

Stress relief

Feeling at the end of your tether? Join the club. **Lucy Brook** discovers the best remedy could lie within



COPING STRATEGIES ... a natural high at Gwinganna, a retreat managed by Sharon Kolkka, who recommends massages as a way to unwind (photographs: Gwinganna); fashion designer Julie Tengdahl schedules time to escape; while New Yorkers Morgan Spurlock and Alex Jamieson make small changes to help beat stress

Remember the last time you were running late for work, sloshed coffee in the car, lost a file you were working on, attended to your bleating mobile phone, scorched the chicken for dinner – and you reacted with Zen-like calm? No? Well, you're not alone.

Experts say this is the first time the human race has experienced a stress epidemic, and it's affecting our productivity at work, our immune systems and everything in between.

"I'd been working long hours for two years – sometimes finishing at 10pm and then having to travel an hour by train to get home," says Danielle (surname withheld), who experienced the effects of chronic stress first-hand, resulting in a series of dramatic life changes.

"My mum was ill in a different country, I was still sharing a house with my ex, and felt undervalued. I was hurrying to the train station one morning when I suddenly couldn't breathe and froze on the footpath, unable to move. My mind went blank and luckily a commuter friend showed up and took me to a doctor.

"A short course of medication helped me sleep, and stress leave gave me time to re-evaluate my life. I moved out, phoned mum more and handed in two months' notice, deciding to freelance and study part-time.

"I've always thought of myself as a bright and breezy person, but the stress took a toll."

As technology saturates society, we've been catapulted into living faster, and statistics suggest we're on the verge of burnout. Workplace stress is costing the Australian economy \$14.81 billion a year, while one in five people suffers depression at some stage. We spend less time interacting with family and friends, and more time communicating via social networking sites and text messages.

Once a response to the physical body being in danger, stress is now our mind's response to deadlines, long hours, financial commitments, personal conflicts and major life changes.

"Western cultures have forgotten how to enjoy unscheduled, free time," says Alex Jamieson, a New York-based nutritionist who wrote the 2005 bestseller *The Great American Detox Diet*, based on her diet prescription for her husband Morgan Spurlock after he gained more than 11kg making the Academy Award-nominated documentary *Super Size Me*. Alex

runs a business designed to empower busy, working women to reconnect with themselves.

"Most hours on the calendar are filled with appointments, classes and work functions, and families with kids are especially hard hit. We need to learn to turn off our phones and have text-free time and media blackout evenings."

Alex says the most common way humans try to cope with stress is by turning to caffeine and sugary, processed foods for instant energy hits and comfort. In other words, there's a direct correlation between soaring stress levels, the obesity epidemic, heart disease and diabetes.

"Imagine we're still living as hunter-gatherers," says Alex. "We live a quieter life, because we have no technology. We wake and sleep with the sun, eat seasonal wholefoods and we exercise. We have the support of a large extended family to help raise our kids.

"Once in a while, a large, wild animal comes into our area and we get stressed. Our body goes into 'fight or flight' mode. Blood rushes from our hands and feet to protect our brain and vital organs.

"The more prolonged the stress, the more the body tries to protect our organs by keeping on weight. This is the situation we're in today," she says. "Humans are now constantly barraged by tiny stressors from the moment they wake up. Every email, phone call and commercial is another hit. This is what's keeping so many of us from losing weight."

Sharon Kolkka, general manager of Gold Coast lifestyle retreat Gwinganna, co-owned by Hugh Jackman, has researched stress since the 1980s and says it doesn't manifest from external circumstances but within the mind.

"Stress is the word we give all emotions that are out of control. For example, if a CEO is having a breakdown in his or her office, you see anger, panic or frustration," says Sharon.

"The physical body isn't under stress – there's no gun to the head or sabre-toothed tiger in the room. We haven't evolved to deal with mental stress, but it's important to note that we can turn the stress response on with the mind, which means we can also turn it off."

But the remedies to relieve stress – health retreats, spa treatments, holidays, a healthy, organic diet and meditation courses – all cost money. Is it really possible to buy inner peace?

"You can buy a course, trip to a spa, CD or technique if you're willing to pay the price in dollars, but possessing these items or having these experiences doesn't guarantee the inner calm you long for," says Dr Chris Kang, of The School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland.

"As Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says, 'there is no way to peace – peace is the way'. Happiness can only occur when we are fully present, when we stop buying into the messages given by a consumer-driven society and start looking inwards."

Sharon Kolkka says health retreats impart practical skills and techniques that set people on the path to wellness.

"It's not about going on holiday, eating good food and getting massages," she says. "You have to learn how to unwind. Health retreats teach you that, and if we're doing our job well, you should only need to attend once or twice to put those skills into practice."

Brisbane fashion designer and mum of three Julie Tengdahl says that like many women, she feels stressed and vulnerable when she can't meet everyone's expectations, so she's happy to pay for remedies that get her back on track.

"Discovering the benefits of physical touch has revolutionised my approach to stress," says Julie, 47, who has regular Hawaiian kahuna massages and adds vegetable juices and herbal teas to her diet when she's feeling pressured.

"I set a few weekends aside each year to attend a yoga retreat that's spartan and quiet. I've found that to beat stress, we don't need to make massive changes. By tuning into the rhythm of our lifestyle, we can pinpoint times of high stress and take preventative action before it turns into something more."

The link between chronic stress and disease has always fascinated exercise physiologist Karen Anderson. She's worked with many clients who believed their illnesses – diabetes, heart

problems and cancer – resulted from chronic stress.

"To find happiness, we need to uncover the root of why we're stressed," says Karen, who co-owns Vitale Life in Paddington and Bulimba.

"We aren't born with stress hubs in our brains. We manifest them through thought processes, the people around us, our jobs and the general way we view the world.

"People are often frightened to deal with core problems. One client felt it was easier to stay with an abusive husband than be alone. But unless you're willing to face the hard stuff and change, your stress levels stay the same."

Changing our approach to dealing with stress is also essential.

For Alex Jamieson, living in New York City can be stressful enough, but little things make a difference.

"I watch minimal television. I cancelled my cable (connection), which was wonderful, and in wintertime I go to bed at 9pm, much earlier than I normally do. I work exercise into my day by biking with my son to his school and walking for most errands. I consume far less sugar, caffeine and alcohol than I used to, but I still indulge a little to enjoy myself."

It makes sense to take care of our bodies with good food and exercise, says Sharon Kolkka, but working on our minds is key.

"After all, it's the mind that decides whether you get out of bed in the morning to exercise or not. It's the mind that decides whether you eat that piece of cake or not. Understanding your behaviour and dealing with stress at the base level is the best place to begin."





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