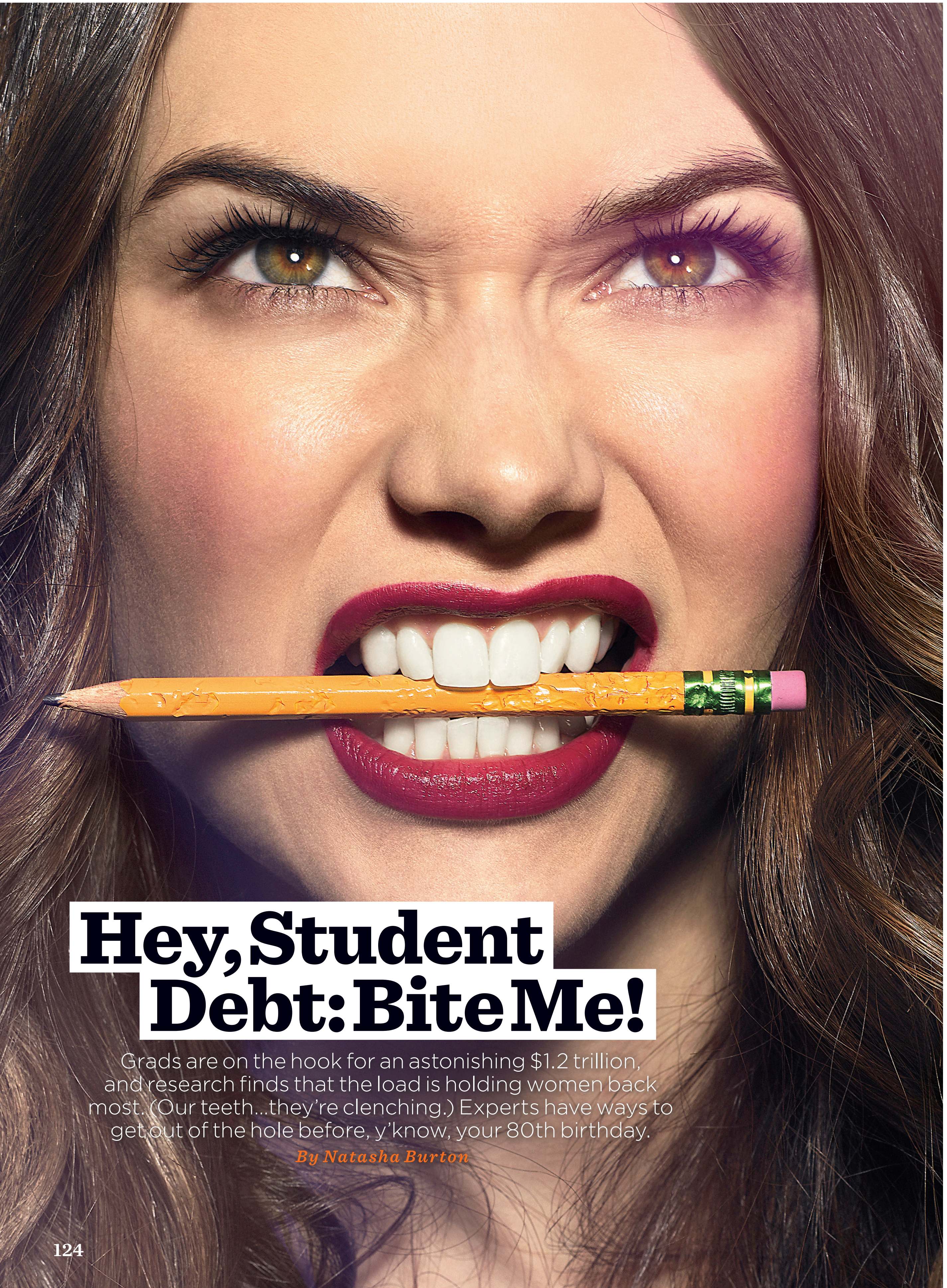

Hey, Student Debt: Bite Me!

Grads are on the hook for an astonishing $1.2 trillion, and research finds that the load is holding women back most. (Our teeth...they're clenching.) Experts have ways to get out of the hole before, y'know, your 80th birthday.

By Natasha Burton

After six years of marriage, Cheryl Koning, 30, and her husband want nothing more than a baby. They had planned to start a family in 2010 but are now delaying it until 2020—all because she owes $50,000 in student loans. "Seeing friends struggle with infertility—and at ages younger than when I expect to try conceiving—makes me worried about my own chances," says the San Francisco public relations professional, who graduated owing $75,000 and forks over $693 each month (about a quarter of her monthly take-home) to repay loans. With every dollar accounted for, nothing's left for raising a child. "We'd hoped to have two children and adopt two, but I'm not sure I'm going to pay off my loans in time. I get angry and think, *How did we get here?*"

In Cheryl's defense, she didn't get here alone. For decades, society has preached that a college degree is nonnegotiable for success. That thinking still stands, but at what cost? Sixty-eight percent of graduates have loan debt (the average hovers at $30,000 per individual), and most of them are women. Some of the reasons are well publicized (females earn less post-college, so the loans take longer to pay back), but others are more surprising: More of us are first-gen college students and, as a result, more likely to come from low-income families, which forces us to finance our own educations if we can't secure enough grants or scholarships. Plus, we now make up 62 percent of attendees at private (read: expensive) four-year colleges.

Regardless of the reason, the debt we accrue negatively impacts nearly every life decision, even decades after we clinch those degrees. We divert less income toward retirement and big purchases (in Koning's case, a car that would significantly broaden the jobs she's able to pursue), and a study published in *Demography* even found that women with outstanding student loans are less likely to marry than those who are debt-free. The researcher suggests one cringe-worthy reason: Men are still more likely to propose, so they may be less inclined to pop the question if their GF is deep in debt.

SIXTY-EIGHT PERCENT OF GRADUATES HAVE LOAN DEBT.

The situation is grim, but not hopeless. Use these methods to help erase that debt—for good.

CONSOLIDATE!

Many college graduates are grappling with up to a dozen different loans. As tempting as it might be to bundle them into one big lump sum and due date, that's risky. "If you consolidate government and private loans together, you lose built-in protections that apply to federal loans but not private," says Betsy Mayotte, director of regulatory compliance for American Student Assistance. These safeguards (such as student-loan forgiveness and deferment options) are lifesavers if you suddenly can't afford your payments. Instead, round up federal loans into one group, then private-bank loans in another, and refinance the two separately. That way, you can snag the lowest interest rate for each set and still wind up with fewer individual balances and, in many cases, lower overall payments.

Start with your government loans: Centralize them in a Federal Direct Consolidation Loan, "where the interest rate is a weighted average of the old," explains Andrew Josuweit, CEO and founder of Student Loan Hero. The savings are small, but this streamlines everything into one balance with a single rate and one monthly payment.

Next, refinance those private bad boys; you may be able to find a bank that'll give you a lower interest rate by combining all of your balances, which can save you major bucks over time. Robin Rechtenwald, a 25-year-old nonprofit PR professional in Pittsburgh, merged eight private loans with variable interest rates ranging from 6 percent to 10 percent into one with a 5 percent fixed rate, nearly halving her overall payment from $900 to $500 per month. "I use the money I save to make extra payments to pay off my loans faster," she says, noting that refinancing also allowed her to put more cash toward principal, which reduces the amount of interest paid along the way.

TRY INCOME-BASED REPAYMENT PLANS.

Income-based *wha*? It sounds like a scheme you'd hear on a late-night infomercial, but it's legit—and a must for grads with high debt-to-income ratios (when your debt far outweighs the cash you bring in each month). Most lenders recommend that no more than 36 percent of your salary should go to loans, but a study by the Institute of Women's Policy Research and AARP found that African American women and Caucasian women carry alarmingly high ratios of 111 and 92 percent, respectively. WTF?!?

That's where income-based government programs can help. They use your annual gross to define just how many of your discretionary dollars should go toward debts. (Don't worry—no one's analyzing your movie-going habits. There's a set formula based on your income and family size, if you're not single.) Federal site StudentAid.gov has a handy bulleted chart that helps you choose which is best for you.

These options are also

So Where Do the Candidates Stand?

The student-debt crisis hasn't gotten nearly as much airtime as other hot-button issues, but some candidates have been more vocal than others. On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton advocates making community college free and giving $175 billion in grants to the states to lower tuition to public universities, which would also receive incentives to curtail fees. Her plan includes steps to make loans more affordable, such as eliminating government profits on student loans (that's a thing!). Bernie Sanders touts an act that would nix tuition and fees for all public colleges and universities—the federal government would cover two-thirds, and the states would pony up the rest. He also supports a lower interest rate and greater refinancing options.

Most Republican hopefuls have been silent about what they'd do to ease the burden. Ted Cruz fessed up that it took him until last year to pay off his $100,000 in student loans, but he voted *against* a bill that would allow debt holders to refinance at lower percentages. Donald Trump's only stance has been to say he's against the government raking in cash from student loans.

PREVIOUS PAGE: DAN FORBES. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: JOSE LUIS PELAEZ/GETTY IMAGES; IMAGE SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES worth it if you're in a field that's unlikely to be lucrative, such as education or social work, since a forgiveness component kicks in after 20 to 25 years (depending on when you incurred the loans). Mayotte also advises using the U.S. Department of Education's Repayment Estimator to see what your payments would be and when you'd be absolved. One warning: When the balance is forgiven, Uncle Sam taxes the pardoned amount as income. (Two U.S. representatives proposed changing that law in 2014, but their bill hasn't gained traction.)

Another smart move before you sign up: Take your parents off any loans they cosigned. Brittany Topham, a 25-year-old advertising exec in Boston, was researching the process and realized payments toward her $175,000 debt would factor in her parents' income (an increase of nearly $100,000 on hers alone) if she didn't remove them before applying.

SMARTEN UP YOUR SIDE GIG.

The hustle is real: Women are more likely to hold down a second job than men are, according to the Economic Policy Institute. (Pay gap, it keeps giving.) If you're one of them, don't just think of it as a check. Take Jenna Drew. While working full-time as a research and information specialist for a financial firm, she tapped the Mind-Body Fitness and Personal Fitness Chef certifications she'd earned to launch her own health-coaching website, through which she offers tips and wellness programs. "It started with an extra $25 toward my student loans each month, but as my business has grown, I've been able to increase that amount to an average of $1,000 a month," says the 28-year-old New Yorker. Bonus brilliance: Since her site utilizes network marketing (she employs reps, similar to the Avon model), Jenna makes money around the clock. "If I just chose to become an Uber driver, I would be making money only while I was physically working," she says. "This way, sometimes I wake up and I have an extra $200." As Josuweit points out, even putting only $100 extra a month toward repaying your debt can make a big difference.

If you're looking for work on a less frequent basis, take on projects that give your résumé a boost, says personal finance expert Kimberly Palmer, author of *Generation Earn*. For example, if your boss isn't giving you a chance to learn a clutch skill that you need for the next level, check out sites like Freelancer.com and Upwork.com to find opportunities that build on your existing chops and let you hone that new one. Just make sure any additional income doesn't push you into a higher tax bracket and negate the extra funds you're bringing in. (Check out Bankrate.com to estimate your tax rate.)

NEGOTIATE CREDIT CARD DEBT.

Trying to pay off plastic prevents many women from making a dent in their student loans. A 2015 National Debt Survey found that more than 60 percent of women carry credit card debt compared with just over 30 percent of men in the same age groups. Experts at National Debt Relief (a settlement company) point to—say it with us now—the pay gap as the biggest contributing factor. Since we earn less, more of us charge our purchases to make ends meet on a monthly basis.

Negotiate with creditors so you can pay down balances without getting buried in interest. "If your cards carry 15 percent interest or more, ask for a promotional 0 percent transfer for 12 to 18 months," says financial advisor Chantel Bonneau. "You pay a certain amount of the principal up front, usually 3 to 6 percent, but then you pay off the rest during that next year to year and a half without accruing any additional interest."

Another option? Refinance credit card debt with a personal loan to get a lower interest rate. "The goal is to pay off debt faster and with less money," Josuweit explains. "Once borrowers are approved, the new lender consolidates the credit card debt into the new personal loan by paying off the debts owed to the old banks and lenders." The borrower then repays this new loan in a set number of monthly installments. Either way, paying down the credit will free up more money, which you can put toward telling those student loans to kiss your debt-free ass. ■