates session and it felt good to be physically active again, even though it was difficult. Because I hadn't trained for a while, my core wasn't as strong as it used to be, so exercises that I previously found easy were now hard. I was a bit disappointed, but I knew that it was going to take time to get back to where I used to be.

At the end of the first week, I decided that, after four months away from CrossFit, I was ready to head back into the box. It was so, so tough and I had to bail out after half an hour. Thank goodness for an understanding coach!

In Week Two, my hubby and I travelled to Phuket to train at Unit 27 in Chalong. I credit this week with really getting me back into fitness. I wouldn't normally train 2-3 times a day but, after last week's shock to the system, it was psychologically easier. I came back to Dubai feeling strong and motivated.

After the intensive training in Phuket, I gave myself three days off. I almost took a fourth rest day but I forced myself not to lose momentum. There was a definite change in mindset after Phuket. Getting out of bed at 6am for a training session was easier and I made fewer excuses.

My last week was the best: Two pilates classes and three CrossFit sessions. There was a noticeable difference in my core work during Pilates, and I hit a PB on my back squat and deadlift. I was thrilled to bits! I've still got a long way to go as far as my upper body strength and endurance is concerned, but this 30 day challenge has reignited my passion and inspired me to train regularly.

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What if I... Showed up on time?

Ishita Saha, Blogger at Ishita Unblogged

I messed up twice during my 30 day challenge and, to top it all off, submitted my report seven days after the deadline, of course! What I realised during this period is that I far too often take up multiple assignments, committing far beyond what I am physically capable of delivering.

The things that I did to make my life easier throughout my challenge were firstly to back-calculate thoroughly. So if I have to reach somewhere at 1pm, I work out I'll have to leave the previous venue at 12:45, and inform the venue that I'll be leaving at 12:15, so that any interviews or food tasting can be scheduled accordingly. I also scheduled everything earlier, to give a cushion of 30-45 minutes. I made lists of things that need to accompany me—camera, smartphone, recorder, car keys, wallet—and made sure my devices were charged the night before. I outsourced tasks that could be outsourced, giving in to the realisation that I cannot be physically present everywhere all the time, and then gave 100% to the commitments I could make. I drew up directions and found out about parking before I left for a venue. I'd set an alarm two hours before an appointment, and reset the alarm again for a reminder one hour before.

Constantly arriving late was making me feel incapable of controlling my own life. I was anxious, nervous, breathless, and unconfident when I walked into appointments. But I've realised that it isn't difficult to change: I just need everything planned in advance so it's crystal clear.

To be honest, the whole first week was decidedly rocky and after a night out an entire day was swallowed to the genius of Joss Whedon but—spoiler alert—quite to my surprise, a distinct improvement was to follow. The subsequent weeks, aided by an unusually high acquiescence rate to social invitations, were much more successful and even the addictive TLC schedule couldn't tempt me.

Disappointingly, my anticipated smugness continued to allude me: I had planned to spend the *huge* amounts of free time I would now have tending to errands, completing long-ignored tasks and going to the gym (pause for guffaw). In reality, I channelled my thirst for stimulation into a voracious reading frenzy. Historical novels, you ask? Non-fiction biographies? Nope. Jilly blinking Cooper. I did learn one important lesson, though: Anyone can survive a month without a box-set crutch—even me. Now, pass the remote!

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What if I... Cut out dairy?

Alison Buck, Teacher, Writer, and Life Coach

This was far harder than I ever imagined. See, I'm actually dairy intolerant. And sugar and gluten and grain and and and... allow me to live! But that's exactly it: Going without these things would actually allow me to live a better and healthier life, especially as I have an autoimmune disease. So when I started this challenge, I thought, "I've got this. It'll be easy because I need to take this no-dairy thing seriously for my health, so I will."

Ha! The "I will" didn't quite work out like that. I lasted exactly four days without a cappuccino and cream and yoghurt on my berries. I then had to start again, and again, and again, and, to this date, I've still only lasted three weeks with no dairy whatsoever. Seems I've spent the whole summer starting over again.

But I've learned a lot. I've become more aware and much more conscious of how many places dairy hides, as well as the fact that my instant gratification alarm needs to be stilled. I also know that after just a couple of days without dairy, my chest is less congested and my joints move easier due to less inflammation. Dairy is known to cause inflammation—a factor you should control as much as possible when, like me, you have rheumatoid arthritis and most of the other autoimmune diseases.

I've noticed that a few minutes after a cup of coffee with cream, a piece of cheese, or a scoop of cream cheese or yoghurt, I start to sneeze, my throat begins to thicken, and in a couple of hours I'm trying to cough up phlegm. And, on the positive side, after three weeks without any dairy at all, my skin is lighter and smoother and I feel a whole lot more energetic.

A great reward for really very little self-control and simply making better choices. There is no excuse, either, as there are plenty of alternatives in coconut, almond and other milks. And I've actually learned to love just black herbal tea and a plain glass of water.

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What if I... Gave up TV?

Fiona Du Vivier, Sales Manager

Confession time. I am a cheat. A big fat cheater. Let's get something straight: I love TV, and this challenge was probably a stupid idea on my part; a fact I sadly realised at 6.30am on Day One. Awoken in a bad mood to tend to our cantankerous canine guests, I decided I had every right to watch the last 20 minutes of a TV series I had fallen asleep to the night before. So far, so useless—but abject failure is a type of achievement, right?

15 What if I... Drank three litres of water a day?

Dilshed Careem, Brand Manager

While everyone else was thirsting over Instagram likes, Facebook comments, and retweets, I decided to go on a different route. My mission was to drink three litres of water every day, and in the unbearable summer heat, I really needed it!

Despite needing the washroom every three minutes, I felt insanely better. Here's what I learned from my journey of self-enhancement... At the beginning, I felt like a bloated piece of human while walking through my office cubicles. Truly, the only thing that kept me on my path was the hope of having my 'Oprah "Aha!" Moment.'

As the second week kicked in, I felt refreshed. I started waking up on time, had no more torturous migraines, and don't even get me started on the feeling of waking up at 6am on a Friday to go for a run with my water bottle, while every other girl is coming up the elevator with her heels in one hand and a shawarma in the other, her face looking like she's been deprived of H₂O for a lifetime.

After a month, my face was no longer peeling, and my breakouts disappeared. I woke up feeling detoxed with surprisingly fresh early-morning breath, and what's funny is that it didn't even cost anything!

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What if I... Slept eight hours a night?

Emily Williams, Assistant Spa and Recreation Manager

Working in hotels, I knew eight hours sleep a night would be a challenge for me. But I didn't realise how few hours I actually slept until I saw it right there on my sleep tracker app. The first week I averaged 5.5 hours a night!

The app showed me that once I fall asleep, I don't wake up much, so getting enough Zs was my problem, rather than broken sleep. I changed my work rota so I could have more consistency and, although I love my afternoon nap, I know it's a sleep killer so I removed it almost completely. I now aim to be in bed by 10pm and keep myself busier after work so there's no time to nap. I try to eat before 7pm and have a hot shower before bed to help me relax. The main thing this challenge has taught me is to have a routine—it's what we teach babies, so I suppose adults should do the same! I'm not quite on eight hours yet, but my average has increased to a healthy seven hours and 15 minutes.



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What if I... Cooked all my own meals?

Hannah Bass, Deputy Editor of WHME

A year ago, I would not have considered this a challenge. Living in London, where eating out is expensive (scratch that: just getting to the restaurant is expensive), your takeaway options are limited to pizza, curry or Chinese, and I had a fruit and veg market right on my doorstep, it was the norm for me to cook every single one of my meals.

Fast forward to Dubai, where you need a mortgage to buy groceries, pretty much every single restaurant delivers, and I work far longer hours than I did in London... Yup, the last thing I feel like doing when I get home is cooking.

But I needed this challenge, as both my bank balance and my waistline were

suffering from an excess of takeout. I wanted to expand my repertoire of healthy but flavoursome dishes (starting with trying the delicious recipes found within the pages of this very magazine!).

Making it part of my social life was key: Instead of turning down dinner invitations, I invited people over to eat, which always ends up being more fun and conversational than a short time slot at a restaurant anyway. On date nights, my partner and I cooked fancy meals for each other and, if anything, it felt more intimate and special than picking up the bill in yet another restaurant.

However, it hasn't been all candlelit dinners and joy—I still find that the moment life stress adds up, my desire to cook disappears. But instead of caving in to the delivery menus stuffed under my

door, I came up with some coping mechanisms. Firstly, plan for the week ahead and get as much shopping done in one go as possible—if nothing else, the thought of fresh produce going mouldy will guilt you into cooking it! Secondly, keep something slow-to-perish in the fridge that I can whip up in less time than it would take to order a pizza—say, eggs, courgettes and canned black beans to throw into an omelette. Lastly, I still find it nigh on impossible to cook seven times a week, but I always cook extra so I can take leftovers for lunch, and stuff a box in the freezer for desperate times.

My 30 days are up, but I won't be looking back—I feel happier, healthier (and richer!), plus more in control of my life when I make the effort to cook more. So if you need me, I'll be in the kitchen!