

WRITERS WOULD RATHER BURN OUT THAN FADE AWAY — HERE'S HOW THEY AVOID DOING EITHER

BY MARK LEIREN-YOUNG

Screenwriting tends to be a job with two speeds — frenzied and waiting for the frenzy to start. And when notes fly at you faster than your fingers can hit the keyboard, deadlines get deadlier and long nights stretch into 48-hour days, it's easy to burnout. Canadian Screenwriter asked 11 of Canada's hottest writers how they avoid getting singed.

"Sex, sleep and regular calls from Revenue Canada seem to do it for me," says Adam Pettle. "There's also TSN and a little single malt number called Glendronach that fellow writer and burn-out avoider Patrick Tarr introduced me to."

The showrunner/executive producer of *Saving Hope* offered one more antidote — reading. "Whether it's a new novel or pulling out the old Tennessee Williams plays, reading great writing makes me want to get to work."

David Barlow says it's easy to forget that sometimes the best thing a writer can do is nothing. "The comedienne and monologist Sandra Shamas has a bit in one of her shows where she says, 'What does writing look like? It looks like this.' And she slumps in a chair looking around vacantly, staring at the ceiling. In other words, sometimes writing can look like you're doing nothing. And often the cure for burnout is to do nothing."

One of Canada's leading writer-producers whose recent credits include *Cracked*, *King*, and

The Border, Barlow warns that, "The danger of the intensive work on series production or even the steady grind of writing, pitching, writing is that you lose the opportunity to refill the tank."

Ellen Vanstone suggests writers should "keep moving." Literally. "Sitting all day cuts off circulation to the gluteus maximus which, in writers at least, seems to be directly connected to the brain. Get up, move around, go for a walk at lunch, offer to get everyone in the room soda pops from a faraway fridge. It's like taking a little baby outside to stop it crying — change the scenery momentarily to lower your stress."

Vanstone, a consulting producer on *Cracked*, also suggests leaving the drama on the page. "People like to make a virtue of staying late and looking busy. Sometimes it's necessary to work long, endless, punishing hours but when it's not, leave. Save your strength for when you need it... Stress and sleep deprivation turn your brain into a stinking brew of toxic biochemical dysfunction."



Clockwise from top left: Adam Pettle, Alison Lea Bingeman, Ellen Vanstone, David Barlow and Morwyn Brebner.

Morwyn Brebner, showrunner/EP on *Saving Hope*, urges keeping an eye on what really matters — at work and at home. "You have to kind of prioritize what's truly urgent versus fake-urgent. I don't sleep with my phone beside my bed and I try to tuck my kids in at night... When we're in production I really don't do anything other than work and spend time with my family. I've learned not to take anything else on. I was a playwright for much of my career and my days consisted of walking around, thinking, some napping — basically I lived like an outdoor cat. Now it's different and I'm grateful but I realize the limits of my time."

Says Brebner, "The other thing I think is important to remember, is that our emergencies are pretty cushy — we're not in a war and considering

climate change, for instance, all our work problems are extremely manageable."

Alison Lea Bingeman says the key to survival is taking time off — when possible. "Don't work over hiatus. If you're not the boss strive to get your work in early so that you can disengage from the show. There's nothing like a fresh start when you return. If you are the boss, schedule a vacation over hiatus and allow your writers to do the same. It's miraculous."

The Bomb Girls writer/producer is a big fan of "time management" — which she admits is easier to preach than practice. "My tendency is to dawdle and avoid till it absolutely must go on paper. I counter that by setting mini-deadlines for myself. If I have a week to write a script I'll parse out each stage of the writing and create milestones I have to reach within