Gina Harney: You're listening to the Healthy in Real Life podcast episode number 47.

Speaker 2: Welcome to the Healthy in Real Life podcast, bite-sized tips for healthy living that you can implement right now. Join us weekly for interviews and real life advice for creating the happiest and healthiest version of yourself. Here's your host, fitness expert, author, and mom of two, Gina Harney.

Gina Harney: Hey everyone, welcome back to the show. Happy New Year! I'm so excited that you're here. Thank you so much for tuning in. For today's episode, we are talking about outsourcing as a form of self-care. I thought that this would be a great topic, especially since we're in January, a lot of us are making healthy changes. And this is something that can often fly off the radar. And it's just making decisions to simplify your life, create systems, and possibly outsourcing some of the tasks that are bogging you down to make you happier.

I'm excited to have Jess Dang on the show today. And she's the founder of Cook Smarts, so here's a little bit about Jess if you're not familiar with her. Jess is the founder of Cook Smarts, which is an online meal planning service. It was voted number one on Life Hacker. She started Cook Smarts in 2012 to help families live healthier, happier lives, feel empowered and inspired in the kitchen, and lighten the mental load of meal planning.

Prior to starting Cook Smarts, Jess was a contestant on Next Food Network Star and she taught in home cooking lessons around the Bay Area. She has three children and she also is a host of the In the Kitchen with Cook Smarts podcast. So if you guys want to try out Cook Smarts, they gave me a discount code for today. It's a pretty awesome meal planning service. What they do is they help you plan out all of your meals, they create the grocery list. You can switch up if you want it to be vegetarian or paleo or gluten-free. And if you want to try it out and get 20% off, you'll just enter the code Fitnessista. So I'll include the links at checkout, but just enter the code Fitnessista to get 20% off for your Cook Smarts.

So I'm excited for you guys to check it out. Before we dive into the episode, I wanted to go ahead and read this week's five star review. Thank you so much to those of you guys who have taken the time to leave these reviews. It means the world to me. I really appreciate it. So this week's review says, "Love, love, love your podcast! Gina, I'm so grateful that I found your podcast. I found it after reading a great article you wrote for WebMD, which included the name of your podcast in the credits. Gina, I love that you and your guests provide insanely relevant and practical advice that I've been incorporate in my live immediately. The content is exactly what I've been looking for and what I've desperately needed. Thank you, Megan."

Megan, thank you so much for leaving that review. I really appreciate it, and if you wouldn't mind just taking 60 seconds to leave that five star review wherever you're listening today in Apple Podcast, Stitcher, or whatever podcast player you're using. It's kind of checking out a new restaurant. If you look online and you don't see any reviews you don't really want to go to the restaurant. So same thing with podcasts. I always lurk the reviews before I listen to something new. So if you guys take that time, just helps the podcast to grow, helps me spread the word, and is just like a little high five, because I'm hanging out here in my closet right now recording this episode.

So for this episode, we are chatting all about outsourcing as a form of self-care. We're going to talk about what self-care means and how it is such an overused phrase right now in the industry. Marketers are just really jumping on the self-care "bandwagon" and I feel like the meaning of it has almost been deluded because of that.

So we're talking about what self-care is, some of the things that you can outsource to simplify your life and make room for the things that make you happier, what are some of the things that you can do for budget constraints or feeling like you have to do it all yourself. And some of Jess' favorite weekly rituals that she includes in her own person self-care routine.

I hope you guys love this episode. Welcome to the podcast, Jess. Hey, Jess! Thank you so much for being on the show today.

Jess Dang: Oh, this is such a treat. I'm so happy to be here.

Gina Harney: Yes, I'm so excited that you're here. And before we jump in, I would love it if you wouldn't mind just sharing some background info about yourself and what led you to create Cook Smarts.

Jess Dang: Sure. One, I'm not a professionally trained chef. And in fact, before starting Cook Smarts, I spent almost a decade in the corporate world, mainly as a spreadsheet nerd. My career then, it was a great fit for me because I loved thinking about numbers and using those numbers to solve problems and coming up with more efficient ways to manipulate numbers.

And I would spend all day in Excel and I just loved it. But I was also someone who really loved to eat, which led me to pick up cooking in my early 20s, and it became just a huge hobby of mine. So much so that I auditioned and got into season 2 of the Next Food Network Star, where-

Gina Harney: Love that.

Jess Dang: ... I got ... Yes, I got to compete against Guy Fieri. It was a whole lifetime ago, but it was so much fun and totally wild experience. And after that, I started a small catering company and I would also host a supper club out of my San Francisco apartment as just a way to test out recipes.

So I could've just easily stayed in the corporate world and kept food as a side hobby, but I had made a promise to myself when I was about 20 years old that if I lived to see 30, I would do something to help people live healthier lives. So the story behind this promise is that when I was 17 years old, I was a senior in high school, and I was donating blood at our school blood drive and a few weeks after my donation, I received a very generic form letter from the agency that ran the blood drive and it said that they couldn't accept my blood because it had tested positive for the Hepatitis C virus.

And little did I know that letter was going to be the start of a long, and at times, pretty scary health journey for me. I was supposed to be my last year of high school, I had studied hard and gotten into a good school, and I was just supposed to be care-free senior. But instead I got a letter saying that, "Hey, by the way, you might have a life-threatening illness."

So for those of you who don't know what Hep C is, it's a virus that attacks the liver. And this was over 20 years ago, and not much was known about Hep C then. There weren't a lot of treatment options and they had likened it to in the news to HIV at the time. And it was just pretty scary stuff.

And apparently I had gotten it as a baby from a blood transfusion I had received when I was born in 1981, back when blood wasn't tested for the virus. I had it all my life and I just didn't know it. After that-

Gina Harney: Wow.

Jess Dang: Yeah, it was just crazy. And I ended up, instead of just going through a normal senior year and being excited about going to college, I was going to doctors and getting all these tests done. And unfortunately, each test revealed that the virus had progressed and led me to the next step.

And finally, the last thing was a biopsy of my liver where they told me there was already damage being done and I needed to undergo chemotherapy treatment. So that's what I ended up doing the summer after my freshman year of college. And I spent a year giving myself shots and taking medicine and that would cause a whole host of side effects from hair loss to fatigue to anxiety. And I was definitely not feeling like an example of good health that year, and it was really hard.

Luckily, the treatment worked for me. My viral loads after the end of that year of treatment were undetectable and I had to go back and check in every year for blood testing, but my doctors told me just to go on and live life like I was cured and I was going to be okay. But I think after going through all that, I just didn't have that sense of security anymore. I was just, "How is this going to be okay?"

I was just kind of holding my breath and thinking about, "Well, if I live to see 30, I'm going to do something to help others feel more ... not so powerless about their health and taking control of their health." So with my love for food and spreadsheets, this idea of creating a meal plan service with an educational focus just fell into place.

So a few months after I turned 30, I decided to quit my corporate job and start Cook Smarts. And now I'm 38, so I'm really proud that I, my team have been helping people feel more empowered in the kitchen for the last eight years now.

Gina Harney: Wow. That is bananas. So first of all, high five from another spreadsheet nerd over here. I love Excel, I love IF statements, the whole deal. That's so funny.

Jess Dang: Oh, me too. Me too.

Gina Harney: Love a good IF statement. But what a beautiful way to take such a scary, unfortunate situation and use that power to empower people to make such healthy changes in their own life. I think that's so incredible. Would you mind just explaining a little bit about Cook Smarts and how it works?

Jess Dang: Yeah. Cook Smarts is an online meal plan service, and what that means is there are all these meal kit services out there these days, but we are purely meal plans. We are all about giving people a menu that's already planned every single week, so that you don't have to search through recipes online and figure out how to put them together.

And we really try to think through a couple things like optimizing for food waste, so if you use half a head of cabbage in one recipe, you'll use it again in another. And we think through how to use your most perishable items first. So we create all our recipes in house to make sure that they're really doable and accessible for any busy family.

So we put it together, you decide which meals you want to make for the week, and we have all sorts of diet options, because we know people just want to be flexible. So one day you can cook a vegetarian meal, and the next day you can be paleo. Every meal has a gluten-free, paleo, and vegetarian adaptation to it.

And then you can choose different serving sizes, because families come in all different sizes. And maybe you want to cook for lunch leftovers or double up for another day and cook a little bit less during the week. We also have weekend prep steps for those weekend prep warriors that like to get ahead of the game. And so if you like to do a lot of meal prepping, you can have all your dinners prepped on a Sunday and just breeze through the week if you'd like.

We just are really all about giving people ... just making it really easy, removing the friction of making home cooked meals. And then with the educational component, we really want people to improve their skills in the kitchen, because we know the faster you are, the more efficient you feel, and the more confident you feel the more likely you are to cook.

So with each of the recipes, when you come back to make it, there are all these short videos that help you improve your knife skills. So you can finally learn how to properly chop an onion so it doesn't take you 15 minutes of tears to get that onion diced. So hopefully you'll get better. And a lot of the videos, they're really short, they're all just the music and text, a lot of people watch them with their kids. And so their kids are actually learning alongside with them and helping with dinner. And it can be a real family team effort.

Gina Harney: Oh, that's so much fun. And I love that you do the tutorials as well, because when I first started learning how to cook, it took me forever to chop vegetables. And my brother's a chef, so anytime we cooked together, he would just stand there just shaking his head and watching me and would eventually would just take all the veggies away and chop them in 30 seconds.

Just little tools like that, and it can be really intimidating to meal plan as well, so I love that you take the guesswork out of it and just make it more attainable for real life. And that you can customize it is just so convenient. So I'll include a link to it so you can guys can check it out.

But today we're going to chat about self-care and I'm really excited about this topic. I feel like it's almost become cliché. It's just so overused and I also feel like it's almost a blanket statement that people use for basic human necessities. I don't want to judge anyone's self-care, if it makes you feel good, go on with your bad self, but when someone's like, "I'm going to take a hot shower, hashtag self-care." A hot shower? That's just human maintenance. But, enjoy that.

I would love to hear what you would define as self-care and just your perspective on it.

Jess Dang: Yes, I totally agree with you. I feel like the marketing world has kind of co-opted the term self-care to sell women face masks and serums, but my definition about self-care is really about asking yourself, "What can I do today to take care of my future self?"

So it's not just giving yourself one hour of peace by getting a manicure, but really putting in place systems for sustainable care of your physical and mental health in the long run. So it's not the quick fixes or the band-aids. I don't want to treat the symptoms of our stress, but really find long-lasting solutions that get to the cause of why we're not taking care of ourselves enough.

And I know that can be a big ask for women, moms especially. We have so much on our plate and so much stuff that needs to get done today that it's incredibly hard for us to prioritize the future, especially when it comes to ourselves. I have three kids ages four and under and I also run Cook Smarts, so I totally understand what a never-ending to-do list feels like.

But I know that if I didn't put a system in place to manage that stress, I would have a pretty burnt out future self. So for me, when I was getting ready to have my last kid, I really had to ask myself, "What can I do to care for my future self?" I realized that so much of my mental energy was taken up by invisible labor, so all those intangible tasks and decisions that moms have to make, that don't feel recognized as work, but it takes up so much time and energy.

What does the family's calendar look like this week? What am I going to feed everybody? What am I going to pack for the kids' lunch tomorrow? Oh, grandma and grandpa are visiting. What arrangements do I need to make so that everybody has a great time? It's so-and-so's birthday party this weekend, what gift do I need to go get? And this is just a really small percentage of most women's decisions to be made lists. And we often have to make these decisions over and over again, and it can just really wear you down mentally.

And so I knew for myself with another baby on the way, I needed to put a system in place for outsourcing as much of those decision making as possible, or putting in a system in place to really simplify it in cases where outsourcing wasn't an option, because there wasn't someone to source it to or we didn't have the budget for it. And that was how I was going to care for my future self and avoid burnout.

Gina Harney: And what a smart thing for you to be able to assess that situation and say, "Hey, we're about to have a baby. What can I do to make my life easier after the baby's here?" Instead of waiting until the baby's born and you're deep into the newborn phase and trying to figure out everything else. I think that that's just really smart to have that perspective and that foresight to look into that.

And the emotional drainage is so real. I'm sure so many listeners can relate to it, because you're the one that is carrying all this information in your brain. I know that our cream cheese container is half empty and we're out of bath tissue, and we have a birthday party this weekend so I need to Amazon it. So it's all these things that you carry around with you, and I love the idea to create just ... What's the word I'm looking for? Systems. Systems in place so that you can make it simpler, easier, and just to reduce some of that decision fatigue.

So I would love to hear some of the things that you think are the best things that you can outsource just to simplify your life and make room for the things that make us happier.

Jess Dang: I really think it comes down to each individual, what makes sense to outsource. Most of us, we're just going through that to-do list thinking that we have to do it all. So I think it's important to take a step back, sit down, and go through the list in its entirety. So the spreadsheet nerd in me would tell you to create a spreadsheet, each row would be a task that you have to do or a decision that you have to make pretty frequently.

And make two additional columns. So the first column, I would use it as how much do I hate this task? How draining is it on you and how much do you just dislike it? And you can use a scale of one to five or maybe even simpler, one to three. So one is I enjoy this task, it's fine. Two is neutral, and three is you just hate it. You really want someone else to do it.

So for the tasks you hate, the second column is you can decide, you can just say try to outsource this or simplify it in some way. I'm going to use meal planning because I'm a little biased here. So a great example is meal planning, and it's no surprise that I love meal planning, but most people, they hate the task. Most of our members don't mind cooking at all, but they really hate that decision making part.

But unfortunately you can't really have home cooked meals without the planning component. Somebody has to decide what are we going to cook this week? And then make the grocery lists and then go grocery shopping for it. But most don't enjoy spending that time, one to two hours on a Sunday combing through Pinterest or the internet, whatever it is, piecing recipes together and then making that grocery list.

But luckily, meal planning is one of those tasks that's really easy and affordable to outsource. There are lots of meal planning companies out there, there's us, but there's lots of others who are happy to decide what your dinner menu should be every week and create a grocery list for you. And since, again, meal planning is something we do for a living, we tend to do it better than the average person. We think through, like I said, about food waste and we make sure that the recipes are not sending you to three different grocery stores. It's all things that can be accessible.

When you're doing it yourself, sometimes you just don't know ... Actually, if done by a professional, they have all these tricks up their sleeves and they can actually do it better and more efficiently than you can. It really depends on each individual. Go through that list of the things that you hate, and then figure out, is there a way that I can have this task done by somebody else or is there a way I can put a system in place to simplify it so it doesn't take up so much of my mental space and energy?

Gina Harney: I love that. You mentioned meal planning, what are some of the other ones that come to mind?

Jess Dang: For myself, I do a lot of things like I don't really want to be shopping for myself. I just go ahead and let someone else decide what I should be wearing. Or in some cases, I also simplify it in a sense that I have a really boring wardrobe. And do so eliminate decision fatigue, I just have a couple different things that I wear and then I might sprinkle a couple new things in.

But for the most part, I stick to a really simple plan and that helps that a lot. Going back to food, a lot of people don't like grocery shopping. That's a really simple task to outsource these days, and yes there might be a delivery fee here and there, but people really have to think about how valuable your time is.

There's all these new grocery delivery services. It's so nice actually to have someone do it for you, and I find that if you're not in the store, there are just fewer decisions for you to make. So when you're in the store, you might come across something that's like, oh, you don't need this, but can become an impulse purchase or you're humming and hawing, "Do I want to buy this or not?" So when you're not the one shopping and you just let someone take your list and run with it, it actually not only relieves you of the task itself, but also additional decision that need to be made. It's one less thing that you have to worry about.

You could outsource to yourself too, and I think people forget that. And so a lot of what I talk about how do I care for my future self, maybe it's getting that plan in place so that you're the one that's taking on the task, but just doing it earlier. And I think that really helps release some of that future stress where you're in the situation and you're like, "Oh my god, I have to get this done." Versus if you planned a little bit earlier and got yourself on a plan and therefore you're able to get it done yourself, but you're not putting yourself in that really stressful situation.

Gina Harney: Yes. I do the same thing. And I tell myself if it's going to take less than two minutes, just do it now. Because I can get it over with, out of my life, it's not hanging over my head anymore. It's done. So less than two minutes, I'll do it with emails, because I'll read the email and sometimes I'll just click "mark as unread." And I'm like, "Why did you do that?" You could just write back. Take 30 seconds, and then you don't have to think about, "Oh, I need to email back so-and-so" all day. It'll drive you crazy.

But you mentioned grocery delivery, we are huge fans of that. I use the Whole Foods one through Amazon and we love it. And just like you said, your time is so valuable and the cost to have it delivered, it's free delivery if it's over $35 and you just have to tip the driver. And the tip is like $8. And I tell myself I will happily pay $8 to not have to chase my children all over Whole Foods while they're trying to throw random items into the cart and asking for mochis or mochis, or however you say random things like that. And we also love the Target drive-up. Have you ever used that?

Jess Dang: No. I do the store pick-up a lot, but I have never done just drive up at the curb. But [crosstalk 00:21:31]-

Gina Harney: The drive up is a game changer, because you mentioned the impulse buys. Target is the worst for that. You just order it through the app and you drive up and they bring it out to your car, and you drive away. It's the best thing ever. I love doing things like that.

But just chatting about outsourcing, budget constraints just immediately come to mind, because I think of Beyonce. Okay, Beyonce can outsource everything because she has unlimited budget, which is yay, Beyonce, great for you, but not realistic for most of us. How would you overcome budget constraint hurdles and even just the mentality of feeling like you have to do everything yourself?

Jess Dang: Yeah, that's a great question, and that's why when I tell people to do that spreadsheet exercise, I have the simplify option too. So you can outsource or simplify. So maybe you hate meal planning but you cannot handle the thought of someone else doing it for you, so then you just have to figure out a way to simplify the task so it's not something that feels really painful or draining every week.

For meal planning, maybe it's coming up with an easy template that you can use every week. Like every Monday is a freezer meal, plus a salad. Or Tuesdays are taco Tuesdays and Wednesdays you always make a soup. So just by having that template in place, you've eliminated some of that decision making up front and that can really help make that task easier when you actually have to do it.

So a lot of our members actually do a hybrid approach where they like someone making the decisions for them, but they still like having some control. So they might choose to make two or three of our meals every week and then they fill in the rest with the regular standbys that they're used to. So they can have their cake and eat it too.

But if you ware someone who is having trouble with the idea of outsourcing some of your to-do lists and losing that control and decision making control, like I said before, I really invite you to think about the value of your time. Most people just don't understand that time is the only resource that you cannot make more of. All of us have the same 24 hours every day and once that time is gone, it's gone. So you just need to think, "How much time would I save by not doing this task and what else could I do with that time that could help me care more for my future self?"

And I think when we see it from that point of view, we can be maybe much more open to letting it go.

Gina Harney: I completely agree. And I think that you can also lean on your partner for this one too, if you have a partner or your husband, because a lot of the times they don't realize everything that you're doing. And my husband and I had a long talk about it because I hit a major exhaustion point earlier, it was towards the end of last year. And just said, "Hey, I'm overwhelmed. I'm working, I'm doing all of these things, juggling all these mental stressors," and he wrote down a bunch of things that I listed that were just bogging me down and he said, "Let me do these for you."

And it was sweet relief. It was Olivia's birthday party last weekend and birthday parties, it just always falls on the mom's lap just to plan everything.

Jess Dang: Always, yes.

Gina Harney: And it's so many little things that you don't think about, but I have to book the venue and order the cake and get the gifts and get the balloons and just invite everyone. And he did half of the party planning, and it was a game changer. And it's not something I ever would have thought to ask him to do, but he was just, "Hey, how can I help with the birthday party?" I was like, "I guess you could call the place and book it."

And he called them, he paid the deposit, ordered the food, and it was just such a game changer. So I just think if you're starting to feel overwhelmed and you have a partner or maybe someone in your family that wants to help out or a close friend, some of those little things like the phone calls and the ordering, they can do that for you. And a lot of the times, they don't mind. They want to help you, especially if you have small kids or you have a baby. And people are looking for ways to help, but don't necessarily know how, that can be a great way to do it.

And something else that came to mind while you were talking is subscribe and save. I feel like that is such a great option through Amazon. Things like bath tissue and paper towels and vitamins, things that you order every single month, if you just pop it on subscribe and save, it's so nice to just open the door and be like, "Oh, our vitamins are here. I didn't have to think to order them again this month."

Jess Dang: Yeah, exactly. That's such an easy one too, because you know how quickly vitamins will be consumed. If there's 180 vitamins in the can and you need to take two a day, "In 90 days, I'm going to need another can of this." I think those things where it's very obvious that when the schedule is recurring, you should just put those in and it's just not then on your to-do list that you have to hold in your brain. Like, "What do I need to order and do?"

But I really love your point of just, I think sometimes we forget that we can outsource to our partners. I think women, we're just not great about asking for help. I don't know if it's we feel like we're showing a sign of weakness or we feel like we have to do it all, or I think there is a societal sense that women should be doing it all. We can't have it all, but you need to do it all.

And that's not fair to us and that's not sustainable for the fact that a lot of women are working and even if you're not working, I feel like being at home with your kids is a more than full-time job-

Gina Harney: Totally.

Jess Dang: ... because you have no mental rest from the demands of a child. And so I think if you have family members that can pitch in ... I'm really lucky. The only way I can keep my sanity, I have a really good system in place, but I also have parents that are nearby and they come once a month for a week, and just that week I can breathe. I can have some relieve, and that makes a huge difference.

Or for a week someone else is actually doing the grocery shopping and I can relax and reset and then get back ready for those three weeks when we're back on our own, and so much of this stuff does fall to me. I think we just need to be ... A lot of it is just being okay with the fact that asking for help is not a sign of weakness, whether it's outsourcing professionally or just within your own family. Or even with your kids, I think a lot of us don't realize our kids are probably more capable than we give them credit for. And just to start that process early.

My kids are really young, so when I ask them to make their bed, it's not the way I would make their bed, but the bed is sort of made and they're getting into that routine. At least I'm not doing it, so someone else is doing it. It might not be up to your standards, but it's going to get done and it's something else that you don't have to do.

Gina Harney: Absolutely. You just have to let go of that control a little bit, and I just tell myself that over time, they'll get better at it. So it's just the practice is so good for them. So I'll put a bunch of towels on the couch, I'm like, "All right, will you girls help me fold the towels?" And they're in 18 different shapes, but I didn't have to fold the towels, which is so nice.

So just little things like that I think make a huge difference, and also just assessing your budget too and finding the things that are worthwhile for you if you can outsource something. For me, a non-negotiable is we have a cleaner that comes every two weeks and I feel like just as I'm starting to fall behind on everything, she swoops in and saves the day. And that is something I will never get rid of.

I will stop shopping, I will get rid of dinners out. If we ever needed to make a cut, that is not the thing that I would cut. So it's just assessing and seeing what you really need, and also I think it's important if you do have a business or you work, assessing your task and devoting the ones that are revenue producing to you first instead of the ones that aren't. So just prioritizing what you're doing is so important.

Jess Dang: I think my eight years of running Cook Smarts has helped me so much, the skills I've learned running a business have transferred into my personal life. Because it's like, in the beginning, I was trying to do everything by myself for the first two or three years at Cook Smarts. And I was just burning myself out and not growing the business, because I wasn't spending my time on things that were going to grow it.

I was down in the weeds. As soon as I started to be like, "Okay, what are the tasks that do not make sense for me to do? What am I really just not good at?" I was trying to make these graphics, I'm not a graphics designer, and then I finally hired one and she could do these amazing things in 10 minutes that would take me hours to figure out. I was like, "What? Why did I not do this sooner?"

I think that's so much of my business inside, is why did I not give this task away sooner to someone that is really good at it and that's all they do? And so just having that practice for my business has definitely helped me in my home life of practicing, I just need to let go of that control sometimes. And it is something you practice, you just get better at it with time. It becomes easier to let go of things as you just get used to realizing, "I cannot do it all and I shouldn't be doing it all."

But I want to go back to what you said about birthday parties. So that is something we've decided for our family that we're not going to do, and that actually relieves a lot of stress. Because with three birthdays a year-

Gina Harney: Oh, yes.

Jess Dang: ... it just seems like a lot. My kids are not in school yet, so I've done elementary school, the two and a half year old and four year old are in preschool, so they don't really know. They've been to a few birthday parties, but I don't think it's a thing that they expect yet. We'll have to reassess once the oldest one gets into kindergarten. Maybe she'll start wanting to have birthday parties.

But we've just decided instead of doing birthday party, we're just going to do a family day. We take the day off of work and we go to the zoo or we make it a special day. But not having to think about who to invite and what food to get and where to have it, and all that stuff three times a year has just been such a relief.

Gina Harney: That's so smart. So smart. And sometimes what the kids do is they want to go on a trip instead, just a little trip, and I love when they do that. Penelope already said next year she wants to go to Disneyland instead of having a party, and she's four, and I was like, "Okay, fine with me." Because I love going to Disneyland and it's way less work than having to plan everything.

Jess Dang: Yeah, exactly. The entertainments all there for you, you just pay the admission. I mean, clearly there's a little bit more than that, but you just pay the admission and then you go in and you have a day of entertainment and don't have to agonize, "Should I invite the entire preschool class?"

Gina Harney: Totally.

Jess Dang: And then for us, a gift for birthday gifts when we do get invited to birthday parties, I've just decided also to eliminate the decision making about gifts, because I'm like, "I don't know if this kid has this book already or this game," so I love photography, so I just take my nice camera and we take a nice picture of the family.

Because so often, people throw these big birthday parties, and they don't have a picture of themselves with their kids at the end of the day.

Gina Harney: Oh, yes.

Jess Dang: So that's we say to people, we're just going to come and take a really nice picture of your family and send that to you and that'll be our gift.

Gina Harney: I love that idea.

Jess Dang: Just eliminating that decision making has made it ... These things, they come up, and somebody has to think about it and it's so nice to be like, well, it's always the same decision. So we don't have to think about it.

Gina Harney: That is perfect. Are there any daily or weekly rituals that you include in your own personal routine that you would consider to be self-care?

Jess Dang: Oh, I love this question. And I actually have three things that I want to share. The first is just a practice in gratitude daily, and I really think this sends so much positive energy to my brain to think about everything I have to be thankful for.

It's not like I am sitting down and trying to meditate or anything, but I just find moment in my day when I feel frustrated, a little [inaudible 00:33:27] take a step back to think about all the things that I am so appreciative of and how lucky I am to have three healthy, happy kids, a job that's really rewarding and even the fact that I live in the developed world and have refrigeration for my food and accessible power to cook that food.

Taking that time to think about these things every day just puts me in a good mental and emotional state and not just get so caught up in the to-do list and sometimes the frustration of the to-do list.

The second self-care thing that I do that's part of my routine is I try not to work at night and I try to stay away from screens. And that doesn't always happen, but it's something I really aim for. Because I know that one of the most important things to care for my future self is just getting enough sleep.

I don't do caffeine, I can't handle it. And it just goes back to my philosophy of treating the cause and not the symptoms. I've really thought about, "What can I do to get more sleep?" Working just gets my brain too fired up and I'm too excited to sleep. It's great that I love my job so much, but not great that it takes me over an hour to get to bed.

So instead of working after the kids go to bed, I will look over my calendar of the next day so that I know what the plan is, what needs to happen to have a productive day. Maybe I'll meal prep a little bit, do my future self a favor, get a little bit ahead of the game. I might do some reading, watch something that doesn't require any brain cells. But just not work. I really just think about what can I do to wind down, and that really, I think, helps me a lot to get the sleep that I need and I wake up a much happier person the next day.

And then the last thing I do is I just make sure to spend time with friends, and this is more a weekly ritual. I don't think people talk about this enough, but investing in your relationships with friends is [inaudible 00:35:14] but they're only going to need me less and less as they grow up, and I don't want to wake up 15 years from now and realize that I lost all my friends.

So I always make an effort to spend time with friends every week. With three kids, dinner parties have turned into brunch parties. Meeting up at a hip restaurant has turned into meeting up at a boba shop. But it's something that's really important to me and I make a point of talking to a friend or meeting up with friends, without kids, almost weekly.

Gina Harney: I think that's so important. And I love the idea just to spend some time on gratitude each day. It makes such a huge difference in your mindset, and just like you said, it brings you back down to earth and helps you to remember what's really important.

There's a commercial, and I don't even know what the commercial is for, but it launched over the holidays last year and it's just a man who wakes up, and it's over the holidays, and his kids come running into the room and they both have bows on them.

Jess Dang: Oh, that's so cute!

Gina Harney: And he gets out of bed and he slides his shoes on and his shoes have bows on them, and he flicks the light on and the light switch has a bow on it, and the water, the faucet has bows on it. He's like, "This is amazing!" And he walks outside and his car has a giant bow on it.

I think of that a lot, because we have so many things that seem so small, but just we're so fortunate. So it's such a good reminder just to keep that in mind during the day and just be grateful. And I feel like by having an attitude of gratitude, it just helps to manifest more good things into your life. So I think that it's really important.

The title of the podcast is Healthy in Real Life, what's one of your favorite sustainable habits that you've created in your routine that you've been able to maintain over time?

Jess Dang: I think it's really caring for myself physically, which involves a whole gamut of things. But exercise and seeing a chiropractor have been really key for me in that. I have three kids in less than four years, so I think pregnancy has just given me such a deep appreciation for what my body's capable of and has made me just really want to care for it.

It's been so strong through three pregnancies and births that I just owe it that care and attention. So I do something for myself physical every day, something for my physical health every day. Whether it's running, lifting weights, doing yoga, stretching, playing with my kids at the pool. It's something that's really important to me.

In terms of eliminating decision fatigue, everybody should follow, just sign up for your hip bootcamp or download an app. Remove that friction so that someone else has just decided what you're going to do for exercise, and that has really helped me. I just go in and I power up the phone and someone has decided on the music and someone is going to tell me what to do for these 30 minutes, and it just makes it really fly by, to eliminate that decision fatigue.

And I really want to give a shout out to my chiropractor, because she was ... Over the years that I've been working with her and going to her, since I got pregnant, it's just made me so much aware of my body and what it goes through every day to be able to do all the things that it needs to do. And so I've just been much more attune with it and really trying to stretch or make sure that I'm not compensating by doing certain things when I'm standing or running or sitting, and it's just made a huge difference I think in my posture and just the way I'm able to then exercise.

Gina Harney: I love that. I think that it's so great when chiropractors help give you tips on form an alignment and exercises you can do. My chiropractor here in town, she has a physical therapy background, so I feel like it's the best of both worlds. I haven't been to her in a long time. Do you get the neck crack, do you let her crack your neck?

Jess Dang: I do, but most of the visit, it's really a very efficient massage or-

Gina Harney: Oh, okay.

Jess Dang: She can just touch certain spots and be like, "Oh, you are really tight here because probably you're standing in a way that's using your gluteus too much." She's able to really explain to me why my posture is bad or why I'm doing this. I'm not someone who needs a massage, because I feel like it just takes too much time. But for her, you're there for 30 minutes and within 10 minutes, she's using this really ... It's like a jackhammer type of tool, but it just loosens your muscles right away, and I feel sore for a day, but then I'm like, "Oh my god." My body just feels totally different afterwards.

So a lot of it, I think, is just more of that, really just loosening up muscles that are too tight because of the ... I'm at a computer a lot of the day. I have a standing desk, but still, ergonomically, I'm not perfect. And so I need that reset every three months. I'm still nursing and I carry my kids. So things are just moving in ways where they're probably not supposed to be all the time. And just having that reset every three months makes a huge difference for me.

Gina Harney: Yes, I love that. And the mom mode too, I just feel like from breastfeeding alone, I was like, "I am going to have a hunchback by the end of this." Because I was hunched over just 24/7 it felt like. So it feels so good. I do like getting massages, but I like going to the chiropractor as well.

Jess Dang: Yeah. I think people just don't realize how physical breastfeeding is, on many accounts, but a lot of it is to do with you're hunched over, looking at the baby, which is great look at baby, but the visits right after I had the baby really are just focusing on neck and making sure I'm re-stretched out, so I'm not ... my whole body is caved in anymore.

Gina Harney: Exactly. Where can everyone find you online?

Jess Dang: Everyone can learn more about Cook Smarts and get a free trial to our meal plan service at cooksmarts.com, and that's Cook Smarts with an S. If you don't use the S, you'll find a very different site. We're also on Instagram at Cook Smarts. And we actually started a podcast last year as well to help home cooks everywhere just gain more confidence and get organized in the kitchen. So you can just find that by searching for Cook Smarts on your preferred podcast player.

Gina Harney: Perfect. So I'll include links to all of those so that you guys can check it out. Thank you so much for being here today. I loved chatting with you, and I really appreciate it.

Jess Dang: Oh, thanks Gina. It was such a pleasure.

Gina Harney: Have a great day. I'll talk to you soon.

Speaker 2: Thanks for listening to the Healthy in Real Life podcast. For more info, check out Gina's blog at fitnessista.com.