



MIN

MAX

QUIET, PLEASE

Noise pollution is a modern plague. It can lead to high blood pressure, heart attacks, insomnia and increased rates of anxiety and depression. One solution to better health may be as simple as dialling down the volume. Question is, do you have the courage to face the silence? Meet eight women who did. | by ANNE BOKMA



“WHEN WE’RE QUIET, **WE GAIN A NEW AWARENESS** OF HOW TIRED WE ARE, OF AN ACHE OR PAIN THAT REQUIRES ATTENTION, OF STRESS WE NEED TO RESOLVE.”

Sometimes it seems impossible

to find a little peace and quiet.

Our days are marked by clatter and clamour. We turn on the radio when we get in the car. We go for a walk with iPod wires dangling from our ears. There’s muzak in the elevator, planes roaring overhead and subways rattling underneath. It’s a struggle to meditate for more than five minutes, and our fingers itch for our phones if they’re more than an arm’s length away. There’s always something good on Netflix, doom and disaster blast from 24-hour news channels, and emails, podcasts, chat rooms and game screens compete for our increasingly divided attention. Addicted to productivity, we go to sleep with visions of to-do lists dancing in our heads and the sounds of our cellphones pinging with persistent notifications. Even when all our gadgets are turned off, it can be difficult to still the chaos in our minds.

The effect of all this sensory input is devastating. The World Health Organization says excessive noise seriously harms human health. Noise pollution has even been called a “modern plague” that can lead to high blood pressure and fatal heart attacks, not to mention hearing loss, insomnia and increased rates of anxiety and depression.

We can barely even recognize the sound of silence anymore. We’re too digitally connected to bother to daydream. We feel guilty if we’re idle. And we’re so distracted that a Microsoft study of 2,000 Canadians found that the human attention span has fallen to eight seconds (a length of time even goldfish can best by one second).

There is an antidote to all this crushing cacophony: quiet time. Studies show that carving out more time for silence and solitude is a balm for the body, calms the mind, boosts creativity and makes us smarter and happier. A 2013 study on mice in the journal *Brain Structure and Function* found that two hours of daily silence can literally create new cells in the hippocampus, an area of the brain that helps us learn, remember things and regu-

late our emotions. Dr. Leo Chalupa, a neurobiologist and vice-president of research at George Washington University, has advocated for “a national day of absolute silence” that he says “would do more to improve the brains of all Americans than any other one-day program.”

Ceaseless noise can work as a tranquilizer to numb our feelings. Silence, on the other hand, restores our energy and helps us better understand ourselves.

Most of us operate on a massive deficit of quiet, but as several women shared with *Best Health*, it’s entirely possible to find moments of stillness in a busy life. Here are their simple strategies.

TAKE A BREAK FROM SOCIAL MEDIA Uzma Jalaluddin was an “unrepentant Luddite” until she got her first smartphone five years ago. At first, she used it only for phone calls and texts but soon was sucked into the digital vortex, compulsively checking her Facebook status and trying to keep up with more than a dozen WhatsApp group chats. A teacher, mother of two and biweekly Samosas and Maple Syrup columnist for *The Toronto Star*, 37-year-old Jalaluddin says spending time on social media meant she was more distracted, read fewer books and found it harder to concentrate on her writing. She uninstalled Facebook from her phone (she still checks it on her laptop) and muted her WhatsApp notifications so she can only view messages when she opens the app.

“It was easy to disengage,” she says. “I crave quiet, and I realize I need at least 30 minutes of silence a day to feel balanced and energized – and that extends to social media.” She grabs her quiet time in the morning, drinking tea and reading the newspaper. “It makes me a calmer, happier person,” she says.

TALK LESS, LISTEN MORE Fiona Heath says she spent years feeling guilty and embarrassed about being someone who is happy just staying home and reading a good book. Then

ISTOCK

3 WAYS TO SHUSH

she read *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* and she was able to articulate her quiet side. "Silence is a source of nourishment, and I appreciate the strengths of insight, calmness and listening skills that it brings."

Forty-nine-year-old Heath has incorporated more time for quiet in her work as a Unitarian minister in Mississauga, ON, by adding two minutes of silence to her worship services each week. There are even small groups that practise conscious listening.

"Listening is hard," she says. "It's actually a skill that takes time to develop because we are used to spending our energy on speaking and sharing. Listening well to someone is a strong way to connect. One of the most supportive things we can do for someone is to just sit and listen."

TURN DOWN THE VOLUME A few years ago, Cheryl Breukelman, an executive and health coach for Epiphany Consulting, stopped taking short-haul flights and now opts for hours-long drives from her home in Hamilton, ON, to visit clients in cities like Kingston, Ottawa and Sudbury. She never turns on the radio.

"As a business owner, mom and wife, I rarely get quiet time, so I've found that this time in the car is incredible," she says. "It brings peace and calm, it makes me feel centred and relaxed, and I can contemplate all sorts of things that are on my mind." She also advises her clients to ensure that they book regular quiet time for themselves to ensure peak performance.

"Quiet increases our self-awareness on every level," she says. "When we're quiet, we gain a new awareness of how tired we are, of an ache or pain that requires attention, of stress we need to resolve, of how we are feeling emotionally, of how hungry we are or of how eager we are for a good stretch or walk. The quiet informs us, and this awareness gives us the opportunity to act positively."

TAKE A SOLO SOJOURN A trip on your lonesome doesn't have to be, well, lonesome. There's freedom in not being beholden to others and doing what you want when you want. Ester Buchholz, author of *The Call of Solitude*, calls



GAMPO ABBEY, a Western Buddhist monastery nestled in the highlands of Cape Breton, NS, is renowned for its silent meditation retreats (it's been featured on Oprah's *Super Soul Sunday*).



THE ART OF STILLNESS, a TED Talk by travel writer Pico Iyer, argues that, in our crowded and chaotic world, there's never been a greater need to slow down and give ourselves permission to be still.



ZERO DECIBELS: THE QUEST FOR ABSOLUTE SILENCE, written by New Yorker George Michelsen Foy, is billed as "one man's quest to find the grail of quiet."

alone time "fuel for life." Cheryl Paterson, a 53-year-old teacher and mother of three in Dundas, ON, says she often refuels her energy by taking a solo trek. A favourite destination is Ontario's Algonquin Park, where she'll swim, meditate on an ergonomic chair she packs especially for that purpose, read, paddle a canoe and hike or run in the woods every day. "Travelling on my own is awesome," she says. "I love removing myself from my normal routine and just having the opportunity to reflect on life."

MEDITATE – EVEN FOR FIVE MINUTES Haven't got time for a 10-day Vipassana silent meditation retreat? Inner bliss could be yours if you carve out just a few minutes of quiet time a day. A 2005 national study by Elisha Goldstein, a Los Angeles-based psychologist, found that sitting in silence and solitude for five minutes a day, five days a week for three weeks resulted in a significant positive effect in stress reduction and well-being.

Of course, the more time you devote to silence, the more you may benefit, says Jill Davey, a 55-year-old meditation teacher and owner of RiverSound Retreat in Fergus, ON. The 10-day silent meditation retreat she went on eight years ago made her a "nicer, wiser and more patient" person, she says. "I'm less moody, more peaceful and more content with how things are," she says.

TAKE A "FOREST BATH" Naturalist Henry David Thoreau called a walk in the woods "the tonic of the wilderness." Now, an emerging profession of certified guides is helping people gain maximum impact from their time in a woody atmosphere by encouraging them to walk quietly and deliberately, covering perhaps 400 metres in three hours.

They're engaging their participants in a series of "invitations" to intensely soak up the sounds and scents of nature by sitting under a tree, listening to the faraway sounds of a songbird or running their fingers over the veins of an oak leaf. The contemplative practice originated in Japan, where *Shinrin-yoku* – literally "forest bathing" – was recognized for its therapeutic value in boosting the immune system and improving peace of mind.

"Many of us had a special spot to go sit in the woods or

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8

SECONDS

A LENGTH OF TIME EVEN GOLDFISH CAN BEST BY ONE SECOND



somewhere else in nature as a child," says 34-year-old Sky Maria Buitenhuis, who trains guides in North America and internationally, including those certified in collaboration with the Canadian chapter of the Association of Nature & Forest Therapy Guides & Programs. "It's something most of us have lost in our adult lives. We often believe we can think or worry our way out of a problem, but what we really need is quiet time in nature so that our inner wisdom and intuition can arise. Forest therapy can calm the chatter in our minds."

TRY QUIET YOGA Thirty-six-year-old Anna Muzzin lost more than 100 pounds 10 years ago, but she continued to think of herself as a heavy person – that is, until she took up Mysore-style Ashtanga yoga. In this type of yoga, students work independently in silence in a group setting on a particular series of postures under the hushed one-on-one guidance of an instructor. "I couldn't see myself in this new body I was in," says Muzzin, who now teaches Mysore Ashtanga in Hamilton, ON.

"When you've been overweight your whole life, you keep seeing yourself in the old way. This type of yoga helped make me lean and strong, but the main benefit was that it helped me limit the fluctuations of my mind that had me thinking about myself in a certain way. The quiet nature of

this physical practice allows us to hear what's going on internally and helps us better understand ourselves."

WALK A LABYRINTH Labyrinths are ancient circular pathways found in cultures worldwide, often used as a walking meditation. By following the single winding path slowly to the centre of the labyrinth and out again, we allow ourselves to be present in the moment, clearing the mind of worries and experiencing insights that support us, says Holly Carnegie Letcher, an occupational therapist in Qualicum Beach, BC.

Letcher uses the labyrinth with her clients as "a tool to manage stress that can decrease heart rate and blood pressure and quiet the mind with regular use, simply by walking the path mindfully." She sees it as a metaphor for life's journey: "Sometimes you may know where you're going or there may be twists and turns," she says. "You may walk side by side or far apart. This walk of reflection through the twists and turns of daily life will take us to our 'centre' if we simply put one foot in front of the other, take a breath and take time to truly listen through the noise and chaos. Trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be on your journey. Walking a labyrinth can support you to find hope, joy, meaning and purpose in those quiet spaces we create. The labyrinth represents a way to create quiet – and to listen to the voice within." *dit*

