

RUNNING ON EMPTY

THE INDIVIDUAL

AN EXHAUSTED OVER-WORKER WHO'S GOING ROUND IN CIRCLES AND STRUGGLING TO SWITCH OFF AS SHE DESPERATELY TRIES TO TACKLE HER STRESS

THE REMEDY

A HOLISTIC MIND-AND-BODY PLAN AT SHA WELLNESS CLINIC IN SPAIN FOR SOME SHORT, SHARP SELF-AWARENESS SHOCKS AND A CRASH COURSE IN MIND-CALMING MEDITATION

There is one particular characteristic I possess that I know really isn't good, that all too easily starts to take over like some kind of personality ivy: I am a workaholic.

I say characteristic but I believe workaholics are made, not born. I certainly wasn't always one. It took time to create this particular brand of tunnel vision. When my father died some years ago, I buried myself in my job and I never managed to properly look up again. Instead, I drowned

myself in deadlines, never wanting to say no to anyone or admit that one more project felt like one too many. Failure, or even turning away, didn't seem like an option. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield: I've taken this Tennyson text far too literally.

But then I finally realised that this pace wasn't making me happy. I felt tired, burnt-out from the constant conveyor belt of stress, my life was out of whack. Breaking the patterns – and even recognising the depths of the problem – was too hard to do on my own.

I found myself on a plane to Spain. Many may think of Sha as a place for weight loss – and it certainly gets great results with its macrobiotic menu – but this is also a medical facility which combines Eastern philosophy and medicine in its approach to general well-being. It has serious intentions, too; founder Alfredo Bataller cured his own chronic illness through diet and naturopathy. The Discovery programme is the newest addition to the schedule and a friend who recently visited described it as 'life-changing'. Superlatives like that are often bandied around but, in this case, I agree.

The concept behind the course is to help restructure and rebalance your life, to look at the percentage of time you spend working compared with the amount spent looking after yourself and on creative pursuits such as learning to sing or dance or paint. My friend, who had dedicated zero time to the latter, is now learning piano, taking a roll-up keyboard with her when she travels for work. This might not sound dramatically life-changing, but for her it was.

My breakthrough came after I went for a cognitive rehabilitation assessment which, thankfully, proved I showed no signs of Alzheimer's (something which secretly terrifies me because post-menopause it seems to take longer to recall words and names). I passed in all areas except recognising number sequences in quick succession; I was shockingly bad at it. This, I was told, could be a sign of deep-rooted tiredness. A few hours later I was sitting in a media room for further tests, with a tape attached to my head and a clip on my ear while the activity and function of my nervous system was projected on to the large screen in front of me.

The doctor gasped. 'You never stop! You are in fight or flight all the time.' (This diagnosis was mirrored by the Traditional Chinese

Medicine practitioner when she took my pulse the next day.) Lines that should have been steady were zigzagging up and down like the tallest tale-teller on a lie-detector machine. I was asked to describe a normal day: meetings, work, more work on the go, crappy TV to relax. 'But you never tell me when you take time to look after yourself?' My delta and theta waves showed that I didn't get enough sleep: my mind wouldn't let me. I was thinking

myself into a state of exhaustion before my body even managed to tire. It didn't look good, particularly in full-colour, blockbuster size.

Meditation, which I'd tried but only ever fitfully, was something I needed to start doing little and often: five minutes up to four times a day. With all the equipment still in place, the doctor could watch my brain activity as I breathed slowly and deeply, a gauge on the screen purring loudly like a contented tiger when I was doing well. It took time to get right and it was only when I concentrated purely on the breath that my brain finally quietened down. Any involved conversation beforehand would set my thinking off again. I was told colouring-in books would be a good activity to force the mind away from its medley of non-stop thoughts. And finding someone to talk to when I got home. 'Please,' the doctor begged me as we finished, 'do something. Because this is your life. And it's flying by.'

I had other treatments too. A one-to-one yoga class helped further with the breath-work I'd been practising. I'm very inflexible but we loosened up some incredibly tight muscles around the breastbone, which it turned out were making my shoulders feel even more hunched. And an Aqua Relax session, similar to watsu, gave some blessed release as I was gently swirled and manipulated around a small pool, emerging feeling freer of body.

But as with any of these courses, the true test is whether you bring something home with you, something you can – and do – action, and then rethink your own patterns. I'm amazed to say that I have. I found a therapist to help me work through some sticky issues. I start and end the day with five minutes of deep meditative breathing, and find at least one other time to close my laptop and inhale. I even began to use a colouring therapy book – not quite daily but regularly and with surprising dedication. And I'll be starting singing lessons soon, something I've long wanted to do.

Other people could have told me a lot of this and I'm sure plenty of friends have tried to. But for me there was something about seeing my innermost self projected as out-of-control lines in full cinema-screen dimensions that brought home just how badly I needed to learn to stop, and how important it was that I got more balance in my life. All work really can make you a very dull girl.

BOOK IT HEALING HOLIDAYS (+44 20 7843 3592; HEALINGHOLIDAYS.CO.UK/CONDENAST) OFFERS A FOUR-NIGHT DISCOVERY PROGRAMME AT SHA WELLNESS CLINIC FROM £2,095 PER PERSON, FULL BOARD, INCLUDING FLIGHTS, TRANSFERS AND ALL ACTIVITIES AND TREATMENTS. **HEALING HOLIDAYS EXCLUSIVE** RECEIVE A WELCOME MASSAGE AND ROOM UPGRADE ON ARRIVAL