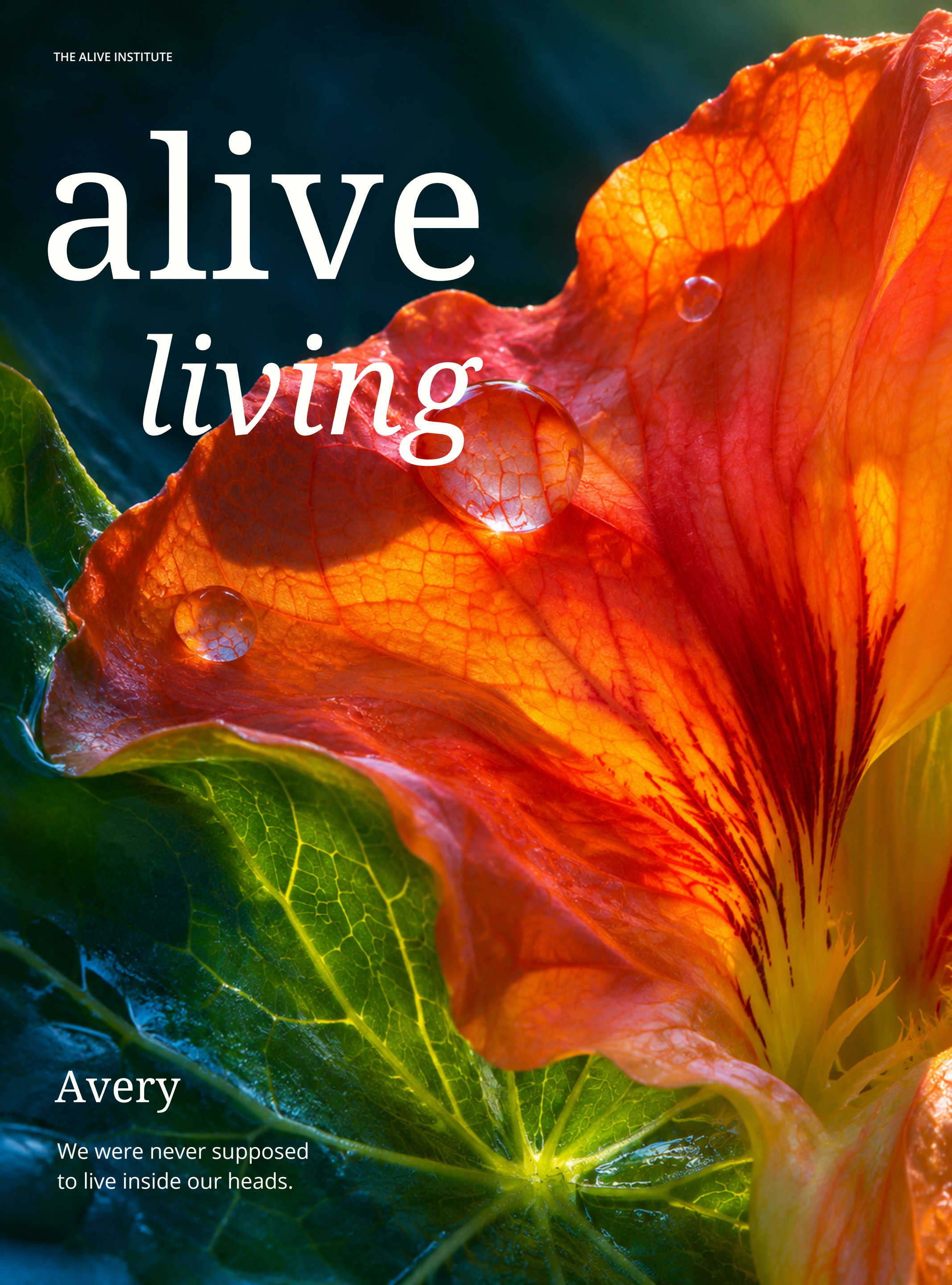
# alive *living*



## Avery

We were never supposed
to live inside our heads.

# We were never supposed to live inside our heads.

It can feel as though life is happening somewhere beyond the thinking. You finish work, sit down with someone you love, or step outside on a beautiful day, and find yourself still planning, remembering, rehearsing. The conversation continues. The light changes. You are busy somewhere else.

That experience can become so familiar that it seems to be the ordinary human condition. Anthropology offers a wider picture.

Research with some pre-industrial, small-scale societies describes people whose sense of self is deeply embodied and woven into relationships with other people and the surrounding world. Their accounts give less emphasis to an isolated inner thinker and less identification with thoughts as the essence of who they are. Understanding is bound up with hearing, doing, responding, and living among others. [1, 11, 12]

Among the Pintupi of Australia, for example, anthropological accounts describe identity through kin and country, with thinking understood in ways that differ from the familiar Western picture of a private mind producing its own thoughts. These accounts show that the sense of being a thinker enclosed in a head is culturally shaped. [1, 12]

Alive begins with the possibility this opens up. The way we experience being human is shaped by how we live. The conditions of ordinary life can draw more of our bodily, sensory, and relational capacities into everyday experience.



# How did we end up here?

Large-scale agriculture and, later, industrial societies reorganized human life. Stored resources, future harvests, property, formal obligations, schedules, and institutions made it increasingly important to prepare for outcomes far beyond the activity at hand. Work and its rewards became separated by longer stretches of time. [1, 13]

That change also altered what daily life asked of us. More had to be anticipated, represented, recorded, and managed. Modern education, work, and digital media extend those demands into much of the day.

The environmental model behind Alive proposes that these arrangements have an unintended psychological consequence. Repeatedly living through abstract demands trains us to keep living through thought. Our bodies, senses, relationships, and surroundings can become less available to us as ways of knowing and finding our way. We may feel distant from the world, from people, and even from our own sense of what matters. [1–3]

The historical explanation is a research-informed model. It draws together anthropological accounts, research on cognitive habits, and studies of how environments influence experience.

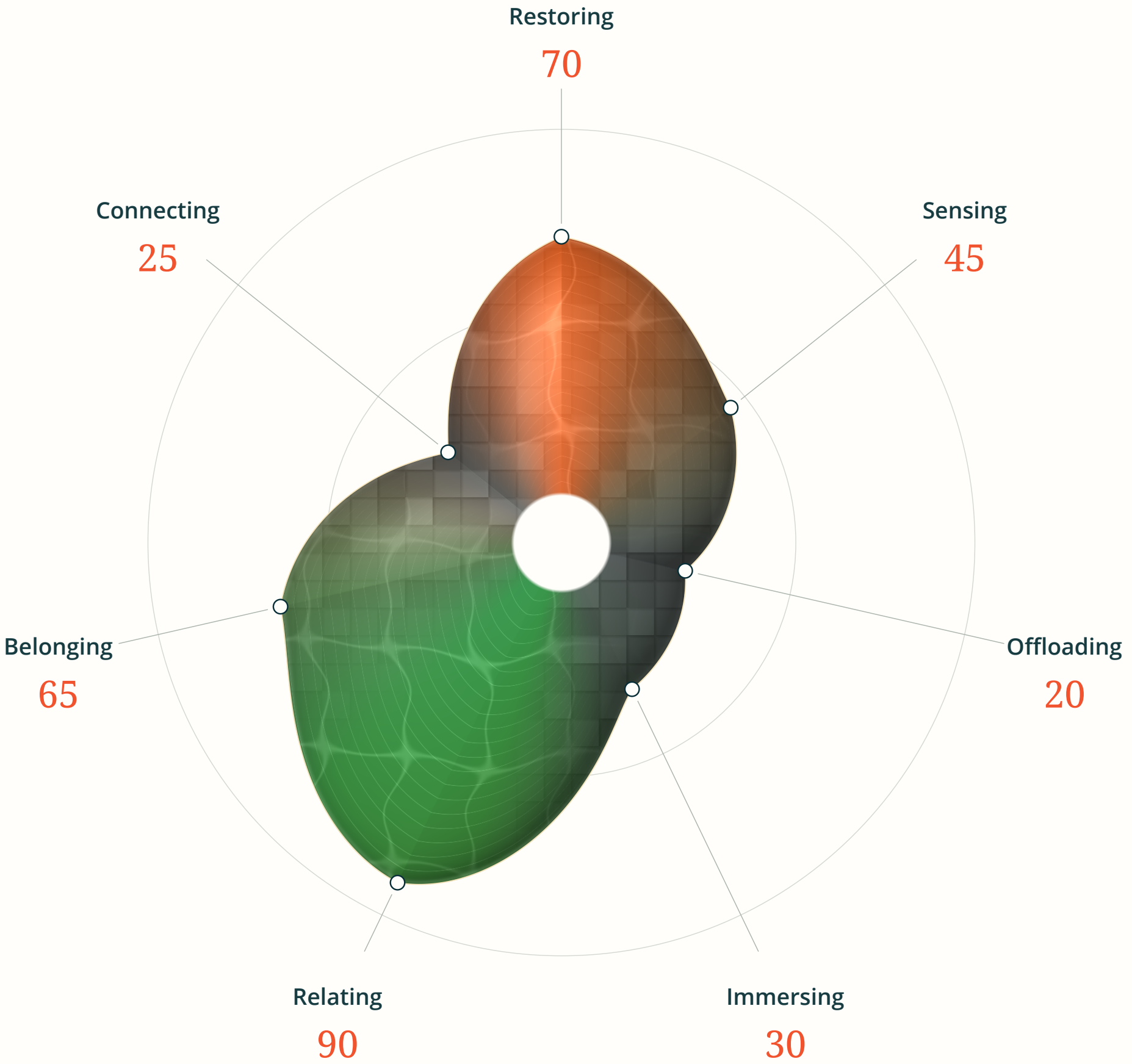
Restoring aliveness means restoring the conditions that bring the full range of human life into play. A room can invite us to notice. An activity can give our hands something real to respond to. A relationship can let us be known. A community can give us a place to contribute.

These opportunities belong within an ordinary week. As they become part of how we live, there is more of life to feel, respond to, and care about.



# Avery

These are the conditions you described in your everyday life.




Higher scores mean more support for each condition in your everyday life.

Something to build on

## Relating

Notice what makes this condition possible and what you would like to protect as you change an ordinary week.

# What would you like more room for?

The pattern in your answers offers a few places to begin. Choose something that connects with what you want in your life and that you have room to influence.

## Offloading

Your score 20 / 100

Choose a responsibility that keeps coming back to mind. Record its next step and when you will return to it. If someone else is involved, agree who is doing what.

## Connecting

Your score 25 / 100

Choose a book, film, or podcast that explores who we are through our bodies, relationships, or the living world. A story following food from sunlight and soil into our bodies is one place to begin. Give it time in your week.

## Relating

Your score 90 / 100

Think of someone with whom you can be yourself. Make room for an unhurried conversation or a shared activity, and allow what matters to you to enter the time together.

*Interest, enjoyment, and the room you have to act are good reasons to choose a starting point.*



# 1. Alive Space

The physical surroundings you live in, and how they bring the restorative qualities of nature into your everyday life.

## Restoring



# Let the living world in.

Living spaces that bring you closer to nature through daylight, plants, natural materials, views, and other natural features.

The places we inhabit shape what reaches us. A room full of screens, alerts, noise, and unfinished work keeps offering reasons to think about something else. Daylight, changing weather, natural materials, and living things offer another kind of contact.

A view of branches moving outside a window can become part of breakfast. A plant needs tending. A comfortable place to sit gives you a reason to stay. These features can make sensory contact with life an ordinary part of being at home.

Look first at the places you enjoy spending time. What do they make possible, and could you bring some of that into another part of the day?

Choose one place you already use for eating, working, or resting. Turn toward available daylight or a natural view. Bring a living or tactile element within reach. Arrange the place so that you will genuinely want to use it.

The aim is a small change you can live with every day. It might be as simple as moving the chair where you drink your coffee so that the tree outside becomes part of the morning.

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Experiments found benefits for directed-attention tasks after interaction with nature, including a walk or viewing nature images. [4]



# 2. Alive Activity

The activities and practical systems that help you engage your body and senses, spend time with nature, and keep tasks and plans outside your head.

**Sensing · Offloading · Immersing**

Your score

45 / 100

Support in your everyday life

# Let your hands have a say.

Activities that engage your body and senses, bringing you into direct contact with what you're doing through movement, making, touch, and immediate feedback.



As dough changes under your hands, you adjust. When you play music with someone, you respond to rhythm, timing, and the sound between you. There is something happening to meet, and your body is involved in knowing what to do.

A day spent mainly with screens and abstract tasks can offer few occasions for this kind of involvement. Consider what you miss doing, especially the things that absorb you because they give you something tangible to respond to.

You might find that in preparing food, tending plants, drawing, dancing, repairing something, playing an instrument, or moving in a way that suits your body. Choose an activity you enjoy enough to return to.

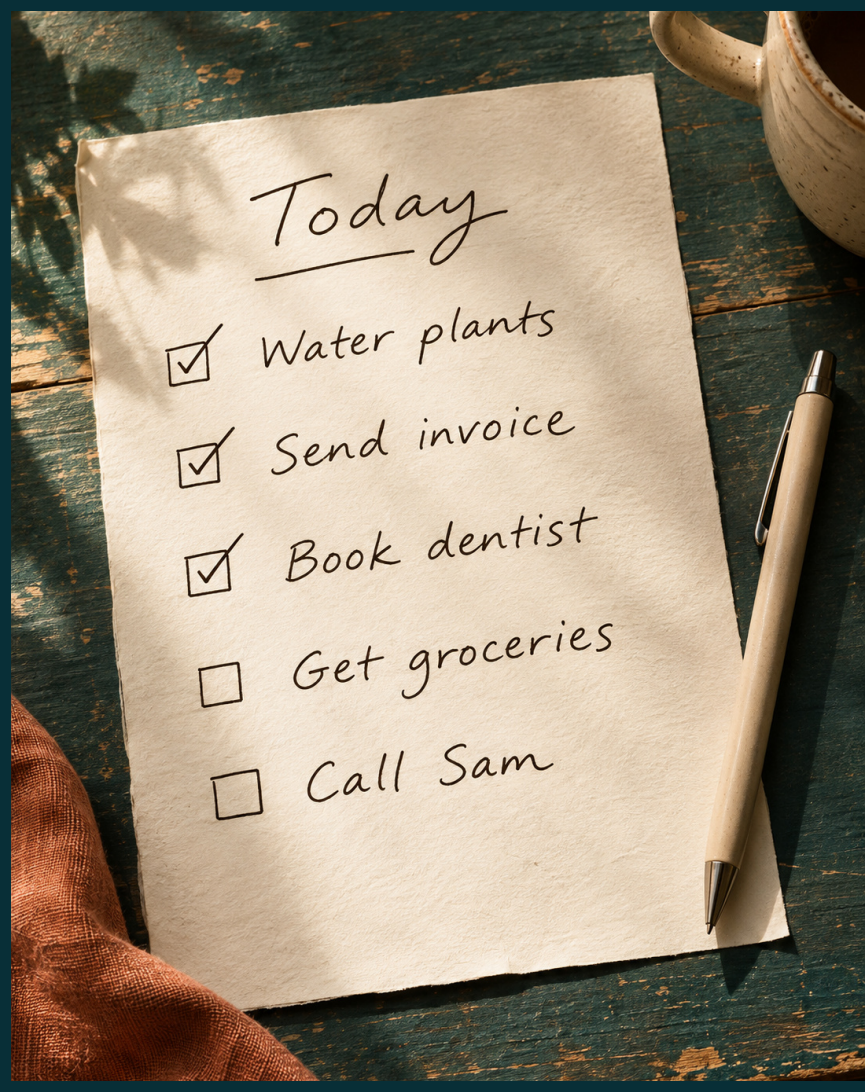
Then attend to what makes it available. Keep the materials somewhere accessible. Leave enough time to get involved. Do it with someone if company helps. The arrangement matters because it gives this part of life a regular place in your week.

What would you enjoy having more opportunities to do?

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A daily-diary study linked everyday creative activity with greater positive affect and flourishing the following day. The study supports a role for making and creating. [5]

# Give unfinished things a next step.




A reliable place to keep tasks, plans, and longer-term goals, so you can return to them without carrying everything in your head.

An unanswered message can follow you into dinner. An appointment you need to make returns while you are trying to listen. A task with no clear owner keeps asking whether you should be doing something about it.

Often the difficulty lies in the arrangements around the responsibility. There is no trusted record, no agreed next step, or no clear point at which you can return to it. Those arrangements are a useful place to look.

Start with one thing that keeps resurfacing. Put its next action somewhere you already look, and decide when you will return to it. If another person is involved, agree who is responsible for what. Make the arrangement specific enough that you can rely on it.

A short list can be enough when it is a list you use. A shared household note can make responsibility visible. A few lines left at the end of work can tell you where to begin tomorrow.

As these arrangements become dependable, you have less to keep rehearsing and more opportunity to take part in what you are doing now.

---

Across experiments, making specific plans reduced interference from unfinished goals. A usable plan can help a responsibility stop competing for attention. [6]



# Spend time within it.

Time with the natural world, whether outdoors, with animals, or through nature’s sounds and images.

Beside water, attention has somewhere to go. There is movement to follow, a change in the light, a sound that comes nearer and falls away. A familiar animal, a garden, or a tree outside the window can also draw you into a world that is continuing around you.

This condition concerns the time your week gives you to be in that contact. Think about where nature is already part of your day and where you would enjoy spending more time.

Begin with an occasion already in your life. Could a break, a meal, a conversation, or part of a journey happen somewhere with a living view? Choose a place within reach where you would willingly spend time and return.

Company can help make a return visit easier. A regular catch-up might become a short walk or time sitting outdoors together. The relationship stays familiar while the setting brings more of the world into the experience.

Let the place matter to you through spending time there. Familiarity can make it easier to notice what changes and to want to come back.

In one experiment, a 90-minute nature walk reduced reported rumination compared with an urban walk. Shorter everyday suggestions here are practical starting points. [7]



# 3. Alive Community

The relationships, communities, and shared perspectives that help you be yourself, feel part of something, and experience your connection with other people and the wider living world.

**Relating · Belonging · Connecting**



# Be with people who know you.

Relationships where you can be yourself, speak honestly, and feel known, without needing to perform or prove your value.

With some people, you can stop working so hard at how you come across. What has been happening in your life can enter the conversation. You hear something real from them, too, and there is room to respond.

A relationship like this has its own history. It grows through ordinary contact, shared experiences, honesty, and the feeling that what you say will be met with care.

Think about what allows a relationship like this to develop. Who helps you feel able to be yourself? What kinds of time together allow the relationship to stay alive?

Protect those occasions. A meal, a walk, cooking, making music, or an unhurried conversation can give a relationship continuity. A good relationship can also become somewhere to explore the changes you want to make elsewhere in life.

You might tell someone you trust what caught your attention in this report and ask what they have noticed. Let their experience of you become part of the conversation.

Diary research links felt intimacy with disclosure and perceived responsiveness. Being met with understanding matters alongside what someone shares. [8]



# Have a place to take part.

Being part of a community where you feel included, have a place, and share something that matters to you.

At first, you arrive as someone new. After a few visits, people recognize you. You learn where things are kept, what needs doing, and who knows how to do it. Gradually, you have a place in what happens there.

Belonging often develops through returning to people and doing something together. A garden needs tending. A choir needs voices. A neighborhood project gives people a shared reason to show up.

Think about where you feel familiar and involved, or where you would enjoy becoming part of something. Consider what would allow that connection to grow.

Look for an activity that interests you enough to return to. Check the timing, cost, access, and welcome. A small group where you can contribute regularly may give relationships the continuity they need to grow.

In a community garden, for example, people come to know one another while planting, watering, noticing what is ready, and sharing what grows. The connection develops through taking part.

Research associates everyday interaction with acquaintances with happiness and belonging. This informs one part of the broader condition of community participation. [9]

# Recognize more of who you are.



Ideas, experiences, and influences that broaden your sense of who you are, beyond your thoughts, into relationship with your body, other people, and life.

What you read, watch, and listen to offers pictures of what it means to be a person. Repeated often enough, those pictures can become so familiar that you barely notice them. The image of a private mind, enclosed in a head and looking out at the world, is one of them.

Other stories open up a wider view. A film might follow sunlight, soil, and water into the food that becomes your body. A book might explore how language and relationships become part of who we are. Music can carry a shared history into the present.

The four statements in this part of the questionnaire ask whether you encounter ideas like these in what you read, watch, or listen to. They concern a sense of self that includes your body, your relationships, and the natural world, with more to you than your thoughts.

Consider what regularly reaches you. Which writers, films, songs, or podcasts offer a perspective like this? Which have stayed with you, changed what you notice, or given words to something you recognize in your own life?

Choose one you would enjoy making time for. You might read about the living systems that sustain your body, watch a story about a place and its people, or listen to someone explore embodied life. Let your reading, viewing, and listening introduce you to a wider understanding of who you are.

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Framing the Mind proposes that metaphors of mind shape how we experience ourselves. Research on self-reference also distinguishes narrative and experiential modes of processing. [3, 10]

# Try one change in the coming week.

Choose an idea that draws you and make it small enough to happen in the week you actually have. You can type in the spaces below or use this page on paper.

**An example to consider**

Choose a responsibility that keeps coming back to mind. Record its next step and when you will return to it. If someone else is involved, agree who is doing what.

**What would I like more room for?**

**What will I change, and when and where will it happen?**

**What would make it easier, and who could be involved?**

**When will I look back and decide what to keep?**

*Return to what actually happened. What did you enjoy? What got in the way? Keep what helped and adjust the rest.*

# Explore it with James.

Some parts of the report may feel immediately familiar. Others may become clearer through talking about your life with someone who understands the perspective behind it.

James Meaden is an industrial and organizational psychologist and the founder of The Alive Institute. His research explores how environments shape cognitive habits, experience, and the ways people understand themselves.

## A private conversation

**30 minutes / $50**

Bring the parts of your report that caught your attention. Together, you can consider how they show up in your life and work out a change you want to try.

## A four-week small group

**Planned pilot / $150 per person**

Choose changes, try them between meetings, and return with what happened. James and the other participants will help you explore what you are noticing and what you want to keep developing. Pilot dates will be announced.

**thealive.institute**

# The thinking behind Alive.

The report brings together a theoretical perspective on human experience and empirical findings about nature, practical activity, planning, and relationships.


[1] Meaden, J. (2024). The environmental model of mindfulness. Frontiers in Social Psychology, 2, 1385819.

A theoretical model connecting cognitive style with immediate feedback, observational learning, nature exposure, and interconnected self-understanding.

Read the research

[2] Meaden, J. (2026). The abstraction habituation model of knowledge worker burnout. Frontiers in Psychology, 17, 1763376.

A theoretical account of how sustained abstract work may shape processing habits and the capacity to recover through concrete engagement.

Read the research

[3] Meaden, J. (2026). Framing the mind: media, metaphors, and mindfulness. Frontiers in Social Psychology, 3, 1621640.

A theoretical examination of how language, media, and metaphors of mind may shape present-moment awareness.

Read the research


These papers and the studies that follow inform the framework and its suggestions. They do not establish the validity of this questionnaire as a whole or guarantee an individual outcome.

The artwork was generated for Alive Living.

# Studies behind the suggestions.


[4] Berman, M. G., Jonides, J., & Kaplan, S. (2008). The cognitive benefits of interacting with nature. Psychological Science, 19(12), 1207-1212.

Read the research

[5] Conner, T. S., DeYoung, C. G., & Silvia, P. J. (2018). Everyday creative activity as a path to flourishing. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 13(2), 181-189.

Read the research

[6] Masicampo, E. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (2011). Consider it done! Plan making can eliminate the cognitive effects of unfulfilled goals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101(4), 667-683.

Read the research

[7] Bratman, G. N., Hamilton, J. P., Hahn, K. S., Daily, G. C., & Gross, J. J. (2015). Nature experience reduces rumination and subgenual prefrontal cortex activation. PNAS, 112(28), 8567-8572.

Read the research

[8] Laurenceau, J.-P., Barrett, L. F., & Pietromonaco, P. R. (1998). Intimacy as an interpersonal process: the importance of self-disclosure, partner disclosure, and perceived partner responsiveness in interpersonal exchanges. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74(5), 1238-1251.

Read the research

[9] Sandstrom, G. M., & Dunn, E. W. (2014). Social interactions and well-being: the surprising power of weak ties. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 40(7), 910-922.

Read the research

[10] Farb, N. A. S., et al. (2007). Attending to the present: mindfulness meditation reveals distinct neural modes of self-reference. Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience, 2(4), 313-322.

Read the research

# Human ways of living.

Anthropology documents variation in how people understand thinking, selfhood, and relationship. These works help ground the opening perspective and the distinction between immediate-return and delayed-return ways of life.


[11] Lillard, A. (1998). Ethnopsychologies: cultural variations in theories of mind. Psychological Bulletin, 123(1), 3-32.

A review of experiments and ethnographies showing cultural variation in how people understand minds and mental life.

Read the research

[12] Petchkovsky, L. (2000). Stream of consciousness and ownership of thought in indigenous people in Central Australia. Journal of Analytical Psychology, 45, 577-597.

A small study of Central Australian Aboriginal adults examining culturally different understandings of thinking and the ownership of thoughts.

Read the research

[13] Woodburn, J. (1982). Egalitarian societies. Man, 17(3), 431-451.

An anthropological account of immediate-return and delayed-return social arrangements, including their implications for obligations and dependence.

Read the research


The historical explanation in the opening is the environmental model's research-informed synthesis of these themes.