





THE TRACKER TRAP

Your Fitbit or Oura Ring is meant to help your health by motivating you to **exercise more, sleep better, and lower stress levels**. But for some, fitness wearables have become yet another source of anxiety, fueling perfectionism and keeping them from feeling great. **Here's how to make sure your tracker is working for you (and not you for it).**

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MATT HARRISON CLOUGH



When it comes to getting her steps in,

Mary Faith Green has a one-track mind.

The 66-year-old retired claims consultant started wearing a fitness tracker in 2013 as part of a program at her workplace that rewarded employees with an insurance-premium reduction if they met certain goals. Green strapped on her Fitbit and aimed for the de rigueur 10,000 steps a day, three or four times a week. Seven years later, when the COVID-19 pandemic came, getting outside to walk those steps became a chance to connect safely with her St. Louis neighbors and escape the confines of lockdown.

But counting her steps eventually became an obsession for Green, who found that the more days she hit her goal, the more determined she was to preserve her streak. “Rain, snow, COVID—nothing stopped me,” says the grandmother of nine. She even invested in a pair of crampons to help her better navigate the ice on winter walks. She kept her roll going for four years until, in 2024, a severe bout of the flu sidelined her for five days, “devastating” her. “Though I desperately wanted to get out and walk,” she recalls, “I knew I finally had to throw in the towel and focus on rest.”

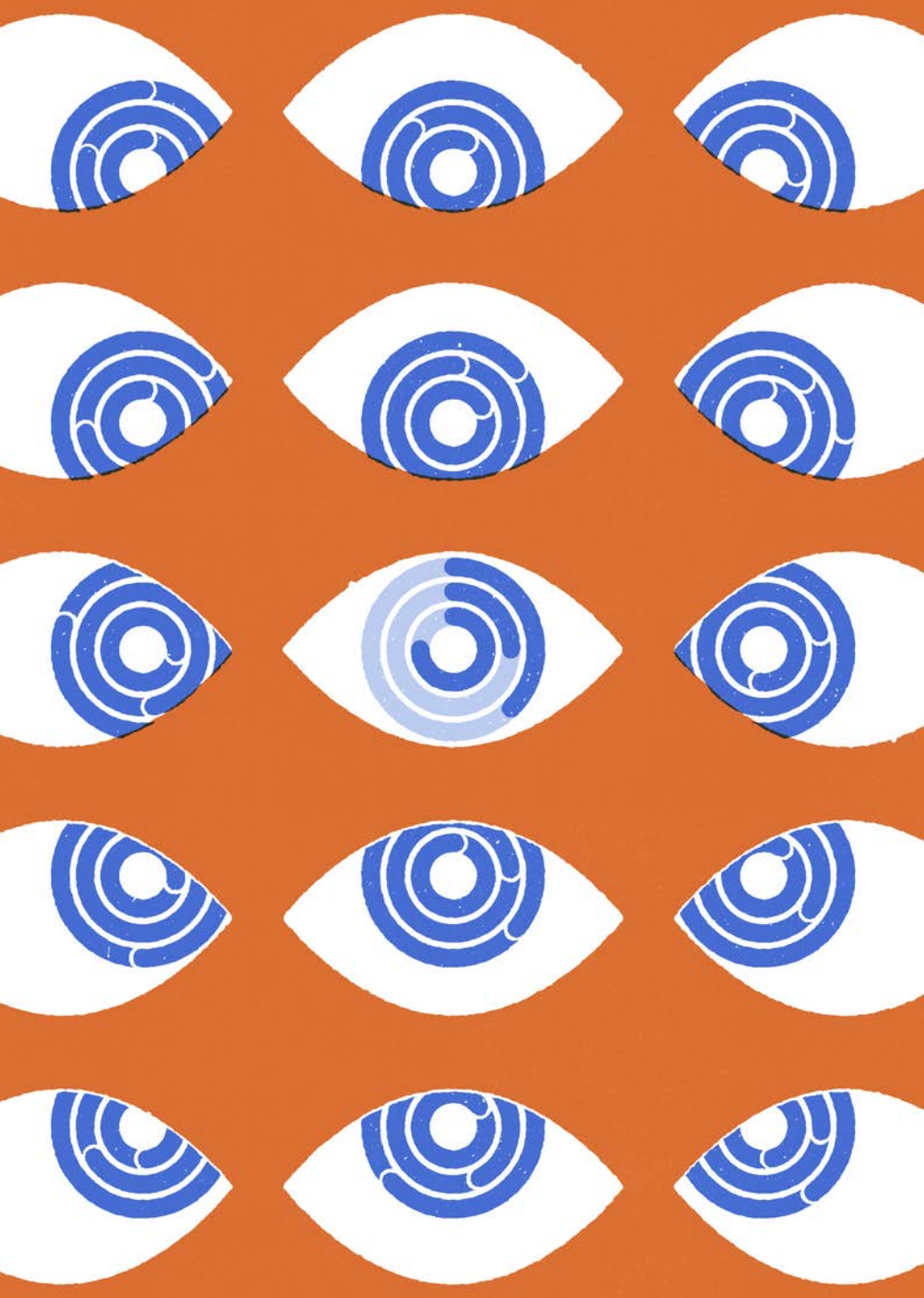
A week later, though, Green started a new streak—and she admits to having gone to some extremes to keep it going. When traveling, she books early flights so she’ll have time to get her steps in at her destination. At airports, she pulls her rolling suitcase only with the arm that’s not wearing her Apple Watch, a choice she feels “more accurately captures every step.” And if bedtime rolls around and Green still hasn’t sufficiently appeased her tracker, she’ll take a quick spin through her neighborhood park (2,500 steps) or around her cul-de-sac (500 steps) or walk laps around her house. “If I circle every room, it’s 0.14 miles, so I do that about eight times for a mile, which is about 2,250 steps for me,” she says.



DATA OVERLOAD?

Green is one of the 40% of American adults who have used a smartwatch, a ring, or another tracker to monitor their health and fitness in the past year—about the same percentage that have a dog or subscribe to cable TV, according to the National Institutes of Health's 2024 Health Information National Trends Survey. Marketed as a way to nudge health-conscious

consumers toward their goals, wearables are foot soldiers (wrist soldiers?) on the front lines of the \$2 trillion U.S. wellness market. Trackers tap into two relatively new cultural obsessions: bio-hacking (a DIY approach to health and longevity optimization—think intermittent fasting, cold plunges, blue-light-blocking glasses) and self-quantification (the use of self-monitoring technology to enhance health), says Leah Lagos, Psy.D., a clinical health and performance psychologist in New York City



and the author of *Heart Breath Mind*.

“These devices provide a window into the invisible processes that govern our physiology—our heart rhythms, sleep cycles, and movement patterns,” Lagos says. “And when people gain access to this kind of real-time physiological feedback, they tend to become more engaged participants in their health.” Using built-in sensors to capture movement and vital signs, these gizmos not only clock our workout sessions but also can scrutinize our sleep quality, gauge our stress levels, and keep tabs on our temperature, analyzing the data before displaying it or transmitting it to a smartphone app. A wearable device can save other health data too: In a 2024 survey, 7% of smartphone users said they tracked their sexual activity, and 6% even admitted to using a device to track their bowel movements.

But some experts worry that fixating on info like step counts, blood oxygen levels, and sleep scores may fuel anxiety, obsessiveness, and all-or-nothing thinking in some users. For Stephanie Rose, 46, a transformation strategist in Detroit, closing the daily Move, Exercise, and Stand rings on her Apple Watch initially felt like “evidence that I was showing up for myself.” Indeed, as her streak grew, she noticed her mindset changing from “*If I work out today*” to “*When am I working out today?*”

After about three years, though, Rose’s relationship with her tracker started to shift from supportive to codependent. “I was heading to the

basement to run on the treadmill instead of [going to] bed, or jogging in place in the hotel bathroom on vacation to close my rings and keep my streak alive,” she says. “Nothing says ‘family fun’ like closing your fitness rings next to the toilet while everyone else sleeps.”

For some users, trackers can be directly counterproductive. A growing number of people suffer from orthosomnia, an unhealthy preoccupation with getting optimal sleep, according to the Sleep Foundation, and quantifying “sleep scores” on a device can worsen the problem. Garrett Yamasaki, 35, an entrepreneur from San Francisco, found himself waking at 3 a.m. to check his sleep stages on his Oura Ring. If his deep sleep measure dipped below 90 minutes (his “ideal” amount, per the app), “I’d doom-spiral into thoughts like, *Did that late-night espresso kill my recovery? Should I have skipped the evening Peloton ride?*” Yamasaki also blamed subpar sleep scores on his dog Mochi’s midnight bathroom breaks, and would “overcompensate with 9 p.m. bedtimes that left my partner rolling her eyes as I tapped through sleep graphs instead of unwinding.”

THE PROS AND CONS OF TRACKERS

There’s plenty of evidence that when used properly, wearables can help you achieve your health goals. From a

psychological standpoint, Lagos says, they are “highly effective” at spurring behavioral change because they allow users to observe themselves and make real-time adjustments. When someone sees that their heart rate stabilizes during focused breathing or realizes that their energy level rises on days when they exercise for at least 30 minutes, it “acts as immediate reinforcement,” she says. “The alignment between awareness, intention, and feedback” helps rewire the brain for desired behaviors, which is where “real, sustainable change begins to take root,” she adds.

With their celebratory badges and shooting fireworks, trackers also tap into the power of gamification, turning a mundane task into something rewarding so as to keep consumers engaged. Like alcohol, drugs, and smartphones, gamification triggers the release of dopamine, the “Ooh, that feels good!” neurochemical that, for better or worse, helps cement habits. When our fitness tracker score rises or we ascend in the rankings on social media (many wearables have a competitive social media component), “we get a hit of dopamine in the brain’s reward pathway, and that feels good, making us want to do it again and again,” explains Anna Lembke, M.D., chief of Stanford University’s Addiction Medicine Dual Diagnosis Clinic and author of *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence*.

Taken too far, however, the quest for

feel-good feedback can lead us to push too hard or go against common sense. For reasons scientists don’t entirely understand, says Dr. Lembke, numbers and rankings “seem to be reinforcing for the human brain.” Like stepping on a scale or counting carbs, quantifying our bodily processes and daily habits via wearable tech “allows us to compare ourselves to other people as well as to our past and future selves.” This, in turn, seems to “drive certain types of compulsive behavior as we seek to move up in the digital hierarchy,” she says.

Sometimes these data-determinative behaviors are ridiculous, as when humor writer David Sedaris paid a fan \$20 to walk two miles while wearing his smartwatch so he could attend a book signing without breaking his streak. But other times they may “force us to disconnect from what our bodies need and can put us into a shame or guilt mindset,” says Tara De Leon, a personal trainer in Annapolis, MD. De Leon says it’s not uncommon for clients to ask her questions like “Does exercise count if I don’t wear my Fitbit?” and “Is it OK to take a rest day even if my tracker says I’ve been inactive?” These questions indicate an overreliance on external rules rather than giving oneself what one’s body is asking for on a given day, she says.

When users apply the intel provided by wearables to support their self-care efforts, De Leon says, that’s helpful—examples include features that help you tune in to how your body is feeling and

IS 10,000 REALLY A MAGIC NUMBER?

■ Like pet rocks and dollar stores, it turns out that “10,000 steps a day” is, at its core, a marketing gimmick. It had its origins in Japan, in 1965, with the Manpo waist pedometer, created to tackle rising obesity rates. The word “manpo” translates to “10,000 steps,” as the device’s inventor, following the work of

Yoshiro Hatano, Ph.D., suggested that walking that many steps a day was key to maintaining health and the Japanese character for “10,000” somewhat resembles a person in motion. But research has shown that taking even far fewer daily steps can be beneficial. For example, in a landmark study by Dr. Lee and her colleagues, data from approximately 17,000 tracker-wearing U.S. women with

a mean age of 72 found that those who took just 4,400 steps a day had a 40% reduced risk of early death compared with those who took 2,700 or fewer daily steps. The risk of premature death continued to dip as step count increased, but only until around 7,500 steps a day, at which point the benefits plateaued. As Dr. Lee says, “Some stepping is good, and more is better—but only up to a point.”

how your day-to-day actions are affecting your mental and physical health. But “when the data stops being data and starts being a moral issue, it’s a problem. When we start thinking *I’m a good person because I closed my rings or I suck at everything, because when was the last time I got enough sleep or steps?* it is no longer a good tool,” De Leon says.

It’s also worth noting that trackers are better at providing accurate data on some measurements than on others. Trackers notoriously overestimate or underestimate calorie burn and may be less accurate at measuring heart rate in people of color and those who have tattoos where a tracker sits. Trackers tend to be “remarkably good” at measur-

ing steps, says I-Min Lee, M.D., Sc.D., a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School whose research focuses on physical activity for health promotion, but generally not so great at measuring sleep, especially sleep stages.

STAY ON THE RIGHT TRACK

To get back to the basics of why you wanted to wear a tracker in the first place—to boost your health, not your stress—we asked the experts for their advice on how to make the most of the experience.

»» Use the numbers as clues, not gospel.

Reliance on data may be trendy, says De Leon, but “true gain isn’t measured in steps, calories, or the tons of other data points we worry about—it’s about how you feel and show up for yourself.” Instead of berating yourself for missing a specific goal, reframe your data points as clues. If you are struggling to close the Stand ring (an Apple Watch measure of how often you get up and move around) on Mondays and Fridays, ask yourself what’s different about those days. Do you work from home and spend more time sitting? Maybe that’s inspiration to buy a standing desk or take your dog for an extra walk. If your Oura Ring says your REM sleep numbers tanked while you were on vacation, maybe it’s because you had a cocktail every night and now you have hard evidence that alcohol affects your sleep. The idea, De Leon says, is to harness the data “to make little sustainable changes if necessary.” Yamasaki says he still geeks out over his data but strives to use it “as a compass, not a crutch” and has “made peace with the fact that some nights cuddling Mochi through a thunderstorm is more important than hitting sleep targets.” (PS: Pet snuggling offers its own health benefits.)

»» Give it a (temporary) rest.

Dr. Lembke recommends taking periodic breaks from trackers and related

social media apps to relearn how to listen to your body’s signals. If you’re not ready to go cold turkey, you can take baby steps by leaving your tracker behind one day a week—like Meatless Mondays, but for smart tech. Apple Watch users can lower the amount of movement required to meet their Activity ring goals when they need a break. (Nobody needs their watch nagging them to get up and move around five hours into colonoscopy prep!) And if you have a history of eating disorders, body dysmorphia, or exercise addiction, De Leon recommends steering clear of wearable technology altogether, as she has noticed that it can amplify weight and body-image issues (for this reason, she recommends that kids and teens skip wearables too). But that doesn’t mean you can’t set goals—Dr. Lee suggests something simple, like saying “I’m going to walk three hours a week.”

»» Define success for yourself.

The fact that your best friend set her Apple Watch Move goal (the number of daily calories burned through activities) to 800 doesn’t mean you should too. In fact, personalizing your goals is part of the secret sauce for successful behavioral change, because that way “you have some skin in the game,” says Mitesh Patel, M.D., vice president and chief clinical transformation officer for Ascension. Setting goals that matter to you taps into intrinsic motivation,



the drive people feel to complete a task simply because it feels enjoyable, interesting, or satisfying (as opposed to doing something to earn a reward or avoid a punishment).

For Stephanie Rose, a major turning point came on June 13, 2023, when her tracker failed to record a long walk and she found herself sobbing over the evaporation of her “Longest Move Streak” award. This extreme reaction woke her up to how far she’d strayed from her original reason for fitness tracking, which was to motivate herself, a working and homeschooling mother of two, to head outdoors for some restorative alone time in nature. Her preoccupation with having technological “evidence” of her success, she saw, was part of an unhelpful and pressure-adding pattern of needing to do things “right.” “The purpose is supposed to be nourishing to me, not an accomplishment,” she says.

So Rose pivoted to a goal she calls her Minimum Daily Promise (MDP) that challenges her to “step away from life and replenish what my spirit needs that day,” she explains. Her MDP is a 15-minute daily walk, period—anything more she does is gravy. Rose appreciates that her tracker made her rethink her long-walk streak: “This empowered me to reclaim my streak as something I do for myself, by my own rules.”

WHO'S KEEPING TRACK?

■ Our team tested a bunch of tracking devices, and these are some of our favorites.

APPLE WATCH

SERIES 10

You probably already use your Apple Watch to call or text friends, pay for coffee, and count your steps; but it can also track workouts such as yoga, HIIT, and swimming; analyze your sleep patterns; and stay on top of your heart rate. Users appreciated the seamless experience of syncing it with other Apple products, such as AirPods. *From \$399, apple.com*



OURA RING

Available in six colors, this elegant ring houses sensors that track data including heart rate, temperature, activity, and sleep, which it crunches to give you personal summaries.



You get the basics for free, but more detailed data is available through an optional membership. *From \$299, [ouraring.com](https://www.ouraring.com) (first month free, \$6 per month after that)*

FITBIT CHARGE 6

This sleek tracker is less bulky than other watches but loaded with tons of features including tracking time spent in target heart rate zones and connection with your favorite exercise machines. It's water-resistant, so you can wear it while you swim, and it includes built-in GPS to record outdoor runs. It comes with a free six-month trial of Fitbit Premium, complete with a personalized summary of your activity, sleep, heart rate, and more. *From \$160, store.google.com (\$10 per month after the trial)*



WHOOOP 5.0 FITNESS TRACKER

This tracker has a minimalist design and no touchscreen, so it works in the background all day to collect insights on everything from your blood oxygen



levels to your heart rate and sleep. Because it doesn't make noise or provide numbers, it doesn't distract you during the day. If you're not into wearing it on your wrist, you can wear it in specially designed Whoop shorts, sports bras, or tank tops. *\$199 for device with black knit band plus one-year membership, join.whoop.com*

PIXEL 3

Designed for Android users, this smartwatch syncs with the Fitbit app and comes in two sizes, 41 mm and 45 mm—one user loved that the display on the larger one was so big and bright that he didn't need to grab his readers mid-run to see his stats. Free tools include Daily Readiness, Cardio Load, Target Load, and Morning Brief. *\$350 at store.google.com (includes six-month subscription to Fitbit Premium; \$10 per month after that)*



To see if a sleep tracker might be right for you, go to prevention.com/sleep-tracking-advice.