

# Workday ReChargers

Feel-Good On-the-Job Breaks

by Marcia Jedd

A few years ago, business-litigation specialist Jennifer Ampulski remembers how her temper spiked when she received a harsh letter from an opposing counsel. Pregnant with her first child, she stormed out of the office for a scheduled doctor's appointment a few minutes later and was shocked with an elevated blood-pressure reading. "You can't feel it when your blood pressure goes up," she says. "That was a lesson to learn how to relax on the spot."

These days, the mother of three doesn't hesitate to take a deep breath and go for a walk, even during a busy workday. A partner at Meagher & Greer in Minneapolis, Ampulski says a brisk stroll outside for a blast of cold February air or through the extensive downtown skyway system helps relieve stress and clear her head in her deadline-driven environment.

Learning to de-stress by giving yourself permission to take breaks can be a huge shift for some people, says life coach Michelle Casto of Brightlight Coaching. "Information overload is a sign of the times, and people are afraid to let go sometimes."

Casto recommends setting the tone in the early morning with a half-hour or hour of activity you find healthful or soulful. "Take time to read something inspirational, listen to motivational speakers or play soothing music," she says. "When you get in the habit, you'll realize just how out of sync you are when you don't do it."

Figuring stress relief into the workday is a no-brainer for Brian Edwards, a busy VP at McKenzie Worldwide.

The Portland-based PR executive primarily works out of his home and occasionally commutes to an office for client meetings. Two high-energy dogs—a border collie and a dachshund—make sure he gets out to walk them.

Edwards has learned to manage the pacing of the tethered-to-technology and virtual-business world. Working in the Pacific time zone, his



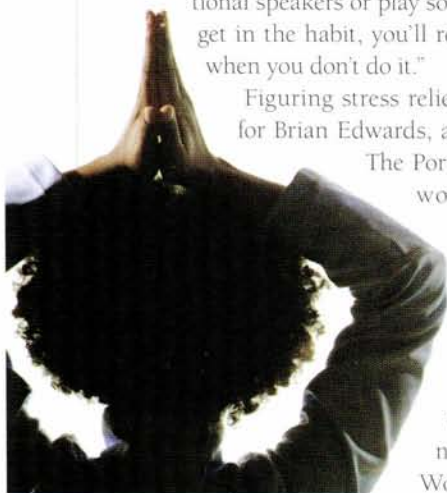
mornings are spent on phone calls and e-mail when the East Coast is plugged in. Afternoons are best for projects, though he still checks e-mail every 30 minutes or so.

On outings with the dogs, "I do take the BlackBerry, but at least I am out walking in the fresh air several times a day," Edwards says. Other breaks include looking away from his PC screen to relax the eyes, or a good old-fashioned 15- to 20-minute nap. "Or I'll knock off a quick set of push-ups or do some knee-bends. They do help."

Unwinding with timeouts during the workday is far from indulgent. Rather, they can boost productivity, says Laura Stack, professional speaker, author and productivity specialist. "The higher your stress level becomes, the lower your performance will be," she says. "As your stress climbs, your performance declines."

Relaxation is key to reducing stress and anxiety, says Stack, author of *The Exhaustion Cure* released in 2008. "Golfers will tell you when they hit the ball with power, they are feeling relaxed. The more tension you have in your muscles, the less power you have. Tight muscles reduce oxygen flow, blood flow and energy flow."

Stack recommends any number of minibreaks as antidotes to stress buildup. Deep breathing to infuse oxygen into your system aids concentration. Aromatherapy, splashing your face with cold water or getting up to stretch help clear the head.



## STRESS-REDUCTION STRATEGIES

"We're not made to stare into a computer screen. A 10-minute walk around the building or any big movement you can make does wonders," she says. "The best thing you can do is to take care of yourself, realizing when you need a break and need to recharge."

Outside of the office, of course regular exercise, massage, yoga, meditation and other preventative measures are proven to promote relaxation and bring long-term mind-body benefits.

Edwards says his full-blown workouts at night—like running, going to the gym and playing soccer on two teams—are essential to his performance at work during the day.

Ampulski says she's learned the benefits of activities such as walking and jogging alternately, which stimulate the left half and the right half of the brain, promoting greater relaxation. "I always knew walking made me feel better, but I'm doing it a lot more frequently and with more purpose now," she says.

Other techniques Ampulski uses to stimulate both sides of the brain include knitting, clenching and unclenching one fist and then the other, and even operating the clutch of her manual-transmission car because it requires her to use both feet.

Ampulski also strives to make her commute a no-business-call zone. "I don't invite colleagues to call me in the car."

If you've tried stress-reduction techniques and still feel overwhelmed and drained, Casto suggests you might check in with your deeper feelings. "I believe stress and success are related," she says. "People get more stressed when we don't feel successful."

Stack cautions against workday distractions that aren't stress-reducers at all, especially if they limit our productivity. "We numb our minds by doing time-wasting activities that may feel as if you're doing something," Stack says. "We lose ourselves in gossip, talking to friends or playing Minesweeper."

In addition to restorative breaks, eliminating the tolerations in our lives helps us feel successful, Casto says. "A toleration is anything that is stressing you, for example: things that are undone

**Body-rhythm basics.** Do what's best for you by honoring your body rhythms. For example, if you're a morning person, don't waste your best productive time in coffee klatches.

**Do the tough work first.** If you tend to procrastinate, you'll find more anguish is produced from guilt than if you had just tackled the project immediately.

**Energy-gaining activities.** Develop a routine of activities that give you energy rather than drain you, such as deleting, delegating or organizing.

**Get up out of the chair.** Energy sags quickly when sitting. Make sure you get up to move around every hour or so.

**Go outside.** A quick five- or 10-minute rest or stroll outside does wonders to clear the mind. Breathe and be present.

**Rest your eyes on the great outdoors.** Being in nature reduces stress. If possible, position your desk or office so you're looking out the window. Stare out the window and visualize your favorite vacation spot.



or incomplete projects. Eliminating tolerations is a great way to unleash stored energy and power."

To get there, Casto recommends deletion, delegation and organization techniques. Whether letting a subscription lapse, saying no or deleting unnecessary e-mail, deleting is freeing, Casto says. "Delete what you don't need to pay attention to, such as online sources of information. Deleting five things that aren't serving you anymore is an instant energizer."

About delegation, Casto says solo entrepreneurs might want to consider hiring an assistant. Stack agrees, noting delegation helps control your availability. "Meetings eat up massive blocks of time," she says. "Can you send someone in your place or ask for the minutes to be forwarded?"

Casto says taking even a few minutes out of each day to organize your workspace or to structure your electronic files goes a long way to fight stress. Stack adds: "Stopping to hunt for what you need not only wastes time, but it destroys your rhythm and forces you to break your concentration. It's well worth it to organize as you go."

Taking the time, money and energy required to feel good about yourself is worth it, Casto says. "It's feeding that deeper part of you that needs to be cared for, making it easier for you to show up and be cared for in your job." **S**