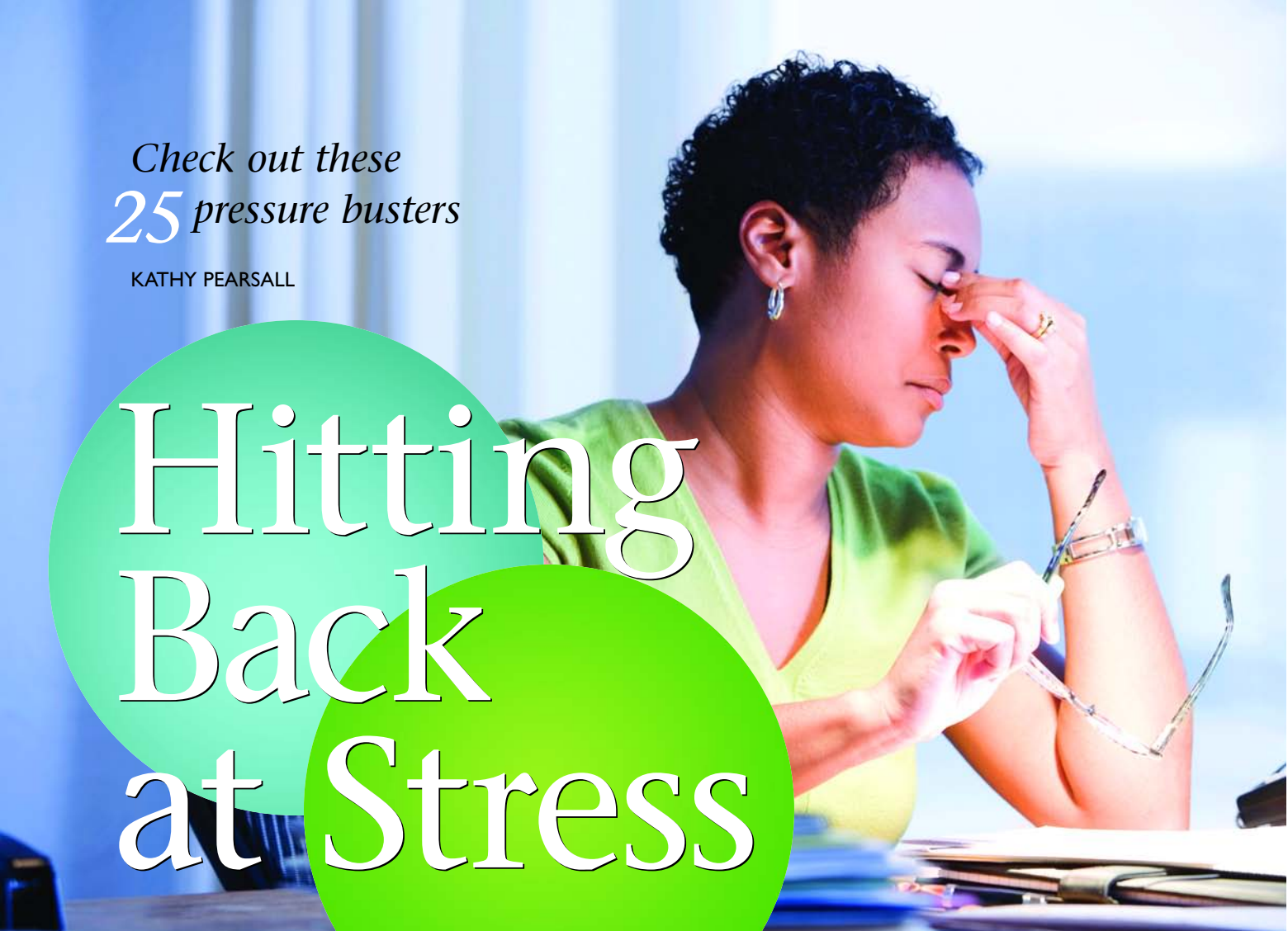


Check out these  
**25** pressure busters

KATHY PEARSALL



# Hitting Back at Stress

## Our Panel of Experts

**Dr. Taylor Alexander**

CEO, Canadian Mental Health Association, Ottawa

**Kim Arrey**

Registered dietitian, Montreal

**Dr. Mark Berber**

Psychiatrist, Markham, Ont., and an assistant professor of psychiatry, Queen's University, Kingston, Ont.

**Bill Dueease**

President of The Coach Connection, an international network of life coaches, Fort Myers, Fla.

**Dr. Penny Kendall-Reed**

Doctor of naturopathic medicine, Toronto

**Dr. David Posen**

Stress and lifestyle counsellor, Oakville, Ont.

**Dr. Ron Sullivan**

Behavioural neuroscientist and an assistant professor of research in psychiatry, University of Montreal

**B**alancing work with family and personal life is one of the greatest challenges Canadians face every day. Whether you work inside of or outside of the home, the never-ending workday is a force to be reckoned with. Active children have packed schedules that must be overseen. Elderly parents need attention. Commuters spend too long in transit. Employers are getting more demanding. And people are enslaved by the very devices designed to save them time. The use of the BlackBerry, for example, has the potential to add many hours of additional work time — outside of the office — to an already hectic week, according to a study from Carleton University in Ottawa.

It all adds up to big-time stress, but dealing with this pressure might be simpler than you think. “The key is to control the things you can,” says Dr. David Posen, a physician-turned-stress-therapist and author of *The Little Book of Stress Relief* (Key Porter Books, 2003). “You have more control than you think; you just have to use it.”

For example, you can decide what you eat, when you go to bed and whether you exercise. “If you just control the basics, there’s a huge payoff,” says Posen.

MASTERFILE

“You’ll have more energy if you take care of yourself.”

Many of his patients are amazed, for instance, at how much calmer they feel after cutting out caffeine for three weeks. But if you absolutely cannot live without this stimulant, Posen recommends consuming it only in the morning. Caffeine accumulates in the system, sticking around for about 10 hours, so it’s best to clear it out well before bedtime.

Psychiatrist Dr. Mark Berber calls stress “the thin edge of the wedge in most mental problems.” It may lead to depression and anxiety, and it can contribute to the development of hypertension, diabetes, asthma, infections, headaches and obesity. While there are plenty of pharmaceutical antidepressants and anti-anxiety pills out there, Berber is quick to recommend taking a hard look at the stresses of life and making lifestyle adjustments before turning to pills. He’s recorded a CD, *Creating Inner Calm* (available only at Chapters/Indigo). On this disc, Berber’s soothing voice coaches listeners on beating stress through breathing, muscle relaxation and creative visualization.

Berber also stresses the importance of hanging out with the right people. “If you have strength in your relationships with your partner, friends and co-workers, this can help shoulder the burden in other stressful areas,” he says.

Studies have shown that people can be genetically predisposed to suffer from stress. The amygdala, the area of the brain that regulates response to stress, tends to be larger or more excitable in anxious people, says Berber. He notes that women are particularly vulnerable to pressure, a phenomenon he attributes to fluctuating levels of estrogen and progesterone.

Another school of thought suggests that female and male brains are wired differently. Neuroscientist Dr. Ron Sullivan reports that stress preferentially activates the left side of the female brain, but the right side of the male brain. There also appear to be gender differences in the activity of serotonin and dopamine, two brain chemicals important for coping with stress. A better understanding of these differences could lead to gender-specific treatments for stress-related disorders.

According to naturopath Dr. Penny Kendall-Reed, people often don’t realize how stressed they are until they begin to experience classic symptoms. One of the main ones is waking up between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. Another is the accumulation of abdominal fat, which is sensitive to the effects of circulating stress hormones such as cortisol. According to research from Yale University in New Haven, Conn., central fat responds to cortisol by increasing in extent, even in otherwise slender women.

Can employers help improve the lives of Canadians? The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is urging employers to reduce stress by offering flexible work hours, allowing employees to work from home when that’s appropriate and encouraging workers to take time off to care for sick children or elderly relatives. The aim is to permit staff members to control their priorities as much as possible (such as recuperating at home when sick instead of toughing it out at work).

“The economic, social and personal impact of mentally unhealthy workplaces is staggering, so we’re calling on employers to make mental health their business,” says the CMHA’s CEO, Dr. Taylor Alexander.

Meanwhile, here are 25 coping strategies to help you find your balance amidst the pressures of daily life.

## 1 Be ready for each day

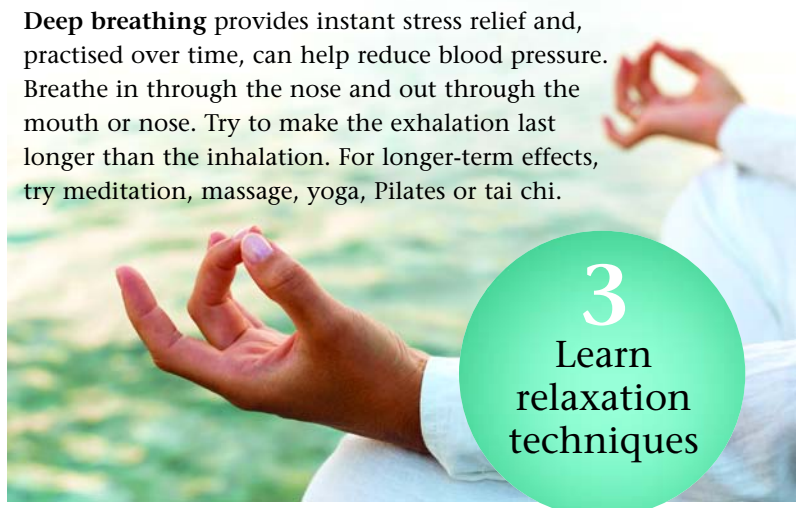
**Start the day** in a relaxed state of mind. This may require getting some things done the night before, but it will be worth it. And set realistic goals for your day. “You can’t do it all, so don’t even try,” says Posen.



## 2 Keep it simple

**Voluntary simplicity** is being embraced by a growing number of people who find joy in the stress-reduced state of shopping less and owning less. The marketing of merchandise that goes on in malls, even in grocery stores, can seduce even the most frugal of shoppers. “Wall Street has taken over Main Street,” says Berber.

**Deep breathing** provides instant stress relief and, practised over time, can help reduce blood pressure. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth or nose. Try to make the exhalation last longer than the inhalation. For longer-term effects, try meditation, massage, yoga, Pilates or tai chi.



## 3 Learn relaxation techniques

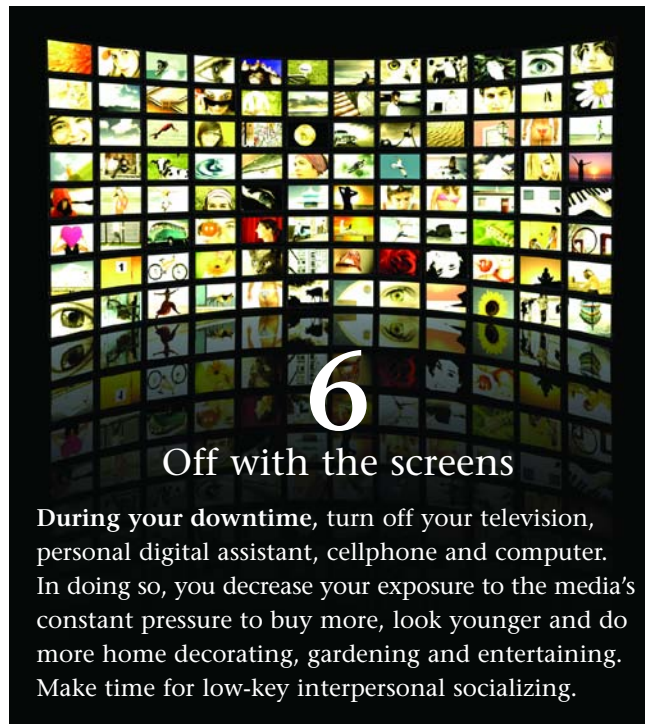
An award-winning video game called MindHabits, designed at Montreal's McGill University, can lower stress-hormone levels as much as 17% by changing the way players think. The game is based on the emerging science of social intelligence, which finds that a significant part of daily stress comes from an individual's social perceptions of the world. You can buy this game from MindHabits Inc. in Montreal. Go to [www.mindhabilities.com](http://www.mindhabilities.com).



Retrain your brain

## 5 Plan nutritious meals

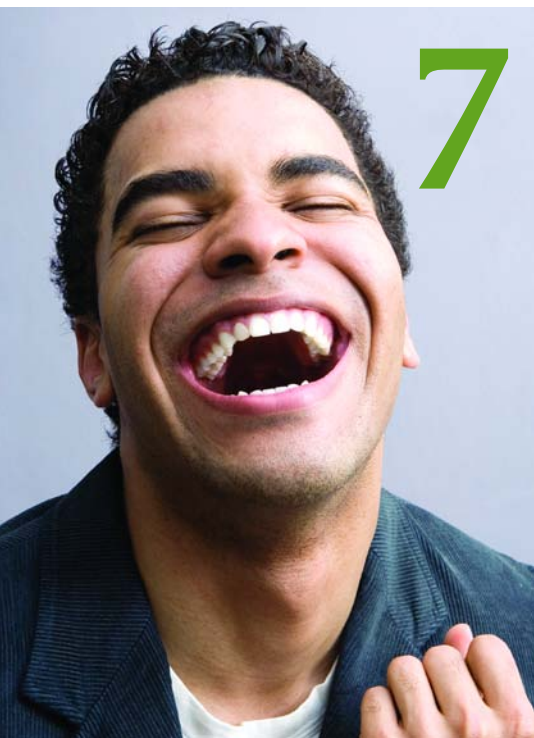
Find a few recipes that you and your family enjoy, write them on index cards and tape them to the inside of the pantry, says registered dietitian Kim Arrey. Keep the basic ingredients on hand at all times, so you can always fix a nutritious meal no matter how hurried your day. "Eating smaller, more frequent meals to normalize blood sugar throughout the day can be calming for some people. For others, trying to eat more often is actually more stressful," she says. The key is to eat at regular intervals of four to six hours, so that you don't get to the starving stage. Someone who is very hungry may overeat, which might cause guilt, weight gain and, ultimately, more stress.



6

Off with the screens

During your downtime, turn off your television, personal digital assistant, cellphone and computer. In doing so, you decrease your exposure to the media's constant pressure to buy more, look younger and do more home decorating, gardening and entertaining. Make time for low-key interpersonal socializing.



7

Laugh more

The mere anticipation of laughter helps reduce stress levels, according to a California study. Just imagine what the real thing can do!



8

Assert yourself

Suffering and seething in silence is hard on the body and the mind, so work to resolve conflicts openly. If you find it hard to ask for what you want in a clear and rational way, or if you find it hard to say no to others, assertiveness training can help.

# 9

## Protect your productivity

When you need to be productive, turn off your email alert and forward your telephone calls to voice mail. Set aside time at the end of the morning and afternoon to get back to people. Constant interruptions decrease productivity and send stress levels rocketing. "Avoid scheduling long meetings and medical or dental appointments on stressful days such as Mondays and Fridays, when you'll be either catching up on last week's work or rushing to get things done before the weekend," says life coach Bill Duesease.

# 10

## Be careful with alcohol

A little alcohol can be relaxing, but too much will stress the body and immune system with a load of toxins — as hangover sufferers can attest.



# 11

## Enjoy the ride

Always give yourself an extra 15 minutes to drive to a destination. Time urgency has proven to be a significant contributor to driver stress, according to a study from York University in Toronto.



# 12

## Chant

Making repetitive sounds slows respiratory patterns, resulting in more regulated breathing, according to a British study. This, in turn, increases oxygen levels to the brain and reduces stress.

# 13

## Make a to-do list

Post a calendar or a to-do list in an accessible place. Write down reminders and follow-ups. While making your list, why not relegate some items to a not-to-do list? "Reducing your daily agenda by as little as 5% to 10% can make a huge difference," says Posen. Definitely eliminate the one thing that seems to make your day impossible.

# 14

## Get moving

Regular exercise is the best stress reducer there is, but you knew that already. Make it fun and stick with it, but weekend warriors take note: too much exercise can stress the body and the immune system. Don't overdo it.



FROM TOP: BRANDON LAUFENBERG/ISTOCKPHOTO; FREDERICK KASELOW/ISTOCKPHOTO; DEREK LATTI/ISTOCKPHOTO

## 15 Keep a journal

Writing down your feelings in a daily or weekly journal is a great stress reducer.

"We move so quickly that we don't always take time to think about our feelings," says Berber. "Journalling helps slow us down and allows us to reflect in tranquillity on our thoughts and feelings."

## 16 Scale back celebrations

Burdensome social engagements, the financial and logistical stress of gift giving and entertaining, raised expectations and feelings of loneliness — these make many people anxious or depressed during the very times they are supposed to feel festive. That holds for birthdays, the last long weekend of summer or Thanksgiving. Decide what aspects of celebrations are important to you and forget the rest.

## 17 Seek sanctuary

Create a serene, uncluttered place in your home where you can experience solitude — a place to close your eyes, practise deep breathing and rebalance yourself.



## 18 Connect with nature

Plant and tend something green, says Berber, especially if you live in the concrete jungle or the bleak suburbs. Or simply take a leisurely walk in a park and maybe bring along a picnic.

## 19 Take time outs

Daily, weekly, annually, you need time and space to bring your energy back up. Take little breaks here and there, and plan a real vacation at least once a year, advises Posen.



## 20 Get a pet

Studies show that pets can help lower blood pressure, perhaps because they make you live in the moment and give unconditional love. Studies also show that dog owners walk more consistently, thus reaping the stress-busting benefits of exercise.



# 21 Try something new

**Mae West said it best:** “When choosing between two evils, I always like to try the one I’ve never tried before.” Novel diversions take your mind off the chronic things that get you down, especially if, in the process, you help someone with troubles greater than your own.



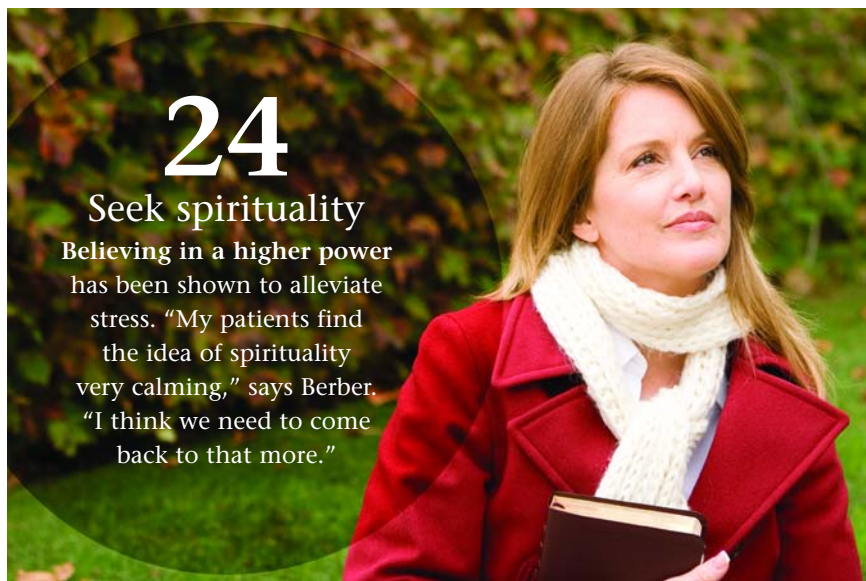
## Pursue romance

Lower blood pressure and overall stress reduction are two good reasons to have sex tonight, reports a study in the journal *Biological Psychology*. There’s also a link between lower blood pressure in women and simple hugs from their partners.



## 23 Use music

**Studies show that music** can help prevent stress-induced increases in anxiety, blood pressure and heart rate. It’s even been shown to boost antibodies measured in saliva.



## 24

### Seek spirituality

Believing in a higher power has been shown to alleviate stress. “My patients find the idea of spirituality very calming,” says Berber. “I think we need to come back to that more.”

## 25

### Sleep well

**Start off by going to bed** half an hour earlier than usual, and add to that every few days, advises Posen. The sign of a good night’s rest is that you can wake up without an alarm clock feeling well rested.

And remember



**Not all stress is bad.** There’s the good stress that comes, say, from departing on an exciting trip, playing a challenging game of tennis or falling in love. It’s the chronic stress stemming from constant nagging pressure that drains your energy and undermines your physical and mental health. 🩺

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