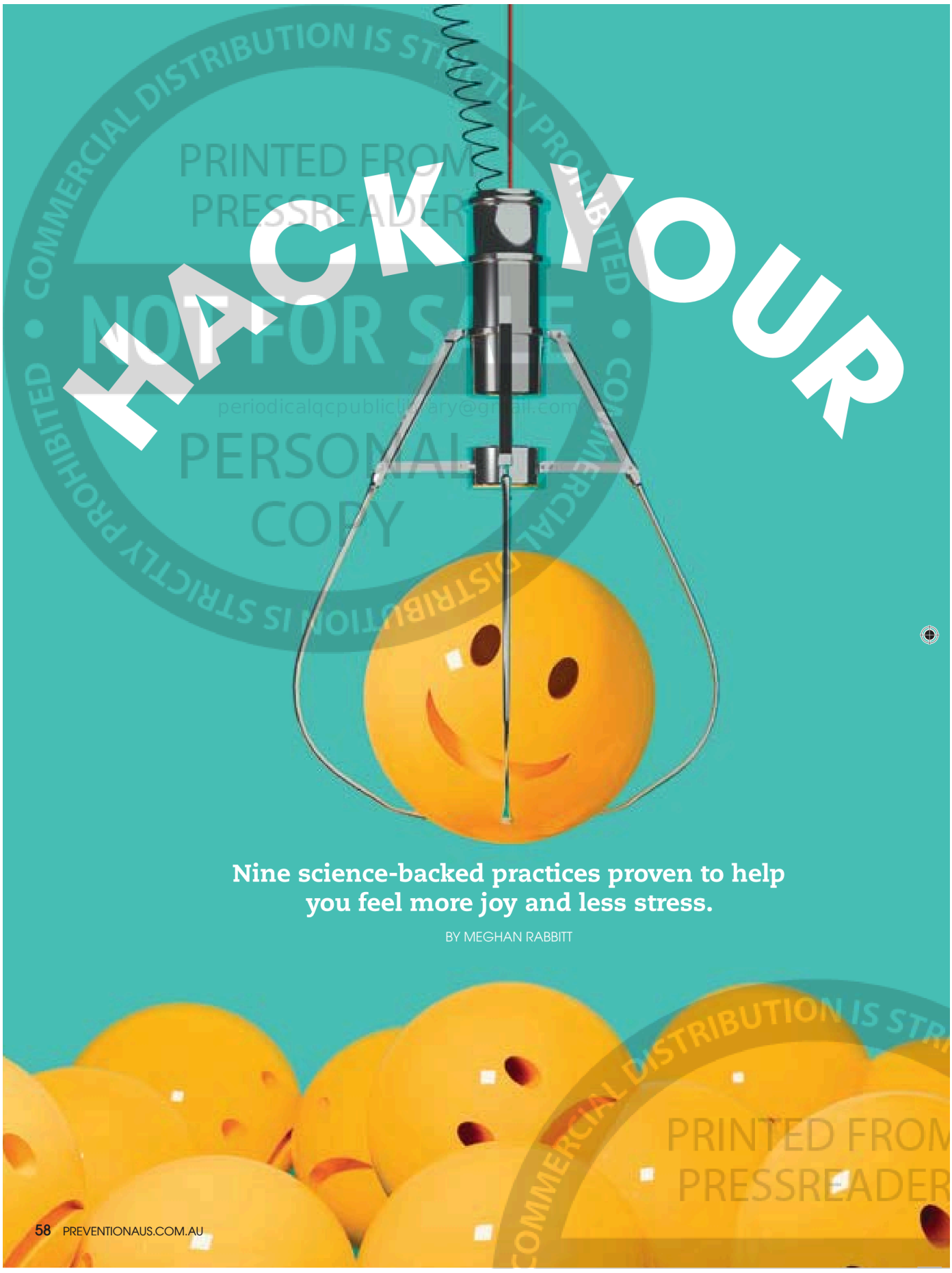
- Happiness

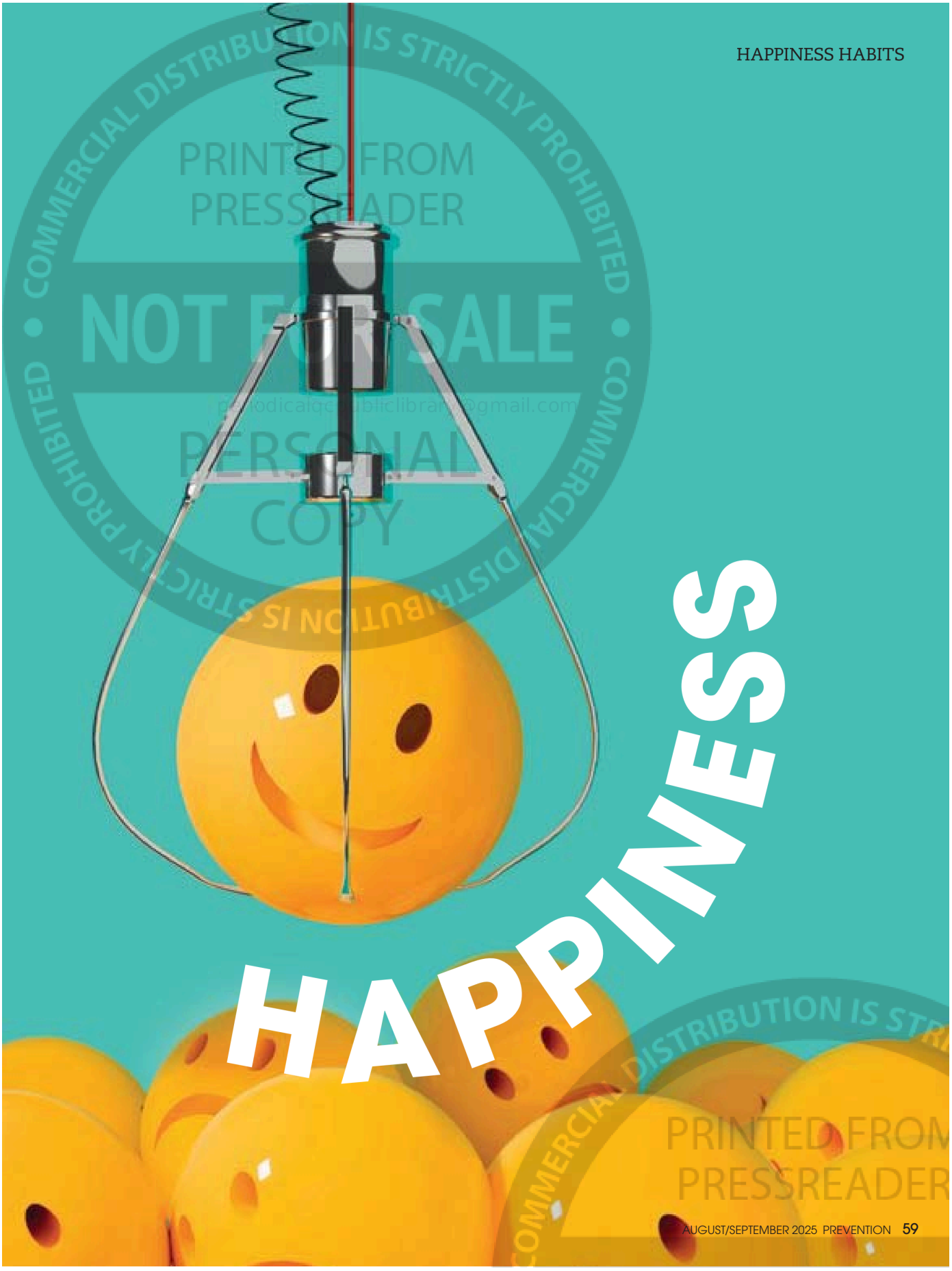


# HACK YOUR

**Nine science-backed practices proven to help you feel more joy and less stress.**

BY MEGHAN RABBITT

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# HAPPINESS

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Is it just us here at *Prevention*, or does a lot of the happiness advice you hear tend to put you in a bad mood? You've heard the tips before: Smile more! Make a vision board! Spend money on experiences, not things!

It's not that these ideas never help (and we've suggested some ourselves), but here's a universal truth that shows the limitations of even worthwhile advice: Life comes with ups and downs, and forcing yourself to exude happiness and positivity when that's the last thing you feel can backfire.

A better game plan is to focus on building quiet little habits proven to tee you up for more contentment no matter what obstacle you face, whether it's dealing with chronic pain, struggling with a difficult in-law, or coping with a crazy schedule that leaves you with little time for yourself. To the extent that these happiness-supporting behavioural tweaks become habits, they won't feel inauthentic or exhausting.

The solution starts with acknowledging and accepting the fact that happiness is not always available on demand and you're not required to feel happy 24/7. "The more we give ourselves permission for things to suck, the more we can see that our lives are going to be filled with tough moments, so we might as well use them as opportunities to find one thing to help us feel even a little better," says Dan Harris, host of the podcast *10% Happier* and author of *10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge, and Found Self-Help That Actually Works – A True Story*. "I think it's great to aim for messy, marginal improvements over time."

Enter the experts you'll meet here, who offer science-backed habits that can help you find more joy, even if just a little, no matter what's on your plate right now. The best part? You don't have to plaster a smile on your face, sign up for dance lessons you can't spare the energy for, or spend money to create a lasting improvement in your mood. Time to embrace your new habits.

YOUR NEW HABIT

## TALK TO YOURSELF THE WAY A MENTOR WOULD

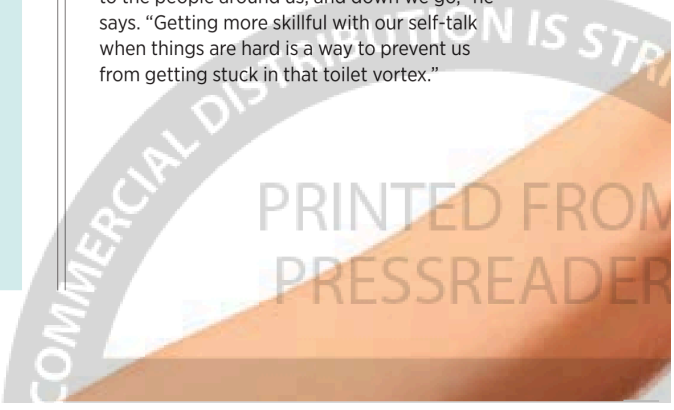
### THE EXPERT: DAN HARRIS

Most of us understand that we should have self-compassion, yet we tend to be our own worst critics. "We kick our own butts thinking that it's the way to reach our goals, be successful, or keep ourselves safe," says Dan. "But data shows that we're much better off talking to ourselves like a coach would – someone who points out where we can do better, but isn't a moron about it."

Dan's inner drill sergeant comes out when he's stressed or anxious, and when he notices those emotions he puts his hand on his chest, acknowledges that whatever he's going through feels hard, and asks himself, 'What would I say to my son in this moment?' And then he gives himself that advice. "Rather than saying, 'You're a complete loser – you blew it,' I'll say, 'I know this sucks, but you've faced setbacks before and recovered. You can handle this.'"

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ Negative self-talk has a way of trapping you in a downward spiral – you're hard on yourself, and then you take it out on the people around you and your relationships start to suffer, says Dan. "And because relationships are so important for our happiness, when they suffer, we get even harder on ourselves. Then we get even worse to the people around us, and down we go," he says. "Getting more skillful with our self-talk when things are hard is a way to prevent us from getting stuck in that toilet vortex."





YOUR NEW HABIT

## PLAY MUSIC INSTEAD OF SCROLLING

**THE EXPERT: DR ETHAN KROSS,** an award-winning professor, director of the Emotion and Self Control Laboratory, and author of *Shift: How to Manage Your Emotions So They Don't Manage You*

When you have the urge to tap into your go-to social media feed, open your music app instead and search for a favourite feel-good song – and while you listen, put your device away. (Or, use that old record or CD player.)

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ This habit acts on two powerful emotion shifters: attention (what you focus on) and sensation (in this case, hearing music). "Think of your attention as a mental spotlight," says Dr Kross. "What you focus on impacts how you think and feel." Unless your social media algorithm feeds you a steady stream of baby animal videos, there's a good chance that shining your mental spotlight on your Instagram or TikTok isn't going to make you feel better the way feel-good music will. "If you select the right song, you can shift your mood in a positive direction," he says.

YOUR NEW HABIT

## GREET YOUR FAMILY

**THE EXPERT: GRETCHEN RUBIN,** author of multiple bestselling happiness books and host of the podcast *Happier With Gretchen Rubin*

Offer a warm hello to household members when they come in (and a fond goodbye when they go). Think about how your dog greets you when you come home and show a little of that kind of enthusiasm, says Gretchen.

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ This habit can transform the atmosphere of your home so it's much more tender and attentive, says Gretchen. "Ancient philosophers and contemporary scientists agree that a key – perhaps *the* key – to happiness is strong, enduring bonds with other people," she says. "A warm greeting helps us to feel connected to others – we feel like we belong; we feel like we matter." And so will they. ►



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YOUR NEW HABIT

# DO A 'SHUTDOWN' RITUAL EVERY DAY

**THE EXPERT: DR CAL NEWPORT,** a computer science professor and author of eight books, including *Slow Productivity*, *A World Without Email* and *Digital Minimalism*

Come up with a phrase that you can repeat at the end of each workday – say, after you reply to any missed messages and create a plan for the next day – that signals to your brain that you're finished. Dr Newport repeats the following phrase: "Schedule shutdown complete." (You can try "I am done for the day, and now I get to relax," or "Switching into family mode.") When your mind starts wandering back to work during your downtime, remind yourself of this shutdown phrase.

## WHY IT WORKS:

■ Dr Newport says the mind tries to trick us into thinking about work after the workday is done by questioning whether we've forgotten to do something (not to mention that our phones may ping if we forget to silence them). Think about it: Do you check emails after you've put in a full day to get more done, or to confirm you haven't missed anything, and feel the relief wash over you? "The shutdown ritual helps dismiss this rumination," says Dr Newport. "If your mind wants you to worry about work, you can simply say to yourself, I wouldn't have said my shutdown phrase if I hadn't been sure I was done for the day. By responding to your mind without specifically reviewing what's on your plate, you get out of the groove that drives you to these thoughts in the first place. Eventually, their insistence diminishes."



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YOUR NEW HABIT

## CHAT WITH A STRANGER

THE EXPERT: **DR SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY,** a distinguished professor of psychology and author of *The How of Happiness* and *The Myths of Happiness*

Whether it's with the check-in person at the kayak rental place or with your seatmate on a flight, even just a few minutes of small talk can go a long way in improving your mood. "Being even a little more sociable is a really effective happiness hack," says Dr Lyubomirsky, who has researched the mood-boosting benefits of acting more extroverted. In one Canadian study, people who were instructed to have a short chat with the barista making their coffee reported feeling happier than those who were told to make their interaction as efficient as possible, having their money ready and avoiding conversation.

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ Humans are hardwired to connect and relate to other people. "We wouldn't have survived, found mates and reproduced if we weren't rewarded by feeling connected," Dr Lyubomirsky says. Plus, taking advantage of small opportunities for connection is a way of showing someone else you see them and care, another research-backed mood lifter. "In fact, being kind to others gives you a bigger and longer-lasting happiness boost than being kind to yourself," she adds.

YOUR NEW HABIT

## EXPRESS GRATITUDE TO SOMEONE

THE EXPERT: **DR LAURIE SANTOS,** a cognitive scientist and happiness expert

It might be gratitude for something big (such as thanking your sister for all the ways she's helping your parents while you're living interstate) or something little (telling the supermarket checkout person how much you appreciate their bagging your raspberries carefully so they won't get squished).

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ Expressing gratitude to someone taps into one of our most fundamental needs: social connection. "When you share gratitude, you strengthen your social bonds with the person you've thanked," says Dr Santos. Telling a loved one, a friend or even a stranger how they've left a positive mark on you also makes them feel good – and there's a lot of evidence that doing nice things for other people ultimately increases our own happiness. ►



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YOUR NEW HABIT

## TRY 'SENSE FORAGING' YOUR SURROUNDINGS

THE EXPERT: **DR EMILIANA SIMON-THOMAS,** an expert on the neuroscience and psychology of human happiness

Whenever you have an idle moment or two, focus all your attention on the information around you that your senses are picking up. What do you see, smell, taste, feel and hear?

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ All too often our thoughts gravitate toward ruminations about our to-dos, hassles and expectations, and this prompts us to overthink, says Dr Simon-Thomas. Tuning in to your senses redirects your mind away from all that. When we're in our heads, we're thinking through what we feel rather than truly feeling what we feel. "This more granular understanding of our sensations and feelings helps us understand and regulate our emotions more effectively," she says. "It makes it easier to learn from difficult experiences and savour the more positive, pleasant ones."

YOUR NEW HABIT

## BE RANDOMLY KIND

THE EXPERT: **DR EMMA SEPPÄLÄ,** happiness scientist and author of *The Happiness Track*

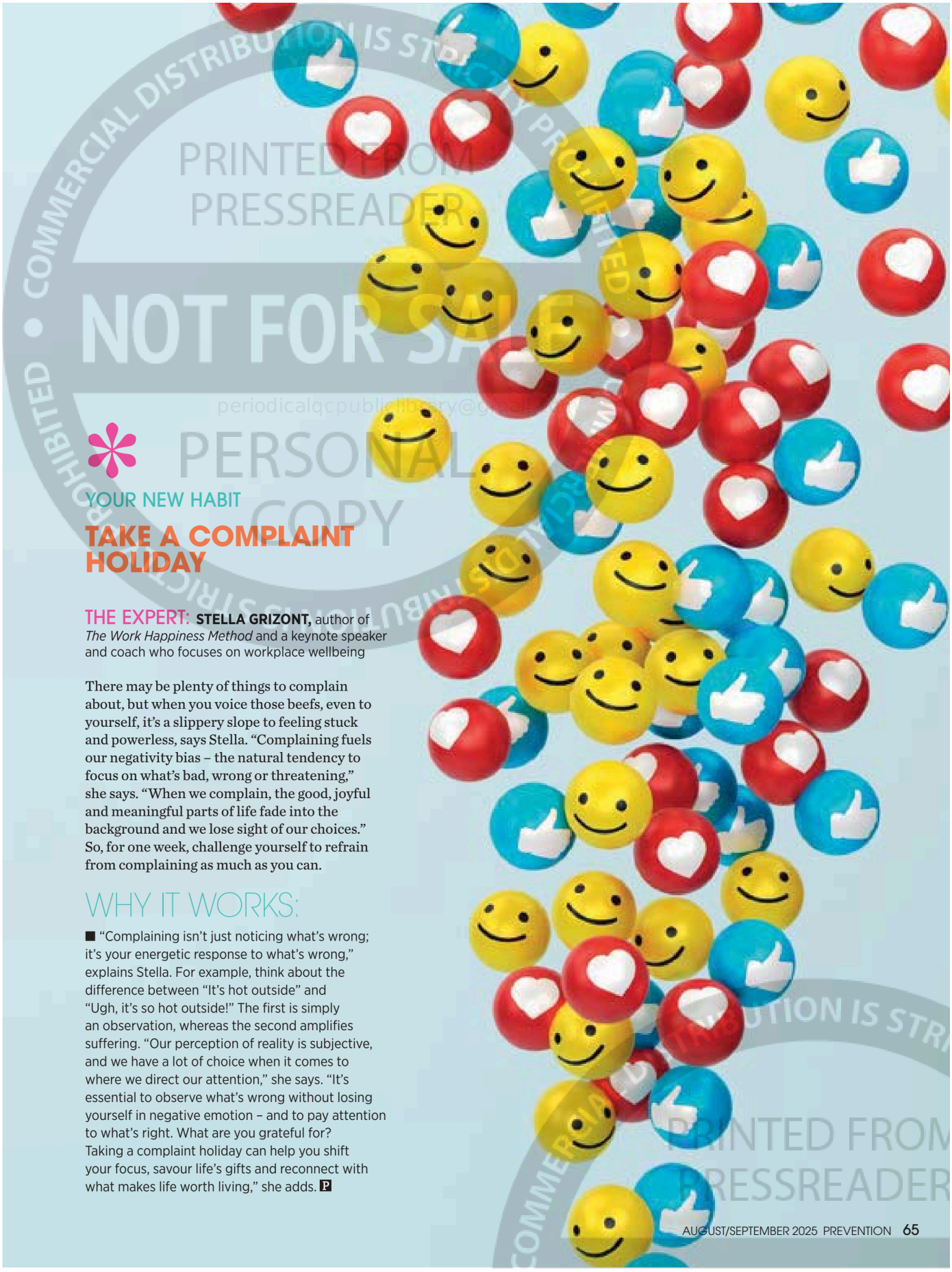
Giving to others is a proven way to increase your own feeling of wellbeing, whether it's a small gesture (holding the door open for someone) or a good deed that requires a little more effort (volunteering to cook for a friend who's sick). In one study, participants received a sum of money and half were instructed to spend it on others while the other half were told to spend it on themselves. Those who shopped for others felt significantly happier than the ones who did not.

### WHY IT WORKS:

■ Depression and anxiety are linked to a state of self-focus. Being compassionate toward others broadens our perspective beyond ourselves, says Dr Seppälä. "Think of the last time you helped someone," she says. "It likely made you feel great no matter how you felt before that." Try our Kindness Challenge on page 16 to get started.



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YOUR NEW HABIT

# TAKE A COMPLAINT HOLIDAY

**THE EXPERT: STELLA GRIZONT,** author of *The Work Happiness Method* and a keynote speaker and coach who focuses on workplace wellbeing

There may be plenty of things to complain about, but when you voice those beefs, even to yourself, it's a slippery slope to feeling stuck and powerless, says Stella. "Complaining fuels our negativity bias – the natural tendency to focus on what's bad, wrong or threatening," she says. "When we complain, the good, joyful and meaningful parts of life fade into the background and we lose sight of our choices." So, for one week, challenge yourself to refrain from complaining as much as you can.

## WHY IT WORKS:

■ "Complaining isn't just noticing what's wrong; it's your energetic response to what's wrong," explains Stella. For example, think about the difference between "It's hot outside" and "Ugh, it's so hot outside!" The first is simply an observation, whereas the second amplifies suffering. "Our perception of reality is subjective, and we have a lot of choice when it comes to where we direct our attention," she says. "It's essential to observe what's wrong without losing yourself in negative emotion – and to pay attention to what's right. What are you grateful for? Taking a complaint holiday can help you shift your focus, savour life's gifts and reconnect with what makes life worth living," she adds. P