



SHUTTERSTOCK

Pets thrive best when humans take a holistic approach to their health and wellbeing.

Update your pet’s health and wellness routine

FAMILY FEATURES

Pets are more than companions – they’re family – and keeping them healthy can be simple, enjoyable and rewarding.

Today’s pet parents may be busier than ever, yet they’re also more committed to wellness than previous generations. That means approaching their furry friends’ unique needs with the same balance, care and attention to overall well-being as they do their own.

In fact, according to the 2021 Human Animal Bond Research Institute Benchmark Survey of Pet Owners, increased knowledge about the health benefits of the human-animal bond led 91% of pet owners to say they would be more likely to take better care of their pets.

Pet health isn’t just about food, however. A holistic approach to wellness combines daily supplements, dental care, exercise, mental enrichment and proactive health, with many owners looking for ways to simplify routines to support their pets every day.

These practical ideas can help support a pet’s overall wellness routine.

Flexible nutrition plans to pets’ needs

Every pet is unique, but balanced nutrition forms the foundation of wellness. Dog and cat parents are

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Is stress causing your weight gain?

By Jessica Daniels

BLACKDOCTOR.ORG

Ding Dongs and Doritos have never solved anyone’s problems, but that doesn’t keep us from seeking solace in food.

When work gets hectic, when plans fall apart, when relationships founder, we often try to calm our minds by filling our stomachs.

Everyone has their own comfort food. A bag of chips, a big plate of macaroni and cheese, or a carton of mocha fudge ripple ice cream can all make a person feel better, at least temporarily.

Food therapy has an obvious downside: While it may be comforting, it’s also fattening. Everybody knows that obesity rates have been climbing steadily over the decades and that we live in stressful times. Is it possible that we’re simply trying to eat our way to happiness? Could stress be making us fat?

In recent years, scientists have uncovered surprising connections between stress, appetite, and weight gain. Simply stated, the chemicals that we produce during stressful times can help determine what we eat and how we store fat in our bodies.

Despite what some late-night commercials claim, this new understanding has not led to any magic-

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ADOBE STOCK

Digital apps and changes in social mores has made dating more complicated than ever.

Modern dating is digital and harder to navigate

Shifting technology and social standards requires adjustment

By Nikya Hightower

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Dating is exhausting.

Since COVID-19, connections are getting harder to make. Relationship expectations have shifted, and online dating apps have gotten further from their intended mission.

Some people are still looking for their perfect match while others have hit a wall of exhaustion. Relationship coach April Carter and matchmaker Laurie Berzack share advice what to look out for, trends and how to keep going when the search for a partner gets tough.

Dating trends have evolved from courting to marrying for financial stability or fulfilling gender roles to the digital age.

Today there are challenges of connecting over apps or trying to live up to social media portrayals of the perfect relationship.

“I think there’s way too much of an emphasis on superficiality

now,” Berzack said. “I think that a lot of people think that just because somebody else is on the same app that they are at, that they’re capable of having a relationship with that person when in actuality they’ve got nothing in common. They’re not a match whatsoever.”

Online dating has its benefits, such as specifying preferences and broadening the pool of possibilities, but it also comes with its downsides.

“I think that the dating apps have really changed the way that people meet each other, and I think COVID also really played a huge role in how people are meeting,” Berzack said. “It used to be, even with the dating apps, that you would go to a bar, restaurant and whatnot, people would converse with one another and just be more sociable. I think that COVID created a different dynamic where people just stuck to their little

bubbles.”

Keeping an eye out for red flags at the start can save a lot of grief and time in the long run, starting with people who avoid communicating their feelings or having conversations with substance.

“I could not stand online dating,” said Amanda Parry, a client of Berzack’s. “I felt like it was very inauthentic. Guys, when we’re not having very superficial conversations, I would engage in a conversation and it would be, ‘how’s the weather?’ Or ‘what did you do this weekend?’ And you would either not get a response back or you’d get a response a couple weeks later. I wasn’t having meaningful conversation.”

Questions are important in getting to know someone which sets the foundation of being able to progress the relationship.

“I went on one date, and I’m very bad at getting out of dates that

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Holiday plant legends and traditions

By Melinda Myers

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The holidays are here and you are probably seeing many traditional holiday plants for sale at your favorite flower shop and garden center.

These may or may not be part of your holiday traditions but knowing a bit about their lore can be something fun to share at holiday gatherings.

The traditional carol “The Holly and the Ivy” mentions two of the evergreen plants associated with the holidays. Ivy, holly and mistletoe were three green plants that brightened the deciduous British forests in winter.

Winter greenery was prized for its beauty and symbolic assurance that spring would come again. Ivy along with holly and mistletoe were the standard holiday decorations for homes and churches before the Christmas tree.

English ivy is a popular houseplant that thrives in a bright location. Purchase



MELINDA MYERS

The legend of the poinsettia is of Mexican origin, and its name comes from Joel Poinsett, a U.S. ambassador to Mexico.

or train English ivy into a wreath or tree for the holidays. Or grow it on an obelisk or orb and enjoy its year-round beauty.

Outdoors, English ivy is used as a groundcover or trained on a trellis or home for vertical interest. It is considered invasive in some parts of the United States, so check before adding this plant to your

landscape.

The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe started in England in the 19th century. According to mistletoe etiquette, a man should remove a berry each time he kisses a woman. And when the last berry is gone, the kissing is over.

This parasitic plant was believed to have magical powers since it seemed to

mysteriously appear in tree canopies and grow without roots. What original observers did not realize is fruit-eating birds deposited seeds in the trees. Once the seeds sprouted, they formed a parasitic relationship with the tree.

Mistletoe hunting is one traditional way this high-hanging plant has been

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«RIDES

Mazda CX-70 has the crossover look and improved cargo space

By Winfred Cross

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Mazda’s CX-70 is a great but unasked for idea.

Like the CX-90 but need more room for stuff? The CX-70 may be your ticket.

The CX-70 is the CX90 without the third row. If you can live with carrying five people and not six or seven, you gain loads of cargo space. Lover the second row and you have cavernous space.

The CX-70 shares all the CX-90’s components minus the third row. My Turbo S Premium model is powered by a 3.3-liter turbo charged in-line six-cylinder engine that makes 340 horsepower and 369 pounds-feet of torque. That’s enough giddyup to make the CX-70 feel spry.

The vehicle’s four-wheel independent suspension with front and rear stabilizer bars makes the peppy beast agile as well. It’s a Mazda, should you expect less? No.

You can get a four-cylinder hybrid if you like but this in-line 6 returns fairly good fuel economy with a combined total of about 23 mpg.

Mazda’s appeal has grown over the years because of the fit and finish, reliability and, most of all, drivability. Take the CX-70 on the road and you will discover it handles like a Mazda should but something this big shouldn’t. There is body roll, but it corners nicely and handles twisty roads without much fuss. The ride is smooth

and comfortable, and the cabin remains relatively quiet even when being heavy footed.

Sit a CX-70 by its sister CX-90 and you will not tell them apart until you open the door and count the seating spaces. That’s not a bad thing because both are stylish and handsome vehicles.

The exterior of the CX-70 is certainly familiar, using Mazda’s current design language. The grille is large but not imposing. The headlamps are artfully sculpted but provide ample illumination at night. Bumpers and door handles are body colored but exterior mirrors are black. The overall look is urban friendly, looking more crossover than SUV.



MAZDA

The 2026 Mazda CX-70 has a more urban look paired with more cargo space.

The interior is where Mazda exceeds expectations. The look is modern, open and airy. You can get

monochromatic leather or, depending on the trim level, an accent color. The seats are comfortable with

the proper cushioning. The driver’s seat has power controls to find the perfect

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Modern dating is digital and harder to navigate

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aren't going well, and the guy didn't ask me one question about myself," she said. "And that is not attractive."

Another red flag is when someone avoids speaking about the future.

"That means they don't see you in the future," Carter said.

Berzack also points out that someone stuck on superficial factors such as height, race, or fitness can be considered a red flag.

Another issue that needs to be acknowledged is that times have changed and marriage is no longer the focal point it once was.

"I think that men and women need to be looking at the traditional roles of men and women in a very different way than we have in the past," Berzack said. "I think that the men need to step up and become more emotionally intelligent so that they can handle maybe not being the breadwinner in the family and not feel a decreased confidence in that role."

Said Carter: "You have men online that want a woman who is a cook, a cleaner, all those things. But that value has shifted. There are a lot of women who are self-assured, right? Meaning that they have the degree. They're going to work. They no longer want to be that type of woman."

Although dating can be exhausting, there are some ways to navigate its difficulties. There is not one right way to go about it but shifting perspective can turn things around.

"I had to do the inner work," Carter said. "I started doing the inner work and peeling off the layers and just focusing on me and giving myself more self-love. Once I did that, everything shifted for me."

"I started attracting men that were more so on my level in terms of loving themselves, wanting to pour into themselves and wanting that type of relationship, a long-term loving relationship. Not just through marriage, but also through friendship as well."

Putting personal boundaries, not ignoring the red flags, and knowing when to take a step back can help people avoid dating burnout.

"Work on yourself and self-improvement," Berzack said. "If you're feeling unhappy about a certain aspect of your life, do the work around it. Go to therapy, do a self-help group, get to the gym, hire personal stylists, do whatever it is that you need to do to feel good about who you are."

When hitting a dating wall, make adjustments – whether it's personal or dating patterns instead of settling or repeating mistakes.

"Loving yourself is first and foremost because you have to love yourself first, truly, before you understand what it's like to love somebody and what it looks like for somebody to actually genuinely love you," Carter said. "Do not give up on love and continue to get back out there because there is somebody special for everybody. Somebody is waiting for you."

Holiday plant legends and their place in traditions

Continued from page 1B

harvested. Hunters take aim and shoot. Unfortunately, some of the mistletoe can be blown to pieces, adding to the challenge of this harvesting technique.

Some cultures believed mistletoe could cure diseases, bestow fertility, and protect homes from ghosts. The Druids used branches of mistletoe to welcome in the New Year and thus the plant became associated with Christmas.

Be sure to hang your mistletoe high or opt for the artificial sprigs as the berries are poisonous to people and pets.

You may be surprised to know Wassailing is another plant-related tradition. In England, people would visit apple orchards caroling along the way. Once there, they would sprinkle cider or liquor over the trees' roots while chanting to help ensure a good crop the coming year.

You may have already purchased a poinsettia or two to give or decorate your home. It was once cultivated by the Aztecs who called it cuetlaxochitl and used its colorful bracts for dye and the milky sap as medicine. The name poinsettia comes from Joel Poinsett, a U.S. Amba-

sador to Mexico in the 1820s, who happened upon a blooming poinsettia shrub and brought cuttings back to the United States.

The legend of the Poinsettia is also of Mexican origin. It is said on the first Christmas two small children wanted to visit the baby Jesus but were too poor to buy him a present. So, they picked weeds along the road to decorate his crib.

The other children made fun of their gift, that is, until their gift of love turned a beautiful red.

Take time to enjoy family, friends and of course your favorite holiday plants and traditions.

Melinda Myers has written more than 20 gardening books, including the Midwest Gardener's Handbook, 2nd Edition and Small Space Gardening. She hosts The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything" streaming courses and the nationally syndicated Melinda's Garden Moment radio program. Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for Birds & Blooms magazine and her website is www.MelindaMyers.com.

Mazda CX-70 has crossover look and improved cargo space

Continued from page 1B

driving position with a nearly panoramic view of the highway. Materials are high quality. Plastic is used sparingly in the interior, with some metal and wood. Mazda does not promote the CX-70 as a luxury vehicle, but it feels near-lux.

The dash has a 12-inch digital gauge cluster that can be configured to show various information. The touch screen is a bit confusing because it only works as a touch screen in certain apps. There is a rotary knob that takes you through menus but it's sometimes confusing. Mazda has used this for

years and I wish the company would come up with a better solution.

There is Apple CarPlay and Android Auto and both are wireless.

The Premium package makes the CX-70 one well equipped vehicle. Some of the more notable items include a panoramic sunroof with fixed glass over the second row, reverse tilt mirrors that are heated, heated rear seats, heated and ventilated front seats, digital review mirror with hemline, power tilt and telescopic heated steering wheel, Bose sound system, wireless cell phone charging, satellite radio, eight-way power driver and

passenger seats, adaptive cruise control, self-leveling headlights, AWD, traction control, ABS and nearly every driver's aid.

Selecting the Premium package isn't cheap. The price starts at \$52,450 and goes higher with destination and of course taxes.

This CX-70 is a great handling, well sorted SUV. It's pricey but feature packed.

- Pros:**
- Massive cargo area
 - Excellent handling
 - Good fuel economy
 - Awesome fit and finish
 - Plenty of power
- Cons:**
- Some confusing controls
 - Pricey

Is stress causing weight gain?

Continued from page 1B

bullet treatments for weight loss; you can't slim down simply by taking a pill that supposedly blocks stress hormones.

But recent research does help drive home a point that many psychologists and weight-loss specialists have been making for years: Managing stress can be a crucial first step toward slimming down.

The cortisol connection

When we feel stressed out, our bodies resort to chemical warfare. Looming deadlines, traffic jams, or arguments turn on an alarm in the brain that triggers the release of stress hormones. As a key part of our defense, the adrenal gland starts releasing large amounts of the hormone cortisol, a chemical that helps prime the body's "fight or flight" response.

Cortisol gets a lot of attention in both medical journals and the press, and for good reason. For one thing, it seems to play a major role in all sorts of stress-related health problems, including heart disease and weakened immune systems.

It also helps control the buildup of fat, a process of deep interest to just about everyone. In times of stress, cortisol can collect fat from the blood and other storage places in the body and move it to the belly.

Cortisol can also increase the size of individual fat cells. For some people, waist size may be an outward sign of stress. A study published in Psychosomatic Medicine found that women with mostly abdominal obesity tended to produce especially large amounts of cortisol when faced with a difficult task.

Cortisol isn't the only hormone released during stress, and it's certainly far from the only hormone that controls appetite. For these reasons, it's overly simplistic to say that cortisol alone causes weight gain. Likewise, she says, it's unrealistic to think that so-called cortisol-blocking supplements could aid in weight loss -- and that's assuming such products can even reduce cortisol levels in the first place.

Still, there's little doubt that cortisol affects food choices. Studies in both animals and humans suggest that the hormone may help stoke an appetite for high-energy foods loaded with fat, sugar, or both.

As reported in an issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, rats that have their adrenal glands removed suddenly lose all interest in sugary drinks, but will still happily eat their rat chow. (Interestingly, they no longer want to run in their wheels, either.) When injected with the rat equivalent of cortisol, they suddenly develop a taste for things like sugar and lard -- at the expense of their regular food.

The same study found that sweets and fats can quiet the stress alarm in a rat's brain. The flood of stress hormones slows down, and the rat suddenly acts less annoyed.

If it could talk, the rat would probably say it feels calm -- the same feeling that humans often find at the bottom of an ice cream carton.

It's often hard to translate findings from animals to humans. Still, a few studies suggest that cortisol can encourage people to overeat, too.

For example, a study published in Psychoneuroendocrinology found that women who produced large amounts of cortisol during stressful situations also consumed more calories afterward.

Stressful binges

As reported in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, subjects who

were prone to eating binges tended to have higher levels of cortisol both when they woke up in the morning and after they completed a physically stressful task.

Researchers have found that stress may be especially dangerous -- and especially fattening -- for anyone with binge-eating disorder, a condition that causes people to periodically go on eating sprees that are beyond their control.

As Gluck and colleagues noted in the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, roughly 30 percent of people who seek medical treatment for weight loss have the disorder.

The researchers point to stress as a key trigger of the disorder's onset. However, binge eaters aren't the only ones who overindulge when times get tough. While binge eaters feel like they lose control over food, other people may make a conscious decision to go for that extra brownie or slice of pizza, perhaps with the idea that a stuffed stomach will take their minds off their troubles.

Managing stress, slimming down

Whatever a person's basic approach to eating, lingering stress can scuttle any efforts to lose weight. In the words of a report from the American Psychological Association, "Weight loss is never successful if you remain burdened by stress and other negative feelings. If you're facing twin battles against stress and weight, calming your mind should be your first priority."

Laurel Mellin, a clinical psychologist at the University of California at San Francisco Medical School, has designed a weight-loss program that addresses this issue. To drive down the urge to overeat, she says, people must first find the tools to nurture themselves and set limits.

Among other things, she recommends simply asking yourself two basic questions at least five times a day "How do I feel? What do I need?"

Besides learning how to detect and deal with often buried feelings and needs, she suggests 30 to 90 minutes of exercise a day to help relieve stress and find balance.

Of course, there's no one-size-fits-all remedy for stress. Some people find relief through physical activity, relaxation exercises, yoga, or meditation. Others need to see a psychologist who can help them adjust their outlook on life and their approach to food.

Still, others may need to make lifestyle changes, perhaps including more long walks and fewer late nights at the office.

The American Psychological Association does offer a few other tips for people trying to lose weight:

- Think about what you eat and why you're eating it. Do you tend to overeat when you feel upset or sad? If so, remember that there are healthier, more effective ways to cope with stress.
- Avoid radical changes in your diet or activity level. Trying to reinvent yourself overnight will only add stress to your life. Instead, make changes slowly.
- For example, you can cut down the portion sizes of foods you already eat instead of switching to entirely new foods.
- Get support from family and friends.
- Encourage your entire household to make healthier food choices and find an exercise buddy. As a bonus, you'll find that social support is an excellent buffer against stress.
- Ice cream and chips can make a person feel better, but the feeling won't last. In the end, staying healthy is the ultimate victory over stress.

Trump's idea for health accounts has left millions of US patients in debt

By Noam M. Levey

KFF HEALTH NEWS

Sarah Monroe once had a relatively comfortable middle-class life.

She and her family lived in a neatly landscaped neighborhood near Cleveland. They had a six-figure income and health insurance. Then, four years ago, when Monroe was pregnant with twin girls, something started to feel off.

"I kept having to come into the emergency room for fainting and other symptoms," recalled Monroe, 43, who works for an insurance company.

The babies were fine. But after months of tests and hospital trips, Monroe was diagnosed with a potentially dangerous heart condition.

It would be costly. Within a year, as she juggled a serious illness and a pair of newborns, Monroe was buried under more than \$13,000 in medical debt.

Part of the reason: Like tens of millions of Americans, she had a high-deductible health plan. People with these plans typically pay thousands of dollars out of their own pockets before coverage kicks in.

The plans, which have become com-

mon over the past two decades, are getting renewed attention thanks to President Donald Trump and his GOP allies in Congress.

Many Republicans are reluctant to extend government subsidies that help cover patients' medical bills and insurance premiums through the Affordable Care Act.

And although GOP leaders have yet to coalesce around an alternative, several leading Republican lawmakers have said Americans who don't get insurance through an employer should get cash in a special health care account, paired with a high-deductible health plan. In such an arrangement, someone could choose a plan on an ACA marketplace that costs less per month but comes with an annual deductible that can top \$7,000.

"A patient makes the decision," Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.) said at a recent hearing. "It empowers the patient to lower the cost."

In a post on Truth Social last month, Trump said, "The only healthcare I will support or approve is sending the money directly back to the people."

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Generation Zers are parenting differently from their parents

BRANDPOINT

With access to more news and social media than generations past, Gen Z parents are faced with more options than ever before when it comes to raising their own kids.

In fact, a new Kiddie Academy survey of 2,000 parents of children ages 0-6 found that more than four in five parents polled (85%) agree that there's no "one size fits all" approach when it comes to parenting, as they blend an average of three different parenting styles.

According to The Bump, parenting priorities likely reflect the environments each generation grew up in. For example, millennials who came of age in the '90s have seen a growing cultural focus on mental health, while Gen Zers, who came of age during a challenging post-COVID job market, see the need to be "practical, resilient and future-ready."

Here are three ways Gen Zers parent differently from their parents:

Tough love over warm-and-fuzzy
Gen Z parents prioritize preparing their child for the real world (54%). And when asked how similar or different their parenting styles were to how they were raised, 40% of those surveyed said their approach was "somewhat" to "very different" from their parents. This paradigm shift in parenting reflects the real-world focus of Gen Zers compared to previous generations, notably their own parents. It's more "actions have consequences"

than "trophies for every-one."

There's an intentional focus on preparing children for life's inevitable disappointments instead of sheltering them. Survey findings also revealed these younger parents follow their own intuition (47%) slightly more than they follow their parents' advice (46%).

Face generational trauma head on
Despite Gen Z being the first generation raised with "gentle parenting" in mind, only 32% employ this approach as parents themselves, instead leaning more towards "cycle-breaking parenting" (41%) which focuses on healing generational trauma by actively identifying and addressing negative family patterns.

Not only does this parenting style require self-awareness and empathy, it takes courage to face unresolved issues and uncomfortable emotions.

Parent each child uniquely
The majority of Gen Z parents are choosing parenting styles based on what their individual child needs - rather than trying to make their preferred style work regardless of their child's personality.

And they're tailoring their parenting style to suit the circumstances as well as the child. What's more, 84% of parents surveyed say their styles have evolved as their children have gotten older.

Perhaps because they're having fewer children than previous generations and delaying having children due to the desire to achieve

financial stability first, Gen Zers plan to be less traditional about raising children. They have a strong desire to make the world a better place and model this outlook for their children.

Consequently, Gen Z parents are using a mix of styles focused on prioritizing real-world consequences, healing generational trauma and treating each child as a unique individual. And they're flexing flexibility by being willing to change their approach as their children grow.

"What's true across generations is that parents are learning to parent as they go," said Joy Turner, vice president of education at Kiddie Academy. "Creating a nurturing environment where children feel safe, supported and loved is ultimately the most important thing we can do for our little ones."

Update your pet's wellness routine

Continued from page 1B

increasingly seeking customizable food and supplement solutions designed around their furry friend's age, needs and lifestyle.

Age-specific formulations and products featuring natural, minimally processed ingredients and eco-friendly sourcing allow owners to support their pets' overall health, from mealtime to daily wellness routines.

Support healthy skin and coat

A pet's coat often reflects its overall health. Along with a balanced diet and plenty of water, adding a daily supplement can help support a natural shine.

While professional grooming keeps dogs and cats looking their best, incorporating regular at-home brushing and bathing with a gentle shampoo strengthens the bond you share and provides an opportunity to spot any changes, like lumps or bumps.

Wellness with functional support

Even with a balanced diet, many pets may benefit from extra support to maintain their overall well-being. Functional supplements can help target specific needs, including joint mobility, immunity and stress relief.

For example, NaturVet's easy-to-use Lickable supplements - available in Hip & Joint, Calming and Multi-Vitamin formulas for dogs and cats - offer a simple way

to make wellness an effortless part of everyday life.

Exercise and mental enrichment

Movement is essential to any wellness routine. Regular walks, agility activities and games help keep pets fit and happy.

Physical exercise is only part of the puzzle, though. Interactive toys, puzzle feeders, scent games and agility training help dogs and cats stay mentally sharp, even on days when outdoor activity is limited.

Calming home environment

Dogs and cats can experience stress when routines aren't followed, just like people. Maintaining a consistent daily schedule and providing a quiet, comfortable space - such as a bed in a low-traffic area - can help promote calm, comfort and security.

By taking a few simple, consistent steps each day, pet parents can create a balanced, enjoyable wellness routine that keeps their furry family members healthy, happy and thriving. From functional supplements and daily care habits to exercise, mental enrichment and a calming environment, small efforts can make a big difference, turning everyday care into a rewarding part of life with your pet.

To find more practical health and wellness solutions for your pet, visit naturvet.com.

Start a New Year routine by establishing new habits

FAMILY FEATURES

With time away from work and school - not to mention indulgent feasts and social commitments - it's easy to let good habits go by the wayside around the turn of the new year.

Whether you're resolving to get back to a regular routine or starting one anew in 2026, now is a perfect time to rethink your day-to-day for heightened productivity and less stress.

Commit to a new year of new routines with this step-by-step guidance.

Establish bed and wake routines

When routines begin to fade, sleep is often one of the first areas of health that can slip. It's also one of the simplest bad habits to shake.

Hold yourself accountable by preparing for sleep at the same time each night with an easy-to-follow routine - like brushing your teeth, drinking a glass of water and changing into pajamas - that signals your body it's time to rest.

Waking up at the same time each day, even on the weekends, can help you dial in on a more natural sleep and wake rhythm.

Organize and declutter

If a messy home is what's keeping you awake at night, try putting a weekly or biweekly "cleaning day" on the calendar and ask family members to do their part.

Start in shared spaces like the kitchen, bathrooms and living areas then divide and conquer bedrooms, prioritizing throwing away (or recycling) items that aren't used frequently while reorganizing chaotic spaces for peace of mind.

Plan meals and snacks

The hectic nature of life, especially busy weeknights, is inescapable. Whether you're wrapping up late work meetings, running kids to activities, tackling homework or juggling errands, turning to a tasty, convenient air fryer snack like Mrs. T's Snack Pierogies can hold the family over before mealtime.

All you need is an air fryer and eight minutes to enjoy big and bold, on-trend flavors including Cheddar Sour Cream and Onion, 5 Cheese or Cheddar Ranch Seasoned with Bacon. Easy for teens to prep on their own and ideal for busy moms, they're a perfect bite to whip up while getting back into the swing of things.

Update family calendars

Keeping up with a schedule full of field trips, sporting events, work meetings, social commitments and weekend activities can be a chore, but turning to technology makes it more manageable.

Choose a family calendar app that can be downloaded to your devices and log all of your upcoming events so everyone stays in the know.

Review screentime habits

While tech can encourage better organization and planning, it can also encroach on special moments together.

After a break from school and work, you might've noticed more screentime around the house - making this an ideal time to return to screentime limits or, at the least, mindfulness of how often you and your loved ones are in front of a TV, computer or mobile device. Encourage kids to put down the tablets and instead opt for family game nights or craft sessions, putting your creativity to the test while reconnecting offline.

Plan for downtime

Reshaping day-to-day schedules, reviewing routines and preparing for a strong start to 2026 doesn't mean fun is out the window. You can meet your goals and set your family up for success with, like always, a little planning.

While building out your calendar with mandatory meetings and obligations, make sure to prioritize downtime, too. Schedule family game nights, dinners at home when everyone is available or a weekend trip to a favorite nearby attraction.

Remember what matters most in the hustle and bustle: shared moments with your nearest and dearest.

Find quick, easy snacking solutions at mrstspierogies.com/snackpierogies.

FOOD LION

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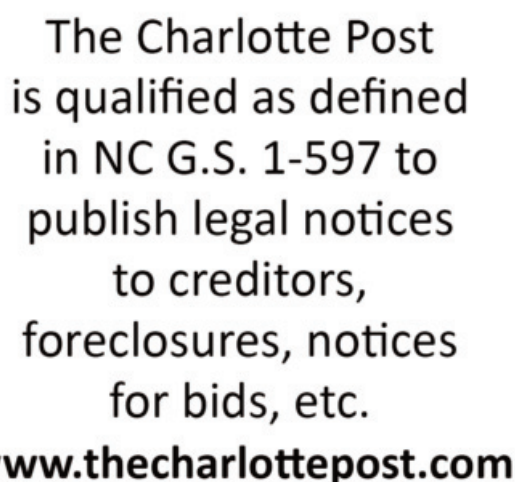
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EDUCATION



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« ON THE MARQUEE »

The Grinch, jazz, and a new year

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

A rundown of arts and entertainment options as we transition from the holidays to 2026.

Then, it's time to turn the calendar for music the bring in the new year. Here's what's on tap:

Through Dec. 28
"Dr. Seuss' How The Grinch Stole Christmas! The Musical" takes the stage at Belk Theater at Blumenthal Arts Center. Limited tickets remain for Dec. 26 (2 p.m., 6:30 p.m.), Dec. 27 (11 a.m., 3 p.m.) and Dec. 28 (11 a.m.). Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Dec. 31
Middle C Jazz presents a New Year's Eve celebration with the Voltage Brothers.

For tickets, showtime, and schedule, go to www.middlecjazz.com.

Through Jan. 4
Mint Museum Randolph presents "Future Now: Virtual Sneakers to Cutting-Edge Kicks" and "Central Impact: Skateboarding's Art and Influence."

"Future Now" features futuristic designs from Bata Shoe Museum's holdings alongside creations from top designers, collectors, and innovators.

"Central Impact" explores skateboarding through its most iconic canvas: the deck. The exhibit features rare boards, original art, and archival media from the 1980s forward as it highlights the evolution of skate culture locally and globally. Free with general admission to the museum.

Jan. 9-10
Charlotte Symphony Orchestra presents Strauss' "Blue Danube" at Belk Theater, 130 N Tryon St.

A sweeping tribute to Vienna and the rich tradition of the waltz, the program includes virtuosity to start the new year. Strauss's "On the Beautiful Blue Danube" evoking Vienna's famous river. Grammy-winning conductor Michael Christie will lead the symphony.

Tickets: tix.blumenthalarts.org.

Jan. 17
The Philharmonik with Bobby Carter at Booth Playhouse, 8 p.m.

Please see **THE PHILHARMONIK** | 68

‘Severance’ star Tramell Tillman gets it together in ‘25

By Mark Kennedy
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Tramell Tillman didn't dream of being an actor when he was growing up. He yearned to be a storm chaser.

"I wanted to follow tornadoes. I wanted to study hurricanes. I wanted to see volcanoes up close. I wanted to experience an earthquake," he says.

There was something about the power of nature that was breathtaking to the young Tillman: "Things like natural disasters or flowers, they don't ask for our adoration or respect. They do what they need to do and they leave. That's badass."

Tillman may not have grown up to chase storms but he might know something about the hurricane of fame, having gone through quite a 2025. Now he's a force of nature.

The "Severance" star enjoyed a breakout Season 2 in which he became a more prominent manager at Lumon Industries, capped by a finale in which he led a marching band with full choreography. That led to making Emmy history as the first Black man to win a supporting actor in a drama series trophy. As the year ended, he collected his first Golden Globe nomination, too.

Tillman also played a spiky submarine captain opposite Tom Cruise in one of the biggest hits of the year, "Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning," got asked to the Met Gala and was named a GQ Man of the Year. He's now earned a spot as one of The Associated Press' Breakthrough Entertainers of 2025.

"It's been quite a banner year," Tillman says. "I want to continue to expand and to tell more stories, stories that we haven't heard and stories that tell the same story but in a different perspective."

Tillman, 40, was born in Washington, D.C., and raised in nearby community of Largo, Maryland, the youngest of six, something he says he brings to his unnerving Seth Milchick on the Apple TV

Please see **SEVERANCE** | 68



MINT MUSEUM

Drums 4 Life perform at a Martin Luther King Jr. Day program sponsored by Levine Museum of the New South. The museum will continue its King Day tradition with a screening of "Selma" and discussion of the civil rights leader's impact on society.

Museum marks King Day with screening, discussion

Levine Museum of the New South to show 'Selma' for 2026 program

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Levine Museum of the New South will continue its annual January celebration of Martin Luther King's legacy.

The museum will mark King Day with a series of programs from film, history, family experiences and forums. Each event is open to the public for reflection on stories and teachings connected to the civil rights pioneer.

"We approach MLK Day as a moment to slow down and really look at the threads between past and present," Mint Museum President and CEO Richard Cooper said in a statement. "Dr. King's work continues to shape the issues our communities face today, and we hope these programs help guests under-

stand how those stories still inform and inspire our future."

The programs:
· "Learning From Selma," Jan. 15, 6 p.m., Carolina Theatre, 230 N. Tryon St.

A screening and community discussion of "Selma," the film chronicling the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery marches and King's leadership during a pivotal moment in Civil Rights Movement. The program opens with a reception ahead of the screening. After, attendees will get a discussion guide crafted to extend the conversation. Tickets: \$28, \$18 and \$13.

· MLK Family Day, Jan. 19, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., One Independence Center, 101 N. Tryon St.

A free family-friendly hands-on celebration of King's life and legacy. The day will open with storytimes at 10 a.m., 11:15 a.m. and 12 p.m. that centers on King's message of hope, courage and community. Children

can explore arts and craft activities inspired by his work and mission between performances and readings.

· "We Paved The Way: An Author Talk with Dr. Jennifer Dixon-McKnight," Jan. 29, 6:30-8 p.m., 915 Pearl Park Way.

The museum will host the Winthrop University professor for a conversation on her new book, "We Paved the Way: Black Women and the Charleston Hospital Workers' Campaign."

The book highlights and recognizes the Black women who led the 1969 Charleston Hospital Strike in South Carolina — a defining moment for civil rights and labor rights in the South.

Dixon-McKnight will share insights into her research, the women who shaped the movement, and lessons from their leadership. A question-and-answer session and book signing will follow. Tickets: \$15.

«MOVIE REVIEW

Wonder and war in 'Avatar: Fire and Ash'

By Jake Coyle
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Avatar: Fire and Ash
2.5 stars

When I came down with a cold the day after I saw the third and latest "Avatar" film, "Fire and Ash," I half-wondered if I had picked it up on Pandora.

The promise of Cameron's 3D trilogy has always been immersion: immersion in a science-fiction world, in technological wonder, in a maybe future of movies. "Avatar" is almost more a place to go than a movie to see.

Still, it's now been two decades since Cameron set off on this blue-tinted quest. The sheen of newness is off, or at least less pronounced, with new technological advances to contend with. "Fire and Ash" is running with a behind-the-scenes video about how performance capture was used during the film's making. The implicit message is: No, this isn't AI.

The "Avatar" films, with their visual-effects wizardry and clunky revisionist Western storytelling, have always felt, most of all, like an immersion in a dream of James Cameron's. The idea of these movies, after all, first came to Cameron, he has said, in a bioluminescent vision decades ago. At their best, the "Avatar" movies have felt like an otherworldly stage for Cameron to juggle so many of the things — hulking weaponry, ecological wonder, foolhardy human arrogance — that have marked his movies.

"Fire and Ash," at well more than three hours, is our longest stay yet on



20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) and Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) in "Avatar: Fire and Ash."

Pandora and the one most likely to make you ponder why you came here in the first place. These remain epics of craft and conviction. You can feel Cameron's deep devotion to the dynamics of his central characters, even when his interest outstrips our own.

That's especially true in "Fire and Ash," which, following the deep-sea, family-focused part two, "The Way of Water," pivots to a new chapter of culture clash. It introduces a violent rival Na'vi clan whose rageful leader, Varang (Oona Chaplin), partners with Stephen Lang's booming Col. Miles Quaritch and the human colonizers.

For those who have closely followed the "Avatar" saga, I suspect "Fire and Ash" will be a rewarding experience.

Quaritch, Pandora's answer to Robert Duvall's Bill Kilgore in "Apocalypse Now," remains a ferociously captivating character. And the introduction of Chaplin's Varang gives this installment an electricity that the previous two were missing.

But for those whose trips to Pandora have made less of an impact, "Fire and Ash" is a bit like returning to a half-remembered vacation spot, only one where the local ponytail style is a little strange and everyone seems to have the waist of a supermodel.

Time has only reinforced the sense that these films are hermetically sealed movie terrariums. They're like a \$1 billion beta test that, for all their box-of-

Please see **WONDER** | 68



APPLE TV

“Severance” star Tramell Tillman, who plays Seth Milchick on the Apple TV hit, earned his first Golden Globe nomination as well as a prominent role as a submarine captain in “Mission: Impossible – The Final Reckoning.”

‘Severance’ star Tramell Tillman gets it together

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series. “I believe Milchick to be a people pleaser. He is dutiful, and in my childhood, I was very much the same way — gotta please the parents, gotta please the teachers,” says Tillman. He credits “Severance” creator Dan Erickson and primary director Ben Stiller for incorporating his ideas about Blackness, code-switching and the historic Black college experience to Milchick, an alumnus of Jackson State University. Not that he knows all the secrets. “I am enjoying the fact that we don’t know who Milchick is even in the second season, but what we do see are splashes of his humanity coming through,” he says. Tillman also added a cool glee to his Capt. Jack Bledsoe, the commanding officer of a U.S. Navy submarine Cruise’s Ethan Hunt intercepts. (“You must be Capt. Bledsoe,” says Hunt. Replies the captain: “And you must be out of your mind.”) Hunt needs them to do some crazy things to save the world and Bledsoe should refuse, but he doesn’t. Tillman sees a connection between the two big roles. “They both serve something bigger than themselves,” he says. “I believe that’s why both of them are willing to go above and beyond, or they’re will-

ing to risk themselves or their team to accomplish a mission. No pun intended.” Tillman admires a host of performers, including Jeffrey Wright and Colman Domingo. He loves the versatility of Hugh Jackman, who can do Marvel movies and Broadway. And he adores the talent of Donald Glover, who acts, sings and writes. “I’m a person who loves versatility. I’m inspired by that,” he says. “I think it’s beautiful to be able to do one thing and do it excellently, but to see someone who’s able to multiple things and carry it — execute it beautifully, artistically, intentionally — is wonderful.” Tillman can next be seen in the Amazon/MGM film “Your Mother Your Mother Your Mother” and Lena Dunham’s Netflix film “Good Sex.” Taking a page from Jackman, he’s also signed up for “Spider-Man: Brand New Day.” During his very excellent year, Tillman has learned to lean on friends, especially those outside of the world of entertainment, unfazed by the fancy parties and proximity to Cruise. “My tendency — and I’m working on this — is to reach out and allow those people to be there to catch me,” he says. “Much of my life, I’ve had to learn how to lean on and catch myself. Life has a way of changing that.”

Wonder and specter of war in ambitious ‘Avatar: Fire and Ash’

Continued from page 5B

fice success, have ultimately proven that all the design capabilities in the world can’t conjure a story of meaningful impact. The often-remarked light cultural footprint left by the first two blockbusters only hints at why these movie seem to evaporate by the ending credits. It’s the lack of inner life to any of the characters and the bland, screen-saver aesthetics. At this point in a trilogy, nine hours in, that hollowness makes “Fire and Ash” feel like almost theoretical drama: more avatar than genuine article. These movies have had to work extremely hard, moment to moment, just to pass as believable. But almost every gesture, every movement and every bit of dialogue has had something unnatural about it. (The high frame rate is partially to blame.) That’s made these uncanny movies a combination, in equal measure, of things you’ve never seen before, and things you can’t unsee. “Fire and Ash,” scripted by Cameron, Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver, picks up with the aftermath of the climatic battle of “The Way of Water.” The Na’vi and their seafaring allies, the Metkayina clan, are nursing their wounds and recovering the human weapons that sunk to the sea floor. When a rival clan called the Mangkwan or Ash People come to challenge the Na’vi, those weapons represent an ethical quandary. Should they use such fire-power in their own local battles? This is a more difficult question partially because the fire-mad Mangkwan are especially bloodthirsty, led by their slinky sorceress, Vanang (played with seductive sadism by Chaplin, granddaughter of Charlie). But their fight is only a piece of the larger war of “Fire and Ash.” The focus of this third chapter (films four and five are said to be written but not greenlit) is interspecies coexistence. As human and Na’vi lines continue to blur, the question becomes whether the human invaders will transform Pandora or if Pandora will transform them. That puts the focus on the three char-

acters in various in-between states. First, there’s Spider (Jack Champion), the human son of Quaritch who lives happily with the Na’vi while breathing through a machine to survive the Pandora atmosphere. (Champion has the double misfortune of wearing a mask and looking downright puny next to the tall and slender natives.) But in “Fire and Ash,” he discovers he can breathe unfiltered, a development that prompts intense military interest in a potentially hugely profitable breakthrough in Pandora assimilation. There’s also Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), the former human who has made a Na’vi family with Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). For Neytiri, the growing menace of human warfare causes her to doubt her bond with Jake. The prejudices of “Fire and Ash” seep even into the home. Most interesting of the three, though, remains Quaritch. He may be violently trying to subjugate Pandora but he also obviously delights in his Na’vi body and in his life on this distant moon. You can see him flinch when his commander, General Ardmore (Edie Falco), refers to their Mangkwan allies as “savages.” Meanwhile, Quaritch and Vanang hit it off like gangbusters. “You’ve got new eyes, colonel,” one character tells Quaritch. “All you’ve got to do is open them.” The “Avatar” films have done plenty to open eyes over the past 16 years. To new cinematic horizons, to the boundlessness of Cameron’s visions, to the Papyrus font. But the most endearing quality of “Avatar” is that Cameron believes so ardently in it. I might be caught up less in the goings on Pandora, but I’m kind of glad that he is. There are worse things than dreaming up a better world, with still a fighting chance. “Avatar: Fire and Ash,” a 20th Century Studios release, opened in theaters Dec. 19. It’s rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association for intense sequences of violence and action, bloody images, some strong language, thematic elements and suggestive material. Running time: 195 minutes.

The Philharmonik and Bobby Carter at Booth

Continued from page 5B

Black Notes Project Music Weekend kicks off with the ensemble, which fuses classical orchestration with hip-hop’s energy and contemporary groove. Christian Gates, known professionally as The Philharmonik, is an American vocalist, multi-instrumentalist, lyricist, music producer and genre defining artist. Special guest Carter, producer of NPR’s Tiny Desk Concerts, opens with a live DJ set. For tickets, go online to: blumentharts.org/events/detail/the-philharmonik. Feb. 13 Chaka Khan, Patti LaBelle, Gladys Knight, and Stephanie Mills are extending

their “The Queens! 4 Legends. 1 Stage” tour to Spectrum Center. The tour brings together four trailblazing R&B/pop giants for a celebration of legacy, sisterhood, and music. Tickets: bpctickets.com. March 7 The eighth annual Queen City Blues Festival is at Ovens Auditorium at 7 p.m. The Southern soul and modern blues scene blend old-school storytelling with contemporary R&B, with performances by King George, Pokey Bear, Lenny Williams, West Love, Tonio Armani, Mike Clark Jr., E.J. Jones, Stephanie Luckett & the YP Band, and Henry Welch. Tickets: ticketmaster.com.

OUT & ABOUT

PHOTOS BY DANIEL COSTON | FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST



Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Chief Estella Patterson joined Mayor Vi Lyles at the Good Friends luncheon, held at the Charlotte Convention Center on Dec. 4.



Jay D. Jones brought some holiday soul to this year’s Tosco Music Holiday concert, held at the Knight Theater on Dec. 15.



Johnson C. Smith University choral singers entertained the Women Executives Christmas Party at Carolina Theater on Dec. 10.

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