

Chapter 3

Taking Care of Body and Soul

Pacing ourselves and investing time in our own wellbeing is not something that comes naturally to most of us. When we are preoccupied with caring and providing for our family, our home, as well as coping with our workload outside the home, it sometimes requires real discipline to allocate regular time for personal enhancement. Often, with the best will in the world, our New Year's Resolutions to exercise regularly and make more time for relaxation go out of the window at the first sign of a hiccup in our routine.

There is plenty of hard evidence to suggest that stress underlies many major health problems, and that regular exercise and relaxation are two sound ways of avoiding these, and of keeping both your mind and body in good shape. Taking time out for yourself is not just a nice idea, it is a necessity, especially if you lead a full and demanding life. As a working mother and a busy doctor with four children, we feel pretty qualified to talk about the lifestyle burdens that others have to contend with.

The stress factor

There is a fine line between stress and distress. Stress is reasonably healthy, as it stretches us to capacity and keeps us on our toes. Dealing with challenges as they present themselves is good for our morale, but when we get to the point of overload we cross the line and our modern-day lifestyle often leaves many of us reeling, feeling overwhelmed and under par. If these symptoms continue for more than a short period of time our health can suffer.

The rational ones amongst us do not usually take on a complete 'case load' all at once; we don't ask to be overwhelmed, it just grows on us gradually. We collect our responsibilities as we go along. Perhaps we have been coasting along quite successfully, then a promotion comes along which demands more from us, and at the same time a close relative gets sick, or our partner is made redundant, we find we are expecting another baby, and so on. Additionally, when asked to commit to a project, some of us have not learned to say 'no'. And so we soldier on, believing that

we can manage somehow, until one day our body sends out the warning. Whilst this scenario is occurring we are snacking instead of eating properly, and not doing much in the way of exercise or relaxation, or indeed having much fun. Often we lose ourselves along the way because of the many and varied day-to-day pressures of life.

The first warning for some of us could be a bout of flu, or the onset of headaches. Alternatively our digestive system or our energy levels could be affected. Were we to re-evaluate our runaway lifestyle at this point, and invest time in getting our body back into shape, we might well be able to circumvent the health crisis brewing. Invariably though we get up from our sick bed, and go into the ring for the next round. Many of us feel that we have to soldier on, no matter what. There does not seem to be an obvious alternative. Women are particularly prone to this form of martyrdom.

And so we continue, until our bodies say 'no more'. We have both physical and mental limits, and the body can only tolerate so much abuse. It is a vicious circle. Because we feel so awful, usual tasks become more demanding, and looking after ourselves is the last thing to consider. When something goes wrong with the car, the warning light goes on, and when you use a computer wrongly it makes a noise or flashes a message, but our poor bodies fail to communicate their troubles. Most of us wouldn't recognise the signals anyway, until it was too late.

We may not necessarily have a nervous breakdown, but we may develop a weakness in some area of the body as a result of an immune system dysfunction. Some of us develop migraine headaches, others get recurrent thrush, irritable bowel syndrome, panic attacks, depression, chronic fatigue or a nervous rash. The unlucky minority will simply have a fatal heart attack or develop a serious medical condition.

Whilst all this has been going on, it is likely that many of us will have become regular visitors to our doctor's surgery, and have begun taking the 'appropriate' medication. So we are now treating the symptoms, and at best suppressing them. You might even get labelled as 'neurotic' if you are really persistent. What we actually should be doing at this point is looking seriously for the root cause of the problem and addressing it. Whilst some doctors are enlightened and may question you about your troubles or refer you for counselling, they are used to dishing out 'a pill for an ill'. They do not usually have the time in their short consultation to find out what really underlies your symptoms. (At the WNAS we take a whole hour for the first consultation in our clinics, and we have to be organised about using the time wisely in order to get the measure of the real problem.)

There is plenty of medical evidence to support the fact that persistent stress (distress) can affect us both physically and mentally. Let us look at the following case history to demonstrate the point.

Bernice's story

Bernice was a 34-year-old mother of two who, despite her apparently normal life, was at breaking point through stress.

'My husband, who is a conservative, high-powered, executive said I should have been able to "pull myself together" but I was unable to. He wouldn't discuss my upset over the termination I had had after the birth of our last child, or the problems we were experiencing with our sex life, which was now non-existent. I was so anxious and tearful, I honestly don't know how I got through each day. Everything seemed too much, I couldn't even bring myself to answer the telephone when it rang. The most frightening thing of all, which I didn't bring myself to tell anyone, was that I kept seeing "little people" out the corner of my eyes. I knew they weren't there, but they seemed so real. I really thought I was going insane.

Formerly I was such an organised and rational person. I have a very idealistic brain in my head and usually like things to be just so. I used to entertain a lot and loved doing activities with my two children. I have many friends and lots of close family, but I couldn't cope with seeing them as I felt antisocial. One minute I'd feel violent and aggressive, and then I'd think morbid thoughts about dying. I also had chronic back pain and as well as the sleeping pills I took regularly, most days I took at least eight painkillers, which made me very constipated.

My doctor suggested that I got in touch with the WNAS, and in sheer desperation I did. My diet was overhauled, I was sent off to the cranial osteopath, and took Optivite and Efamol. Once my back was feeling better I started to exercise gently and was able to stop taking all the painkillers and sleeping pills. I found the WNAS programme hard to stick to for the first few weeks but was so determined to give it my best as I honestly felt this was the last resort for me.

It did get easier and within a month I was feeling considerably better. Miraculously the osteopath sorted out my back problem, so that I no longer suffered constant pain. My constipation cleared up and the "little men" disappeared thank goodness. After following the programme for three months my symptoms had vanished, and my husband felt that his wife had returned. I was relieved too. I hate to think what might have happened to me and to my family if I had not been pointed in the right direction when I was at such a low ebb.'

Many of us have the ability to cope with near tragedy or disaster, and it is not until it is over, and the dust has settled, that we feel it is safe to 'fall

apart'. With hindsight, the warning signals are all there and we can reverse the situation if we come to our senses soon enough.

Here are some tips to help you next time!

- Make sure you make some sacred time for yourself: time to think, and time to switch off from your responsibilities.
- Tell your family how you feel, and ask for their support whilst you get yourself sorted out.
- If your stress comes from work, discuss with colleagues how you can make changes, or if you are self-employed you will need to re-evaluate.
- Try to get away, even if it's only for a few days. Sometimes we can see things more clearly from a distance.
- Learn not to take on too much. If you feel fully committed learn to say 'no'.
- Prioritise your responsibilities and see if you can off-load or delegate some of the less important tasks.
- Eat regular wholesome meals and have a supply of nutritious snacks. Don't fall into the trap of missing meals and eating junk food or chocolate instead.
- Take time each week to exercise. You should be doing three or four sessions of exercise per week, even if it's just skipping or a work-out to a video at home.
- Make time each day to relax formally. You will need 15 minutes, with no interruptions. Really switching off is an art, and you may need some instruction or to read a book on the subject (see page 29).
- Get your partner or a close friend to give you a massage, preferably using some relaxing aromatherapy oils such as geranium or lavender.
- Watch an entertaining film or make time to read a good book.
- Make sure you laugh occasionally. Laughter is so good for us, and yet when we get absorbed with problems in life we seem to lose our sense of humour.
- If you can't see a solution to your current stresses find someone to talk it through with, or get some professional help (don't forget Useful Addresses on page 512).
- Two great books to help you reclaim your life and sort out where you are going next are written by Dr Lucia Capacchione, an American art therapist and teacher, who, when suffering a life threatening illness in 1973, worked out a self-healing method that brought her back to complete health. The first is entitled *Recovery of your Inner Child*, which allows you to search for the root of your stresses and reverse them through journal writing and drawing. She has devised an amazingly powerful technique which is quite enlightening. The second book is entitled *Visioning*, which provides the techniques to work towards living the life you really desire. This involves making a collage, which is fun and therapeutic in itself. Details of both books can be found on page 494.

The benefits of relaxation

Stress and relaxation are at opposite ends of the spectrum. When you are able to maintain the balance there's a good chance of you remaining healthy. However, when the scales tip and stress outweighs relaxation, symptoms of ill-health often rear their heads. With our fast pace of life and our heavy commitments, taking time out for ourselves is often a luxury we consider we cannot afford. But in reality can we afford *not* to make time to relax and unwind? For we know the powerful affect stress can have on us. It has been shown to suppress ovulation in menstruating women, to greatly contribute to digestive disorders like irritable bowel syndrome, to play a key part in migraine headaches, and to increase the number of hot flushes at menopause.

The ability to 'switch off' and refresh ourselves is the key to sanity, but it may not be as easy as it sounds. When you are preoccupied, wound up and tense, it may be hard to lose sight of the benefits of taking time out. Being able to relax thoroughly is actually an acquired skill – which for some of us takes a little practice – but all that is required is some time, and a comfortable space in which to spend that time. Once you have learned the art of relaxation you can practise it at any time, and best of all it is free. Even setting aside time to *think* is therapeutic. Sometimes we go headlong into adverse situations simply because we didn't make time to plan tactics, something which is as true for family and social situations as it is for problems at work.

We all deal with the stresses and strains of life in different ways. Some of us bottle them up and then fall apart one rainy day. Others soldier on feeling disgruntled and perhaps comfort eat or take to the bottle as a result. Regardless of how stress affects you, it is important to take some quiet time each day, as little as 15 or 20 minutes is all that is needed.

Simple relaxation

You will need a quiet space where you can confidently switch off. If necessary, put the answerphone on, or take the phone off the hook. Let other family members know that you don't want to be disturbed for a while, and put on some comfortable loose clothes. Either lie down on a mat, on a soft carpet or firm bed. Make sure that you are comfortable with the room temperature and lighting. You can play some calming music in the background. Once you feel comfortable, do the following, step-by-step:

- 1 Place a pillow under your head, and stretch out full length. Relax your arms and your lower jaw.
- 2 Take a few slow deep breaths before you begin.
- 3 Then concentrate on relaxing your muscles, starting with the toes on one foot and then the other. Gradually work your way slowly up your body, going through all the muscle groups.

- 4 As you do so, first tense each group of muscles and then relax them, taking care to breathe deeply as you relax.
- 5 When you reach your head, and your face feels relaxed, remain in the relaxed position for ten to 15 minutes.
- 6 Gradually allow yourself to 'come to'.

Other methods of relaxation

There are many other relaxation methods available, some of which you will be familiar with. Yoga and meditation are both widely practised doctrines which allow you to practise mind over matter. Massage is a useful tool and so too are creative visualisation, biofeedback and autogenic training. Many of the martial arts like tai chi are therapeutic too. If you find it difficult to close your mind down, it may be a good idea to choose a system of relaxation to try and then to get a little tuition in its principles. Here's an idea of what's on offer.

Yoga

Yoga has been practised throughout the world for thousands of years. It works on the principle of bringing about a harmonious balance between mind, body and soul. It is particularly effective in helping to relieve stress and stress-related conditions. To get started, it's best to attend a yoga class and then to practise the postures at home on a regular basis. There are many good books on yoga (see Recommended Reading on page 490), and there are also a few yoga videos which you might find helpful. Yoga poses can be very powerful, so it is important to have instruction in the early stages.

Massage

We often subconsciously touch or rub a painful area in an attempt to bring about relief. Massage is a term used to describe the ancient art of healing by touch, which is designed to relieve tension, improve circulation and help the body rid itself of toxins. It can also relieve pain by stimulating the production of brain chemicals called endorphins, the body's own painkillers, and by blocking transmission of pain messages by increasing the sensory input to the brain.

There are now many different massage techniques from which to choose, and lovely relaxing aromatherapy oils to use which aid relaxation. If you haven't had a professional massage before, it is worth asking around to find a local person with a good reputation. It is a real treat. If your budget does not permit regular visits to the masseuse, then ask your partner or a friend to do the honours. You could enrol on a massage course with a partner and then practise on each other. Most local authorities have classes and there are many good books on this subject (see Recommended Reading on page 490).

Self-massage

It is possible to massage many parts of your own body, your face, head, neck, shoulders, lower back, abdomen, arms and legs. You will need some almond oil, to which you add a few drops of an aromatherapy oil of choice. Geranium, lavender, orange and melissa are particularly mild and relaxing. It is best to stick to the mild oils as stonger oils which are absorbed through the skin can cause other problems if used inappropriately.

Rub yourself in a clockwise direction on your abdomen, with stroking motions on your arms and legs, kneading your shoulders, and smoothing your neck. Give your face and your temples a rub gently stretching the skin, and with two fingers each side gently massage your temples in a circle. Lastly, rub your ears between your thumb and forefinger, starting at the top and working your way down to the ear lobe, pulling gently at the same time. It feels wonderful and increases circulation to your face and head, as well as easing stress.

Creative visualisation

This is a favoured method of distraction from the stresses of everyday life. If you can recall pictures of holidays when you wished time would stand still or other wholesome fantasies, you can have them all. Creative visualisation is simply a structured method of daydreaming.

Get yourself comfortable in a quiet space, preferably warm and darkened, and without a telephone extension. Lie down, close your eyes and then just float off. Look at those lovely mind pictures until your heart is content. As time goes by, you will develop the ability to 'stay' in your daydream without your mind wandering. When you come round, you should feel warm, calm and relaxed.

Self-hypnosis

This is a self-induced state that makes the mind susceptible to new ideas. When practised regularly it helps to bring about a feeling of calmness and mental agility. It is a system of implanting positive messages which have a therapeutic value, and is thought to be particularly useful in helping to relieve stress, high blood pressure, migraine and insomnia. Some people find that it also helps them to overcome addictive habits. Half an hour each day can leave you feeling refreshed, relaxed and in a more positive mood.

Meditation

Another way of separating you from your body, meditation has a calming and renewing effect on both mind and body. You will need to learn to meditate at a class, but once you have the skill you can use it at any time, and anywhere.

Autogenic training

This method of relaxation, designed to tap into the body's own in-built powers of self-healing, consists of repeating six different commands slowly, in sequence, until you reach a semi-hypnotic state. The end result is a much more relaxed and positive you – and requires only half an hour or so, three times per week initially, but it does involve taking instruction.

Biofeedback

This relaxation technique requires you to link up to a biofeedback machine, or relaxometer. The deep states of relaxation reached through this method have been shown to influence blood pressure levels and brain-wave patterns.

All of these methods and more can be learned at specialist centres throughout the country. It may well be worth investing some time on a few dark winter evenings to learn to outsmart the stresses and strains of daily life.

The benefits of exercise

If you are exercising at least four times per week to the breathlessness stage, and have done so for years, perhaps you should skip this section, which is aimed at the 'reluctant exerciser'.

Many of us wish that our bodies were self-exercising. Whilst we acknowledge that we feel saintly after an exercise session, the thought of getting up on a dark morning in order to exercise before the day begins, understandably, doesn't seem that appealing. But, like most bonuses in life, physical fitness has to be worked for. Why do you need to be physically fit, we hear you ask, as you are not planning on entering any competitions? And anyway you lead a busy life, surely that's enough?

As our knee bone is connected to our thigh bone and so on, it follows that if we exert ourselves physically, it will have a positive overall effect on both our body and our mind. Exercising to the point of breathlessness stimulates the release of brain chemicals, called endorphins, which not only raise our mood, but also influence our hormones. Rushing around and leading a busy life may just leave us feeling absolutely exhausted, especially chasing after children from morning till night. We have yet to meet anyone who feels 'high' from these activities. Exercise, on the other hand, helps to improve energy levels and to overcome symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and also increases our sense of self-esteem and wellbeing. In fact exercise has been shown to be more successful in overcoming symptoms of depression and anxiety than psychotherapy. Being in good physical shape is also good for the ego, especially as we age, and shouldn't go unnoticed by our partners.

More good news is that exercise may offset ageing of the central nervous system, as well as being cardio-protective. It also stimulates the heart, which in turn stimulates the flow of blood around the body, which flushes out toxins and keeps our skin glowing. So there are many benefits to be had, and we are not talking Olympics here!

Research shows that we need to exercise four or five times per week at least, to the point of breathlessness. But do not treat getting fit like being in a competition. You need only exercise to increase gradually your fitness level. If you haven't exercised for years, it may take only a few minutes initially before you need the armchair. Each exercise session should be slightly longer than the last one, until you feel 'comfortable' exercising for 40 minutes. It may take a few months to build up to that, and it is worth keeping an exercise diary so that you can monitor your progress. If you are currently under your doctor's supervision, and haven't exercised for a while, it is advisable to get a medical blessing before embarking on your exercise regime.

More good news is that you do not necessarily have to join the gym, or do an hour's aerobics class with a group of stick insects, but you do need to choose the kind of exercise you *like* in order to stick at it. For those who haven't exercised for some time, we usually recommend starting with some brisk walking or gentle skipping, and perhaps a short work-out with an exercise video. We particularly recommend the YMCA exercise videos as they are scientifically based, and begin with ten or 12 minute gentle work-outs. They cater for all fitness levels, so if you have a limited amount of time, putting on the exercise video before anyone else is up in the morning is probably the best solution.

An exercise programme should be for life. It takes months to build stamina and only weeks to lose it if we stop exercising, which is rather infuriating. You are likely to be more successful at sticking to your regime if you make yourself a schedule. It is all too easy to cry off because of other commitments. If you find it hard to stick to your schedule, arrange to meet a friend or colleague for a game of tennis or squash, or make a date to have a gentle jog or swim together. That way it will be harder for you to make some sort of excuse.

What we are aiming for

When you make the decision to exercise regularly, your motivation must be sound in order to maintain the commitment. Whilst most women would not object to having the vital statistics of Pamela Anderson and the men amongst us, Arnold Schwarzeneger, your reason for exercising is health. You want to protect yourself from heart disease and to keep your bones strong, thus preventing the bone-thinning disease, osteoporosis. Any visible physical improvements are a bonus. You want to develop and improve your *Stamina*, *Strength* and *Suppleness*, the three S's.

Stamina

Stamina refers to the efficiency of the heart and lungs in delivering oxygen to the muscles, and can be measured by the amount of time it takes you to get breathless. We can gradually build our stamina, with regular low-intensity aerobic exercise. Aerobic exercise simply uses large muscle groups like the legs and arms, which then demand more oxygen, making the heart work harder. With regular aerobic exercise the heart and lungs become more efficient, which means they will not have to 'work' so hard in daily life. Increasing your stamina also means that you can achieve more for less effort. You should eventually be aiming for four to five 40-minute sessions of low impact aerobic exercise per week in order to reap all the benefits that exercise has to offer.

Strength

The definition of strength is the maximum force needed by a muscle or group of muscles to overcome a resistance. In other words how much effort it takes to push, pull, lift, climb and carry without injuring yourself. We can increase our strength by as much as 50 per cent without gaining muscle size. Stronger muscles will mean that you can get more out of your day, be it in the garden, in the house, or at leisure. Having strong back and abdominal muscles will also improve your posture and guard you from most lower back pain.

Suppleness

Joint mobility is something you take for granted early in life, but as you get older joints naturally stiffen through lack of use. It really is a case of 'use it or lose it'. Stretching exercises will help to maintain your mobility, and are easy to practise at home whilst listening to music or in front of the television. Stretch your muscles slowly, holding each position until you feel the strain, but not pain.

Where specific exercises are of value to a particular condition, like heart disease, osteoporosis, fatigue, PMS, pregnancy and so on, you will see that we give specific instructions and a target to aim for in the relevant section.

The pay-off

If you have always avoided exercise, you are probably grimacing at the thought of what you know should be ahead. Let us assure you that you will reap the benefits of your labour. We have seen so many patients who have not previously exercised begin their exercise programme reluctantly, and then surprisingly come to love it. They feel it improves their energy levels and vitality, and notice improvements in their skin quite quickly. For every hour you spend exercising you will get the equivalent time back in increased stamina, strength and suppleness. Additionally, it is now well

accepted that regular exercise helps to protect us against heart disease, arthritis, protects our bones against the bone thinning disease osteoporosis, and helps us to avoid depression. So exercising is not just a nice idea, both the long- and short-term benefits are well worth the investment of a few hours each week.