

# THE SILENCE SECRET

Feeling anxious, restless, and unsettled?  
Quiet may be the cure





Ask any cottager to list the reasons they come to Muskoka, and chances are that “peace and quiet” will be near the top of the list.

We respond naturally to the respite that quiet brings: Being away from noise just makes us feel better. And now a growing body of research has found that spending time in a quiet environment isn't just a pleasant weekend activity; it's actually good for your body, your spirit, and even your brain.

Some of the most dramatic research has come from experiments involving not just quiet, but silence.

Silence, scientifically speaking is “the absence of any kind of (auditory) stimulation that requires attention or a response,” explains Dr. Norman Farb, assistant professor of psychology at University of Toronto – Mississauga.

It's not something we experience very often. Even in a quiet home there's the hum of the fridge and the computer, the distant sound of traffic, the muffled mutter of a conversation on the street or a t.v. in another room.

But if you can find it, there's evidence that silence can actually grow brain cells.



A 2013 study on mice compared the effects of ambient noise, white noise, pup calls, and silence on the rodents' brains. The researchers intended to use silence as a control measure in the study, something to help them set a baseline against which the different sounds would be measured. Instead they found that two hours of daily silence led to the development of new cells in the hippocampus, a key brain region associated with learning, memory, and emotion.

Can silence have the same effect on human brains? It's possible, but silent places are nearly impossible to find in the modern world. However, quiet places do exist, and Dr. Farb says there is plenty of evidence that those places are also good for us, and that noisy environments cause us harm.



#### REBUILDING IN SILENCE

*Mindfulness coach Sarah Kernohan (facing page) recharges by the water. Spending as little as ten minutes a day in intentional silence can help reduce stress and anxiety.*

Steady exposure to noise pollution may lead to higher blood pressure and fatal heart attacks, according to a report by the World Health Organization and the European Commission's Joint Research Centre.

The WHO said, "there is overwhelming evidence that exposure to environmental noise has adverse effects on the health of the population." Children have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of chronic urban and suburban racket.

Some of this isn't new: In the 1850s, Florence Nightingale argued for noise suppression in hospitals, writing that "unnecessary noise is the cruelest absence of care." The main difference between her time and ours is that research has found a way to quantify just how valuable quiet and silence can be, to demonstrate what Nurse Nightingale knew to be true.

#### What we do in the quiet

To get the biggest impact from your quiet time, Dr. Farb recommends engaging with it deliberately.

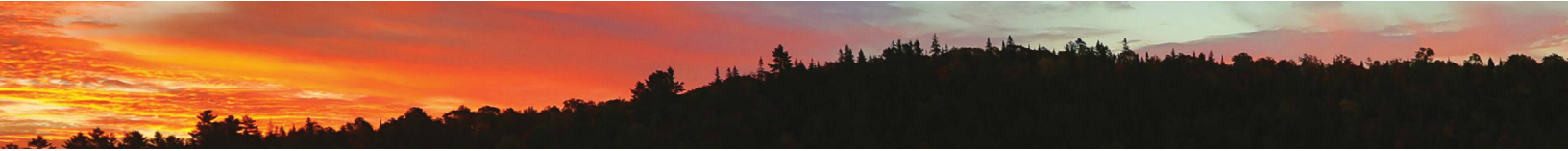
"Go for a walk, swim, or hike and figure out what you're going to do with your time in silence. It's a time to let some of the peripheral issues die down and bring focus to your activities," he says. He adds that people who incorporate 10 minutes of intentional meditative silence into their day report less stress and anxiety.

Studies have also shown positive effects on the brain coming from long-term focused meditation done in relative quiet. And long-lasting personality changes also emerge with continuing practice of quiet meditation, says Dr. Farb.









Quiet meditation is a way for us to connect with our inner monologue and retrain our habits. It's an opportunity to restructure our ways, and the best way to do that is to not reward thoughts with conditioned — usually negative — self-statements.

Indulging in some quiet meditation over time will produce a positive result if there's intention guiding it. Intention to develop oneself or grow in some way — to notice what's going on and to grow with the silence. That's what silent retreats or sensory deprivation tanks allow you to do: Pay attention to what you usually ignore.

"That's the point of meditation — to focus," says Liz Frost, mindfulness coach and yoga teacher and owner of Sugar Ridge Retreat Centre in Elmvale. "Paying attention on purpose to what you are experiencing within and without. Learning how to

control your mind and respond to life events, rather than being reactive from moment-to-moment."

But even if you don't deliberately meditate, you can still experience the positive effects of quiet. You may have experienced a "voila!" moment while relaxing by the lake at the cottage or camping out in the woods, an instant when a difficult problem suddenly becomes clear and the solution presents itself. That's because research shows that the brain uses this time off to subliminally focus on creative incubation, problem solving, and goal setting.

#### Quiet on the lakes

Quiet was once the normal part of the human condition. Now it is a luxury, something few of us get to enjoy in abundance. It's what you seek when you come to the cottage. You want to sit by the lake listening only to the rustling of the leaves, chirping birds, skittling chipmunks, and maybe the occasional insect buzzing in your ears.

Instead, what you may encounter is the roar of power boats, the ground-shaking thunder of construction equipment, and the chatter of stereos drifting across the water

And the quiet slips through your fingers like sand.

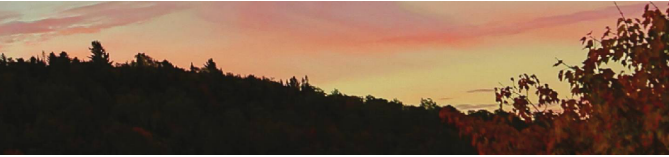
In recent years, lake communities have started taking different approaches to ensure there's a healthy balance of fun



#### SHARING THE LAKES

*Organizations like Safe Quiet Lakes say respectful dialogue is a great way for cottage neighbours to start finding the right balance between noisy, fun activities and quiet enjoyment.*





summer activities and noise levels around the lake, says Greg Wilkinson, director of the non-profit, Safe Quiet Lakes.

It's mostly a matter of talking to cottagers about respecting each other's time at the lake. This can also be done by operating boats respectfully.

"One approach that works is for groups of cottagers and lake residents to determine norms, such as hours of use — for example, scheduling towing sports only between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. or allowing only two loops on the same towing pattern before moving to another part of the lake."

Wilkinson, who is also chair of the group's Advocacy and Public Policy Committee, says there's more compliance when the entire community agrees on the rules of use.

Additionally, boaters can contribute to keeping lakes peaceful by buying or renting quieter motor vessels. "The marine industry knows more and more people are looking for boats that perform well, without infuriating neighbours, so they do offer quieter alternatives," he says. Stay away from "Captain's choice" muffler bypasses, Wilkinson adds, pointing out that they are illegal on inland lakes like those in Muskoka.

"As long as people care about the lakes — and they sure do — and are listening to each other, we have a chance to strike that balance between silence and enjoyment on the lakes," he says.

And that, it seems, is something that everyone can cheer for... as long as we all do it quietly. **L**

