

7 DAYS, 7 WAYS TO EMOTIONALLY DETOX

*Expert advice on
how to save your
sanity* BY KATE RAE

DARK DAYS, COLD NIGHTS, and here's how I've been feeling: tired, disconnected—an exhausting, weird mix of bored and overstimulated. There is much sighing and an appalling amount of yawning. Just as a colonic purports to rid the body of yards of beef damage, I want to do the same to my psyche. I need to flush out the soul-destroying detritus that's lodged in the nooks and crannies, and come out feeling fresh, energized and happy. Enter the experts.

DAY 1 "POWER DOWN THE SCREEN," says naturopath Alan C. Logan, co-author of *Your Brain on Nature*.

The advantages of screen-based technology are many, Logan says, but information overload chews up our contemplative time. "Taking a break from infotoxicity diminishes distractions and affords opportunity for mindfulness. Even a moderate reduction in screen time is capable of improving mental outlook and vitality," he says.

Why do I start with this one? Because I am hooked to my iPhone and laptop with a tween-like ferocity. I can spend a mortifying amount of time doing the "Facebook Spinout," when an idle glance at a friend's birthday pics >

somehow turns into you looking at her cousin's (whom you've never met) wedding pics, then inexplicably leads to you clicking through to her bridesmaid's Mexico snaps, and you wonder why you're hungry and realize that hours have passed. Why do I fill my brain with this crap?

(No offence to my friend's cousin's bridesmaid: You looked really pretty in that turquoise dress.)

While Logan recommends reducing the time we spend online by 30 minutes a day, I decide more extreme measures need to be taken, so I reduce it to a 30-minute maximum per day, and it's surprisingly easy to do. The laptop stays closed. I keep my phone in my bag when out for dinner with friends, instead of placing it on the table. At first all I can do is picture the number of text messages piling up, but that passes.

THE VERDICT: Oh, this is staying. Evenings when I'm home have been lovely. Instead of staring slack-jawed at Facebook or reading about how that celeb who I've never met slept with that other celeb I've never met, I do other things: I knit. I read. I talk on the phone with friends, instead of chatting with them online. I bake a pie. I eat a pie.

DAY 2 RELEASE AND FORGIVE

The fact that, years later, even reading the words "forgive" and "release" causes my brain to angrily issue forth a weird, barky laugh is a pretty good indication that yes, perhaps this is worth a try. What's that saying? That bitterness is like taking poison and expecting the other person to die? I like to think that a certain ex has vacated my premises, but recently I've had a dream where I am ineffectually swinging my fists at him, and none connect. I wake up frustrated and aware that there is still a whole lot of anger inside me. He is crouching in the corners of my psyche, *The Phantom of the Opera*-style. Time to go, guy.

Enter rising self-help star Gabrielle Bernstein, whose books feature her wackily posing on skateboards, and whose Twitter feed is populated with sayings such as "Gandhi is my homeboy." She

WELCOME IN THE DOOM, AND IT WILL SPRAWL ITS GLOOMY MASS OVER EVERY SURFACE. I STOP OPENING THE DOOR AND INVITING IT IN

seems very excited for me to do release work, though: To close my eyes and picture my ex standing in front of me. I do, and feel a very un-Gandhi-like urge to kick him in the balls. Next, she wants me to picture a thick black cord attaching us, and then watch as Archangel Raphael floats down and hands me a pair of golden scissors, imploring me to snip through it. I feel nothing, but that night is the first one in a while where my ex doesn't make a smug cameo. Forgiveness though? My hackles rise. That's going to take a bit more work. **THE VERDICT:** It's an ongoing project, this one. I am perplexed by the notion of forgiveness but understand that until I figure it out, there my ex will be, lurking and looming in places he is no longer welcome.

DAY 3 MEDITATE The idea of meditation has always appealed to me. I love the idea of being able to turn my brain off, but I find it almost impossible to do, and it seems that if I am not instantly good at something, I hate it and it gets stuffed under my bed. See also: acoustic guitar.

Instead of offering my brain any opportunity for quiet reflection, I seem to be constantly filling it with crap, shoving it in until it's post-Thanksgiving-dinner full and I am lulled, dulled, complacent. My daily hour-long morning dog walks, for example, while a great way to get air and exercise, also involve me

listening to music—loud. And once I get off the busy streets and onto my local trail, well, that's when the singing along happens. My rendition of "Little Red Corvette" has been heard by some of my neighbourhood's most stoned teens and sweaty trail joggers. The singing is good for me—there's no doubt about that. But I wonder if it might be better to give my brain a bit of a chance to just be still.

For those frustrated by the thought of meditating, author Susyn Reeve suggests in *The Inspired Life* to start simply with a walking meditation. All I have to do is say "left, right," as my feet move. That's it. I leave my iPhone and headphones behind. It's just me, the dog, and a pocket full of plastic bags. No singing along to Prince, no texting while watching the dog hunker down for a poop.

Here's a transcription of that impressive first 30 seconds: "I need to buy salt. Who runs out of salt? My boob is itchy. Did I lock the door? How will I remember to buy salt?" Then my brain decides to sing a couple of lines of "Rocket Man." Then I'm back to the damn salt. But I keep at it: "Left, right, left, right," and I realize by the end of my walk I feel less stressed about the rest of my day than usual. **THE VERDICT:** Keeper. By Day 5 I am already noticeably less distracted on my walks. Those annoying voices—the nagger, the bitch, the worrier—all seem quieter. It's just me and my >

dog and the sound of my feet. I used to arrive home anxious and wound up. Instead, I feel calmer, my shoulders sitting miles lower than their usual hangout around my earlobes.

DAY 4 SHUT THAT MEAN GIRL THE HELL UP According to Sechelt, B.C.-based therapist Sandra Friedman, there are three words that women and girls hiss at ourselves: Ugly. Fat. Stupid. No question: I'm a stupid. Drop something? Stupid. Make a small mistake at work? Stupid. Forget someone's name when introducing her? Stupid. I decide to start keeping track of how many times a day I use it, tossing in "idiot" and "moron" too. End of day tally: 17. Seven. Teen. I am appalled. If I were in a relationship with someone who called me an idiot even once, I'd be out of there so fast, I'd leave comic book whoosh marks in my wake. I resolve to take note of the horrible things I say to myself, and I resolve

to stop. **THE VERDICT:** God, this one is important. I decide that just noticing isn't enough and take it to the next step: Talk back. That inner mean girl may be vicious as hell, but she doesn't possess a hell of a lot of deductive reasoning. "Idiot," she says when I forget to pack the lunch I'd made that morning. "Tired," I correct. She has no comeback. "Moron," she says, when I forget to buy salt for the third day in a row. "Forgetful," I clarify.

DAY 5 GET YOUR ASS OFF THE COUCH The link between mood and endorphin-releasing exercise is clear, vast and indisputable. Every expert will tell you about its enormous benefits, and I know them all to be true firsthand. Exercise has always been my brain's Cascade: In goes the muddied, lipstick-stained wine glass. A half-hour run later, out it comes: Clean, clear, chiming prettily when you give it a flick with your fingernail. So why when I need it

the most do I do it the least? The crappy weather means going for a run is perilous and so: back to the gym where I spent most of my summer and fall.

The workout is hard. I wheeze. I glance around for places where I might be able to vomit discreetly. But when I leave an hour later, my muscles are pleasantly shaky, my brain shockingly clear. I return to work with so much energy that I realize I am speaking in all caps. That night I sleep soundly for the first time in ages. **THE VERDICT:** This one is integral, I know, and I vow to not let the apparently magnetic connection between my couch and my ass destroy me.

DAY 6 EXPRESS GRATITUDE The idea of a gratitude journal reeks of red-cardiganed women gushing about them on late-'90s *Oprah*. But apparently they were all actually on to something: As the November 2011 issue of the *Harvard Mental Health Letter*

reveals, expressing gratitude on a regular basis results in more positive emotions, greater satisfaction from good experiences, improved health, greater ability to deal with adversity and stronger relationships.

I decide to take a gratitude journal for a spin. Picking up a pen and holding it to paper, I realize that while I was a regular journaler for decades, the only time I write anymore is while filling out cheques to the dog walker and my therapist. "Gratitude," I write carefully along the top of a page. Then I underline it. Then I underline it again. Then I stare into space and wonder how many incredibly interesting things have happened on Facebook in the time it took me to write that. Then the mean girl calls me an idiot and I tell her to eff off. I start. Some of it's easy: My friends and my family, of course. I add: "That I haven't gotten the cold that's been going around the office." Then I knock wood, convinced that I have jinxed myself.

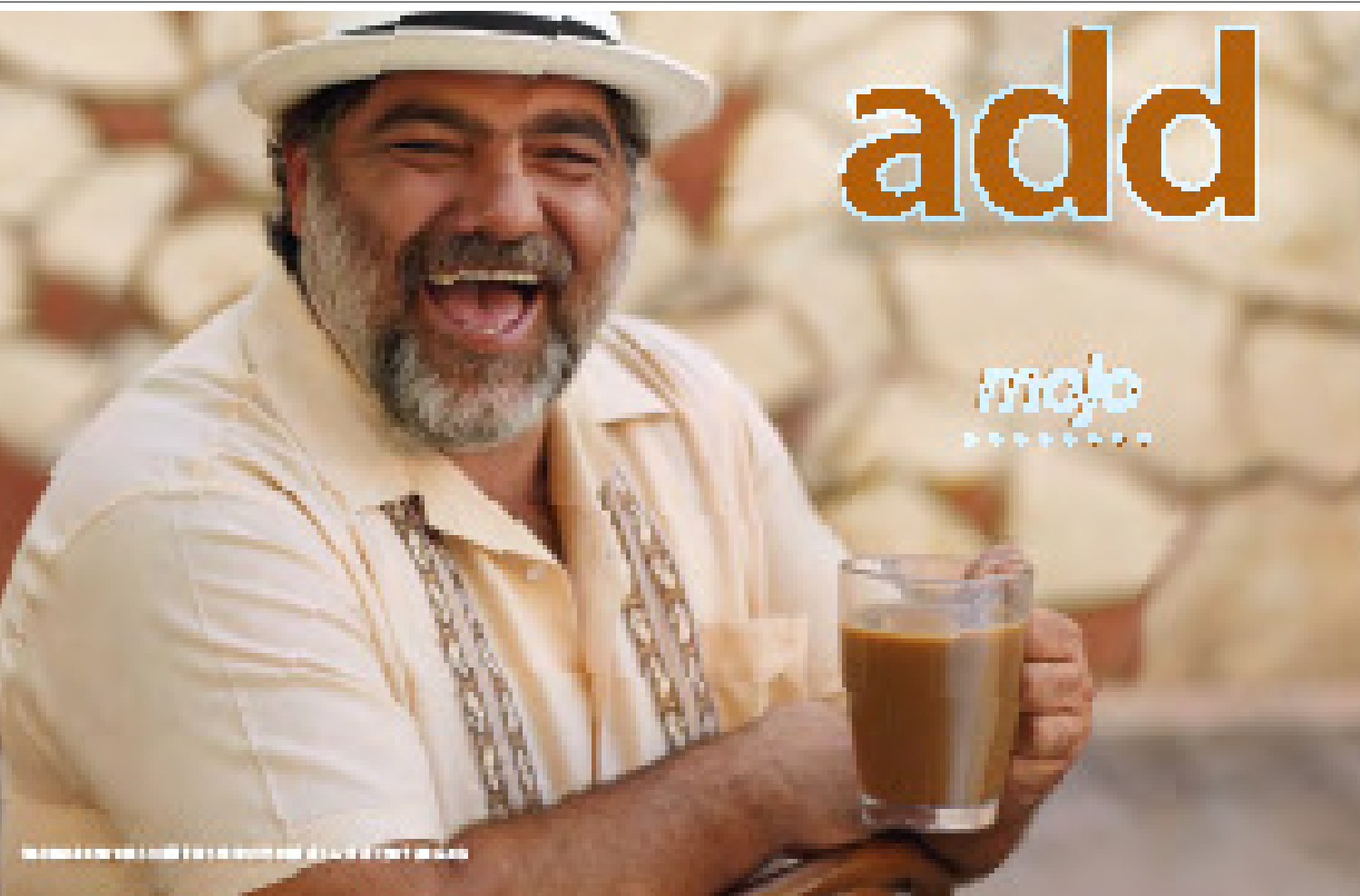
Turns out I never realized just how crazy superstitious I was until I started doing this. My dog practically has a delirium-induced stroke from all of the knocking on the table I do, convinced that someone is at the door. Her annoying barking, unfortunately, means that she does not make the list.

THE VERDICT: This one will take some work. Although I feel grateful and lucky every day, I need to learn how to articulate it to myself and those around me.

DAY 7 STOP OVER-THINKING While worriers may feel as though they have to run through every possible outcome to every possible situation in order to feel prepared for the day, this is, unsurprisingly, a crappy thing to do: Over-thinking and rumination usher in a host of adverse consequences, writes Sonja Lyubomirsky in *The How of Happiness*. "It sustains or worsens sadness, fosters negatively biased thinking, impairs a

person's ability to solve problems, saps motivation, and interferes with concentration and initiative."

I realize that I will have to start at the basics: Stop thinking the worst. Forty years of rigorously practising catastrophic thinking means my brain can seem like a horrible machine constructed by sadistic scientists determined to discover just how many bizarre scenarios can be created from one completely innocuous piece of information. Instead of letting myself sift through the rubble of all the worst possibilities, I vow to stop—to assume the best, give others the benefit of the doubt, and to trust that if the shit does go down for some strange reason, I'll deal with it then. **THE VERDICT:** As soon as I began this, I noticed an enormous difference. I felt lighter, sunnier. Welcome in the doom and it will sprawl its gloomy mass over every surface. I stop throwing open the door and inviting it in. This will take lots of practice, but dear God, this one is a keeper. □



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