

Karen Ann Monsy talks to a stress consultant, a nutritionist and a stress survivor, discovering that when it comes to calling a time-out on this lifestyle scourge, there's no time like here and now

BEATING BACK

STRESS

You know you've reached the end of your tether when you can't tell Sunday from Wednesday, your list of things-to-do is the only image your mind draws up every five minutes, you wake on your day off in a half panic fully convinced you've missed an important deadline — and you're sure anyone who gives you the slightest offence will see the clobbering end of your baseball bat.

The above case scenarios were everything this writer went through about three weeks ago — only I didn't realise it was stress at the time. Unfortunately, like me, too many sail the same tumultuous boat in Dubai's more-work-than-play culture — and let stress creep up and catch them unawares. The impact, if you've been there, is similar to being kissed by a speeding freight train.



MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER: Carole Spiers

One of the biggest — and most obvious — culprits of stress is work-related pressure. While there are no stats on record to prove the theory, the numbers for the local scene are anything but healthy, according to Carole Spiers, BBC guest-broadcaster and leading authority on corporate stress (www.carolespiers.co.uk). The British consultant flies out to the Middle East at least four times a year and has more than just a good idea of rising stress levels in the region. “Everyone needs to find their work/life balance — which doesn’t really exist in Dubai,” she states.

“If you haven’t got any slack, that’s what takes you into the stress zone. Stress is like a light switch that you need to turn on to manage a given situation and turn off to recharge your batteries. But people are on a Ferris wheel at the moment, going from one crisis to another and fire fighting all the time. You can top up an old car battery, but you can’t avoid buying a new one; it’s no different for the human machine,” she sums up.

Signs of stress are there for individuals to see but they don’t necessarily listen to those warn-

EATING RIGHT: Belinda Rennie.
KT Photo/ Kiran Prasad

ing signs because there’s an inability to switch off, Carole feels. And how can one switch off from work if the CEO is on his Blackberry at 11pm, emailing people and expecting responses? “You’ve got people working 24/7 because that’s the culture certain businesses pride themselves on.”

On the other hand, though the thought of a break appeals to all, very few actually translate that into more than just talk. Carole explains this is partly because of “the need to be needed”. “The common question is: How can you

manage without me? You start worrying about whether your job is at risk. You’re needed,” she assures, “but are you needed 24/7? If yes, well, you know something; if you were ill, the office would not burn down!”

The effects of a burnout can be severe. One of Carole’s clients is a top lawyer in London... or rather, used to be. “The lady was introduced to me by her PA because of symptoms of stress she was seeing. When I spoke to her she assured me she was completely in control and there was nothing to worry about. Three months later, her secretary asked if I’d go see her again — only she was no longer in London; she was in a Priory hospital. Her body had broken down... I’m still seeing her today,” says Carole, “but she’ll be lucky if she ever gets back to working even part-time again.”

There are different levels of stress, but if you’re running away with the illusion that only working professionals have reason to be hassled, you can stop making tracks now. Carole says everybody is susceptible to stress — even homemakers and kids. In their position of looking after the family, she points out that the



homemaker is constantly under pressure, adding, “I’ve got three children, I know!”

Stress and nutrition

Nutritionist Belinda Rennie has 18 years of experience in her field and she’s only too familiar with the effects of stress on one’s diet. “When people are stressed, they have a lot of unregulated blood sugar,” she explains. “They like to skip meals because they haven’t got the time to think, plan and prepare meals. So they opt for fast foods or quick sugary snacks that they can pick up from the petrol station or on the way back home.” Today, she says, about 80 per cent of the patients she treats at the Cooper Health Clinic on Dubai’s Al Wasl Road suffer from imbalances in their bodies, of which stress is a component.

“During stress, the body is in a fast mode. Blood that is normally directed to the digestive system to produce digestive enzymes is diverted away to the muscles and other areas of fight and flight (a person’s natural response to a stressful situation),” cautions the 46-year-old Australian. “If the person can’t relax, he could soon have a panic attack, have issues sleep-



THINKING POSITIVE: Katrina Thornely

ing, family relationships could deteriorate, and work performance would be less effective. Along with other contributors, stress can cause a person to have more sick days than anything else.”

Good nutrition may not completely erase health issues, but it does help solve a lot of problems. “When a person starts eating more regularly, starts having breakfast and the right types of foods, their blood sugar rises,” says Belinda. “As a result, their energy and enjoyment of life improves as well.”

Thinking positive

Health concerns, as a source of stress, are many. But in some cases, such as in arthritic patients, stress may even function as a trigger. Realising the need to help people battle everyday frustrations and thus reduce stress, the Emirates Arthritic Foundation recently held a workshop to educate people on the subject.

Patient support director for the foundation Katrina Thornely has had arthritis since she was a year old. The biological medication she is on costs Dh70,000 a year — a figure that should be enough to induce a full-blown panic attack on its own. “Our main motive was to reduce the amount of stress in our patients’ lives,” says Katrina. “Arthritis usually sets in at critical [read: harrowing] points in our lives when we don’t need things to get any worse! We’re trying to help people deal with their levels of stress and allow their bodies to recover from such situations.”

Much of the workshop focused on breathing techniques and laughter — not exactly the first solutions you’d think of to combat arthritic pain. Says Katrina, “If you fake laughing, it’s not as powerful as a normal laugh. Laugh-



BREATHING EASY: Participants practise breathing techniques during a workshop by Emirates Arthritis Foundation

ter is beneficial for breathing as it helps you take deeper breaths and helps the oxygen flow into the body which can boost the immune system.”

Speaking to the bubbly 28-year-old, you wouldn't think stress played its mind games with her too. Katrina begs to differ. “When dealing with chronic conditions it's about the state of mind as well. It can be very frustrating I don't know what it's like to wear stiletto heels, go mountain climbing etc. The frustration is for people who've had that taken away from them. But it's about having people focus on what they can do instead of what they can't. You can mope around and let the disease control you or you can take control of your life.” Every day is a new day. The key is taking it one step at a time.

Sometimes though, you just need a professional ear and a helping hand. Emirati Alia Abdulla (name changed) could tell you a different story of endurance but it's probably not one that many would choose to come forward with.

Alia began displaying symptoms for the skin disease lupus since she was 12-years-old, but doctors would diagnose the disease for what it really was only 15 long years later. Till then, her parents went from one hospital to the next, both locally and abroad, trying to find answers to a condition that left their daughter with red

spots, butterfly rashes and excessive hair fall. “For 15 years, I forgot about the issue and lived my life,” says Alia. “Every time I felt some pain, I'd give myself an explanation. I never knew why I always suffered from exhaustion more than others around me.”

When the disease was finally diagnosed, everything went downhill. “I'd never heard of lupus in my life,” Alia recounts. “I didn't believe my rheumatologist in the beginning. I went home and read about it online, and I was shocked. I refused to take the required medication and during some sessions, my rheumatologist would spend 45 minutes just trying to convince me. It was very difficult to take a decision regarding the medicines because of their side effects, one of which was depression.”

The stress of “not being able to work as before” was just one factor that worsened Alia's state of depression — to the extent of taking indefinite leave from work. “Many times, I'd wake up in the morning with aches. I hated socialising or talking to people because I felt they were looking at me sympathetically. I'd only wear dark clothes. The idea of not being able to continue with activities I used to — I was a very hyper-active person before — plus all the tablets I had to take was just too much.”

The dark days are a thing of the past, but Alia remains ever grate-

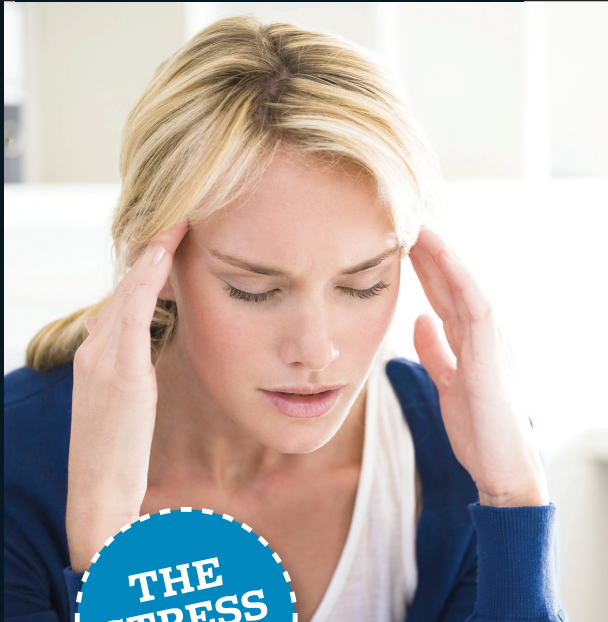
ful to her doctor. “If it weren't for his support, I don't know what I would've done. He was part rheumatologist, part psychiatrist for me. I realised that perhaps the condition wasn't so severe but I was killing myself. Slowly, I changed my way of living. I don't put myself through stressful activities now. I try to enjoy my time, wear colourful dresses and motivate myself.”

She keeps her advice simple. “Think positively. Appreciate and accept yourself.” As for herself, Alia says she's much happier now. “Life is almost back to normal.”

[Karen went into a dead faint at her alarmingly high score on the stress test (see next page), and now wants reassurance that she's not alone. How much did you score? Write to her at karen@khaleejtimes.com]

NUTRITIONAL TIPS

- > Eat breakfast
- > Reduce caffeine and increase water intake
- > Eat more regularly throughout the day; foods that contain a balance of protein and carbohydrates
- > Consider a nutritional supplement that contains extra B group vitamins, vitamin C.
- > Ask for help when you need it. Don't wait for a critical health event.



THE
STRESS
TEST

How stressed am I?

Add up the numbers next to each statement that you agree with. Scores over 10 suggest it's time to sound the alarm and find yourself a stress-buster!

I spend so long at work that my outside relationships are suffering.

- 1 = Not at all
- 2 = Sometimes
- 3 = Most of the time

I'm so busy I find it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the job in front of me.

- 1 = Rarely
- 2 = Sometimes
- 3 = Most of the time

I always get a good night's sleep without worrying about work.

- 1 = Most of the time
- 2 = Sometimes
- 3 = Rarely

Recently I've found it more difficult to control my emotions.

- 1 = Not at all
- 2 = Sometimes
- 3 = Most of the time

I feel tired during the day.

- 1 = Very rarely
- 2 = Sometimes
- 3 = Most of the time