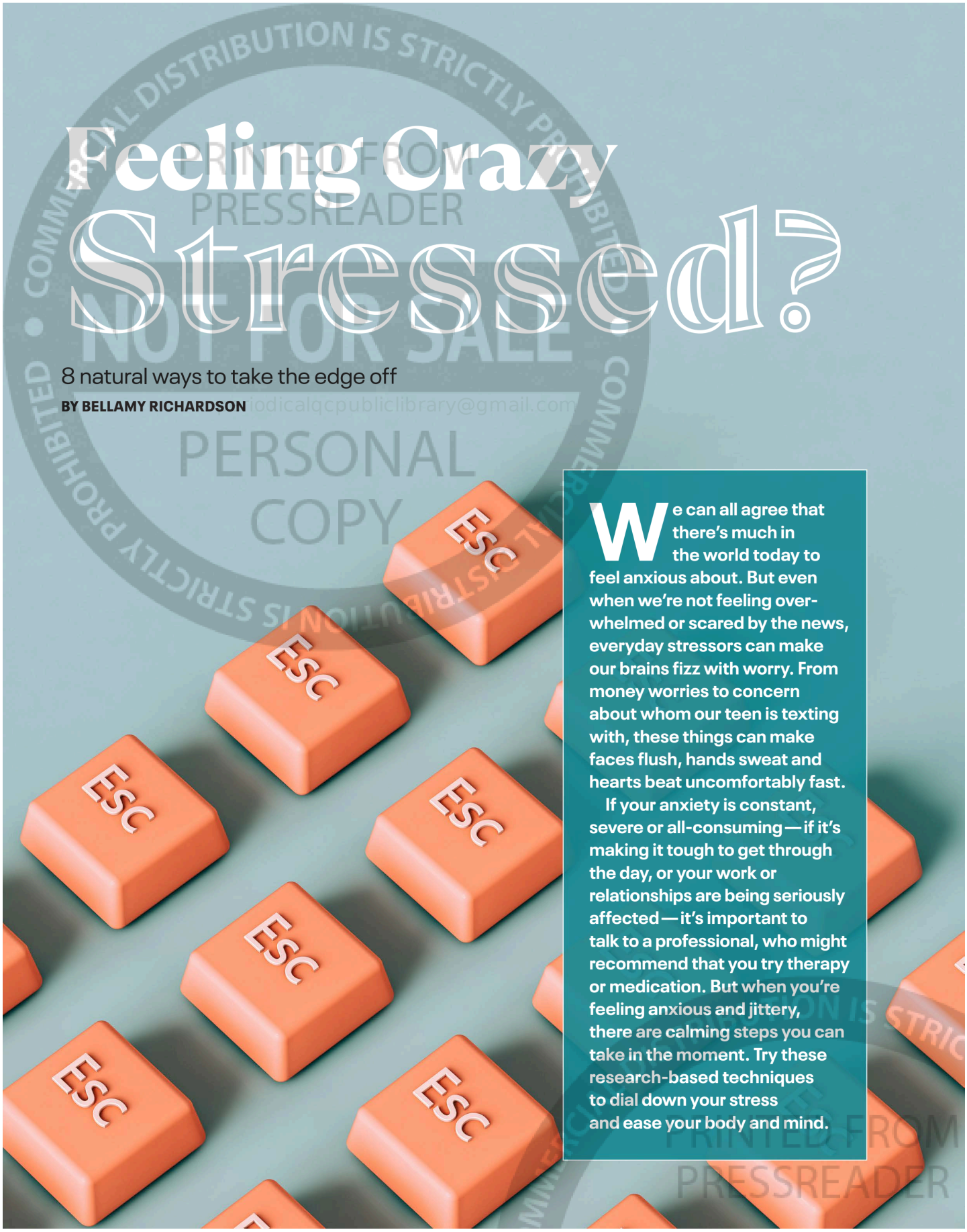
- Stress management



Feeling Crazy Stressed?

8 natural ways to take the edge off

BY BELLAMY RICHARDSON

We can all agree that there's much in the world today to feel anxious about. But even when we're not feeling overwhelmed or scared by the news, everyday stressors can make our brains fizz with worry. From money worries to concern about whom our teen is texting with, these things can make faces flush, hands sweat and hearts beat uncomfortably fast.

If your anxiety is constant, severe or all-consuming—if it's making it tough to get through the day, or your work or relationships are being seriously affected—it's important to talk to a professional, who might recommend that you try therapy or medication. But when you're feeling anxious and jittery, there are calming steps you can take in the moment. Try these research-based techniques to dial down your stress and ease your body and mind.

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Establish a routine.

"Creating structure in your day helps you feel more in control," says Rachel Goldman, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist and a clinical assistant professor in the psychiatry department of NYU Grossman School of Medicine. She suggests looking at four key aspects of your daily life: sleep, diet, movement and stress management. When you have consistency in those areas—by doing things such as going to bed at around the same time each night, eating balanced meals, getting out for a walk or a workout and writing down your concerns before sleep—your anxiety symptoms may ease.

Breathe consciously.

It sounds simple, but science has shown that focusing on your breath and practicing deep-breathing exercises can improve both physical and mental feelings of anxiety. One that Goldman recommends trying is the five-finger technique: Spread one hand out in front of you and, with a finger from your other hand, trace up and down each finger, inhaling as you trace upward and exhaling as you trace downward. Doing it just once might make you calmer; if not, repeat it.

Get moving.

You can use up nervous energy and possibly lessen symptoms of anxiety with exercise, research shows. Be sure to move your body every day, whether by going for a walk, attending a cardio class or taking breaks to dance or do a brisk chore when you've been sitting for a while. And you get a double win if you run, hike or cycle outside: Being in nature has been found to increase positive emotions, and focusing on the world around you can shift your perception and calm stress.

Write it out.

Goldman recommends doing a "brain dump" to push racing ruminations out of your head and onto a piece of paper. "Don't censor yourself; just write down all those thoughts," she says. The activity may help your brain stop hitting repeat.

Tap into your senses.

Anxious thoughts often center on things we can't control, like the "would've, could've, should'ves" of the past. But concentrating on the present—what you're seeing and hearing right now—may soothe your anxiety. Try this grounding exercise: Pause and name five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell and one thing you taste.

Weigh yourself down.

Using a weighted blanket is another way of grounding yourself, says Goldman. "It's like being hugged—the pressure can calm you down." That pressure activates your parasympathetic nervous system, she says, which lowers your heart rate as well as your stress hormone levels. That increases feel-good neurotransmitters like serotonin, helping you feel calmer. (A dog or cat lying on your belly can also help!)

Chill out, literally.

Try splashing cold water on your face or neck, running cold water over your wrists or holding an ice cube in your hands to cool your anxiety. When you're stressed out and your heart is racing, a jolt of something cold can help by activating your parasympathetic nervous system. "It shocks your body out of a heightened state of anxiety and tells it to do something else," Goldman says.

Distract yourself.

Sometimes a little laughter or an absorbing podcast is enough to push out anxious thoughts. Try a gut-busting YouTube video or an episode of a true-crime podcast and you may just find that it helps redirect your emotional energy enough to calm your racing mind.



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