

# CHILL OUT

## — YOU'RE AT WORK

This can be the most stressful time of year for many employees, as they struggle to get everything done before Christmas. Some companies have innovative ways of easing the pressure, as **Barbara Harding** discovers

**I**T'S quarter four — that crazy time of year when the majority of employees are rushing around like the proverbial chickens wondering how they will tackle their workload before 6pm and when the madness will end.

This means stress levels can reach excessive heights and, combined with bad weather conditions, congestion, darker evenings, poor diet and dire exhaustion, taking care of our physical and mental well-being can often come last in our daily priorities. These are the perfect conditions for aggravating known stressors, and can often lead to ill health and poor productivity at work.

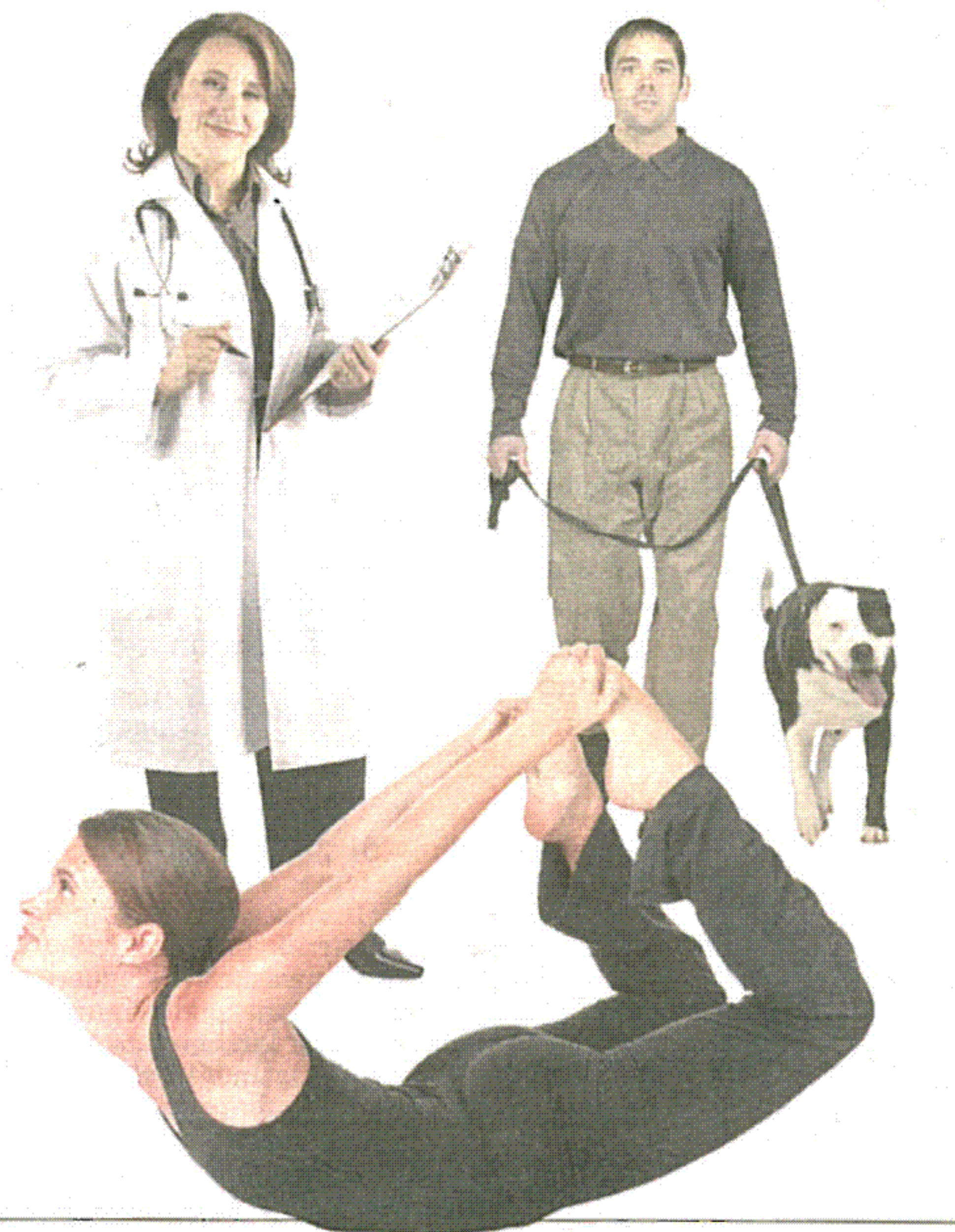
It is therefore essential for employees to strike a proper balance and for the correct support systems be put in place in the workplace. After all, a healthy workforce makes for a happy workforce — just ask the employees at global internet company Google.

Recently voted the best company in the world to work for by *Fortune* magazine, Google is renowned for its cutting-edge initiatives to reduce stress, while also making the hours between 9am and 6pm fun for employees.

Imagine having a doctor, a car wash and a dry-cleaning facility on site so you don't have to run around on your lunch break — well, Google has them. Imagine being able to take your pet to work or bring your family to the company canteen and eat for free — Google encourages it. Imagine your employer paying for your take-out meals for a fortnight after you return home from hospital having had a baby — you've guessed it, Google insists on it.

Once you've picked your jaw up off the floor, maybe you should consider asking your boss to subsidise a lunch-time massage; after all, it's only following the example set by the world's best employer.

According to Rachel Mooney, head of operations at Google Ireland, stress can be caused by various factors, whether they are to do with work, personal issues or both. "Google tries to foster an open and



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transparent environment for all employees. We try to improve their quality of life in terms of everything from mobility to nutrition; after all, a person is not just a set of skills.

"We believe stress can emanate from confusion over what is expected of people in their role. A culture of openness and constant feedback ensures opinions can be aired and addressed; this is very important in attempting to create a low-stress environment."

Aside from keeping the channels well and truly open between staff and management, this young company also highlights the importance of stress management and hosts a 'Wellness Week', which includes input from expert speakers. Mooney adds: "We also offer an employee assistance programme (EAP) — a confidential service that helps people with personal issues. It provides counselling sessions and legal assistance among other support mechanisms."

The EAP concept is not limited to Google; many companies in Ireland avail of this service and access stress-management techniques through the Health Service Executive or health insurance companies.

Cara Driscoll, EAP manager with VHI, explains: "We conduct stress audits and risk analysis with organisations and look at areas where high levels of stress can occur, such as in call centres or in general offices."

"We provide a variety of diagnostic training to some of our clients, the most common being lunch-time talks on taking a holistic approach to stress, either in an organisation or in a family. We also provide legal and financial information and encourage employees to contact our online stress expert Karen Belshaw for a one-to-one confidential consultation."

The VHI LifeStage Choices medical plan also covers members for alternative and holistic therapies such as acupuncture and reflexology. Stressed-out employees are encouraged to avail of these services, particularly if their employer subsidises medical benefits.

### Get moving

Another option for eliminating stress is to incorporate an exercise initiative into the daily grind. Most multinational companies pay a contribution towards gym membership, but employees often find it difficult to raise the energy to work out after a busy day. As a result, relaxation methods such as yoga are on the rise and are often undertaken on company time, which means more employees are encouraged to get involved.

Siobhan Shinnors, owner of AnamYoga, is a qualified personal and commercial instructor who teaches employees in the Munster region. Some of the most notable companies she has worked with include O2 Communications, QAD, University of Limerick, the Limerick Travellers Development Project and GECAS.

Shinnors explains: "Yoga brings numerous benefits to busy employees, particularly those who sit down all day and suffer from lower vertebrae pain or muscular stiffness. Stretching and breathing exercises are of huge importance, and balancing this out gives a sense of coming back to yourself. When an individual is stressed, breathing is normally heavy and quick, but by slowing down and breathing deeply, you connect directly with your brain and bring about a state of calmness."

She continues: "All my classes are either taught during lunch time or at an afternoon seminar and yes, the majority of companies subsidise them. I have received some great feedback, and those in attendance are often astounded by how good they feel afterwards, which inspires them to keep coming back."

It's not just women who attend Shinnors' classes.

"More and more men are attending and they're amazed at how much better they sleep and how relaxed their body feels. At the end of the day, forward-thinking companies offering yoga are seen to be tackling some of the root causes of stress as well as taking a personal interest in employee well-being."

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