

DOMESTIC BLISS



Portrait Ben Anders

Now is a good time to ask whether your house is serving you or your social media feed, says the former editor of Elle Decoration Michelle Ogundehin, who shares tips from her latest book for creating a wellness sanctuary at home

IT MIGHT BE AN UNPREDICTABLE WORLD OUT THERE, but help is closer than you think. Most likely, your salvation is closer than you think. Your home can be your secret superpower and, now more than ever, we need to be able to find solace, not stress, in the house. Too often I see homes that sabotage rather than support this; places that are decorated for likes on Instagram or designed for lives the owners do not lead. The journey that brought me to this point started with my architecture training, followed by 20 years of editing interiors magazines, gaining insights along the way from Buddhist philosophy. The happy home has been an enduring quest of mine. So, if wellbeing is the goal, the most important question to ask yourself is not “How do I want my home to look?”, but “How do I want to feel inside it?” — and that is about a lot more than just the decor. What is key is recognising the power of being surrounded only by things that have meaning for you — lean into what you have, not what you lack. Take this opportunity to break toxic old habits and embrace healthy new ones. Here are seven ways to get started.

■ **APPRECIATE THE SOUND OF SILENCE**

With cars parked, planes grounded and everyone indoors, by default the world has gone blissfully quiet. Yet for some silence is deafening, despite research showing that it improves brain function and cultivates productivity. Have you ever paused long enough before reaching for the remote control to notice the natural soundtrack of your home? While there may be little you can do about external noise (beyond installing triple glazing when the world starts spinning again), the responsibility for what happens indoors is always yours. Choose consciously what, and when, to add to that internal soundscape. Start by switching off all digital notifications, and check out quietmark.com for home appliances that do their work stealthily.

■ **PRIORITISE THE DINING TABLE**

Sharing a home is an agreement to be connected to others, to share stories, food, ample quantities of wine. That is why a dining table for everyone to gather around is your most important piece of furniture. It also prioritises the ritual of eating, which is essential to good gut health. Whether you are dining *en famille* or



solo, be super-mindful of how you decorate your table, of how your food is delivered. Your tableware should be the things you love the most — you’ll use them every day, after all. Don’t keep “special” sets only for guests. Make every meal an occasion.

■ **BELIEVE THAT CLEANING CAN BE CALMING**

We generally see gardening as a relaxing pleasure, whereas cleaning — the act of tending to the indoors — is commonly described as drudgery. Could you, however, be open to considering it a meditative means of self-nurture? No mantras or special tools are required (although I love a cordless Dyson and a Vax steam mop). Simply elevate it from routine to ritual by doing it little and often, and recognising that your home is your temple and that your belongings tell the story of your life. If you can’t be bothered to maintain them, then you cannot expect to enjoy them.

■ **SAY NO TO POINTY SIDE TABLES**

They are a nightmare for your shins and the eyes of small children, plus their angularity cuts off, rather than encourages, an easy flow of air and people. Curvier, rounded designs are the literal expression of comfort — in times of strife we never turn to a stiff-backed seat. By contrast, to sink deeply into a squishy sofa is to feel it cosset and console you. PS: you can never have too many cushions.

■ **PRACTISE ACTIVE REST THROUGH PLAY**

“We do not stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing,” said the playwright George Bernard Shaw. I agree. Young children intuitively understand that time spent this way is never wasted. And yet, in an era when Fomo is a universally understood acronym, many of us have become hardwired to swing between full-on work mode and flat-out exhaustion. Instead we must acknowledge that to stop is to succeed, and that active rest in the space between work and sleep is essential. This doesn’t mean being slumped in front of the TV, watching something forgettable. Better to go to bed. Active rest is engaged not distracted, mindful not



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mindless. In short, it is anything that offers some of the same psychological rewards as your job, but without its frustrations. Certainly, any form of sport is great, but within the home think board games, playing a musical instrument, painting or DIY. Fancy kit is not necessary, nor is much room required, just the desire to make time for it and the belief that it matters.

■ **ACCEPT THAT MULTITASKING IS A MYTH**

It is not possible to do more than one thing at a time and hope to do any of them well. Neuroscience indicates that, far from effortlessly orchestrating two tasks at once, the brain rapidly switches focus between one and the other in a stop/start process that is inefficient, mistake-prone and energy-sapping. Give it up and give yourself a break. This does not, however, herald the demise of open-plan living (which is great for communication). You can work or play wherever you want — it’s about enabling focused concentration.

■ **THE SOOTHING SALVE OF COLOUR**

The use of colour in a home sets the tone, but it doesn’t have to be full-fat vivacious to be effective. The key is to find shades that truly sing to you, then to use them across walls, fabrics and furnishings. Choose no more than six, one of which must be white. Why? Because five colours and their tonal variants is exactly the right amount to create different but cohesive looks across your home without succumbing to blandness or chaos. White heightens those choices. For an added emotional lift, consider colour for your ceilings.



■ **FIVE QUICK FIXES TO INSPIRE WELLNESS AT HOME**

- Clean your windows. They are the eyes of the home, so keep them clear and banish window “treatments”.
- Light a beeswax candle at dinnertime — even if you are eating cheese on toast alone.
- Position your bed so that it faces something of beauty: a picture, a display or, if possible, a window.
- Hang up positive imagery — pictures of well-loved places and people remind you what you care about.
- Get rid of anything that embarrasses or annoys you, or that you’ll mend “one day”. Who needs that in their life? ■ **@michelleogundehin**

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