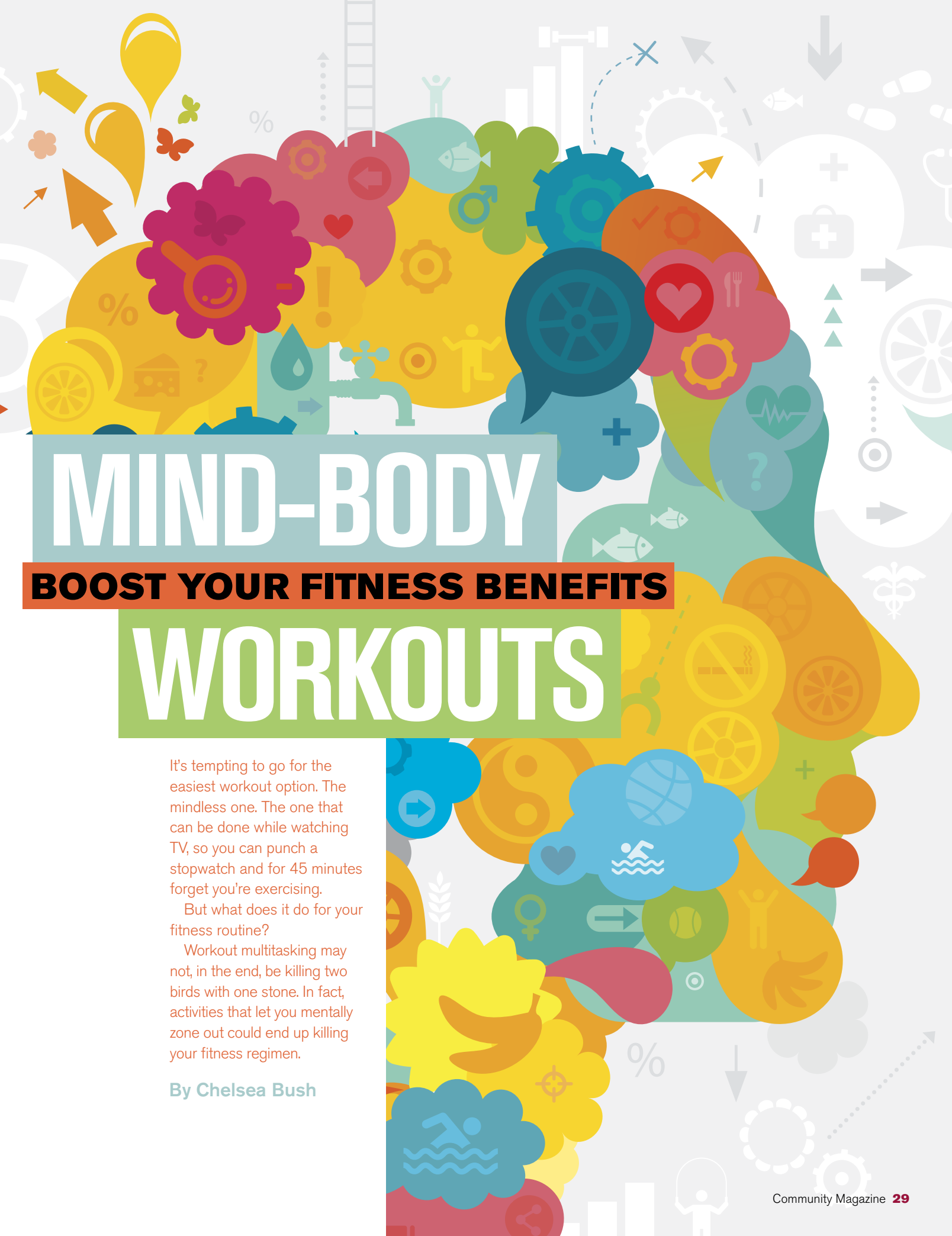


MIND-BODY WORKOUTS

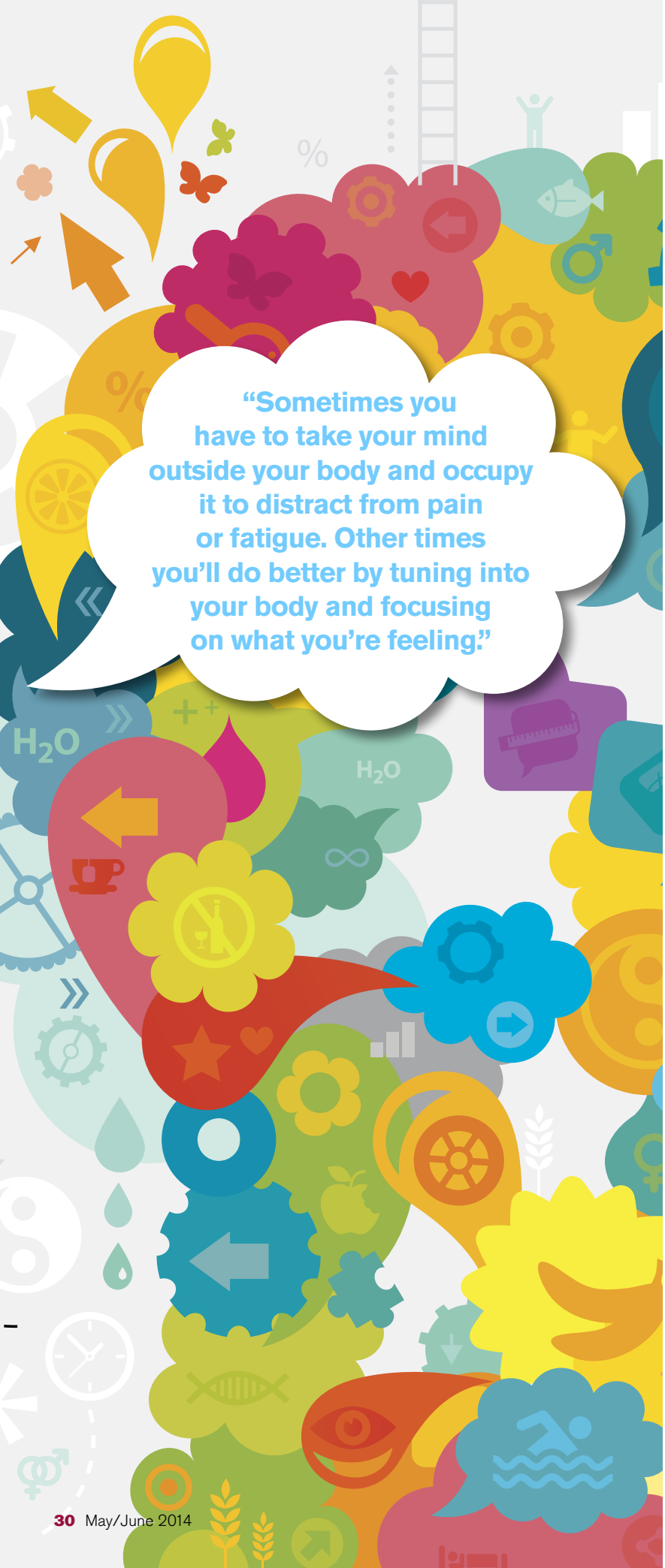
BOOST YOUR FITNESS BENEFITS

It's tempting to go for the easiest workout option. The mindless one. The one that can be done while watching TV, so you can punch a stopwatch and for 45 minutes forget you're exercising.

But what does it do for your fitness routine?

Workout multitasking may not, in the end, be killing two birds with one stone. In fact, activities that let you mentally zone out could end up killing your fitness regimen.

By Chelsea Bush



Research published in the "International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology" shows that 50 percent of people throw in the towel within six months of starting a new workout routine. "We all start with the right intentions, but you really need more than that to keep going," says Nicole Detling, Ph.D., CC-AASP, a Utah-based sports psychology consultant.

So what do we need to help us stick with an exercise routine? Two things help: Staving off boredom and gaining enough tangible results to stay motivated. Both seem best achieved through a workout that demands mental concentration.

"Put a ball in a game, and I can play until my body can't do it anymore," says Detling, who accompanied the U.S. Ski Team to the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. "That constant dynamic movement and change keeps me occupied."

Unlike repetitive mindless workouts, time flies when there's a ball hurtling toward you and rules to follow. It's tough to watch the clock during any activity that involves responding to varying stimuli or an unpredictable opponent. Ball sports are one example, and the same could be said of martial arts, CrossFit, rock climbing, dancing or any competitive sport. Sometimes just learning something new, like a dance step or breathing technique, keeps us engaged.

As for fitness results, like Detling observes, being immersed in an activity helps push our physical limits. We're distracted from discomfort, fatigue, sweat and feeling the muscle burn — all things that might cause us to taper exertion or quit early. Rather than going through the motions, we tend to push harder when involved in mentally engaging workouts. It's here that the physical rewards get good.

This doesn't mean endurance activities like running, cycling, swimming or weight lifting are necessarily off the table. Detling says a different set of mental tactics comes in handy for keeping boredom at bay: Listen to music, think about what's for dinner, name an animal for every letter of the alphabet or simply tune into the pain and visualize the results to come.

"Sometimes you have to take your mind outside your body and occupy it to distract from pain or fatigue," Detling explains. "Other times you'll do better by tuning into your body and focusing on what you're feeling."

Mentally tracking your progress is another good strategy for staying motivated. As explained in the book "The Winner Effect" by Ian H. Robertson, conquering a fitness challenge produces a neurological response in the brain that makes us pumped to go after bigger and better challenges.

So here's to being on the victorious side of that 50 percent statistic. Keep the exercise spark alive by putting your mind to work — and maybe learn a few dance moves in the process.