

# THE

In a world full of digital distractions and constant clatter, carving out time for contemplation and tranquility is a must. Here, 10 Canadians share their simple strategies for finding peace.

# QUIETER

# LIFE

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**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. Everywhere we go, people are chatting on their phones. There's muzak in the elevator and, no matter whether you live in the city or the burbs, the traffic's getting worse. With the endless stream of 24-hour news, emails and social media competing for our attention, it can be a struggle to find even one

loss, insomnia and increased rates of anxiety and depression. And Statistics Canada cites "smoking, overconsumption of alcohol and less healthy eating habits" among the consequences of a stressful life.

Meanwhile, we're so distracted that a Microsoft study of 2,000 Canadians in 2015 found that the human attention span has fallen to eight seconds from 12 in the last 15 years. (Even a goldfish, they report, can now best us by one second).



## PRACTISING 20 MINUTES OF SILENT MINDFULNESS EXERCISES EVERY DAY CAN IMPROVE YOUR NIGHT'S REST.

minute to meditate, or just sit back and stare at the sky.

Addicted to productivity, we go to sleep with visions of to-do lists dancing in our heads. It's no surprise that in 2014, almost a quarter of Canadians aged 15 or older said that most of their days were "quite a bit" or "extremely" stressful. Even on vacation, or in retirement, we can have a hard time relaxing and calming our minds.

All this sensory input has a harmful effect on us. The World Health Organization reports that excessive noise can lead to high blood pressure and fatal heart attacks, hearing

Thankfully, there is an antidote to this cacophony: quiet time. Studies show that carving out more room for silence and solitude is a balm for the body, calms the mind, boosts creativity and makes us smarter and happier. One of them, a 2015 University of Southern California study of people over the age of 55 who experienced disturbed sleep, found that practising 20 minutes of silent mindfulness exercises every day can improve your night's rest. Dr. Leo Chalupa, a neurobiologist and vice-president of research at George Washington University, has

even advocated for "a national day of absolute silence," which he says would do more to improve our brain functioning than a full day of the mind-stimulating exercises we're often prescribed.

The fact is, most of us operate on a massive deficit of quiet. But, as we discovered by talking with 10 tranquility-seeking Canadians, it's entirely possible to find moments of stillness in a busy life. Here are their simple strategies.

### Talk Less, Listen More

Fiona Heath, a Unitarian minister in Mississauga, says she spent years feeling guilty and embarrassed about being someone who is happy just staying home and reading a good book. When the 49-year-old finished *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, by Susan Cain, she was finally able to articulate the benefits of her reclusive side. "Silence is a source of nourishment, and I appreciate the insight, calmness and listening skills it brings."

Heath was inspired to incorporate more time for quiet in her work, adding two minutes of silence to her worship services each week. She has even organized small groups at the church for congregants to practise listening.

"Listening is hard," she says. "It's a skill that takes time to develop

because we are used to spending our energy speaking and sharing. Listening well is a strong way to connect, and it's one of the most supportive things you can do for someone."

### Turn Down the Volume

A few years ago, Cheryl Breukelman, an executive and health coach for Epiphany Consulting, stopped taking short-haul flights to see clients and now opts for hours-long drives from her home in Hamilton to visit cities that include Kingston, Ottawa and Sudbury. And when she's behind the wheel, she never turns on the radio.

"As a business owner, mom and wife, I rarely get any silence, so I've found that this time in the car is incredible," Breukelman says. "It brings peace and calm; it makes me feel centred and relaxed; and I can contemplate all sorts of things." In fact, she now advises her clients to book regular quiet time to ensure peak performance.

"Quiet increases our self-awareness on every level," she says. "When we're quiet, we can gain a clearer sense 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 gives us the opportunity to act positively."

## Meditate—Even for Five Minutes

“Gone are the days when meditation was seen as a ‘hoo-ha’ idea,” says Good+Hec founder and director Chris Hecimovich, a Nova Scotia native who travels between Canada and the United States teaching mindfulness in corporate environments and to professional sports teams. And he’s right: yoga’s favourite cousin was among the most prominent wellness trends of 2017.

verses changed my life.” He ended up staying on, living in an ashram for two months.

Now a pro helping people bring quiet mindfulness to their day-to-day lives, Hecimovich explains that you can’t really do meditation wrong and that the most important thing is to be consistent. First-timers can ease into the practice by trying a morning meditation in bed or over coffee at the kitchen table. “Start with being comfortable sitting with



IN HER BOOK *THE CALL OF SOLITUDE*, AUTHOR ESTER BUCHOLZ DUBS ALONE TIME “FUEL FOR LIFE.”

Once a successful sales exec, Hecimovich succumbed to full-scale burnout in 2010. “I felt dead and lonely and without purpose,” he explains. After 15 years of relying on his sharp business instincts, that same inner impulse took him instead to India.

“I had never practised meditation, but I knew I needed space and peace,” says Hecimovich. “For 30 days, I sat on my cushion every morning and chanted in my head: ‘May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be happy.’ Those four

yourself for five minutes,” he says. “It will evolve from there.”

## Take a Solo Sojourn

A trip on your lonesome doesn’t have to be lonely. There’s freedom in not being beholden to others and in having the ability to do what you want when you want. In *The Call of Solitude*, author Ester Bucholz dubs alone time “fuel for life.” That’s something Cheryl Paterson, a 53-year-old teacher and mother of three in Dundas, Ont., has taken to heart.

Paterson says she recharges by taking regular solo treks. Her favourite

destination is Ontario’s Algonquin Park, where she’ll swim, read, paddle a canoe and hike or run in the woods every day. She even packs an ergonomic chair for meditation.

“Getting away on my own is awesome,” Paterson says. “I love removing myself from my normal routine and just having the opportunity to reflect on life.”

## Find Calm in the Community

Toronto photographer Ben Freedman spends a lot of time in hushed art galleries. As artistic project coordinator at the Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival, installing exhibitions and checking out shows are a major part of his job. As Freedman explains, though, the intense creative energy that surrounds him on a daily basis is almost always paired with relatively minimal noise.

Like libraries and history museums, art galleries provide quietude that isn’t solitary. You’re in the company of other people, but it’s generally understood that these places are for quiet conversation only. “I always prefer my second visit to any exhibition over opening night,” Freedman says. “When I enter a gallery, my intention is to learn or experience something, not dissimilar to the goal of meditation. And today, looking at anything for an extended amount of time in silence is a gift.”

## Take a Break From Social Media

Uzma Jalaluddin was an “unrepentant Luddite” until she got her first smartphone five years ago. To begin with, she used it only for phone calls and texts but soon was sucked into the digital vortex, compulsively checking her Facebook timeline and trying to keep up with more than a dozen WhatsApp group chats. A teacher, mother of two and biweekly columnist for the *Toronto Star*, the 37-year-old 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 ends up viewing messages less frequently.

“It was easy to disengage,” Jalaluddin 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 finds these moments of peace in the morning, drinking tea and reading the newspaper. “It makes me a calmer, happier person.”

## Take a Forest Bath

“We need the tonic of wildness,” Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. Now, more than 150 years later, an emerging profession of certified forest guides is answering

that call, helping people gain the best benefits from wooded walks by encouraging them to move quietly and deliberately, covering as little as 400 metres over three hours.

"Many of us had a special spot to go sit in the woods, or somewhere else in nature, as children," says 34-year-old Sky Maria Buitenhuis, a trainer for the Canadian chapter of the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs. "It's something we've lost in our adult

### Silence the Family Circus

One of the reasons why many of us have a hard time relaxing into quietude is that we're not used to it; no one ever showed us how. That's why James R.C. Smith, the Vancouver-based Brit behind the daddy blog socialdad.ca, has made sure to integrate this lesson into his parenting. "I grew up in the English countryside, which was always quiet," Smith says. "I learned to listen to the sounds of nature over everything else." Now he's trying to replicate that



## "FOREST BATHING" IS RECOGNIZED FOR ITS THERAPEUTIC VALUE IN BOOSTING THE IMMUNE SYSTEM.

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 our inner wisdom and intuition can arise."

Forest guides engage participants in a series of "invitations" to soak up nature's hushed sounds, evocative scents or the sensation of running their fingers over the veins of an oak leaf. This contemplative practice originated in Japan, where *Shinrin-yoku*—"forest bathing"—was recognized for its therapeutic value in boosting the immune system and improving peace of mind.

experience for his two-year-old daughter in an urban environment.

Lesson one: flexibility. "She's a toddler. If she doesn't want to be quiet, she's not going to be," Smith explains. "But it's not always about lower volume; it's about less distraction."

Smith always has blocks and art supplies handy, making it easy to break away from noisy toys and iPads with an activity that's still stimulating. He limits television to one hour a day and encourages a low-volume household. "If music is on, it's not too loud. There's no shouting, and we take turns speaking," says Smith. "Quiet

periods benefit my daughter the same way they benefit us all. They are times for calm thoughts and understanding. We're free to let our minds wander."

### Sign Up for 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 class, students work independently within a group setting on a particular series of postures under the hushed one-on-one guidance of an instructor.

"When you've been overweight for your whole life, you keep seeing yourself in the old way," says Muzzin, who now teaches Mysore Ashtanga in Hamilton. "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, winding pathways found in cultures worldwide and are often used as a form of walking meditation. By slowly following the labyrinth to its centre and then back out again, says Holly Carnegie Letcher, an occupational therapist in Qualicum Beach, B.C., we allow ourselves to be present in the moment and can clear our mind of worries.

Letcher uses the practice of walking labyrinths—most often found painted on the ground in public spaces—with her clients as a tool to lower blood pressure and manage stress. She also sees it as a metaphor for life's journey: "This walk of reflection through the twists and turns of our days will bring us to our centre if we simply put one foot in front of the other, breathe and take time to truly listen through the noise and chaos. Trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be," she says. "The labyrinth represents a way to create quiet—and to listen to the voice within." **R**



### WEATHER THE STORM

Trying to stop it from raining has never worked, but eventually the rain does pass.

TRACEE ELLIS ROSS, actress