

HOW EL SALVADOR PRESIDENT  
**NAYIB BUKELE** BECAME THE WORLD'S  
MOST POPULAR AUTHORITARIAN

# The Strongman

by  
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# TIME Magazine

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## How Nayib Bukele's 'Iron Fist' Has Transformed El Salvador

Vera Bergengruen is a senior correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. She covers the overlap of national security, politics, and technology. Her work at TIME has won the Society of Professional Journalists' Sigma Delta Chi Award and a New York Press Club Award.



*You can read the transcript of the interview [here](#) and the Spanish version [here](#).*

Before he became arguably the most popular head of state in the world, Nayib Bukele was an adman. The President of El Salvador has branded himself the “world’s coolest dictator” and a “philosopher king,” but he is, perhaps above all, a former publicist attuned to the power of image—his own and his country’s. On the day we met in late June, at the presidential offices in San Salvador, Bukele was dressed all in black. Nine brilliant peacocks roamed the lawn outside. “A leader should be a philosopher before he is a king,” Bukele told me, reclining in a chair as the sun set over the

lush jungle grounds, “rather than the typical politician who is hated by their people.”

It was Bukele’s first interview with a foreign reporter in three years. The occasion was something of a victory lap. At 43, he has remade a nation that was once the world’s murder capital, turning it into a country safer than [Canada](#), according to Salvadoran government data. Bukele’s policy of *mano dura*—iron fist—drove an aggressive crackdown on vicious gangs that has jailed 81,000 people and led to a precipitous drop in homicides. After [decades of violence](#), fear, and extortion, citizens can move freely in former gang-controlled “red zones,” lounge in parks, and go out at night. El Salvador now markets itself as the “land of surf, volcanoes, and coffee,” hosts international events like the Miss Universe pageant, and draws tourists and cryptocurrency enthusiasts to coastal enclaves like “Bitcoin Beach.” The transformation helped Bukele cruise to re-election earlier this year; his approval rating these days tops 90% according to the latest CID Gallup poll. His picture adorns key chains, mugs, and T-shirts at souvenir stands; prominent portraits of him and his wife greet visitors at the airport. As we spoke, blue-and-gold banners festooned the streets of the capital, remnants of his second inauguration three weeks earlier.

Bukele’s popularity has come in spite—or perhaps because—of his defiance of constitutional, political, and legal constraints. Since 2022, he has ruled under emergency powers that suspend key civil liberties, including due process. His security regime can make arrests without warrants, including of minors as young as 12, and hauls hundreds of suspects into mass trials. One in every 57 Salvadorans is now incarcerated—triple the rate of the U.S. and the highest in the world. Bukele’s allies have fired top judges and packed the courts with loyalists, allowing him to dodge a constitutional prohibition to run successfully for a second term—all with broad public support.



**Read More:** [\*A Controversial Facial-Recognition Company Quietly Expands Into Latin America\*](#)

Organized political opposition has, in the President's words, been "pulverized." Defense attorneys, journalists, and NGOs say the government has intimidated, surveilled, or attacked them, spurring many to flee. "El Salvador's institutions have been totally co-opted, subdued, and made obedient to the presidency," says Celia Medrano, a Salvadoran human-rights activist.

Human-rights groups have accused Bukele's government of abuses including arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, and torture. Salvadoran lawyers tell TIME they have documented thousands of cases of innocent people who were caught in the dragnet with no

legal recourse. Bukele appears to consider them collateral damage in a larger war, the cost of guaranteeing the safety of the nation's 6 million people. "Go anywhere," he dares me. "Ask the people. It will be incredibly rare to find a negative opinion in the population." He resents foreign critics' focus on preserving El Salvador's fragile democratic institutions—a corrupt system that, as many see it, only allowed the gangs to flourish. "Everything in life has a cost," Bukele says, "and the cost of being called authoritarian is too small to bother me much."

For Bukele's admirers, El Salvador has become a showcase for how populist authoritarianism can succeed. His second term will be a test of what happens to a state when its charismatic young leader has an overwhelming mandate to dismantle its democratic institutions in pursuit of security. The results will have sweeping implications not just for El Salvador but also the region, where political leaders are eager to replicate what many call *el milagro Bukele*—the Bukele miracle.

Whether it can be sustained is a different question. While most Salvadorans say they are satisfied with the state of the country's democracy, 61% say they fear negative consequences if they publicly express their opinions about its problems, according to a survey by [Chilean](#) firm Latinobarometro. Supporters hail Bukele as a visionary, but critics call him a millennial *caudillo*: a social-media-savvy strongman repackaged for the TikTok age. Some close to him say he worries about losing support as Salvadorans' concerns shift from security to the economy. El Salvador remains one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere, and Bukele has made a series of gambles that have not been well received by many foreign investors and creditors, including adopting Bitcoin as legal tender and investing some of the country's reserves in the [cryptocurrency](#).

**Read More:** [Javier Milei's Radical Plan to Transform Argentina](#)

Even so, others are following the Salvadoran leader's blueprint. His name is invoked on the campaign trail from Peru to Argentina. Some of his harshest critics, including in the Biden Administration, are now courting his favor. Ecuador and Honduras are building mass prisons inspired by Bukele's. His popularity in El Salvador may export a brand of "punitive populism" that leads other heads of state to restrict constitutional rights, especially in a region where voters are increasingly gravitating toward authoritarianism. "The international community has been paralyzed by Bukele's popularity and his success crushing the country's bloodthirsty gangs," says Benjamin Gedan, director of the Wilson Center's Latin America Program. "But we know how this story ends. And when Salvadorans tire of Bukele, they might have no options to express their political preferences."



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**The seeds of El Salvador's** transformation were first planted in Nuevo Cuscatlán, a sleepy town of 8,000 people on the outskirts of the capital. It was there, in 2012, that the sharply dressed scion of a wealthy local family arrived to run for mayor. "He would come with bodyguards to give speeches," recalls Rosa Mélida, a 62-year-old resident, standing in the shade of a corner store. "He handed out food baskets to older people and paid to fix our houses." As Mélida and her neighbors talk about the young mayor who became

their President, they wave their hands toward the sky, gesturing at the green hills above. Bukele still lives up there, in a gated community called Los Sueños: The Dreams.

Bukele grew up in San Salvador, the fifth of 10 children of Armando Bukele Kattán, an affluent businessman and imam of [Palestinian](#) descent. He attended an elite, bilingual private school, where he was shielded from the brutal civil war that devastated El Salvador during the 1980s. As the son of an outspoken Muslim cleric, he learned how to define himself as an outsider and wield snark as a weapon. In an early sign of his tendency to troll his critics, Bukele captioned himself the “class terrorist” in the high school yearbook in 1999.

Although he enrolled in college to become a lawyer, Bukele soon dropped out. He ran a nightclub, a Yamaha dealership, and a political-advertising firm before deciding it was time to jump into politics himself. He decided to run for mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, a small town that was looking for a candidate. Bukele’s first campaign video shows a smiling 30-year-old with a starched white shirt and neatly gelled hair, promising to use his business background to transform the town into a modern “model of development.”

It was soon clear that Bukele had larger ambitions. As mayor, he donated his salary to fund high school scholarships, poured funds into construction projects, and tripled the number of security officers patrolling the streets, documenting all his exploits on [YouTube](#). When people questioned where the money came from, he debuted what would become a trademark slogan: “There’s enough money to go around if no one steals.” (In fact, the town would go into heavy debt during his term, according to Salvadoran investigative outlet *El Faro*.) At that point, Bukele belonged to the left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) party, like his father. Yet he conspicuously shunned its traditional red colors and outdated revolutionary slogans. More

than a decade later, the town's clinic, library, and park are still emblazoned with the peeling cyan *N* he adopted as a logo—branding that entwined Bukele's first initial with the town's. “He is allergic to anything that looks old or smells like your grandmother's closet,” says a foreign diplomat who worked with him.

[video id=HdpvzryB autostart="viewable"]

In 2015, Bukele ran for mayor of San Salvador and won in a close race. He continued to promote attention-grabbing public projects, including the construction of a flashy upscale market and an effort to put lights on every corner of the capital to combat crime. Bukele posted about these moves on social media, where he amassed a following that soon eclipsed that of the country's then President. “He's like a cinematographer,” says a former associate. “Before he even makes a decision, he's thinking about what the end result will look like as a movie reel.” He cultivated an image of modern irreverence, often wearing a backward baseball cap, jeans, and a leather jacket. One popular image, visible on posters and magnets across El Salvador, shows him with his feet on his desk in the mayor's office, sporting aviator sunglasses.

FMLN officials soon became wary of the young politician's presidential ambitions. Bukele openly criticized the party's leaders, crafting a parallel political brand with his trademark cyan symbols. His inner circle consisted of his brothers and several friends from his private-school days, all of whom have followed him into the presidency. After a series of clashes, Bukele seemed to decide he was popular enough to have outgrown the party. After one incident in 2017, in which he reportedly threw an apple at a fellow FMLN official, the group expelled him.

Within a month, Bukele had launched his own party, Nuevas Ideas, and ran in the 2019 presidential election as an antiestablishment populist. He wielded his social media machine effectively, bragging

that while his opponents traveled the country he could campaign from his phone, as his media team created viral Twitter challenges and emotive ads. “It was a way to reach the population directly without going through the press filter,” he tells me. Campaigning with his pregnant wife Gabriela, a prenatal psychologist and former [ballet](#) dancer, Bukele offered the chance of a fresh start after decades of corrupt, unpopular governments. At age 37, he won the presidency with 53% of the vote.



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**Soon the musty** red drapes and dark-paneled wood of the presidential palace were gone, replaced by gleaming cream walls with gold molding. Government social media accounts were given a facelift and began to pump out coordinated messaging. Bukele announced ambitious plans to renovate the capital’s historic center and attract foreign businesses and tech investors. In his first speech before the U.N., he created a viral moment by turning around and snapping a photo: “Believe me, many more people will see that selfie than will hear this speech.” The adman wanted to project a new, modern nation that was breaking with its past.

Yet El Salvador was paralyzed by entrenched violence. Its two largest gangs, Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, were American imports—both formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by civil-war refugees who were eventually deported back to El

Salvador. In a country tentatively emerging from that brutal conflict, the gangs grew their ranks by forcibly conscripting young people. They controlled vast territories and forced everyone—from working-class street vendors to large companies—to pay “rent,” or extortion fees. They killed with impunity. Salvadorans were gunned down for not crossing the street, for looking a split second too long at someone’s sister, for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Previous governments had used emergency powers to briefly instate *mano dura* in a limited way, including in the early 2000s to stem gang violence. Though popular, the crackdowns eventually backfired, driving gangs to regroup and change tactics. Like his predecessors, Bukele allegedly sought to broker a truce with the gangs. Early in his presidency, according to U.S. officials and audio recordings published by Salvadoran media, he cut deals that provided financial incentives to MS-13 and Barrio 18 “to ensure that incidents of gang violence and the number of confirmed homicides remained low,” according to the U.S. Treasury Department, which sanctioned two Bukele associates for their involvement in 2021. (Bukele denies this.)

At the same time, he moved to consolidate power. In February 2020, Bukele entered the national parliament, flanked by armed soldiers and police in a brazen show of force, to demand lawmakers vote on new security funding. Political opponents called it an unprecedented act of intimidation. Yet Bukele succeeded in tightening his grip on the legislature, ushering in electoral reforms that cut the number of seats from 84 to 60. In May 2021, lawmakers aligned with Bukele voted to remove El Salvador’s Attorney General, who had reportedly been investigating Bukele’s deals with the gangs, as well as the top judges on the country’s Supreme Court.

The move drew international condemnation, including from the [Biden Administration](#). “We have deep concerns about El Salvador’s

democracy,” Vice President Kamala Harris tweeted. Though privately infuriated by the rebuke, according to advisers, Bukele publicly embraced the outrage. He changed his social media bio to “world’s coolest dictator” and posted photos of soldiers helping civilians with the hashtag #quebonitadictadura—nice dictatorship. When international bodies raised alarms, he trolled their concerns. “Where is the dictatorship?” he tweeted when protesters demonstrating against what they saw as Bukele’s unconstitutional power grab blocked the city in 2021 without government interference. “Few countries can say this: We have never repressed a demonstration,” Bukele tells me, clearly angry at what he sees as foreign double standards. “We have never used a tear-gas can or a baton.”

Bukele turned the controversy to his advantage. He began to tweet mostly in English, noticing “an interesting audience for our country’s agenda,” he says. “It was an opportunity. We found that my social media presence served as a window for investors, investment funds, banks, important figures, and politicians.”

To market his vision of a new El Salvador, Bukele still needed a modern pitch. In September 2021, he made the nation the first to use Bitcoin as legal tender, earning global headlines and the attention of the growing crypto-currency community. Bukele installed Bitcoin ATMs, announced plans to build a geothermal-powered “Bitcoin city,” and boasted the move would draw foreign investment and benefit Salvadorans, many of whom lacked bank accounts or internet access, let alone digital wallets. Advisers admit it was a PR stunt. “We call it the Great Rebranding. It was genius,” says Damian Merlo, a Miami-based lobbyist. “We could have paid millions to a PR firm to rebrand El Salvador. Instead, we just adopted Bitcoin.”

As policy, the gimmick has flopped. Investing some of El Salvador’s national reserves into crypto was not well received by many foreign investors or the International Monetary Fund. Today

Bukele concedes that Bitcoin “has not had the widespread adoption we hoped” among ordinary Salvadorans. Fewer than 12% have made a single transaction. But the move had the desired effect, putting El Salvador on the map for something other than its violence. “It gave us branding, it brought us investments, it brought us tourism,” says Bukele.

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**Amid the bitcoin hype**, however, the alleged secret truce with the gangs fell apart. In March 2022, more than 87 people were murdered in a single weekend, the deadliest killing spree since the end of the civil war. One of the victims, later identified as a local surf instructor with no known gang ties, was left on the highway to Bitcoin Beach, hands and feet bound, a bullet wound in his head. It was a clear message to Bukele from the gangs, and an inflection point for the young President.

Bukele’s response was to implement a new, aggressive *mano dura*. He declared a 30-day “state of exception,” restricting free assembly and permitting arrests without warrants and detention without trial. The military surged into gang-controlled areas. Police barged into homes and strip-searched residents. Suspected gang members or collaborators were arrested at school, at work, on the street. “We were arresting more than 1,000 people per day,” says René Merino, the Defense Minister, who downplays the military’s role in the effort. “We had to do it in a way where the medicine would not be worse than the sickness.”



The police advertised a hotline to “bring more terrorists to justice.” By dialing 123, Salvadorans could anonymously report anyone they suspected of having links to gangs. In the swirling atmosphere of fear, however, it was often hard to separate violent criminals from innocent teenagers with rock-band tattoos, or clothing or colors associated with gangs, according to local defense attorneys. Some people denounced business rivals or called in neighbors to settle petty scores. Salvadoran security forces, under pressure from superiors to meet hefty arrest quotas, were happy to carry out the often indiscriminate sweeps. “If they didn’t find the person they were looking for, they would just arrest whoever was at home,” says Alejandro Díaz Gómez, a lawyer with local human-rights group Tutela, citing videos filmed by family members. (Bukele officials say that 7,000 people have been freed owing to lack of evidence.)

The approach succeeded at curbing the rampant [violence](#). Homicides in El Salvador dropped by half in 2022 and more than 70% in 2023, according to government data. “It was an overwhelming victory,” says Bukele. “We were fighting an irregular army of 70,000 men and suffered no civilian casualties.” Jails filled with gang members and suspected associates; the population of the country’s largest prison, designed to hold 10,000, swelled to more than three times that number.

Next Bukele built the Centro de Contenimiento del Terrorismo, or CECOT, a sprawling detention facility that could house 40,000 more inmates. In slick videos set to upbeat music, Bukele's government advertised the prison's spartan conditions. Meals were reduced to two a day, prisoners slept on bare metal slats, and inmates were stripped to their underwear and frog-marched through corridors. Under previous governments, "there used to be YouTube videos posted by gangs showing them in prison with prostitutes, strippers, parties, drugs," Bukele says. The images of the brutal crackdown became an unlikely sensation, making El Salvador's President the most-followed world leader on TikTok. He issued a public warning that if the gangs moved to retaliate, "I swear to God they won't eat a grain of rice, and we'll see how long they last."

**Read More:** *Inside a Prison Cell for Gay Former Gang Members in El Salvador*

Salvadoran and international human-rights groups have accused the government of a range of abuses, including forced disappearances, torture, deaths in custody, and targeting poor and marginalized communities. Bukele scoffs at the allegations. The roughly 140 prisoners who have died in Salvadoran prisons per year during the state of exception amount to "an incredibly low mortality rate by Latin American standards," he says, "indeed lower than the U.S." He questions the focus on conditions in El Salvador's prisons compared with those in notorious jails in neighboring countries. "How can I ask the Salvadoran people, who often have modest meals like beans and tortillas for dinner, to pay taxes to provide meat and chicken to prisoners who have killed their family members?" he asks.

Salvadoran officials say the punitive approach is part of the Bukele government's appeal. "There are 660 million Latin Americans who are seeing what is possible with clear common-sense criminal procedures," says Security Minister Gustavo Villatoro, whose office features a large screen depicting the location of every police

car in the country, with different dashboards to keep track of reported crime. Villatoro says that the government “studied the enemy, like in any war.” He shows me a 90-page handbook cataloging gang tattoos, graffiti, and slang to identify suspects’ affiliations. If Bukele “hadn’t had the courage to send the hypocritical international groups to hell, we would have fallen into the same mistake that the six former Presidents made,” he says. Those predecessors had faltered in seeing through the draconian measures required to root out the gangs, Villatoro argues, whereas Bukele had persevered. “There are many priests,” Villatoro adds, “but few are exorcists.”

After his allies removed Supreme Court judges and replaced them with supporters who reinterpreted the Constitution in his favor, Bukele decided to run for a second term in spite of a pre-existing ban. In February, he won a landslide victory, with 84% of the vote. Nuevas Ideas, a party that did not exist six years ago, won 54 of the nation’s 60 congressional seats. El Salvador had effectively become a one-party state, controlled by a single man.

Bukele insists his consolidation of power has been “100% democratic.” If other world leaders aren’t able to get such results, he argues, that’s on them: “We’re not going to artificially grant half of the Congress to the opposition just to say that we are a democracy.” Other heads of state, he suggests, would use any means necessary to achieve the transformation El Salvador has. “Their failure,” says Bukele, “can’t be our road map.”



**Bukele's second inauguration** in early June was a far cry from his first. A parade of high-level political figures made the trek to San Salvador, including King Felipe VI of Spain, regional leaders, more than a dozen U.S. officials and lawmakers, [Donald Trump Jr.](#), and [Tucker Carlson](#). “It was the hottest ticket in the Americas,” says Merlo, Bukele’s U.S. lobbyist. Bukele arranged a dramatic spectacle, designing new capes for the military guard and sporting a striking suit with a stiff, gold-embroidered collar and cuffs that evoked a cross between Latin American revolutionary war heroes and *Star Wars*. Visitors were ushered into the best restaurants, shown the gleaming new Google regional offices, and taken to the renovated historic center at night to showcase the country’s safety.

Bukele casts himself as an independent operator, but he has conspicuously cultivated ties to the American right. Though he came up in a left-wing party, “the left has lost its way across the world,” says Bukele. “It has a serious identity crisis, and the right is at least setting a course.” Bukele, who speaks English fluently, has given two rare interviews to Carlson and spoken at the Heritage Foundation and Conservative Political Action Conference. His tweets use tropes common in right-wing online circles. Bukele has baselessly accused the billionaire philanthropist George Soros of funding journalists who write critically about him, one of the

reasons he says he has stopped speaking to the press. “At least state propaganda openly acknowledges it’s propaganda,” he says. “When we put out a video spot, no one’s hiding that it’s propaganda.”

In recent months, he has invited Carlson and Florida Representative Matt Gaetz to spend the weekend at his lakeside retreat, staying up into the early morning discussing everything from politics to AI, according to advisers. Gaetz, a [Trump](#) acolyte who has recently visited El Salvador several times and posed for photos at the CECOT prison, says he considers Bukele a “kindred spirit” and an inspiration to the Western world. “He sees himself as a liberator, not an authoritarian,” Gaetz tells TIME. “Sometimes, to solve third-world problems, you need some third-world solutions.”

In July, Gaetz led the launch of a bipartisan El Salvador caucus in Congress which includes several Democrats, including Representative Lou Correa of California. “Whether you agree with his methods or not, he has brought peace to his people,” Correa tells me. “His popularity among the *Salvadoreños* in my district is unbelievable,” he says. “They love the guy. My job is to work with him.”

Even the Biden Administration has softened its previous criticism. In 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department had sanctioned some of Bukele’s top officials for covert negotiations with the gangs and “multiple-ministry, multi-million dollar corruption,” and U.S. officials criticized his moves as antidemocratic. For his second inauguration, the Administration dispatched Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to attend, a marker of his growing clout. It’s clear that Bukele feels vindicated. When it comes to his controversial policies, “suddenly it’s better to embrace them [...] and try not to fight against something that is too popular, not just in El Salvador but throughout all of Latin America,” he tells me.

Privately, U.S. diplomats agree. There is little to be gained by feuding with a leader with overwhelming popular support, they say.

It's more valuable to keep an open line, especially since they need El Salvador's help to stem migration to America's southern border and are seeking ways to counter Chinese influence in the region.

Under [Xi Jinping](#), China has invested \$500 million in infrastructure projects in El Salvador, including a huge futuristic library that now flies the Chinese flag in front of the country's National Palace and main cathedral.

At the same time, U.S. officials and international pro-democracy groups worry *Bukelismo* is catching on in the region. Political parties in Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, and Argentina have incorporated the Salvadoran President's name into their platforms and echoed his tough-on-crime language. Argentine Security Minister Patricia Bullrich recently spent four days in the country learning about the "Bukele model" and signing a cooperation agreement. Citing Bukele's example, Honduras has announced plans to build an emergency megaprison for 20,000, and Ecuadorean President Daniel Noboa has declared an unprecedented state of "internal armed conflict" to crack down on criminal gangs.

But the long-term success of the "Bukele model" is far from certain. The security gains won't guarantee long-term stability without a plan to keep the next generation from relapsing into a cycle of violence, Salvadoran officials and analysts say. Mass arrests have left more than 40,000 children without one or both parents. While military and police budgets have ballooned, funding for victim-care programs amounts to less than 1% of the security budget, says David Morales, the chief legal officer of Cristosal, a Salvadoran human-rights group. The state of exception, which has been renewed 29 times, "has now become permanent, and victims have been totally abandoned," he says. "An autocracy has now been installed in El Salvador with a great human cost." Bukele officials say they are seeking to make the current policies "irreversible" through a series of legal reforms. Then, Bukele tells TIME, he hopes to lift the state of exception and "return to normal constitutional processes and maintain the peace we've achieved."

Security has also come at a steep financial cost for El Salvador. Under Bukele, its public debt has skyrocketed to more than \$30 billion, or 84% of the country's gross domestic product. The economy remains anemic. "Bukele has built a house of cards, because it's an incredibly expensive security policy," says Christine Wade, an El Salvador expert at Washington College in Maryland. "It's not financially sustainable, and his future will depend on his ability to address that." More than a quarter of the country still lives in poverty, and remittances from Salvadorans abroad amount to the equivalent of 20% of its GDP. Bukele needs a deal with the IMF to regain access to international markets and finance its debt, says Will Freeman, a fellow of Latin American studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. One stumbling block has been the Bitcoin gamble; another is the lack of budgetary transparency by his government, which has hidden its spending and contracting from public view. "Bukele has been very resistant to it," Freeman suggests, because it could reveal corruption. But if El Salvador is left to face a brutal fiscal adjustment on its own, he adds, "that will be the big moment when we test how deep his popularity runs."

For now, Bukele's support remains unshakable among ordinary Salvadorans, including many who have family members in prison. Anyone who did not live through the terror of life under the gangs will never understand how much things have changed, says Alvaro Rodriguez, a 39-year-old taxi driver. "Thanks to Bukele, the most dangerous thing here are these pigeons," he says, gesturing at a plaza in downtown San Salvador that citizens used to have to pay gang members to enter.

Which is why Merino, the Defense Minister, believes the government has a mandate to continue *mano dura*. "No matter how much these human-rights groups cry and complain about the state of emergency, people here are much freer than in countries where there isn't a state of exception," he says. "Once you have the support of the population, there is nothing to stop us."

No one, including Bukele, knows how El Salvador's experiment will end. While he rules out running for a third term, he knows what happens to Latin American strongmen when they leave office. Three of his predecessors have been arrested or indicted. But for the former adman, it's all part of a narrative: Bukele the Messiah. "I used to be the safest person in the country, I had bodyguards and armored cars," he says, gesturing with his arms in our interview in his office. "Now the country has safety but I do not. I traded my security for that of the Salvadoran public." He pauses. "As I said," he adds, "everything in life has a cost." —*With reporting by Simmone Shah*

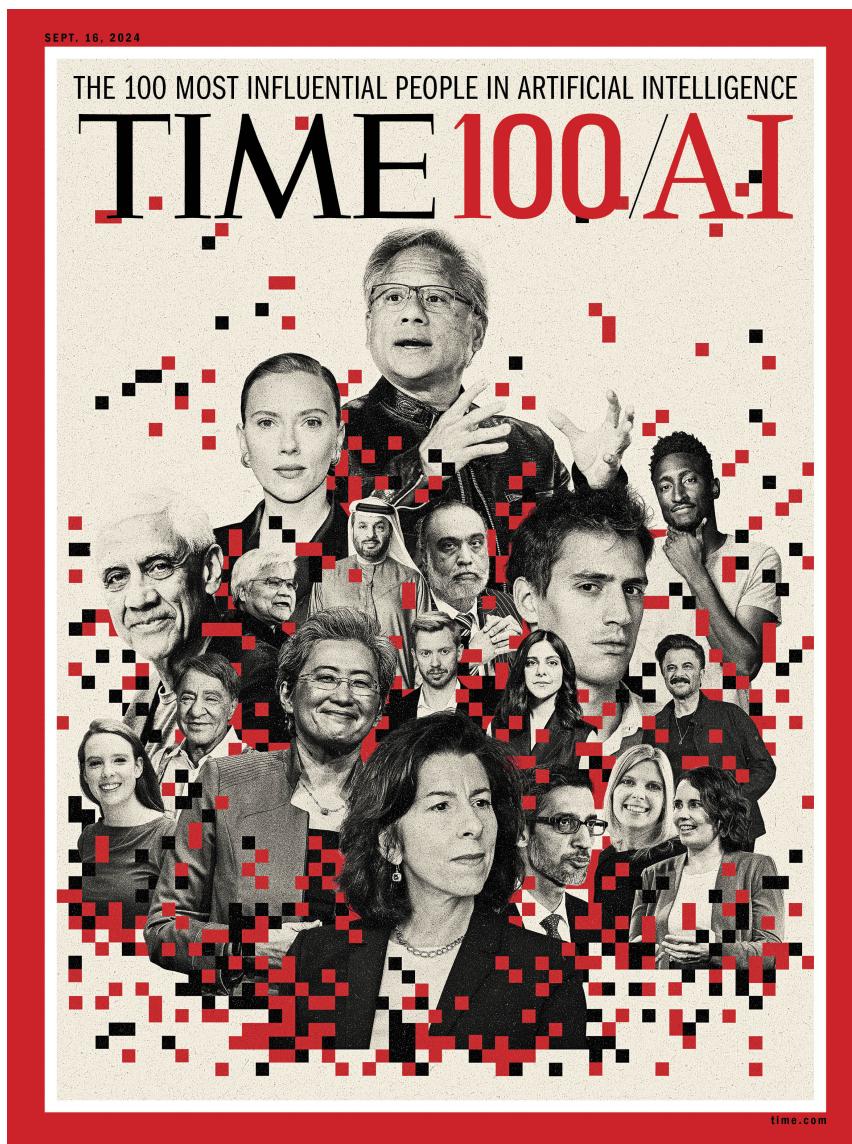
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## How We Chose the TIME100 Most Influential People in AI 2024

Sam Jacobs is Editor in Chief at TIME where he leads TIME's global newsroom and its journalism across all platforms. Since joining TIME in 2013, Jacobs has held a variety of senior editorial leadership positions. Previously, he was national political correspondent at Reuters, associate editor at Newsweek and staff reporter for The Daily Beast. His writing has appeared in the Boston Globe and New York Observer.



As we were finishing this year's [TIME100 AI](#), I had two conversations, with two very different TIME100 AI honorees, that made clear the stakes of this technological transformation. [Sundar Pichai](#), who joined Google in 2004 and became CEO of the [world's fourth most valuable company](#) nine years ago, told me that introducing the company's billions of users to artificial intelligence through Google's products amounts to "one of the biggest improvements we've done in 20 years." Speaking that same day, [Meredith Whittaker](#), a former Google employee and critic of the company who, as the president of Signal, has become one of the world's most [influential advocates for privacy](#), expressed alarm at the dangers posed by the fact that so much of the AI revolution depends on the infrastructure and decisions of only a handful of big players in tech.

Our purpose in creating the TIME100 AI is to put leaders like Pichai and Whittaker in dialogue and to open up their views to TIME's readers. That is why we are excited to share with you the second edition of the TIME100 AI. We built this program in the spirit of [the TIME100](#), the world's most influential community. TIME's knowledgeable editors and correspondents, led by Emma Barker and Ayesha Javed, interviewed their sources and consulted members of last year's list to find the best new additions to our community of AI leaders. Ninety-one of the members of the 2024 list were not on last year's, an indication of just how quickly this field is changing. They span dozens of companies, regions, and perspectives, including 15-year-old [Francesca Mani](#), who advocates across the U.S. for protections for victims of deepfakes, and 77-year-old [Andrew Yao](#), one of China's most prominent computer scientists, who called last fall for an international regulatory body for AI.

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**Just two months** after we launched [last year's list](#), we witnessed one of the most dramatic recent events in the business world, a moment that drew the world's attention to the individuals leading

AI. In November 2023, OpenAI's board shocked the industry by firing CEO Sam Altman amid questions about his integrity. After his subsequent return to the company, Altman was recognized as TIME's 2023 CEO of the Year. Since then, several top safety leaders have left OpenAI, raising concern over the lab's—and the industry's—pace of development. OpenAI has promised to refocus on increased caution, installing a new safety committee, which it has said will assess the company's approach. Safety concerns animate many of the individuals recognized in this issue.

If the world of AI was dominated by the emergence of startup labs like OpenAI, Anthropic, and their competitors in 2023, this year, as critics and champions alike have noted, we've seen the outsize influence of a small number of tech giants. Without them, upstart AI companies would not have the funding and computing power—known as compute—they need to propel their rapid acceleration.

This year's list offers examples of the possibilities for AI when it moves out of the lab and into the world. Innovators including Zack Dvey-Aharon at AEYE Health and Figure's Brett Adcock are showing the real-world potential for AI to improve how we live and work. Many industries, including media companies like TIME, are now partnering with leading AI companies to explore new business models and opportunities. The consequences of those moves will likely determine who appears on next year's list.

Since launching the TIME100 AI last September, we've been able to gather members of this group together in San Francisco and Dubai. We look forward to convening this group again in San Francisco and London later this fall as we continue to grow this community.

*[Buy your copy of the TIME100 AI issue here](#)*

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## **‘Act Like You Didn’t Even Hear’: Harris Fans Don’t Want Racist, Sexist Attacks to Distract Her**

Brian Bennett is the senior White House correspondent at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. He has covered wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, interviewed world leaders, traveled across the globe with President Trump and President Biden, and written extensively about intelligence, immigration and the fallout of major disasters.

Nik Popli is a reporter at TIME, based in the Washington, D.C. bureau. He covers economic policy and national politics, focusing on Congress, technology, and the economy.



Donald Trump stunned a roomful of Black journalists in late July when he claimed Vice President Kamala Harris “happened to turn Black” a few years ago. The former President has also in recent weeks repeatedly mispronounced Harris’ first name and said she would be treated as a [“play toy”](#) by world leaders.

The first woman of color running as a major party’s presidential nominee is expected to continue to draw political attacks with

racist or misogynistic undertones until Election Day. For many women of color at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago this week, the advice they had for Harris for the next 10 weeks could be summed up in four words: Don't take the bait.

"Some things you don't even need to dignify—act like you didn't even hear," says Rev. Shari Nichols-Sweat, a 66-year-old retired high school music teacher from Chicago, who belongs to the same historically Black sorority as Harris, [Alpha Kappa Alpha](#). Nichols-Sweat was at the United Center on Thursday night, having just watched Harris' [convention speech](#).

Speaking to the country, Harris described how she saw first-hand as a child the challenges her mother faced as "a brilliant, five-foot-tall, brown woman with an accent" who emigrated to the U.S. from India at the age of 19 with a dream to become a breast cancer research scientist. "But she never lost her cool," Harris said. "She was tough."

Harris is taking the same approach. Instead of expressing outrage at Trump's comments or calling them racist and sexist, she has often responded with a light touch, saying such comments are a part of the "same old show" of disrespect, and dismissing Trump and his allies as "weird" and Trump himself an "unserious man."

Harris will come face-to-face with Trump in a primetime debate in Philadelphia on Sept. 10, where he may further question her racial identity and level personal attacks against her in front of a nationally televised audience. She's already doing debate prep sessions to plan out how she will respond to Trump's tactics in person, according to campaign officials.

Former First Lady [Michelle Obama](#), during her convention speech on Tuesday, addressed the racist rhetoric and attack lines that have been wielded against Harris, warning that people "are going to do everything they can to distort" her background and

accomplishments. “My husband and I, sadly, know a little something about this,” she said, before calling out by name Trump, who peddled unfounded “birther” allegations against Barack Obama. “For years, Donald Trump did everything in his power to try to make people fear us. See, his limited, narrow view of the world made him feel threatened by the existence of two hardworking, highly educated, successful people who happen to be Black,” she said.

[video id=b4xhimBG]

Obama offered a piece of advice to Harris: “Going small is never the answer,” she said. “Small is petty, it’s unhealthy and, quite frankly, it’s unpresidential.”

Like Harris, Angela Alsobrooks, a Democratic Senate candidate who had a primetime speaking slot at the DNC on Tuesday, could also make history this cycle as Maryland’s first Black Senator. She tells TIME the racist and demeaning attacks against Harris are a sign Trump’s worried about losing: “He attacks her because she wins,” she says. Harris’ candidacy has “excited and engaged people” and she “should continue to be exactly who she is and continue working,” Alsobrooks says.

Alexandria Alston, 33, a fashion designer and embroiderer from Chicago who attended Harris’ speech Thursday night, said the Vice President is playing it right to not give Trump’s insults too much oxygen. “She is keeping her focus on what she needs to keep it on. Sometimes when people attack you, you have to look forward and not necessarily give them so much attention.” Those baiting comments were effective distractions in previous election cycles, Alston says. But she thinks this time is different. “You know this is a tactic of his, and so I don’t think we’re taking it,” Alston says.

Rather than hurt Harris, the attacks diminish the one lobbing them, says Krystal Kidd, from Southfield, Michigan. “I’m really

disappointed because I really thought he was a dynamic businessman once upon a time,” she says. “They show he hasn’t done his due diligence to be competitive in this race.”

Like so many others at the convention this week, Kidd hopes Harris continues to ignore such efforts by Trump. “She doesn’t have to do anything to push back against him,” says Kidd. “Everything she’s worked for speaks for her.”

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# Gaza's Doctors Face a New Battle: The War on Polio

Wright is an Editorial Producer for TIME



Polio has resurfaced in Gaza for the first time in 25 years, thriving in the same conditions in which people are dying. The first [case](#) was confirmed Friday in a 10-month-old unvaccinated child in Deir al-Balah, the enclave's health authorities have said; the World Health Organization announced last month that the virus had been initially detected in wastewater in the city. Now, in Gaza, the medical safety of thousands of children depends on the safe delivery of vaccines to the region.

“Just when it seems the situation could not get worse for Palestinians in [Gaza](#), the suffering grows—and the world watches,” said U.N. Secretary General António Guterres in a [press statement](#) Friday. “In recent weeks, the poliovirus has been detected in wastewater samples in Khan Younis and Deir al-Balah,” he said.

The reemergence of polio in Gaza did not come as a complete shock, given the situation in the region since the Hamas attacks on

Israel last October, during which roughly 1,200 people were killed. More than 40,000 people have been killed in Gaza in the ensuing conflict, according to figures from the Hamas-led Gaza health ministry, which are considered reliable by the U.S. government and the U.N.—and, unsurprisingly, routine immunization coverage, including for polio, has dropped. “Any disease that [can] spread that way will eventually spread,” says Dr. Majed Jaber, a physician from Gaza who spoke to TIME from Al-Mawasi, a town in Khan Younis. “Kind of a Murphy’s law.”

Ancient Egyptian art suggests that polio has existed for thousands of years. In 1840, a German scientist theorized the disease could be [contagious](#). But it took more than 100 years after that for a vaccine to be introduced. After President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was [diagnosed](#) with polio at 39 and was left partially paralyzed, announced the creation of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis in 1938—named after what polio was known as at the time—comedian Eddie Cantor [mused](#), “...Nearly everyone can send in a dime, or several dimes. However, it takes only ten dimes to make a dollar and if a million people send only one dime, the total will be \$100,000.” Parents sent in “[truckloads](#)” of dimes to the White House, spurring the rebrand of Roosevelt’s foundation to the March of Dimes.



When Jonas Salk, born in 1912 to Russian-Jewish immigrants, licensed the first version of the vaccine in 1955—by which time the virus was killing or paralyzing more than half a million people globally per year—it was meant to be universally accessible. Salk never profited from the formulation or production. When Salk was asked about who owned the vaccine, he said “Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?”

After the oral poliomyelitis vaccine (OPV) was developed in the late 1950s, the ease of administration made it so that mass vaccination campaigns were more practicable; that form of the vaccine is now more commonly associated with places outside the U.S. Polio has decreased by 99% percent globally since the 1980s, a victory attributed to the launch of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI). In the past several decades, the Palestinian vaccination effort was a success story, due in large part to the ease with which parents could take their children to hospitals for scheduled doses. “The occupied Palestinian territory had very high rates of vaccination coverage and that’s why we were quite successful in eliminating polio,” says Dr. Hamid Jafari, Director of Polio Eradication for the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region. “According to the regular childhood schedule, children in Gaza were getting vaccinated at very high rates.”

National immunization days were carried out in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on a yearly basis from 1995 to 1999, incorporating the more commonly-used OPV. Gaza had been polio-free, according to the U.N., since 1999. Jafari says pre-war vaccination rates were as high as 99%.

The reemergence of polio in Gaza is suspected to have stemmed from the same strain that affected Egypt in late 2023. The virus could have been circulating in victims in Gaza since as early as September last year. Although a vaccine now exists to stop it, the virus can still spread quickly via contact with fecal matter—a problem now exacerbated by the combination of the displacement

of masses of Palestinians with the fact that all five of Gaza's wastewater treatment plants have [shut down](#), according to the U.N., causing runoff to flow [openly](#) into the streets. "Keep in mind, polio spreads in already dismissed areas—areas without any access to the slightest aid," Jaber says.

### **Read More:** *The Infants Among the War Dead*

Indeed, the ease of administering both the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) and OPV does not mean that vaccination efforts are necessarily easy—and the situation in Gaza serves to magnify that difficulty.

Of the 36 hospitals in Gaza, only 16 are partially functioning today. Of the 107 primary health care facilities, fewer than half are still operating, Jafari says. The vaccines themselves must be stored at optimal temperature to remain effective, and are linked to refrigeration [equipment, which requires steady electricity that Gaza lacks](#). The trucks that carry the vaccines and equipment also require fuel—a resource Israel has [blocked](#) from entering Gaza. Even basic hygiene practices that deter the spread of infectious diseases like polio are difficult. In Gaza, "the Israelis have been strict with access to hygiene products, including soap, toilet wraps, cleaning products, and towels," says Jaber, the doctor in Khan Younis. "They have turned [them] into luxury products most cannot afford."

The virus's presentation is also a risk in and of itself, as it can mask the disease under common symptoms. "[They] typically include symptoms of a stomach flu—like nausea, vomiting and diarrhea," says Dr. Michael K. Wroten, who runs a clinic for polio survivors at Medstar National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington, D.C. Children in Gaza were already experiencing the spread of other infectious diseases. The spread of illnesses of all types makes it difficult to discern the root cause of such symptoms. "It is a headache to even start thinking about polio," echoes Jaber, between

working in clinics in Gaza. “We doctors lack the facilities to manage a child with diarrhea. Now we have to worry about this.” (The long-term effects of polio, such as paralysis, are also particularly difficult to cope with in places lacking infrastructure, which entails inaccessibility for people with disabilities, both physically and professionally. “These factors can put significant emotional and financial strain on individuals with polio, their families and communities,” says Wrotten, “especially during times of conflict where resources are already sparse.”)

A [U.N. vaccination campaign](#) aims to send out 708 teams to hospitals in Gaza—most of which are hardly operational. But the logistics are daunting. At least two rounds of vaccinations are planned to treat all children in Gaza under the age of 10. This comes as two more cases of acute flaccid paralysis, a symptom of polio, were [confirmed](#) in the region as of Tuesday, in a 5-year-old and 10-year-old. According to Jafari, the GPEI plans to [implement](#) the use of novel oral polio vaccine type 2 (nOPV2), a modified version of the vaccine used in Gaza in the past, which is more sustainable in emergency conditions.

“Without appropriate interventions, such as vaccination campaigns,” says Wrotten, “there could be widespread outbreaks of polio within a matter of months.”



But while the U.N. has requested a “Polio Pause” in fighting in order to conduct its campaign, several people familiar with the situation argue that combating the virus in Gaza requires a true ceasefire. “In terms of implementing these polio vaccination campaigns, there should be peace,” says Jafari. “...and if peace cannot be obtained, if ceasefire cannot be implemented, at least periods of tranquility... should be very clear so that the program can very clearly announce to these communities when it is safe to come out and bring their [children](#) for vaccination.”

**Read More:** [\*Britain’s New Government Comes Under Pressure to Pivot on Gaza\*](#)

“We all want to be hopeful,” says Dr. Susan Kullab, an infectious disease specialist who volunteered in Gaza in May with the Palestinian American Medical Association and the Jordanian American Physicians Association, who notes that health workers there don’t have reliable internet access in order to communicate with one another. “But the reality is that without ceasefire this is very challenging. Even if [the vaccines] do get in, how are they going to ensure that children get it?”

Edward Ahmed Mitchell, Deputy Director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, puts the argument in stronger terms: “No vaccine campaign is going to succeed while the population is actively experiencing a genocidal bombing campaign.” The U.N.’s plan to send out vaccinations, he notes, won’t work without collaboration with both Israel and Hamas.

The resurgence of polio in Gaza after 25 years highlights the dire consequences of war on public health. “A ceasefire is the only way to ensure public health security in the Gaza Strip and the region,” said the WHO, in a [statement](#) Friday. As history has shown, [polio](#) is a formidable adversary, and the futures of countless children in Gaza remain in peril.

**Correction, Aug. 26:** *The original version of this story mischaracterized the drop in polio vaccination in Gaza since the start of the war. Routine vaccination for all types of poliovirus has dropped, not just for circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2.*

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## The NFL's New Kickoff Rules, Explained

Sean Gregory is a senior sports correspondent at TIME. His work has been cited in the annual Best American Sports Writing anthology nine times. His stories have won awards from the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, and his work was named a finalist for Deadline Club and Mirror awards for excellence in magazine writing and reporting on media, respectively.



On a February afternoon in Las Vegas, [Harrison Butker](#) of the [Kansas City Chiefs](#) took seven steps toward the football, as many in the crowd of 62,000 at Allegiant Stadium held their phones aloft to capture the most anticipated moment of the NFL season: Super Bowl Sunday kickoff, finally, the beginning of the big game. More than 100 million viewers also tuned in, rapt with anticipation.

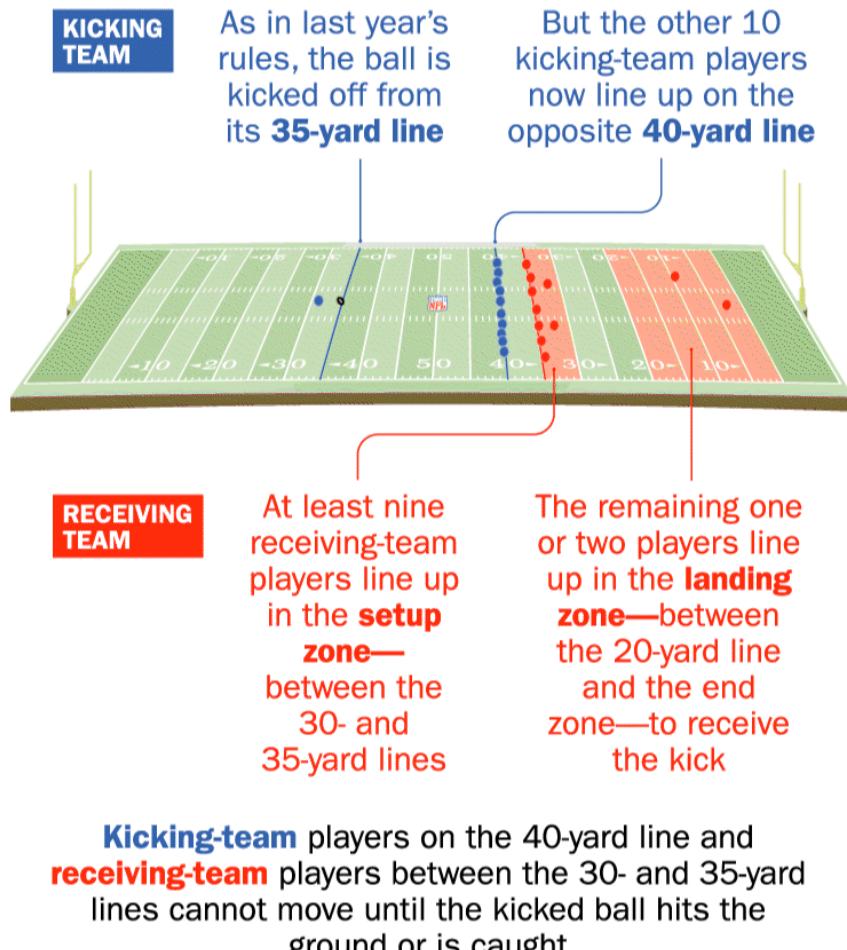
Butker proceeded to bum them all out. The ball sailed over the head of the San Francisco 49ers kick returner, out of the end zone for a touchback. Bor-ing.

Whereas Devin Hester of the Chicago Bears started off Super Bowl XLI, in 2007, with a bang by returning the opening kickoff [for a touchdown](#)—and nine other speedsters, including [Fulton Walker](#), [Desmond Howard](#), and [Percy Harvin](#) have done the same over the years—not a single Super Bowl LVIII kickoff produced even a play. There were 13 kickoffs in the game. And 13 dull touchbacks.

The NFL is seeking to sack such tedium. Back in March, the league passed [new kickoff rules](#) for this upcoming season, which begins on September 5. They're somewhat convoluted, but here's our stab at an explainer.

## New NFL kickoff rules

In an effort to make kickoffs more exciting while also reducing injuries, the NFL is implementing complicated new kickoff rules this season



<b>KICKS THAT HIT AND STAY IN THE LANDING ZONE</b> MUST BE RETURNED—NO FAIR CATCHES ARE ALLOWED	<b>KICKS THAT FAIL TO REACH THE 20-YARD LINE</b> THE RECEIVING TEAM TAKES POSSESSION AT THE 40-YARD LINE	<b>KICKS THAT HIT THE LANDING ZONE AND GO INTO THE END ZONE</b> MUST BE RETURNED OR DOWNS FOR A TOUCHBACK TO THE 20-YARD LINE
<b>KICKS THAT HIT AND STAY IN THE END ZONE</b> CAN BE RETURNED OR DOWNS FOR POSSESSION AT THE 30-YARD LINE	<b>KICKS THAT GO OUT OF BOUNDS BEFORE THE GOAL LINE</b> RECEIVING TEAM TAKES POSSESSION AT THE 40-YARD LINE	<b>KICKS THAT GO BEYOND THE END ZONE BY AIR OR BOUNCE</b> TOUCHBACK TO THE 30-YARD LINE

SOURCE: NFL TIME

Teams will still kick off from their own 35-yard line, but receiving teams will start from their own 30, instead of their own 25, on a touchback, offering less incentive for the kicking team to just blast the ball out of the end zone. Meanwhile, the 10 other players on the kicking team will be positioned at the other team's 40-yard line, rather than the point of the kickoff, as in the past. At least nine players on the receiving team must line up in the "setup zone" between their own 35- and 30-yard lines; in the past, eight or nine receiving-team players would set up between the kicking team's 45-yard line and the receiving team's 40.

None of these players can move until the kicked ball has hit the ground or the hands of a returner in the "landing zone," between the receiving team's 20-yard line and the goal line. (If a kick fails to reach the 20, the receiving team takes possession at its own 40-yard line: that's attractive field position.) This alignment approximates a play from scrimmage, with the kicking and receiving team facing each other in close space, which should keep kickoffs safer. Traditionally, players build up speed when running downfield, creating high-impact collisions. Under the new rules, balls that fall in the landing zone must be returned.

"The two major themes that everybody is trying to work through is to make the kickoff relevant again, bring that exciting play back more into the game, but it has to be something that is designed in a manner that hopefully reduces the injury rate, which has historically been the highest on the kickoff play," says former referee Walt Anderson, who now works for the NFL as its officiating rules analyst. "That's really the challenge."

The early returns look promising. More than 70% of kickoffs were returned in the 2024 preseason, compared to 54.8% during last year's preseason. The NFL saw 18 returns of at least 40 yards this preseason, double the number from 2023.

But the regular season may tell another story. Just 22% of all NFL kickoffs were returned in the 2023 season, the lowest in history: teams are likely putting kickoffs in play during exhibition games to evaluate their coverage personnel. One qualified skeptic of the new rules—former New England Patriots coach and six-time Super Bowl winner [Bill Belichick](#)—predicts that once the games count, teams will continue to boot the ball out of the end zone, like Butker did in the Super Bowl.

Putting the receiving team just five yards closer to the end zone isn't worth the risk of allowing a premier returner to do more damage. “Once you get into the regular season, if the [opposing] team’s got good returners, it’s just gonna be touchbacks,” Belichick [told](#) *The Pat McAfee Show* in August. “That’s all it’s gonna be. You put them on the 30 instead of 25, I mean, big deal. But I’d rather do that than kick it to one of these guys that can change field position on you in a hurry.”

If you want to create more returns, says Belichick, move the kickoff spot back to the 20 or 25, making it more difficult for the Butkers of the world to put the ball out of play. This tweak makes logical sense.

And here's the good news: this new format is in play for a year. If it flops, the league can fix it.

“We’ll see what happens during the course of the year,” says Anderson. “Do we want to end up making some changes? Do we want to go back to the drawing board? Everything’s on the table.”

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## Maria Branyas, the World's Oldest Person, Dies in Spain at 117



Maria Branyas, the [world's oldest person](#), died in a Spanish nursing home at 117 years old, according to her X account and a spokesperson at the home.

Branyas, who was American-born, officially became the world's oldest person [according to the Guinness Book of World Records](#) in January 2023 after [Lucile Randon](#), a French nun who previously held the title, passed away.

“Maria Branyas has left us. She has gone the way she wanted: in her sleep, at peace, and without pain,” her family wrote in [a post on her account on X](#).

In a second post, the family said she had told them she would pass away soon. “I don’t know when, but very soon this long journey will come to an end,” she was quoted as saying.

Branyas’ age was verified by Gerontology Research Group, a nonprofit that validates the ages of supercentenarians—those who have lived 110 years or longer.

She was born in 1907 in San Francisco, California but moved to Catalonia in 1915. She married a Catalan doctor named Joan Moret, with whom she had three children. Her husband passed away in 1976 at the age of 86, according to Guinness.

Branyas, who had lived through the 1918-1920 Spanish flu pandemic, gained fame in Spain in May 2020 after she became the oldest person to successfully recover from COVID-19 at the time.

“This pandemic has revealed that older people are the forgotten ones of our society. They fought their whole lives, sacrificed time and their dreams for today’s quality of life. They didn’t deserve to leave the world in this way,” she [told the Observer after her recovery](#).

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## Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Suspends Presidential Campaign

Simmone Shah is a reporter at TIME. She covers international and tech news.



Independent presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy Jr. suspended his campaign on Friday in what he said is an effort to make sure Democrats don't win the White House.

"In my heart, I no longer believe I have a realistic path to electoral victory," Kennedy said.

He said he will now support former President Donald Trump based primarily on three issues: free speech, the war in Ukraine, and what he called "the war on our children."

Kennedy announced his decision in Arizona, where he filed paperwork to withdraw his name from the ballot earlier this week. In his speech, he thanked the campaign's volunteers and staff and derided the political system and Democratic Party. "Now in an

honest system, I believe that I would have won the election,” he said.

A member of one of America’s most prominent political dynasties, Kennedy gained notoriety for [strange personal stories](#) and his promotion of conspiracy theories, particularly around [vaccines](#). He joined the race as a Democrat, intending to challenge incumbent President Joe Biden, but then dropped out of the Democratic primary to launch an independent bid. (Biden dropped out of the presidential race himself in July.) Kennedy’s campaign failed to maintain steam—a poll from [CBS](#) earlier this month found his popularity lingering at just 2%.

Kennedy said he didn’t want to play spoiler in the tight race between Trump and [Vice President Kamala Harris](#), who [accepted the Democratic nomination](#) at the party’s convention this week.

“Our polling consistently showed by staying on the ballot in the battleground states, I would likely hand the election over to Democrats with whom I disagree on the most existential issues—censorship, war, and chronic disease,” he said.

Kennedy said he would remove his name from the ballot in key battleground states and suspend campaign activities, though would remain on the ballot in less competitive states. “I want everyone to know that I am not terminating my campaign. I’m simply suspending it, not not ending it,” he said.

Trump told [CNN](#) on Tuesday that he would consider giving Kennedy a role in his second administration if he dropped out and endorsed him. “I didn’t know he was thinking about getting out, but if he is thinking about getting out, certainly I’d be open to it,” Trump said.

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# The Polaris Dawn Mission Opens a New Chapter in Private Space Flight

Jeffrey Kluger is an editor at large at TIME. He covers space, climate, and science. He is the author of 12 books, including *Apollo 13*, which served as the basis for the 1995 film, and was nominated for an Emmy Award for TIME's series *A Year in Space*.



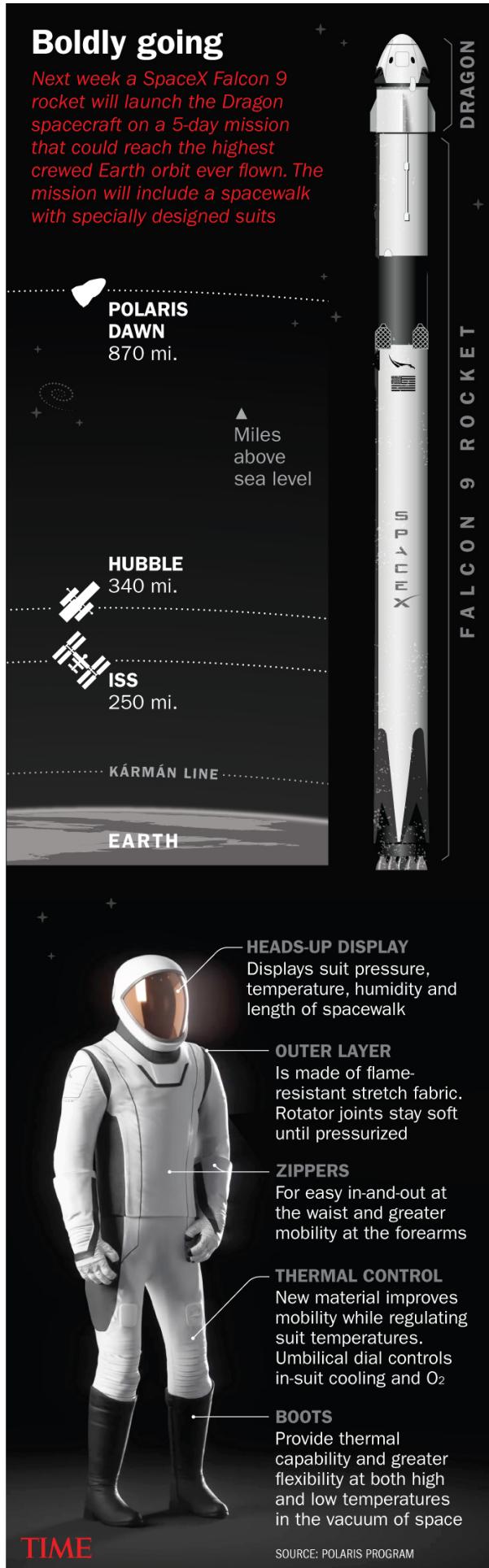
It was a very big deal on Sept. 14, 1966, when astronauts Pete Conrad and Dick Gordon [flew their Gemini XI spacecraft](#) to a never-before-attained altitude of 850 miles. It's still a big deal 58 years later, since that record for a crewed spacecraft in Earth orbit remains. But that will change later this month, when the crewmembers of the [Polaris Dawn](#) mission—set for launch on Aug. 26—fire their thrusters and climb to a new benchmark of 870 miles, venturing farther from home than any astronauts on any non-lunar mission have ever traveled.

The Polaris Dawn crew will notch other achievements too—becoming the first commercial astronauts to perform extravehicular activity (EVA, also known as a spacewalk), and the first to test communications between a spacecraft and the satellites that make

up the [SpaceX Starlink](#) system. They will also conduct a suite of more than 40 scientific experiments, testing the [SpaceX Dragon spacecraft](#) at altitudes that take it through the [Van Allen radiation belts](#), and also performing more than a dozen experiments on the crewmembers themselves, including exploring what to do about the stubborn problem of space motion sickness, which is experienced by [60% to 80% of all space travelers](#) during their first two or three days off the Earth. In addition, they hope to raise tens of millions of dollars for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

## Boldly going

Next week a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket will launch the Dragon spacecraft on a 5-day mission that could reach the highest crewed Earth orbit ever flown. The mission will include a spacewalk with specially designed suits



The mission is bankrolled by [Jared Isaacman](#), the billionaire founder and CEO of [Shift4](#), an internet payment company. It will be Isaacman's second trip to space, after the all-civilian mission of [Inspiration4](#), in September of 2021. That journey too raised [a lot of money](#) for St. Jude, Isaacman's favorite charity, and marked the first time an all-civilian crew journeyed spaceward. For both missions, Isaacman was effectively a paying customer of SpaceX, buying seats aboard the Dragon at [a reported \\$50 million each](#). Polaris Dawn has a bigger mission, kicking off the first of three flights in the Polaris series, which could see private crews perform maintenance on the [Hubble Space Telescope](#), and also fly aboard the inaugural mission of SpaceX's massive [Starship rocket](#).

“We named the Polaris program after our North Star,” says Isaacman, “which is [actually a constellation of three stars](#), and Polaris is contemplated to be three missions.”

Isaacman could be on all of those Polaris flights, which, after Inspiration4, will give him a total of four trips into space, making him one of the world's most experienced astronauts—despite his never having been part of NASA or any other governmental space program. His crew the first time around was noteworthy for its inclusion of [Hayley Arceneaux](#), then 29, a physician assistant at St. Jude, who had been treated there for bone cancer when she was a child, and became the first person to fly in space with a prosthetic—a rod in place of her left femur. This time around, the crew includes pilot Scott Poteet, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, and vice president of strategy at Shift4; mission specialist Sarah Gillis, a lead space operations engineer at SpaceX; and mission specialist and medical officer Anna Menon, another SpaceX lead space operations engineer.

For all of the contributions to science the Polaris series could make, it is the possibility of servicing Hubble and raising its altitude to a higher, longer lasting orbit that might be the greatest. Hubble has been [aloft since 1990](#), and in the decades since, it has established

itself as one of the most important cosmic observatories ever built. Five servicing missions conducted by space-shuttle crews helped extend its useful life, but since the shuttles stood down in 2011, the telescope has always been just one breakdown away from going offline for good. A new servicing mission by a new crew could keep it in operation for years to come.

“There’s been a study jointly conducted with SpaceX, Polaris, and NASA, on the feasibility of boosting Hubble,” says Isaacman. “[It’s] a pretty easy risk-reward ratio in my mind.”

Flying the maiden mission of Starship—which would happen on the third mission—would be no small thing either. The spacecraft has been selected by NASA for use as its Human Landing System—the lunar module for the Artemis program, which aims to have astronauts back on the moon before the end of this decade. Only a handful of NASA giants have commanded first missions in a new spacecraft—Alan Shepard in Mercury, Gus Grissom in Gemini, Wally Schirra in Apollo, and John Young in the shuttles. Whoever flies Starship on its first Earth orbital mission will be in rarefied company.

But Polaris Dawn will be the first out of the gate for the Polaris series, and it has manifold jobs to do. The business of conducting medical tests—including performing head tilts while spinning in the spacecraft—to puzzle out the stubborn problem of space sickness, could go a long way toward making space habitation and settlement more practical. Astronauts have been suffering from motion sickness since the first humans flew in space, and no one has ever come up with a good solution beyond administering antiemetics and other drugs.

“You can’t have this great SpaceX vision of putting hundreds of thousands of people in space if half of them are throwing up, because the other half are going to throw up too,” says Isaacman.

“That’s certainly something that has to be conquered for a species that evolved in 1g,” or normal gravity.

More immediately, the Polaris Dawn crew will also be the first to try out a new, more robust spacesuit design. Not only will it protect astronauts when they’re inside a nominally pressurized spacecraft, but also when they’re in the hard vacuum and extreme temperatures encountered during EVAs and on the surface of the moon. Like the old Apollo lunar suits, the new ones are rugged and allow for outdoor mobility—but unlike the old suits, they are also comfortable.

“One of the things you have to consider is oftentimes you introduce hard joint points around the suit,” says Menon. “If you’re sitting in a seat with restraints on, you can actually hurt the person inside with that. So SpaceX has developed this really novel joint design that, when a suit is unpressurized, actually becomes like a soft joint. On the EVA, Sarah and Jared will gather great data on the suit performance.”

The Starlink work could be groundbreaking too. More than 6,200 [Starlink satellites](#) are currently in orbit, and [up to 42,000](#) could eventually be deployed. The system, which has most famously been [used by both Ukraine and Russia](#) in their ongoing war, provides broadband service from the sky to the ground, but has not been used to date between two spacecraft. Polaris Dawn will run a proof-of-concept experiment establishing that it can be done.

“We are adding a laser to the trunk of Dragon,” says Gillis. “In order to communicate and send internet to the spacecraft, you have a laser directing information [from Starlink], and then another laser returning information to that moving constellation at all times. It’s incredible bandwidth availability.”

Life aboard Dragon during the five-day Polaris Dawn mission will be relatively comfortable. The four-person spacecraft has a

[habitable volume](#) of 328 cubic ft., somewhat roomier per person than the [three-person, 210 cubic ft.](#) Apollo. In orbit, that volume goes further still, since a weightless crew can make use of ceiling and bulkhead room that is not available in 1g.

The crew's food will be better and fresher than commonplace astronaut food too—at least for the first two and a half days. "The fresh-food options include little sandwiches, pizza slices, and empanadas before you get into Clif Bars, beef jerky, and stuff like that," says Poteet. The crew will have cold-brew coffee as well, which will serve a dual purpose—frozen into pouches that will be used to keep the fresh food cool, and becoming potable once the pouches thaw.

An earthly audience will be able to follow the mission as it unfolds—with liftoff, EVA, splashdown and other segments broadcast live. Menon, who is the mother of two small children, has co-authored a children's book titled [\*Kisses From Space\*](#), about a cosmic dragon and her terrestrial babies, which she will read from orbit. Copies of the book are being sold on the Polaris Dawn site and the one she takes to orbit will be auctioned off, with all proceeds going to St. Jude.

There may be music from space as well. During Inspiration4, crewmember Chris Sembroski played the ukulele for viewers at home. Polaris Dawn's Gillis is a classically trained violinist and may be taking her instrument to space with her. "Some secrets I'm going to keep," she says with a laugh.

Menon and the other crewmembers, of course, take little about their mission lightly. The journey will require lifting off atop a 23-story [Falcon 9 rocket](#) generating 1.7 million pounds of thrust, and flying a [13,228-pound](#) Dragon around the world at 17,500 miles per hour—or 4.9 miles per second. A lot can go wrong with that thrust, weight, and speed. The men and women who will fly the Polaris missions know that they will be taking their chances—

chances in the interests of high adventure, yes, but solid science too.

*Correction: The original version of this story misspelled the name of an astronaut. He was Dick Gordon, not Dock Gordon.*

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## At a Camp for Sudanese Refugees, the Overlooked ‘Worst Humanitarian Crisis in the World’ Comes Into Focus

Solcyré (Sol) Burga is a general assignment reporter at TIME. She covers U.S. news with a focus on student loans and LGBTQ+ issues.



Adré is supposed to be a town of transition. Perched on the border between Chad and Sudan, the city, which was initially used for

cross-border trade, has now become the passing point for people escaping civil war and famine in what some diplomats [have called](#) the “worst humanitarian crisis in the world.”

More than [600,000 refugees](#) have reportedly fled from Sudan to Chad in the last 16 months, meaning the neighboring country has seen more Sudanese refugees in one year than the previous 20 years combined, many of which have settled in makeshift borders, per remarks made by Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Another 10 million people remain forcibly displaced within Sudan since the internal political conflict began in April 2023.

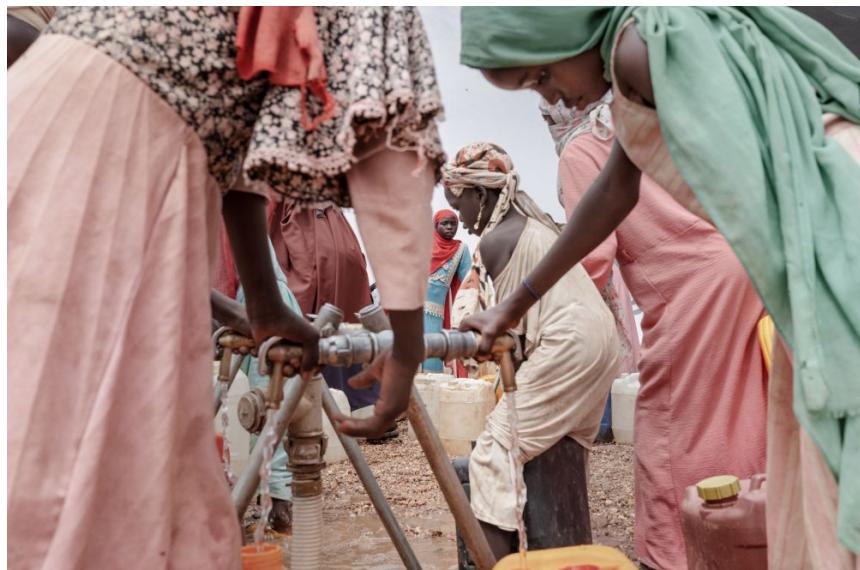
The newly-arrived families, mostly women and children, are entirely reliant on the aid of humanitarian groups, but in order to receive such assistance people must first wait their turn to be registered, which can take days, says Nicolò Filippo Rosso. A documentary photographer, Rosso visited refugee camps in Chad earlier in the summer, during trips with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Health Organization (WHO).



Rosso recounts meeting one pregnant woman who had recently arrived at the refugee camp in Adré with her children and was on the verge of giving birth. Sharing her plight, the woman told him that her children were exhausted from walking, had high temperatures, and were not eating properly.

The town of Adré is largely overwhelmed. “I’ve seen a lot of things related to migration in many places, but this was the first time that I really felt that it couldn’t be worse than that,” says Rosso. “There is a lot of intervention from NGOs and from United Nations agencies, but it’s not complete because Adré is so close to the border that it is unsafe because there are gangs raiding the camps at night, and [raping women and girls](#), and there is a lot of traffic of weapons.”

Even so, there have been several obstacles to distributing aid. Adré was closed off to international aid for six months, [though it was announced on Aug. 15 that the embargo had been lifted](#). In June, the UNHCR [said](#) they only received 10% of the requested \$214.8 million in aid necessary to help refugees at the border. The ask was made just prior to the rainy season, which typically lasts through September, and could exacerbate the existing crisis and cause outbreaks of waterborne diseases, according to the UNHCR.



Rosso, who himself contracted malaria, pneumonia, and COVID-19, says it’s very common to get these diseases. “The point is that you can cure malaria, you can cure COVID, but it’s open [defecation]. There is no sanitation, so the condition[s] people are living in is bad,” he says.

The photographer, who has documented other migrant crises in the Americas, typically composes black-and-white work, but has used color in the project to better encapsulate the “dignity that the Sudanese refugees have and their openness to each other, to others.”

“These women who are alone and [have gone] through violence of all kinds are there with their children maintaining pride,” Rosso says. “Color also is full of details that sometimes can distract you from the pain.”

















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## What's the Best Skin-Care Routine?

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



Walking down the skin-care aisle is like sensory overload. There are gels, creams, so-called essences, and serums, so many serums. The products claim to revitalize, exfoliate, hydrate, brighten, soothe, correct—or work anti-aging wonders. What's a skin-care novice to choose?

“It can be overwhelming for me, as a dermatologist in practice for 25 years, to walk into a Sephora and be surrounded by all the different options,” says Dr. Jessica Wu, who practices cosmetic and clinical dermatology in Beverly Hills, Calif. “There used to be one or two retinoids, or one or two vitamin Cs. Now, there are literally dozens, if not hundreds, of each category. It can be really intimidating.”

The first step to developing a skin-care routine, Wu tells bewildered patients, is understanding your own skin: Is it oily, dry, or normal? To figure that out, wash your face, and then consider

how it feels two hours later. “Is it feeling oily? Is it feeling dry and tight, or is it feeling pretty?” she asks. “That gives you a general idea of where you fall in that spectrum.”

From there, you can design a routine that requires only two to three steps at the start and end of the day. We asked experts which five products to prioritize—and when and how to apply them

## A gentle cleanser

Washing your face for 60 seconds with a gentle cleanser every morning and night is a terrific way to reset your skin. You’ll say good riddance to dirt, makeup, sweat, oil that built up over night, dead skin cells, and other impurities. “Even if your house is very clean, there could still be dust that falls on your skin or mites living in your pillow,” Wu says. “If you have animals, they could be licking your face, or kids could be touching your face.”

If you have dry skin, look for a creamy cleanser, she advises. If you’re oily, opt for a gel or foaming cleanser, because they’ll help break up the oils. Alexis Pfropper, an esthetician who owns ästhetik spa and skincare in Punta Gorda, Fla., likes to remind people that cleanser isn’t meant to have a stripping effect. “We want to clean it, but not overstrip it to the point where you get that squeaky-clean feeling,” she says. “That’s actually a little inflammation starting to happen, because your face is now so dry, and the pH is thrown off the skin.”

### **Read More:** *[How Much Do You Actually Need to Shower?](#)*

Pfropper suggests looking for a cleanser that contains hyaluronic acid, vitamin E oil, and glycerin, all of which help hydrate the skin. Avoid fragrances, sulfates, parabens, and alcohol, which could be irritating, she says.

## Moisturizer

Especially as we age, our skin gets drier because we're losing water—and that's one reason why moisturizing is so essential. "It can be really important to repair that skin barrier, so bacteria and yeast don't cause a problem," says Dr. Leah Ansell, an assistant professor of dermatology at Columbia University who practices in Rye, N.Y. "Plus, a moisturizer can just make your skin look and feel good."

Most people benefit from using a gentle moisturizer that doesn't have added scents or a ton of extra ingredients. Ian Michael Crumm, an esthetician in New York, suggests those with oily skin opt for a water cream moisturizer, which is lightweight; people who run dry might benefit from a rich moisturizer that has a thicker texture. You can apply it to your face, neck, chest, ears, under your eyes, your hands—anywhere prone to dryness.

## Vitamin C serum

Vitamin C is a powerhouse antioxidant that helps protect your skin from particles called free radicals that are created by UV rays.

[Exposure](#) can break down the skin's collagen production, while leading to signs of aging, like wrinkles, dark spots, fine lines, and saggy skin. "Our skin is bombarded by these free-radical particles, and we want to protect its collagen from being unnecessarily or prematurely broken down," Wu says. "That way, we can keep the skin looking fresh and smooth and youthful."

### **Read More:** [Why You Should Never Pop a Zit](#)

You can apply vitamin C every morning, Wu says, right after you wash your face. Squeeze a few drops onto your palm or directly onto your face, and then gently massage it into your skin. You can even put some on your chest, she adds.

When you're shopping for a vitamin C serum, look for one that includes vitamin E, which is another antioxidant, Wu suggests—the

combination is stronger than just vitamin C alone. Ideally, it should be sold in an opaque container with a pump. “Vitamin C is very fragile,” Wu says. “If it’s in a jar, you open it and it gets exposed [to light and air], and it breaks down. Just like a bottle of champagne or a bottle of soda—when you open it, it goes flat.”

## Sunscreen

Here’s a familiar but essential addition to any skin-care routine: sunscreen. Everyone should get in the habit of using it 365 days of the year, starting at a young age, Ansell says. While it’s especially important in the spring and summer, it’s possible to get sun damage any time of year, she points out. Even if you think you’re not going to spend a lot of time outside, you might still be at risk. [Side and rear windows in cars](#), for example, protect against UVB rays, which cause sunburn, but not against all [UVA rays](#), which are linked to wrinkles, skin aging, and other damage. “A lot of dermatologists see that people have more brown spots and a lot more wrinkles on the left side of their face,” Ansell says, and that’s because they’re not wearing sunscreen while driving.

Opt for a broad-spectrum sunscreen that’s SPF 30 to 50, Wu advises. (Going much higher than that doesn’t offer additional protection, she adds.) If you have sensitive skin, look for mineral sunscreen instead of a chemical version, she says—it’s less likely to be irritating. And keep in mind that you need to reapply sunscreen at least every two hours, or more often if you’ve been swimming or sweatily exercising.

- [5 Dermatologists on the 1 Thing You Should Do Every Day](#)
- [What’s the Best Skin-Care Routine?](#)
- [8 Ways to Stay Hydrated If You Hate Drinking Water](#)
- [Here’s the Best Kind of Sunscreen](#)
- [The 1 Heart-Health Habit You Should Start When You’re Young](#)

## **Retinoids**

Retinoids are derived from vitamin A, and they can help keep your skin looking youthful. The overarching term refers to retinol (which you can buy over the counter) as well as a variety of products that require a prescription. Among them: tretinoin (which treats acne and hyperpigmentation) and tazarotene (which works against acne, psoriasis, and sun-damaged skin). While people tend to use the word “retinol” to describe any and all retinoids, “that’s like calling all alcohol beer,” Wu says.

So which do you need? Most people do well with retinol, but some people—like those with severe acne or other skin conditions—benefit from more powerful prescription retinoids. Ask your dermatologist which is best for you. In general, if you’re testing a retinoid for the first time or have dry or sensitive skin, it’s best to start with retinol—it tends to be less drying and often contains hydrating ingredients, Wu says. Apply a thin layer to your face before you go to bed (it can be broken down by the sun), but only every other night for about a month. Some people find it irritating, so it’s best to ease in slowly.

Almost any adult can benefit from retinol, experts say, though people who are pregnant or breastfeeding are generally advised to avoid using the product. You should also skip it if you have a sunburn or broken, already-irritated skin. And it’s important to note that retinol can make your skin slightly more sensitive to the sun. “Retinoids help stimulate new collagen and also unclog pores, and they help push the dead skin cell layers off the skin,” Wu says. “In doing so, you may sunburn more quickly, because you have less layers of skin protecting you. That’s why we tell people to be sure to use some protection if you’re going to be using a retinol.”

**What’s the best order in which to apply these products?**

Order matters when you're applying skin-care products. Here's the step-by-step routine experts suggest following:

## In the morning

1. Wash your face with cleanser and softly pat it dry.
2. Apply vitamin C serum.
3. Moisturize your face.
4. Apply sunscreen.

## In the evening

1. Wash your face with cleanser as soon as you get home—it's probably dirty from the day.
2. Before you go to bed, make sure your skin is dry, and then apply your retinoid. ("Medication always goes first," Ansell says. "You want that closest to your skin.")
3. Moisturize your skin to help lock the retinol in.

## How quickly will you see results?

You won't notice a payoff from your skin-care routine immediately, Ansell cautions—but that doesn't mean it's not working. The earliest you might see results is after about four weeks. "Your skin should feel better—the texture is going to be smoother," she says. If you're dealing with discoloration, you probably won't notice any improvement for two to three months. "It's really the long-term benefits of a skin-care routine that are where you see all the results," she says. "It takes months, and even years, but it's a really good thing to do for your skin."

**Read More:** [\*How Much Hair Loss Is Normal for Women?\*](#)

## Enlisting a professional's help

If you're dealing with an issue like acne, eczema, or rosacea, consult with your dermatologist before starting a new skin-care routine. Or, if you have fairly normal skin, consider scheduling an appointment with a licensed esthetician. Many offer in-person as well as virtual consults, Crumm says, and it's smart to come prepared with a list of what products you use and when, as well as how much you're willing to spend on a new routine. Your esthetician will ask about your skin goals—a more even complexion? Looking dewey?—and then develop a step-by-step plan “around your personal preferences, capabilities, and budget,” he says.

Regardless of what products you gravitate toward, keep in mind that it's never too late to start a skin-care routine. Experts recommend thinking of it as an investment in yourself. “For so long, skin care was a vanity thing, and it's not,” Pfropper says. “It's OK to take 5 minutes out of your day to moisturize and apply sunscreen and serums.”

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## How to Make Friends as an Adult—at Every Life Stage

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



Chris Duffy isn't going to sugarcoat it: Making friends as an adult is hard. If you've ever tried to figure out exactly how to ask a potential platonic connection for their number—or word that first follow-up text—you know what he's talking about. "It's mortifying," he says. "It requires being vulnerable and cringe-worthy and putting yourself out there."

Social awkwardness aside, it's simply harder to meet new people as an adult, when you no longer have shared high school classes or a college dorm room. Add in [long work hours](#), [a fear of rejection](#), and [lack of trust](#), and it's no wonder many people struggle to make new friends.

Yet despite these obstacles, investing time and energy into growing your community is unequivocally worth it. Friendships keep us [mentally](#) and [physically healthy](#). Plus, "I think a lot of pressure gets

put on your partner to be everything,” says Duffy, author of *Let’s Hang Out: Making (and Keeping) Friends, Acquaintances, and Other Nonromantic Relationships*. “There’s this idea that they’re supposed to be your creative inspiration and your sexual partner and the coparent to your kids, and also your best friend—but friends bring something that your spouse doesn’t. You can find parts of yourself and get inspired and have fun” by broadening your group of confidantes.

We asked Duffy and other experts how to approach making new friends as an adult, based on the life stage you’re into.

## Early adulthood

Your 20s are the ideal time to start reflecting on your own friendship-making style—knowledge that will serve you the rest of your life. In part, that means figuring out whether you’re a joiner or an initiator, says Nina Badzin, who hosts the podcast *Dear Nina: Conversations About Friendship*. As a joiner, you’ll make it a point to proactively join activities or events you find interesting, like dance classes, a kickball league, or a professional networking group. If you’re an initiator, you’ll step up to organize get-togethers. “Maybe you invite two people, and those two people invite two people,” she says. Being a joiner and being an initiator both require a conscious effort; knowing which you are will help you determine the best approach to making friends.

You’ll likely meet lots of people at work—proximity fuels close bonds—and those connections can lead to other connections. “The acquaintance you made at this thing may stay an acquaintance, but maybe you meet someone through that person who becomes a friend,” Badzin says. “It takes time. In your 20s, you’re planting these little seeds that hopefully will blossom later.” So if you hit it off with your colleague’s roommate at happy hour, exchange numbers and then actually follow up to plan another time to hang

out. If that sounds daunting, remember that one of you has to make the first move. “Why not let it be you?” Badzin asks. “Somebody has to be brave. We really are in much more control of our social lives than we think.”

Badzin’s advice resonates with Jillian White, 24, who moved to New York City a little over a year ago. She was determined to meet new people, so she turned to social media—and found she was far from the only one searching for connection. A social platform called [222](#) that she tested out, for example, asks users to take a personality quiz based on their interests; they’re then matched with similar people, and the group is invited to participate in an activity like going out to eat or singing karaoke together. White also joined another group, [10 Chairs](#), that curates dinner parties for 10 people at a time. After each event, attendees are added to a group chat with everyone else who was at the dinner, which makes staying in touch easy.

“It’s really a bonding experience because everyone’s in it together, and everyone’s a little uncomfortable,” White says. “I can reinvent myself. If I don’t want to tell you about parts of me, I don’t have to. And maybe I’m finding myself, and fitting into different groups I didn’t think I’d be a part of.” It’s scary, she says, but more than that, exciting. Her advice to other young adults: “Give yourself grace. Making friends is hard, and it takes trial and error, but everyone has the same common goal to meet people.”

## When you’re a new parent

After becoming a parent, you might feel too exhausted, at least at first, to even consider bringing another new person into your life. But the early months of parenthood can also be isolating, especially if it’s mostly just you and baby all day in the beginning, and it can be nice to bond with someone over all the new experiences and hopes and worries that come with this phase of life.

That's why Duffy suggests leaning into low-effort opportunities, and starting with people in the vicinity: the other parents at the playground, at "parents and babies" sessions at the local library, or at a new-mom or -dad support group. Duffy likes to take walks with his baby, and he's found that he regularly crosses paths with the same people also walking their babies. The easiest thing to do, he says, is give a slight nod and perhaps say good morning. But if he wanted to take it a step further, he'd make it a point to stop and say: "Hey, I've seen you walking around with your baby before. I'm Chris. What's your name?" Or perhaps he'd ask for advice: "Have you found a good baby music class you like around here?" That might strike up a conversation that leads to an ongoing connection.

Still, it's essential to establish that your friendships are about the adults, not the kids, Badzin stresses. "Eventually these kids get older, and they're not going to want to hang out, or someone's going to leave someone out in middle school, or date and break up," she says. "If the friendship isn't grounded in the adults, the adults will have drama between them." She's seen many people stop talking to their friends because their kids hurt each other.

One way to do that is to make sure all your conversations don't revolve around the kids—that way, you have other interests and shared likes to ground the relationship. Though it might feel awkward, Badzin also suggests having a direct conversation, especially if you start noticing the kids are drifting apart. Word it like this: "We should just assume that at some point our kids are going to want to hang out with other people." Remind each other that you're committed to staying friends, regardless of how the kids' friendship evolves.

- [\*\*How to Make Friends as an Adult\*\*](#)
- [\*\*How to Rebuild a Broken Friendship\*\*](#)
- [\*\*How to Know if Your Friendship Is Toxic\*\*](#)
- [\*\*How to Make a Long-Distance Friendship Work\*\*](#)

- **What Makes a Friendship Last Forever?**

## Adulthood and midlife

When you enter your mid-30s, and as you cycle through your 40s and 50s, it can be helpful to reframe how you think about friendship. “As we get older, gone are the days of having that one all-encompassing best friend” you might have relied on in your 20s, says Rachel Ann Dine, a licensed professional clinical counselor in Agoura Hills, Calif. “Be open to being part of different friend groups that fulfill the different pieces of who you are as an adult.” You might have one group you go out to an expensive dinner with once a month, for example, and another you hike with for free every weekend.

Dine suggests regularly setting small connection goals for yourself: going to a group workout class once a week and smiling at somebody, giving your neighborhood book club a chance, joining a pickleball team, tagging along with your coworkers to happy hour once a month. “You may not hit it off with anybody the first time you go, but that doesn’t mean your person won’t show up,” she says.

Duffy, meanwhile, is a proponent of finding ways to regularly spend time at the same place, like a favorite cafe or the library down the street. “If you go to the same coffee shop every day, I guarantee you, you will get to know the people who work there on that shift, and you’ll probably get to know other people who go there,” he says. “If you find a place where there’s people you share interests with, and then you repeatedly cross paths with them, that’s how it works.” These repeated low-stakes interactions, as he describes them, can evolve into meaningful relationships. Plus, he points out, when you’re feeling lonely, it’s simply nice to have someone know your name. “Don’t discount the power of saying hello,” he says.

Even for those with the best of intentions, scheduling can get tricky during the midlife years, Badzin acknowledges. We've all seen the memes that [celebrate canceled plans](#). But it's essential to be conscious of—and actually put work into—making time for friends. "You have to not be a flake," she says. "You have to keep your plans as much as you can, even when you don't feel like it because you're tired. Most people are usually happy that they put that time in."

## Senior years

Think you're too old to make new friends? You couldn't be more wrong, Badzin emphasizes—but you have to stay open to the possibility. Then, find ways to put yourself out there, like joining a group to play games or taking up a class with built-in socialization. "I don't love yoga as much because you don't talk during yoga," she says. "Learning a card game, knitting, a writing class where you're sharing—there's chatting during all of those. If it's a silent experience, you're not really going to meet someone." Badzin's mom, for example, who's nearly 80, regularly makes new friends through literature classes and other community education programs, as well as at gym programs designed for older people.

You might find that intergenerational friendships, in particular, are rewarding. Dine recently befriended a "funky, wonderful" woman in her late 80s—meaning the two have a 50-year age gap. They met at an antique store and have already gone out to coffee several times. Duffy, meanwhile, met a 102-year-old friend at the local swimming pool, and he's since enjoyed hanging out on her front porch while sipping iced tea. "It's incredible and beautiful and kind of wild," he says. "I get so much out of having older friends and younger friends."

Sharon Croteau, 83, has made too many friends to count since moving into Wake Robin, a continuing-care retirement community

in Shelburne, Vt. She plays bridge multiple times a week, volunteers regularly, puts together jigsaw puzzles with her fellow residents, participates in strength and conditioning and water-aerobics classes, and goes blueberry-picking with other community members. She took up golf at age 75 and recently started playing pickleball. As long as you're doing things that genuinely appeal to you, she says, it's easy to meet new people—and to know you'll already have something in common with them. Croteau has always had a full life, and she's enjoyed maintaining that richness at her new home. "I decided that in order to make friends, you have to be a friend to yourself," she says. "You have to understand where you're at and what you enjoy doing."

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## How to Know if Your Friendship Is Toxic—and What to Do About It

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



We all know the importance of fostering close social connections. Friends are great—until they’re not.

Psychologists say they hear often about so-called toxic friendships, which veer away from the health benefits we’re accustomed to and instead take a hammer to emotional and psychological well-being. “A lot of what I see in these dynamics is that one person is acting in good faith, and the other is being manipulative or controlling,” says Brooke Sprowl, a therapist in Santa Monica, Calif. “It really takes a toll on your self-trust, because you’re being told that if you set boundaries, you’re being selfish, or if you’re not giving in to all of their needs, you’re letting them down.” People with toxic friends might also experience self-doubt, she adds, constantly questioning if they’re seeing things the right way, or if they’re missing something. It’s no wonder these relationships can trigger anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues.

With that in mind, we asked experts how to know if your friendship is toxic—and what to do about it.

## Recognizing the signs of a toxic friend

Toxic friendships are often one-sided. You might notice you're always the one initiating conversations, making plans, and generally keeping the friendship alive. You might even start to feel like your friend's pseudo-therapist. "You're listening to their concerns and giving them advice, but you're not getting that same kind of treatment and respect in return," says Dr. Sarah Quaratella, a psychiatrist in Denver who works with college students often struggling with toxic friendships. "You become a vessel for a friend's trauma dumping, but they can't remember your dog's name."

### **Read More:** *[How to Make a Long-Distance Friendship Work](#)*

Boundary violations are also common: If you're not a night person, and you tell your friend that after 8 p.m., you're going to be on the couch in front of the TV, they shouldn't keep calling you at 11. "If you have a friend pressuring you or making you feel guilty, or like you need to change yourself to meet their expectations, that's a red flag," Quaratella says.

Angela, 43, who used her first name only in order to talk candidly about her relationships, grew up in a small town where high school nights were spent around a bonfire, drinking beer out of kegs. "That set the tone for 'friendships,'" she says. Throughout her teens and 20s, her friends often encouraged her to drink or party more than she wanted to, leading her to make choices she later regretted. And as she got older, she felt too embarrassed to talk about the things she was passionate about or that they couldn't relate to, like her business-school classes. "Who we surround ourselves with is so important, because feelings and emotions are contagious," she says. "And the negative ones will bring you down."

Like Angela, you might realize that you don't like who you are when you're around your so-called friends, adds Jenna Brownfield, a psychologist in Minneapolis. Perhaps you feel like you're losing parts of yourself that you cherish. "You might feel like it's hard for you to be compassionate toward your friend, when that's a characteristic you really value," she says. "Or feeling less playful or funny, if that's a way you like to show up in the friendship." If you check in with yourself after spending time with a friend, you might also find that you feel mentally and emotionally drained.

Toxic friends are often guilty of emotional hijacking, Brownfield points out. That's when, intentionally or not, someone does something that escalates emotions rapidly, like yelling or slinging insults. That person will also create lots of pressure: "We have to talk about this *now*." They might have a scarcity mindset, too, which Brownfield describes as wanting your friendship to be more important than any other friendships. "That might look like messages of, 'You can't have other friends' or 'Why did you go to another friend instead of turning to me when you needed help?'" she says. It can end up isolating you from other connections, leaving you focused solely on what's actually a toxic friendship.

## **What to do about it**

It's a good idea to give yourself time to figure out how to proceed. Take a step back from the situation and talk to your support system to get some perspective, Quaratella urges. Talk through your long-term expectations: What are your hopes for the friendship? What needs to change, and realistically, will it? You can start to "come up with ways to preserve your integrity and self-respect, while also advocating for yourself," she says.

Sometimes, there are changes you can personally make that will prove helpful. If you make it a point to be in tune with your emotions and practice emotional-regulation strategies, you might

not feel as triggered by your friend's behaviors, Brownfield says. "You can start to see, is that enough to shift the dynamic between us? Me being able to stay calm when things get heated?" she says.

Otherwise, it's time for a direct conversation. The best way to approach it, Brownfield says, is to focus on the pattern or cycle hurting your friendship. "Have that common enemy of like, 'What is this pattern playing out between us, and how do we conquer it together?'" Improvement is possible, she says—but it won't happen overnight or with one conversation. It requires time and effort from both people. After you've talked, if you notice old behavior flaring up again, you'll need to call attention to it: "Oh my gosh, there we went again." If the situation continues to deteriorate—or if your friend isn't committed to positive change—it may be time to part ways.

## More From TIME

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## How to end a friendship respectfully

Ending a friendship is difficult no matter what, but the way you approach it can make a big difference. Sometimes, it might make sense to simply distance yourself without formally cutting ties. "If it's like, you're at different places in your life, you can decide if you want to just have things naturally fade and leave it open, so that if things change, you can always come back to them," Quaratella says.

But if the friendship clearly needs to end, it's usually best to have a direct conversation and set firm, cordial boundaries. In that case, you might say, "I'm in a place right now where I need to take a step back from this friendship." Or: "I'm taking time to myself right now and working through some things. I'll reach out when I'm

feeling more able to participate in our friendship.” If the person has really hurt you, Quaratella suggests adding: “I’m not comfortable with the way this friendship is going right now, so I’m going to stop our communication here.”

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Before having that conversation, keep in mind it can be a good idea to rehearse what you’re going to say with someone you trust. “You can practice what you’re going to say, so you set yourself up in the best position without feeling like, ‘Oh, no, I sent that text when I really wish I didn’t,’ ” Quaratella says.

When Angela, the woman whose friends pushed her to party, realized those relationships weren’t healthy, she handled the breakups in different ways. Though she communicated directly with some people in her friend group—calling out hurtful behaviors—things naturally shifted with others. Today, she has “wonderful” friends who share many of her interests, like health, spiritual growth, and parenting. “As we evolve and grow, our friendships will evolve and grow. I think it’s so important to know that you never have to feel like you’re trapped in a friendship.”

## **What to do when a friend ghosts you**

Sometimes, it might feel like a friend vanished into thin air. Being ghosted is painful, Quaratella acknowledges, and can make you feel confused and distressed. She suggests first reaching out to a mutual friend to see if they’ve heard from your potential ghoster. “The answer could be yes, and that hurts so much,” she says. “But it can give you context in the sense of whether this is a universal issue—like, ‘This person fell off the grid from our friend group’—or ‘It

seems like they're ghosting just me.’’ That can help you determine your next step.

You might find it makes the most sense for you to try to reach your own place of acceptance that the friendship is at least on pause. ‘‘You can accept that and be like, ‘I’m going to make the choice to not keep reaching out,’’’ Quaratella says. ‘‘You almost ghost them in return. What I like about that option is it leaves the door open for a rekindling of that friendship.’’ She’s seen high school best friends, for example, drift apart during college—and then, 10 years later, reconnect. When they look back, they’re glad they didn’t say any harsh final words that might have arrested the reunion.

Depending on the circumstances, however, you might also want to be more direct. For example, you might send a message that says: ‘‘I’m really sad that we haven’t been able to talk as much. I miss you,’’ giving your friend an opportunity to respond, Quaratella suggests. Sometimes, people apologize, explaining that they’ve been busy or are going through a hard time, which helps the person who’s been ghosted realize it’s not personal. Otherwise, knowing you made a final effort can allow you to move on and grieve the friendship.

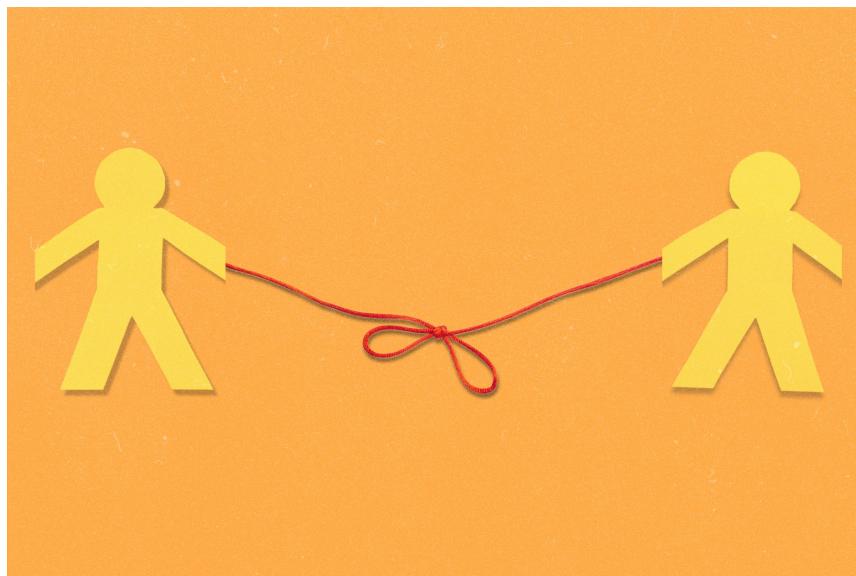
Whatever you do, remind yourself that ‘‘regardless of what that friend did, you are able to have healthy friendships, and you can feel secure with yourself,’’ Brownfield says. ‘‘There’s a difference between ‘I feel disposable’ vs. a deep belief of ‘I am disposable.’’’ If you’re able to hold onto the knowledge that you’re a valuable friend, you’ll be better able to endure the pain of evolving friendships, she stresses.

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## How to Make a Long-Distance Friendship Work

Angela Haupt is a health and wellness editor at TIME. She covers happiness and actionable ways to live well.



If you see Alexandria Agresta breaking into a wide grin, one of her best friends—who lives thousands of miles away—probably just sent her a meme or an inspirational quote from Instagram. The person may or may not have included a note about why they liked it. Either way, the notification dinging on her phone thrills her. “It’s this really powerful symbol that during their busy day, they saw this thing and thought of you,” says Agresta, 30, who lives in Miami. “It gives me tingles. To me, in this digital age, it’s such a beautiful symbol of connection—like the digital form of unconditional love.”

Agresta, whose long-distance BFFs live around the globe, saves all the Instagram posts her friends send her in a special folder on the app. Then, when she’s feeling lonely, she can click through—and that big smile will return.

While nurturing long-distance friendships takes work, the payoff is worth it, experts say—and even small gestures like those that are meaningful to Agresta can keep bonds alive. “You have to find ways to keep that friendship special,” says Kristen Suleman, a therapist in Houston whose clients often bring up long-distance friendships. “It’s all too easy to have different schedules, and live in different time zones, and be like, ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’ You have to let that person know they matter to you, and that the role they play is irreplaceable.”

We asked experts—and people working to maintain their own long-distance friendships—to share their favorite ways to keep those bonds strong.

## **Check in about communication preferences**

First, get clear on how much communication will help each person feel like their needs are being met, advises Jerilyn Adams, a therapist in Milwaukee who estimates that 90% of her friendships are long-distance. One friend might be happy with the occasional check-in, while another is staring at their phone, awaiting a text that never arrives. Having a direct conversation about what the right amount for each friend is can help prevent feelings of being forgotten about or not prioritized, Adams says.

Keep in mind, too, that each person might prefer a differ type of communication. Jacqueline Shaulis, 47, of Martinsburg, W.V., has been cultivating long-distance friendships for years, in some cases with people she’s never met in person. One friend exclusively texts; another always calls on the phone. “We’ve all come to respect one another’s way of connecting,” she says. “It happened over time, with a lot of trial and error. It’s just about finding that rhythm that allows you to nurture the friendship consistently.” When in doubt, she adds, always ask.

## **Schedule regular virtual or phone catchups—and make them special**

Suleman and her friends, who have lived in different parts of the country for around 20 years, make it a point to schedule monthly or bimonthly calls. Since she and many of her best friends are parents, the calls are often after the kids' bedtimes. "We schedule them a few weeks out," she says, because otherwise busy schedules might keep these catchups from actually making it onto the calendar. As she points out, "Life can happen—but we try to commit to it."

When Suleman wants to let her friends know she's thinking of them, she Venmos them \$5 or \$10 and tells them to get a treat on her. "It's just the gesture that matters," she says. "Sometimes we do that right before a catchup call, and it's like we're having coffee together because we went and bought it for each other."

## **See each other in person when you can**

Friend trips require a financial investment and a lot of coordination, but if you can swing them, they ensure you always have something to look forward to. Plus, they prove you're committed to keeping the friendship alive. Suleman and her friends do one annually; they've been to Seattle and Miami, for example, and this year, they'll do a girls' weekend in New England.

If a trip sounds like too much of a splurge, get creative about ways to make a get-together work. Brianna Paruolo, a psychotherapist in New York, suggests visiting each other's cities and, if possible, staying in your friend's home. Hosting each other "can be cost-friendly," she says, "while also promoting more quality time." If you'd still like to travel somewhere new, skip the star-power destinations and focus on more affordable places.

When you're in the planning stage, Suleman suggests maintaining a shared Google doc or iPhone note where you can brainstorm ideas about where to go and what to see when you get there. "It's been such a collaborative thing," she says. "We say, 'Where have we been, and where have we not been?' It helps us build those shared experiences."

Agresta and her friends, meanwhile, like to have at least one trip on the calendar at all times, usually to a music festival, since that's something they all enjoy. "It's like killing three birds with one stone," she says. "You get to see each other, see an artist, and travel somewhere new." Though they aim to take one group vacation a year, they're sometimes able to pull off more; last year, the long-distance friends saw each other five times. "If we have at least one on the calendar, that's perfect," Agresta says. "But we're pleasantly surprised when it's more than that."

## **Find small ways to keep each other updated on daily life**

When you and your friend live in different parts of the country, you miss out on all the day-to-day details that create a shared history. That's why Adams suggests keeping each other updated: sending links to restaurant menus before you go out to eat, for example, and mentioning the names of the people you'll be with, instead of simply referring to them as "friends."

Another way to do that, Suleman adds, is to get into the habit of sending each other audio messages throughout the day. It's a simple way to keep in regular touch, without having to pour a lot of mental energy into crafting a long text or email.

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## **Get your whole family involved**

Suleman and her long-distance friends make it a point to show photos of each other's families to their kids. That way, it's clear "they're important in our lives, even though we don't see them very often," she says.

On birthdays, the friends take things a step further and enlist their entire family to help make a festive video. Maybe they sing in it; maybe they all learn a celebratory TikTok dance to mark the special day. "Whether it's for them or their kids, it shows you're thinking of them," Suleman says. "It's an easy thing to do, but it makes a big difference."

## **Don't underestimate the value of snail mail**

Go old-school and write handwritten letters to your friends, advises Natalie Rosado, a licensed mental-health counselor in Tampa. You can add surprises like drawings, trinkets, books, friendship bracelets, or even photo prints from the last time you got together. "Handwritten letters are personal and meaningful," she says. "They add a nostalgic and tangible element to the friendship." Your friend might display them on their wall or refrigerator and look that way every time they need a spark of joy in their day.

## **Create a shared photo album**

Suleman and her friends send each other photo texts regularly, but sometimes, things get lost in the chaos of the day. So they created a shared photo album that they can all add to and peruse when time allows. "There's no pressure or expectation, but whenever any of us thinks of it, we try to add a few," she says. "It could be things

that are important to each of us—one friend will be like, ‘Look at these gorgeous flowers.’ And someone else will be excited about their kid’s outfit.”

If you’re feeling especially motivated, you could even set up a monthly photo challenge. Assign a theme—like home-cooked meals or dramatic views—and at the end of the month, share your top five to 10 favorites with each other. “It provides a window into daily experiences and keeps the connection vivid,” Rosado says.

## **Participate in activities together**

Who needs proximity? Today’s technology allows friends to embark on all sorts of projects together, even across time zones. Depending on what you’re interested in, you and your friend could start a blog, a digital scrapbook, or even an online business together, Rosado points out. “Working toward a common goal strengthens the bond,” she says. Or choose a weekend night to make dinner together: You can follow the same recipe, and cook or bake together over FaceTime. Once it’s time to enjoy the dish, keep chatting—allowing the conversation to, finally, veer away from how many cups of milk you need and whether the meat looks too crispy.

Another idea: Join an online fitness class together or follow the same routine from a platform like YouTube. “Share progress, motivate each other, and even exercise together over a video call,” Rosado suggests.

## **Show up for each other’s milestones**

Agresta recently became a DJ, and she invited her favorite people to her Miami rooftop for a special debut party. All her long-distance best friends made the trip. Even those who live on the other side of the country told her: “We wouldn’t miss it for the

world. We're going to be there," she recalls. The experience taught her that it's essential to make an effort to be there for each other's milestones, and not just weddings or new babies. "Those are a given," she says. "But for me, becoming a DJ was really important, and I wanted everyone I loved to be there. That was like my wedding," and it wouldn't have been complete without the presence of long-distance friends.

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## How to Rebuild a Broken Friendship

Jamie Ducharme is a health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, Long COVID, mental health, vaping, psychedelics, and more. Her work for TIME has won awards from the Deadline Club, the New York Press Club, and the Newswomen's Club of New York. Additionally, she is the author of *Big Vape: The Incendiary Rise of Juul*, which was adapted for a forthcoming Netflix docuseries.



In relationship research, there's a concept known as “[turning points](#).” These are moments when bonds change, either for better or worse—perhaps because of shifting life circumstances or something more dramatic, like a fight or reunion.

Long-term friendships often involve multiple turning points, [studies show](#). “Friendships have a lot of different trajectories,” says Jeffrey Hall, director of the Relationships and Technology Lab at the University of Kansas. “They can go up, they can go down, they can plateau.”

Sometimes, if a relationship has cratered, one person has to actively initiate a turning point to revive it. How to do that, of course, depends on why your friendship suffered in the first place. Did you [drift away from a childhood friend](#) once adulthood hit, or are you trying to repair the damage after a [friend breakup](#) or betrayal?

No matter the circumstances, experts say it is often possible to get your friendship back on track. Here’s where to start.

## If you simply lost touch

First, get out of your own head. People tend to resist contacting old friends, even if they want to, because it feels as awkward as talking to a stranger, [one 2024 study](#) suggests. Other [research hints](#) that we don’t get in touch because we consistently underestimate how much people appreciate our outreach.

But the truth is, people typically respond well to hearing from an old friend, perhaps [even more so when the interaction is unexpected](#), says Miriam Kirmayer, a Montreal-based clinical psychologist who specializes in adult friendship. Sending that text may feel uncomfortable, but “it’s an opportunity to make someone’s day,” she says.

That said, your overture is more likely to be successful if there’s a reason behind it. The reason may be obvious—you just moved to their city and want to catch up—or you may have to create one, Kirmayer says. “It can be something as simple and earnest as saying, ‘I’m not sure why after all this time you’re on my mind...’

but I have to let you know [something] reminded me of you,'" she says. The idea is just to make it clear why you've decided to reach out, so they're not befuddled by an out-of-the-blue message and left wondering what you want.

Kirmayer recommends [starting with a baby step](#), like a text or a message on social media, so you can feel out the vibe and let the relationship progress organically. But if you're serious about becoming friends again (and if geography allows), it's important to eventually progress to in-person friend dates, says Jessica Ayers, an assistant professor of psychological science at Boise State University who studies friendship.

"Doing things in person, having that eye contact, and being able to disclose things" face-to-face will make it easier to get to know each other again and signal that you're serious about reconnecting, she says.

Once you've done the hardest part—making the first move—consistency is key to preventing the renewed relationship from fizzling out, Hall says. If you live in the same place, you could set a standing lunch date. Or, if you don't, perhaps it's a recurring virtual hangout. Hall, for example, schedules a monthly phone call with the friend who was the best man in his wedding; sometimes they talk for 15 minutes and other times they talk for hours, but they always make it happen.

Finally, try to bring your connection into the present, rather than leaning solely on [nostalgia](#), Kirmayer says. Make a point of asking about their current interests and hobbies, or perhaps even try to find new ones together.

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## If you had a friendship breakup (and you caused it)

If you decided to end a friendship, or behaved in a way that caused a friend breakup, reopening that book will take some humility on your part.

If you [need to apologize](#) and haven't yet, that's the place to start—assuming your former friend is open to hearing it, Ayers says. You could start by sending them a message along the lines of, “I'd like to reconnect. I know I owe you an apology. Is there a path forward for doing this?” Ayers suggests. It may feel easier to “steamroll through” straight into the apology, but it's probably kinder to allow the other person time to decide how much, if any, interaction they'd like to have with you, she says.

And hard as it is, you have to be willing to accept any outcome, Hall says. “Genuine and meaningful apologies come with no expectation,” he says. “If they don't even want to respond, that's their decision. If you're in the wrong, you have to own it—and owning it means you don't get to push them to do anything.”

But if your initial apology goes well and your friend agrees to try again, resist the temptation to continually grovel moving forward, Kirmayer says. Constantly apologizing can feel insincere and even manipulative, like you're trying to guilt-trip your friend into forgiving you and returning to how things were.

Rather than over-apologize, “you have to show that you've changed” with your behavior, Ayers says. “That is hard and it takes a lot of time and a lot of energy,” but it's the best way to prove you're ready to recommit to the relationship.

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## If you had a friendship breakup (and they caused it)

Before revisiting an old relationship, it's a good idea to first figure out why you feel compelled to do so, Ayers says. That may be particularly important if you're contacting someone who previously hurt or rejected you. Do you simply want closure or an apology, or are you really interested in trying to be friends again? Being explicit about what you want from a reconnection helps set the stage for both of you, Kirmayer says.

But, again, remember that you can't force anyone to be your friend —even if you feel like the one who was previously wronged. If someone decided to cut off the relationship, or acted in a way that damaged it, they may not be interested in returning to it, even if you are.

That's particularly likely if clashing traits were at play in the original breakup, Ayers says. She researched "friendship deal-breakers" in graduate school and found that it's usually easier for people to address situational problems, like one person being too busy for the other, than inherent trait differences. If your friend stopped talking to you because they didn't like your sense of humor, the situation isn't likely to change unless your jokes have.

If you and your friend give it another go and you find yourself struggling to move on from your past hurt, you have a few options. You could try to talk it through, either on your own or by visiting a therapist together. (There aren't many clinicians who explicitly offer friendship therapy, Kirmayer says, but some who provide marriage or family therapy may be willing to work with friends.)

You could accept that your friendship may never be as strong as it once was, but perhaps can exist in a specific context—maybe you're no longer close confidants, but you enjoy going to yoga together. Or, you could make an explicit agreement not to talk about your past conflict in hopes of moving past it, Kirmayer says.

Doing so may feel like you're avoiding the elephant in the room. But there's a difference between ignoring a difficult topic and coming to a mutual decision to put it to the side, Kirmayer says. "It's a boundary," she says, and one that may help you focus less on your past, and more on your future.

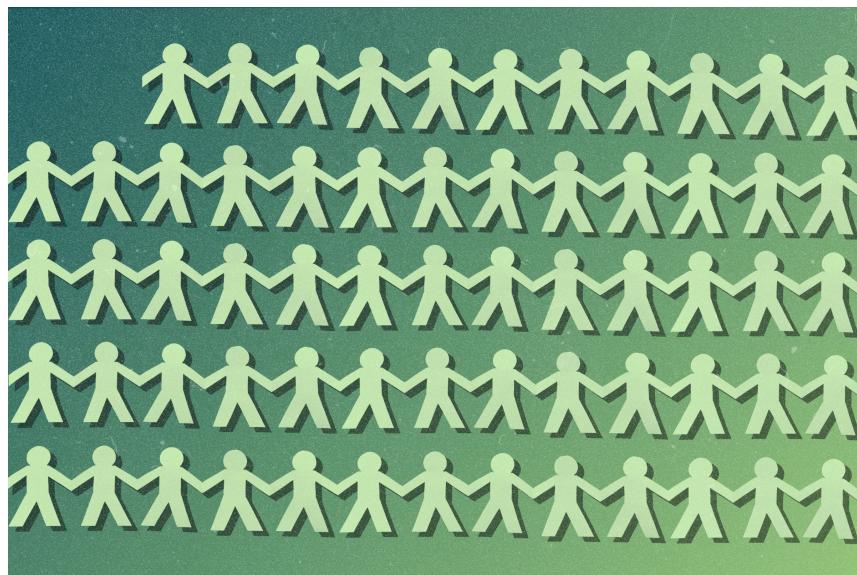
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## What Makes a Friendship Last Forever?

Jamie Ducharme is a health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, Long COVID, mental health, vaping, psychedelics, and more. Her work for TIME has won awards from the Deadline Club, the New York Press Club, and the Newswomen's Club of New York. Additionally, she is the author of *Big Vape: The Incendiary Rise of Juul*, which was adapted for a forthcoming Netflix docuseries.



There are many flavors of friendship. Most U.S. adults [say they have pals who fit into specific niches in their lives](#), like gym friends or [work friends](#). These relationships may come and go as life circumstances change, fading away when someone switches jobs or loses interest in a shared hobby.

Then there are close friends, those you [lean on in hard times](#) and know on a deeper level. Many U.S. adults say they have [only a small handful of friends who fit into this category](#).

Rarer still are the true forever best friends, those who are by your side for decades on end—through jobs, moves, relationships,

fights, losses, and life stages—and may even come to feel like family. But what makes a friendship durable enough to stand the tests of time in this way?

Shared traits, interests, and backgrounds help a lot, says Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist and author of *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships*. Dunbar's work suggests there are seven areas of overlap that are particularly crucial in forming a solid friendship: speaking the same language, growing up in the same area, having similar career trajectories, and sharing hobbies, viewpoints, senses of humor, and tastes in music. Every close friend pair may not have every one of these things in common—but the more they share, the stronger their relationship is likely to be, Dunbar says.

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Despite the cliché that opposites attract, research actually suggests “we prefer people who are very similar to us,” he says.

[\*\*Research\*\*](#) by Jeffrey Hall, director of the Relationships and Technology Lab at the University of Kansas, also finds that people need to spend lots of time together—at least 300 hours—to become true best friends. And, Hall says, friends who express their deepest thoughts and emotions to each other tend to become more tightly bonded than those who keep it surface level.

Once you’re solidly close with someone, consistency is key to staying that way, says Aminatou Sow, who co-wrote the book [\*\*Big Friendship: How We Keep Each Other Close\*\*](#) with her friend Ann Friedman. Ride-or-die friends don’t necessarily have to see each

other all the time, but research does suggest friendship maintenance is important, Sow says.

Assurances about the future—making clear to your friend that you want them in your life for the long haul—and developing shared rituals are good ways of doing that, she says. A “ritual” can be as simple as regularly sending memes or scheduling a monthly phone catchup. Or it can be borrowed from the realms of family and romantic relationships: taking an annual friend vacation, celebrating birthdays and life events together, even marking your friendship anniversary. “These are small things that keep the magic alive,” Sow says.

And it is indeed “magic,” in Sow’s view. She doesn’t think science has all the answers when it comes to close friendship and why some relationships last forever. “You don’t predict who you fall in love with,” romantically or platonically, she says. “Some of it is mystery and magic and the rest of it is hard work.”

There is an ineffable quality to some best friendships, Hall agrees. Science suggests it takes a lot of time to build a strong bond—“but what’s very weird,” he says, is that once people become best friends, they may go months or even years without talking and still pick up right where they left off. Sometimes, “once a very strong friendship has been created,” Hall says, “it never really stops being that way.”

How do real-life BFFs explain their decades-long connections? TIME spoke to a lifelong friend pair to find out.

*Amy Kohn, 69, who lives in New York, and Madeleine Rudin, 69, who splits her time between Florida and Connecticut, have been friends for 65 years.*

**MR:** We grew up across the street from each other in New York City. We met on the playground and then started kindergarten

together the next day. We ended up being in school together for 14 years. We just clicked.

**AK:** I never felt like I fit in very well at school, so having a best friend was everything. Madeleine helped me go through the first 18 years of my life. It was always us against the world.

**MR:** It became trickier when we went off to college in different states, but we would write letters. I visited once or twice, and we saw each other when we were home on school breaks.

**AK:** But then we had a long period where we had no contact. I came out to Madeleine when I was 21 and she was terrific. But I had a number of separate bad experiences socializing in straight environments, and as a result, I became enmeshed in New York City's gay community from my late 20s into my 30s. We weren't in touch during that time.

**MR:** I made other friends. I wasn't angry at her; I just figured we sort of went our separate ways. And then one day out of the blue, Amy emailed me.

**AK:** There's no good answer to why it took so long for me to do that. I finally did because I had been with my family for Thanksgiving and my cousin asked about Madeleine. The phone rang immediately after I sent the email, and it was Madeleine. Back then, I didn't know email went that fast!

**MR:** The day we re-met for lunch, I remember weeping. It seemed like such a waste of years, because we just clicked immediately again. After that, it never stopped.

**AK:** In many ways, we're very different—I'm all about sports and active stuff and Madeleine isn't into that. But there's a level of trust and unconditional acceptance that is the core of everything. I know I can tell Madeleine anything, and if she disagrees, there's not a

scintilla of judgment. Whenever anything really good or really bad happens in my life, immediately, I want to tell Madeleine. She just gets me. If I think I'm being funny, she does too.

**MR:** I feel the same way. I would have said the same things about her! I've also had a lot of health challenges over the years, and Amy has been there every step of the way. She's my go-to, other than my son. I know she's not going to tire of me being ill. She's just so supportive.

**AK:** We're really explicit about how important we are to each other. We say, "I love you" a lot. We have verbalized that we'll be there for each other forever and that, at our age, is enormously comforting.

Another piece of advice that I gave my daughter is, "Recognize that all of my friends, on any given day, are idiots." Meaning, I don't love everything they do, but I still love them.

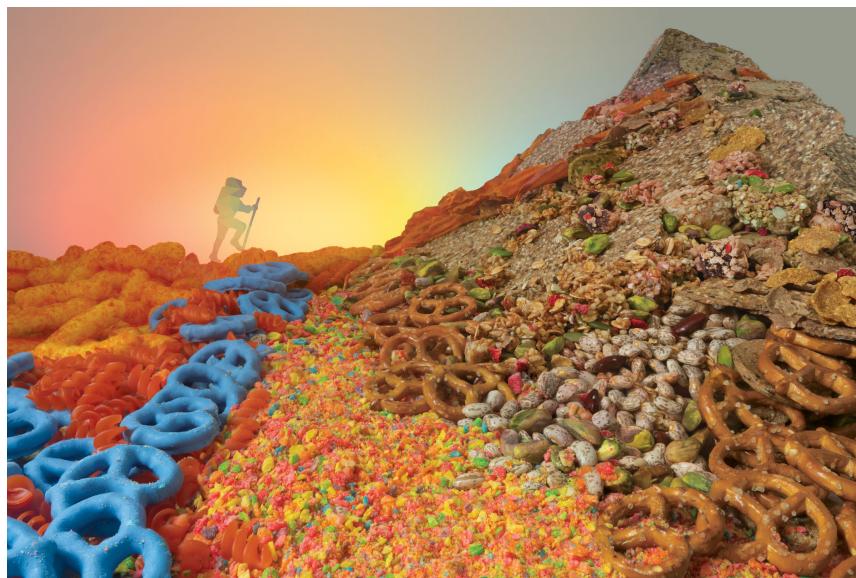
**MR:** I've told my son, "You can have friends for different reasons." Not all of my friends want to do everything that I want to do. For a while, I felt like I had to be as close with everyone as the next person. Then I realized, "No, I don't." But with Amy, I don't have any of those issues.

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## Why One Dietitian is Speaking Up for ‘Ultra-Processed’ Foods

Jamie Ducharme is a health correspondent at TIME. She covers the COVID-19 pandemic, Long COVID, mental health, vaping, psychedelics, and more. Her work for TIME has won awards from the Deadline Club, the New York Press Club, and the Newswomen’s Club of New York. Additionally, she is the author of *[Big Vape: The Incendiary Rise of Juul](#)*, which was adapted for a forthcoming Netflix docuseries.



Jessica Wilson is passionate about the pupusas from Costco. Not just because they’re tasty, but also because they’ve helped the California-based registered dietitian fight back against the mounting war on [ultra-processed foods](#).

It all started in the summer of 2023, when author and infectious-disease physician Dr. Chris van Tulleken was promoting his book, *Ultra-Processed People*. While writing it, van Tulleken spent a month eating mostly foods like chips, soda, bagged bread, frozen food, and cereal. “What happened to me is exactly what the research says would happen to everyone,” van Tulleken says: he

felt worse, he gained weight, his hormone levels went crazy, and before-and-after MRI scans showed signs of changes in his brain. As van Tulleken saw it, the experiment highlighted the “terrible emergency” of society’s love affair with ultra-processed foods.

Wilson, who specializes in working with clients from marginalized groups, was irked. She felt that van Tulleken’s experiment was over-sensationalized and that the news coverage of it shamed people who regularly eat processed foods—in other words, [the vast majority of Americans](#), particularly the millions who are food insecure or have limited access to fresh food; they also tend to be lower income and people of color. Wilson felt the buzz ignored this “food apartheid,” as well as the massive diversity of foods that can be considered ultra-processed: a category that includes everything from vegan meat replacements and [nondairy milks](#) to potato chips and candy. “How can this entire category of foods be something we’re supposed to avoid?” Wilson wondered.

So she did her own experiment. Like van Tulleken, Wilson for a month got 80% of her daily calories from highly processed foods, [not much more than the average American](#). She swapped her morning eggs for soy chorizo and replaced her thrown-together lunches—sometimes as simple as beans with avocado and hot sauce—with Trader Joe’s ready-to-eat tamales. She snacked on cashew-milk yogurt with jam. For dinner she’d have one of her beloved Costco pupusas, or maybe chicken sausage with veggies and Tater-Tots. She wasn’t subsisting on Fritos, but these were also decidedly not whole foods.

### **Read More:** [Why Your Diet Needs More Fermented Pickles](#)

A weird thing happened. Wilson found that she had more energy and less anxiety. She didn’t need as much coffee to get through the day and felt more motivated. She felt better eating an ultra-processed diet than she had before, a change she attributes to taking

in more calories by eating full meals, instead of haphazard combinations of whole-food ingredients.

How could two people eating the same type of foods have such different experiences? And could it be true that not all ultra-processed foods deserve their bad reputation?

These hotly debated questions come at a crucial moment. In 2025, the U.S. government will release an updated version of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which tell people what they should eat and policymakers how to shape things like school lunches and SNAP education programs. The new edition may include, for the first time, guidance on ultra-processed foods. Officials at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration are also [reportedly weighing new regulatory approaches](#) for these products.

The food industry, predictably, maintains that ultra-processed foods have been unfairly demonized and can be part of a healthy diet. Likely sensing a threat to their bottom line, large food companies have [reportedly already started lobbying](#) against recommendations around processed-food consumption.

What's more surprising is that even one dietitian would take their side, defending a group of foods that, [according to 2024 research](#), has been linked to dozens of poor health outcomes ranging from depression and diabetes to cancer, cardiovascular disease, and [cognitive impairment](#). Wilson has endured plenty of criticism for her position, which is not popular among the nutrition-science establishment. But she stands by it. Sweeping recommendations to avoid all ultra-processed foods stand to confuse people and make them feel bad about their diets, Wilson says—with questionable upside for their health.

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What is a processed food, anyway? It's a rather new concept. Foods are mainly judged by how many vitamins, minerals, and

macronutrients (think fat, protein, and carbs) they contain, as well as their sugar, salt, and saturated-fat contents. There's no level of processing on a food label.

Scientists don't agree on exactly how to define processed foods. If you give two experts the same ingredient list, "they will have different opinions about whether something is processed or not," says Giulia Menichetti, a faculty member at Harvard Medical School who researches food chemistry. Take milk. Some experts consider it a processed food because it goes through [pasteurization to kill pathogens](#). Others don't think it belongs in that category because plain milk typically contains few additives beyond vitamins.

The most widely used food-classification system, [known as NOVA](#), uses the latter interpretation. It defines an unprocessed food as one that comes directly from a plant or animal, like a fresh-picked apple. A minimally processed food may have undergone a procedure like cleaning, freezing, or drying, but hasn't been much altered from its original form. Examples include eggs, whole grains, some frozen produce, and milk.

### **Read More:** [\*What's So Great About Cottage Cheese?\*](#)

Under NOVA, a processed food contains added ingredients to make it taste better or last longer, such as many canned products, cured meats, and cheeses. An ultra-processed food, meanwhile, is made largely or entirely from oils, sugars, starches, and ingredients you wouldn't buy yourself at the grocery store—things like hydrogenated fats, emulsifiers, flavor enhancers, and other additives. Everything from packaged cookies to flavored yogurt to baby formula fits that description.

"You end up with a system where gummy bears and canned kidney beans" aren't treated so differently, says Julie Hess, a research

nutritionist with the USDA. At the end of the day, they're both processed.

Why should that matter to anyone aside from researchers and dietitians? Because most people who care about their health have the same question about processed foods: Are they killing me? And right now—despite their looming possible inclusion in dietary guidelines—no one really knows the answer. There's limited cause-and-effect research on how processed foods affect health, and scientists and policymakers have yet to come up with a good way to, as Hess says, “meaningfully delineate between nutrient-dense foods and nutrient-poor options”—to separate the kidney beans from the gummy bears.



Hess and her colleagues drove home that point in [a 2023 study](#), for which they created a hypothetical diet almost entirely made up of ultra-processed foods like breakfast burritos, canned soup, and instant oatmeal. The diet wasn't nutritionally stellar—it was high in sodium and low in whole grains—but scored an 86 out of 100 on a measure of adherence to the federal dietary guidelines, considerably better than the average American's score of 59. The experiment highlighted that there are nutritious ultra-processed foods, and that certain ones “may make it easier and more convenient to have a healthy diet, because a lot of these foods are

more shelf-stable, they're more cost-effective, they're sometimes easier to access," Hess says.

A 2024 study backs up the idea that people who eat processed foods can still be healthy. Although the researchers did find links between heavily processed diets and risk of premature death, they concluded that overall diet quality may be more important than how many processed foods someone eats. In other words, if someone is eating plenty of nutritious foods, maybe it's OK if some come from a wrapper. The study aimed to correct "the potential misperception that all ultra-processed food products should be universally restricted and to avoid oversimplification when formulating dietary recommendations," the authors wrote.

Even vocal critics of ultra-processed foods, like van Tulleken, agree that not all are equal. He's particularly concerned about those that are high in salt, sugar, or saturated fat, which is true of many ultra-processed foods but not all of them. These elements have long been nemeses of the nutrition world, but van Tulleken argues they're especially damaging when eaten in industrially made foods spiked with additives and designed to be [as appetizing as possible](#). "We've had fat, salt, and sugar in abundance in our diet for a century, and I'm the first to say they are the nutrients of concern," van Tulleken says. "But they weren't a concern when we were mixing them up at home, because when you cook at home, your purpose is not to get me to eat 3,000 calories in half an hour."

### **Read More:** [6 Health Myths About Oils](#)

Industrial production means that ingredients undergo complex chemical changes, the implications of which researchers don't fully understand, says Menichetti, from Harvard. "We co-evolved with our food, so if our bodies got used to certain chemicals in certain ranges," altering foods' compositions via processing could change the way they affect human health, she says.

Already, some studies suggest that ultra-processed foods affect the body differently than unprocessed ones, regardless of their nutrient profiles. [One 2024 study](#) found that plant-based foods, which are traditionally considered healthy, lose many of their benefits and even contribute to higher risks of heart disease and death when they're ultra-processed (when a whole grain turns into store-bought bread, for example). And [a 2020 review article](#) found numerous bad outcomes—cancer, cardiovascular disease, [IBS](#), depression, and more—linked to ultra-processed diets and not a single study connecting them to better health. Those results suggest that a food's processing level is linked to its “healthiness,” the authors wrote.

[A 2019 study](#) from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provides some of the strongest evidence that ultra-processed foods can directly cause health problems. For the study, 20 U.S. adults lived in an NIH laboratory for a month. For two weeks, they ate minimally processed foods like vegetables and nuts. For the other two, they ate ultra-processed foods like bagels and canned pasta.

The two diets were designed to be equivalent in calories, sugar, salt, and macronutrients, but people could eat as much or as little as they wanted at mealtimes. On the ultra-processed diet, people ate more and gained weight. Meanwhile, on the minimally processed one, they lost weight, had positive hormonal changes, and saw markers of inflammation drop. Those findings suggest something about ultra-processed foods drives people to overeat and may cause health problems, says lead author Kevin Hall—but it's not yet clear what that something may be.

“There’s a very, very long list of potential candidates,” Hall says. Is it the combination of ingredients manufacturers use to make foods tasty? Is there a problematic ingredient or additive? Does something about the manufacturing process degrade the food’s quality? Or is the explanation something else entirely?

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In November, the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee is expected to release a report on ultra-processed foods, which will assess the available data on how they affect the body. More research is needed. But at a meeting in May, committee member Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, an obesity-medicine specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital, previewed the group's findings: that people who eat highly processed diets are at risk of obesity.

Even with questions outstanding, we already know that some ultra-processed foods are harmful, says Kendra Chow, a registered dietitian and policy and public affairs manager at the nonprofit World Cancer Research Fund International. Stereotypical "junk foods" that are high in salt, sugar, or saturated fat—things like chips, candy, and hot dogs—have long been linked to health problems like [cancer](#) and heart disease. The science on those foods is clear enough that people should limit how often they eat them, she says.

What's trickier, Chow says, is figuring out what to do about foods that are ultra-processed but seem to have more nutritional value, like flavored yogurts and store-bought vegetable pasta sauces. "Stigmatizing a broad category of foods that also includes lower-cost, accessible options, especially without providing an alternative or improving access and affordability of healthy foods," is not the answer, she says.

### **Read More:** [\*Can Food Really Change Your Hormones\*](#)

Despite his prominent campaign against ultra-processed foods, van Tulleken agrees. He realizes a ban on them wouldn't be practical; it would essentially wipe out the modern food system, with particularly disastrous consequences for people of lower socio-economic status. (He would, however, like to see more regulation of food marketing and warning labels on processed products high in salt, sugar, or saturated fat.) Though he feels strongly that ultra-processed foods are contributing to a modern

public-health crisis, van Tulleken also recognizes that they serve an imperfect purpose in a world where many people are strapped for time and money.

Even Hall, the NIH researcher, eats ultra-processed foods—and not infrequently. Most days for lunch, he heats up a frozen meal in the microwave. “I’ll try to choose one that is high in fiber and whole grains and legumes and low in sodium and saturated fat and sugar,” he says. But he knows that technically, it’s in the same category as a Twinkie.

After her experiment last summer, Wilson also continues to eat plenty of processed foods—and to feel good about it. To her, the debate is about more than food; it’s also about the realities of living in a country where [grocery prices are spiking](#) and lots of people simply don’t have the resources to eat three home-cooked meals made from fresh ingredients every single day.

“People often assume that a dietitian’s day is telling people to eat less,” Wilson says. But she says she spends far more time helping people figure out how to eat more—whether because they’re trying to feed a family on a tight budget or because they simply don’t have time and energy to cook—and how to add nutrient-rich foods to their diets in a way that’s affordable. For some of those people, ultra-processed foods may be the difference between going to bed hungry or full, Wilson says. She’d pick full every time.

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## How Natasha Rothwell Wrote Herself Into the Leading Role

Judy Berman is the TV critic at TIME. Along with reviewing current television, she writes about the ways in which entertainment and pop culture intersect with our larger social and political realities. Her TIME essay on [\*Ted Lasso\* and modern masculinity](#) won a New York Press Club award in 2022.



An allergy to over-the-counter pain medication changed [Natasha Rothwell's](#) life. Soon after she moved to Los Angeles, in 2015, to write for Issa Rae's era-defining HBO dramedy [\*Insecure\*](#), she had some dental work done and found herself in so much pain that she popped an Advil and crossed her fingers it would be OK. It wasn't.

Realizing that the loud, ragged breathing she was suddenly hearing was her own, she drove herself to Cedars-Sinai in a panic.

The solo hospital trip forced the epiphany that, though rarely alone, she was profoundly lonely. “For the better part of my 20s, I was running around like a heat-seeking missile, trying to find *the one*, to find that piece to make sense of myself,” Rothwell recalls.

“Because being alone was the thing I thought I was afraid of.” In search of love, she’d neglected friendships, family bonds, her relationship with herself. “But in that moment, in Cedars, I was like: ‘Oh no, I’m *lonely*. It’s not that I don’t have someone here that I know—it’s that I didn’t reach out to someone.’”

Almost a decade (and many productive years of therapy) later, Rothwell, who has since appeared in fan-favorite roles in *Insecure* and *The White Lotus*, is sipping a colorful iced-tea drink in the verdant lounge of a Manhattan hotel, recounting how that terrifying incident inspired not just a personal reckoning, but also a creative breakthrough. On Sept. 13, Hulu will release the first series created by and starring the writer, actor, producer, and director. *How to Die Alone* casts Rothwell as Melissa, a self-conscious, self-sabotaging airport worker who has a brush with death during a lonely 35th birthday spent eating takeout and assembling IKEA-like furniture. Her roommate in the hospital, a wise older woman, urges her to “stop caring what other people think and start doing something that scares you.” This advice, coupled with the creeping awareness that she could have died before she’d let her life truly begin, catalyzes Mel’s bumpy transformation from a wallflower into a woman actively pursuing self-love, friendship, financial stability, professional fulfillment, adventure.

“I wanted to have the character have a near-death experience that woke her up to the fact that it’s not about romantic partnership—it’s about partnership with yourself,” Rothwell says. “If this is the period at the end of the sentence of my life, is it going to be a life that I feel is worth living?” In other words: “Time is precious.” By

turns funny, dark, and inspirational in a way that feels hard-earned and genuine rather than glib or saccharine, *Alone* is a show about seizing the moment that could only have come from Rothwell's scrupulous examination of her own life.



**Among the famous faces of Hollywood**, there are those who have never had to eke out a civilian living: [nepo babies](#), child stars, actors who got a big break straight out of Juilliard. And then there are those who have a whole, regular adult existence behind them. That Rothwell, 43, belongs to the latter category is evident in the dignity she brings to characters living relatively unglamorous lives as well as in her groundedness and perspective. Blessed with the kind of multi-hyphenate talent that can transform a breakthrough gig into a sustainable career, she also has a capacity for hard work, which has been key to her incremental rise.

Growing up with a father in the Air Force, Rothwell always felt that she was meant to be an artist and seized the opportunity to perform a new persona every few years, when the military relocated her family and she and her three siblings started over in a new school. “Who do I want to be?” she would ask herself. “You know what? I’m gonna have a ratail.” At Ithaca College, she switched from a journalism major, partially inspired by [Oprah](#), to pursue her true love, theater. Eventually, she moved to New York.

“I was like a weird superhero,” she jokes. “I was a theater teacher by day and then I was doing comedy at night,” notably with Upright Citizens Brigade. The balancing act taught her to “hustle, hustle, hustle, hustle, hustle. That’s such an ingrained mindset. So it’s hard for me to slow down and take in the fruits of my labor.” At the time, it was also tough for Rothwell to translate her onstage triumphs into confidence in her personal life. “I felt like Clark Kent when I got off-stage,” she recalls. The question was: “How do I be Superman in real life?”



As she worked to answer it, success came bit by bit. In 2014, she was hired as a writer on *SNL*. It wasn’t the most supportive environment; [she has said](#) that, as a Black woman, she worried about being seen as a diversity hire and would literally raise her hand to be heard. *Insecure*, a show about the friendships and love lives of young, professional Black women in L.A., was different. It functioned as a [launching pad for Black talent](#), and no one benefited from Rae and showrunner Prentice Penny’s shrewd eyes more than Rothwell. When her informal readings of boisterous wildcard Kelli Prenny’s lines cracked everyone up in the writers’ room, they offered her the part. The character turned out to be more than just comic relief. “Brown-woman roles, especially when they’re supporting, can be broad,” Rothwell notes. “So being able to have her be funny, hypersexual, love her body, love her friends,

fiercely loyal, emotional—all those things excited me.” Kelli’s one-liners induced spit takes, but Rothwell’s vulnerability when, for example, her character feels abandoned by a best friend preparing to have a baby made her relatable and real.

By the summer of 2021, viewers could watch her as both the most offbeat member of *Insecure*’s core friend group and as the most down-to-earth character in another HBO series: *The White Lotus*, auteur and actor [Mike White](#)’s surprise-hit, satirical murder mystery about rich people behaving badly at a luxury resort. A gentle spa manager paid (insufficiently) to pamper ungrateful guests, Rothwell’s Belinda Lindsey bonds with [Jennifer Coolidge](#)’s lost-soul heiress, Tanya McQuoid, and, despite her doubts, allows herself to trust Tanya’s offer to fund her dream wellness venture. As the rules of White’s class-conscious universe dictate, the partnership is doomed. Viewers couldn’t help but feel for Belinda, who gives so much more to others than she gets in return. Yet Rothwell was caught off-guard by the outpouring of love. “I didn’t think she would be seen,” she says, because service workers tend to be as overlooked in fiction about the 1% as they are in life. “So it was beautiful to see audiences see her and see that she had a silent struggle.”



Now, fresh off shooting the upcoming third season of *Lotus*—an anthology series in which Belinda will be the rare character to appear twice—in Thailand, Rothwell is moved to see audiences see her, writing to say they’re the Kelli of their group or cheering the announcement of *Alone* on social media. “I don’t have main character energy in life,” she says. That rings true; though a charming, engaged conversationalist, she isn’t the type to guzzle attention. “I’m in the stands with the foam finger, like: ‘Let’s go!’ So to receive that support has been very moving. When I posted the art for [*Alone*] and the messages came in, I was reduced to tears: ‘Oh, wow. I’m on the field now, and they’re in the stands.’”

A long-gestating project that Rothwell created under the mantle of her production company, Big Hattie, *How to Die Alone* required her to become a different sort of superhero—the kind whose superpower is being in a dozen places at once, collaborating with castmates, conferring with the crew, overseeing episode edits, and making endless decisions, all while giving a funny, poignant lead performance. “I felt like [Simone Biles](#),” she recalls. “I was flexible, I could do it all.” In retrospect, she suspects she found “this reservoir of energy” because she was finally telling the story she’d dreamed about for years: “I was the most present that I think I’ve ever been on set.”

It helped to have role models and resources in two of TV’s most influential creator-performers, Rae and White (who has yet to appear in *Lotus* but who previously starred alongside his co-creator, Laura Dern, in the cult-classic HBO dramedy *Enlightened*). “Something that is unique to both of them is that they are unapologetically themselves,” Rothwell observes. “They fiercely protect their work, and they aren’t afraid of telling unique, interesting stories, because they believe in them.”



Rothwell resolved to bring the same confidence to *Alone*. In conceiving the show, that meant trusting the wisdom she had acquired over years of working to fuse her inner Clark Kent and Superman, and to honor the vulnerability that transformation demanded. “I wanted a show that speaks to what it means to activate and be in the fray of living,” she says. “I didn’t want it couched as a before-and-after story. Let’s get messy. Let’s be in that muck together.”

Melissa’s decision to take control of her life doesn’t make everything fall into place; it’s only the beginning of a path strewn with obstacles. “I’m really trying to change,” she laments, midway through the season. “But it’s like I’m hitting wall after wall after wall.” Among *Alone*’s most profound insights is that working on yourself means auditing every relationship. Mel has to confront a seemingly perfect brother (*South Side* and *Sherman’s Showcase* co-creator Bashir Salahuddin) who criticizes her choices while making some pretty poor ones of his own. And it slowly dawns on her that her best friend and co-worker Rory (Conrad Ricamora) is taking her for granted. This particular subplot is “about when you grow and outpace someone else’s growth,” Rothwell says.

The show’s setting is laden with its own subtext. She felt strongly about looking past the first-class passengers whose first-class

problems TV loves to dissect in order to zoom in on working-class airport employees whose journeys may be more metaphorical than physical. “I have always been drawn to the characters we marginalize,” she says. When we center their daily struggles, flirtations, ambitions, and inside jokes, as individuals and as a workplace community, “we consider that they’re more than one-dimensional people in our lives that help us get on a plane.”



Rothwell took a similarly humane approach to ensuring that her cast and crew were comfortable on set—“not just in talking to me, but in being able to be themselves fully and not feel like someone’s going to say something that’s going to trigger them and give them a sh-t day,” she explains. To that end, she made a rule consistent with *Alone*’s insistence that its self-identified fat, Black, female protagonist is worthy of love, respect, and success: “I was like: ‘We’re not going to use the word *fat* pejoratively anywhere on set. You can’t eat a meal and say, ‘Oh my God, I feel so fat.’” As you might imagine, in Ozempic-era Hollywood, this kind of talk can be an occupational hazard.

It all ties back to the experiment at the core of *Alone*: “Let’s see what happens when someone goes on that journey to figure out how to love themselves enough to stop hurting themselves.” For Rothwell, who is several years farther down that road than Mel,

making progress has meant seizing opportunities she never would've thought possible as a theater major who just wanted some part, any part in some play, any play. This openness led her to a scene-stealing role in last year's big-budget franchise musical *Wonka*, and makes her want to keep expanding her repertoire. "I want to do it all," she says. For example? "Dead-ass: an action hero." Also: "A horror story. I would kill to be in *Misery*. Give me that opportunity to be the villain."

For now, though, she's focused on the projects she already has lined up, especially given the imminent threat to shows by and about women of color posed by the streaming contraction and the risk aversion of a post-strike Hollywood. In early September, [the news broke](#) that she was developing and slated to star in an adaptation of "[Who TF Did I Marry?](#)," the viral series of TikTok videos by [Tareasa 'Reesa Teesa' Johnson](#). "Coming out of the strike, there was a real fear: Will my show fall prey to that unconscious bias that seems to be expressing itself by having so many amazing shows go away?" Rothwell recalls. "That's why I want to be present in this moment, because you just never know when something is going to go away."

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## His Three Daughters Is a Lived-In Tale of Sisterhood, Grief, and Grace

Stephanie Zacharek is the film critic at TIME. She is the recipient of a Newswomen's Club of New York award, and was a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist.



Death can both tear family members apart and bind them closer—often simultaneously. That's the mysterious dynamic writer-director [Azazel Jacobs](#) mines in *His Three Daughters*, a story of three mismatched sisters who gather in their childhood home, a modest, rent-controlled Manhattan apartment, to usher their dying father into the whatever-it-is-that-comes-next. The eldest, bossy, uptight Katie ([Carrie Coon](#)), feels the need to steer the ship, as everyone else seems incapable; she's particularly obsessed with a "Do not resuscitate" form that her father was supposed to have signed when he was still cogent. Christina ([Elizabeth Olsen](#)) has left her family, thousands of miles away, to join her sisters in this emotionally rattling endeavor. A onetime Deadhead and yoga nut, she seems to be the calmest of the lot, though her quietude barely masks her annoying self-absorption.

Then there's Rachel ([Natasha Lyonne](#)), who has been living in the apartment and caring for her father—though not well enough, according to Katie. (It was Rachel, naturally, who was supposed to facilitate the signing of that DNR form.) With their conventional thinking and ingrained momlike ways, Katie and Christina have invaded Rachel's space and cramped her style. Katie harangues her for waking-and-baking and looks askance at her sports betting. It doesn't help that Rachel isn't related by blood: Katie and Christina lost their mother when they were young, and their father remarried, accepting his new wife's daughter as his own. These are three women connected by one man, a father who has loved each disparate personality equally. That's a bond much thicker than blood, though these women haven't yet figured that out.



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The great and terrible thing about the death of a family member is that all survivors learn something new about themselves. Jacobs (director of movies like [French Exit](#) and [Momma's Man](#)) gives these three crackling, perceptive actors plenty to work with and then steps back to capture their workaday magic. There's nothing flashy about *His Three Daughters*; it has a lived-in feel, as if taking its cues from the apartment's central feature, the smooshy recliner that still bears the warm, invisible butt print of the family patriarch. (Played by Jay O. Sanders, he makes a late appearance that helps tie the movie's more elusive ideas into a tender wildflower

bouquet.) Coon helps us see that if Katie stops nagging, she'll have to confront her real feelings, and who wants to do *that*? Olsen vests Christina with the winsome energy of a hummingbird—vibrating with all her might is what holds her together. And Lyonne adds some smudgy shading to the stock role of the eye-rolling stoner wisecracker; she learns that gliding over her feelings isn't the same as living through them.

There are whispers of [Chekhov](#) and Shakespeare in *His Three Daughters*; both of those writers knew a thing or two about the fractiousness, and the durability, of sisterly connections. But the best thing about *His Three Daughters* is the ending. Peaceful but in no way resolute, it offers each of its characters a graceful path forward. The death of a parent, devastating as it can be, always opens a door. But everyone can use a little help as they fumble toward it.

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## A Disappointing Three Women Adaptation Spotlights One Woman Too Many

Judy Berman is the TV critic at TIME. Along with reviewing current television, she writes about the ways in which entertainment and pop culture intersect with our larger social and political realities. Her TIME essay on [\*Ted Lasso and modern masculinity\*](#) won a New York Press Club award in 2022.



For a work of literary nonfiction to thrill readers the way [Lisa Taddeo's](#) 2019 best-seller *Three Women* has done, it must offer more than just rich subject matter. There has to be chemistry between the author and the story; readers have to feel her intimate understanding of its characters and sense the unique perspective she brings to their predicaments. Fittingly, given that *Three Women* is a triptych portrait of female desire in 21st century America, there's an element of seduction. [Taddeo](#) closes the deal by closing the space that separates herself from the women whose sex lives she chronicles. Their minds, hearts, and libidos speak so loudly, you might forget she's even there.

That such a feverish read was adapted into a steamy yet sad premium-cable drama is no surprise. Yet the 10-episode series, created by Taddeo for Showtime then shelved and picked up by Starz, breaks the book's sweaty spell. Like the text spun through a centrifuge, this version of *Three Women*, premiering Sept. 13, pairs retellings of the subjects' stories with the tale of a fourth woman: the Taddeo-esque journalist ([Shailene Woodley](#)'s Gia) traveling the country to collect characters. Despite bold performances and sensitive directing that centers women's subjective experiences of sex and their bodies, the show's disjointed structure and flimsy frame narrative suggest that the book might not have been so ripe for TV after all.



Taddeo sets the scene with an encounter between Gia and Gay Talese (James Naughton), a real-life titan of literary journalism whose 1981 tome on sex in the '70s, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*, Gia seeks to update—and a figure whose cultural significance and macho reputation will probably be lost on most viewers under 60. “You’re gonna go out there and f-ck married men,” Talese, whose role as a mentor of ambiguous utility was [central](#) to the [book’s promotional lore](#), proclaims. But she doesn’t, in part because she realizes early on that, when it comes to sex, love, and specifically desire, women are more interesting.

The premiere introduces all three subjects. Lina, played with fire and desperation by [Betty Gilpin](#), is an Indiana housewife and mom whose husband (Sean Meehan) won't kiss her. Starved for passion, she reconnects with a high school boyfriend who has loomed large in her fantasies. Sloane (a radiant [DeWanda Wise](#)), the belle of every Martha's Vineyard ball, satisfies her unruly lust by letting her husband (Blair Underwood) pick men and sometimes women for her to sleep with while he watches. But then she becomes infatuated with a guy (Blair Redford) she doesn't want to share. And Maggie (Gabrielle Creevy) is a 23-year-old waitress in North Dakota whose life was upended by an affair, years earlier, with her high school English teacher (Jason Ralph). When he's named the state's teacher of the year, Maggie finally files charges.



“What they all had,” Gia tells us, in glibly inspirational voice-over narration that belies Taddeo’s capacity for nuance, “was the audacity to believe that they deserved more.” But a scattered format that devotes some full episodes to single characters and, in others, blends vignettes about two or more only highlights how loosely the women fit together. Buoyed by Gilpin’s almost feral vulnerability, only Lina embodies the intensity of a regular woman unmoored by repressed desire. Based on a trial that didn’t end well for the accuser (and paired with a wordy on-screen disclaimer to that effect), Maggie’s story suffers from its similarity to so many

previous stories of teacher-student boundary-crossing on TV. A New England WASP recast as a wealthy Black woman, presumably to diversify an otherwise white series, with only attention paid to the implications of that identity shift, Sloane's arc feels conspicuously lightweight.

Most incongruous is the Gia storyline. The new character forces viewers to make sense of a convoluted, ultimately inessential timeline of the reporting process; her point of entry into Lina's life is especially confusing. And instead of offering much insight into what might motivate a journalist to stake her career on a cross-country quest to illuminate women's sexuality, *Three Women* gives Gia an inexplicably devoted love interest (John Patrick Amedori) and embroils them in a progressively farther-fetched conflict between his commitment and her avoidance.



It's not hard to understand why Taddeo felt compelled to tweak the structure for TV or to add a semi-autobiographical character who could shed light on a remarkable feat of reportage. But in decoupling her voice from those of her subjects, the series severs the mind-meld connection that made *Three Women* electrifying.

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## Justin Theroux on the Joy of Playing His ‘Shallow and Dim’ Swindler in *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*

Megan McCluskey is a staff writer at TIME. She covers culture, focusing on horror, fantasy, and science fiction.



More than 35 years after *Beetlejuice* arrived on the horror comedy scene and left an indelible mark on pop culture, *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*, a long-awaited sequel to Tim Burton’s ghoulish cult classic, is slated to hit theaters Sept. 6. This time around, the story follows a now middle-aged Lydia Deetz (Winona Ryder) as she returns to Winter River in the wake of an unexpected family tragedy—only to find herself once again contending with the tricks and torments of Michael Keaton’s titular malevolence.

Accompanying Lydia are her eccentric stepmother, Delia (Catherine O’Hara); angsty teen daughter, Astrid (Jenna Ortega); and shifty, ponytail-sporting boyfriend, Rory (Justin Theroux), who also manages Lydia’s career as the host of her own paranormal reality TV series, *Ghost House with Lydia Deetz*.

With Ryder, Keaton, and O’Hara all reprising their roles from the first movie, Theroux is a new addition to the world of *Beetlejuice* who grew up as an ardent fan of both the original and Burton’s

body of work as a whole. So when the filmmaker reached out to him about a potential part in the sequel, Theroux was “eager” to find out more. “I was a little apprehensive that there might not be a reason for a second *Beetlejuice*,” he says. “But when I read the script, I was very impressed by the story that had come together around it.”

TIME spoke with Theroux about *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*, his roles in cult classics, and the enduring love for *The Leftovers*.

## **TIME: It's been over 35 years since *Beetlejuice* was released. Were you a fan of the original movie when it came out?**

Theroux: I was absolutely a fan. It came out at a time when I wasn’t aware of what was a studio movie versus an independent movie. But it definitely felt very independent and like it was just mine. I loved it.

## **Tim Burton is known as Hollywood’s resident master of macabre. What stood out to you about his process as a filmmaker?**

I don’t see him as a master of the macabre. I see him as a true creative. We’re blessed with very few directors whose films are just so singular and so visionary, and where there’s a very short distance between their brain and the screen. [Federico] Fellini is one. And [David] Lynch. I think Tim falls into that category. We’re lucky enough that the system has allowed him to have that outlet and sort of create his own genre. He really does make [all of his movies] feel like independent films. He puts a very thick, cozy bubble on the cast and the day’s work. He’s also incredibly energetic, like water skidding across a hot pan. He rarely puts his butt down on his director’s chair.



## **Other than *Beetlejuice*, do you have a favorite Tim Burton movie?**

I adore almost all of his films, but one that's very dear to me is *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*. His first film. I hadn't seen anything like that before.

## **You star opposite Winona Ryder as the iconic Lydia Deetz. What was it like seeing her bring such a beloved character back to life?**

She was the character in [*Beetlejuice*] that I gravitated toward most. She was roughly the same age when she made it as I was when I had a ticket torn for it. And it was the first time I saw reflected on screen what I now know every teenager feels, which is this sort of misanthropic ennui or sadness. So it was really fun to see her on our first day of hair and makeup tests with those cat's claw bangs and updated black dress. It was like, oh, that's exactly how I would envision her 35 years later.

## **You play Rory, a smarmy con artist-type who's dating Lydia. How did you approach that role?**

Playing shallow and dim and not very bright is really fun. And then me and Tim had these long discussions about how we wanted [Rory and Lydia] to feel believable as a couple, but it's just this incredibly ingrown toenail of a codependent relationship.



## **This cast is chock-full of legendary actors. What was your favorite moment on set?**

All of the days on set were really fun. We genuinely were all having a giggle and laughing a lot. But that's separate from the pinch-me moments. There was one day where we were all working on the finale and they had a little holding area for us. I looked around at the actors' chairs that were in this sort of semicircle so you could see all the names: Monica Bellucci, Willem Dafoe, Catherine O'Hara, Winona Ryder, Jenna Ortega. That visual was one of those pinch-me moments where I was just like, "Oh my god."

**You're definitely flexing your comedy muscles in *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*. What appeals to you about comedy versus more dramatic roles?**

With comedy, everything's lighter on its feet. It's the difference between playing tackle football and Nerf darts. When you're doing drama, there's a lot of "Quiet on the set!" and the days can feel a bit longer, whereas with comedy the time seems to fly by.

Particularly when you're working with such funny people. With Catherine [O'Hara], for example, I wanted to go to work on days that I wasn't even working. And I did a couple of times just to see what she would do. To watch her spark and ping-pong around is incredible.

**Considering your roles in films like *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* and *American Psycho*, this isn't your first rodeo with cult classics. What does it mean to you to have been a part of so many projects that fans feel such an intense connection to?**

Nothing's a cult classic until years later. No one sets out to make cult classics. I feel really lucky to work with good enough actors and directors to have made a couple films like that. The films I love are like finding old vinyl in a record store. The ones you feel like you discovered on your own or found years after they'd come out. So to have a few films in my pocket that feel like that for other people is very gratifying.

**You've also been a screenwriter on a number of hit movies. How do you decide where to focus**

## **your energy when it comes to acting versus writing and so forth?**

When you're trying to write something, shepherd it, get it sold, get it made, get it into post-production, and get it out, that's a two-year process or more. Acting is sort of quick hits. You can go and dip in for three weeks or six months. I haven't written in a couple years, but I've been writing a bit more now. So I'm putting my toe back in that water and hopefully creating a few scripts that will be in the pipeline soon.

## ***The Leftovers* consistently appears on lists of the best TV shows of all time. Why do you think that story continues to resonate so deeply?**

At the end of the day, that series was about something we all experience in our lives, which is grief and death. And it did such a beautiful job of gently wrapping its arms around that subject. Films and TV shows deal with difficult subjects all the time, but the supernatural premise that [*The Leftovers*] opens with wasn't what was fully explored in its three seasons. It quickly gets away from that. Add to that the writing, direction, and performers were all so incredibly good. I think that's why it endures.

## ***Sex and the City* is enjoying a cultural resurgence of sorts thanks to its arrival on Netflix. Were you a fan of the show when it originally aired in addition to appearing as two different love interests of Carrie's?**

At that time in my career, I was just trying to get a job and I don't think I could even afford HBO. So I was not a fan, but strictly for

financial reasons. I knew, of course, that it was tapping into the zeitgeist when it was coming out just by seeing it on the cover of every magazine. I enjoyed doing that show thoroughly. And I love that it continues to have this life. It's both a cult classic and a show that keeps revealing itself.

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