

helped me become more aware of it and to keep it in check more easily.

RATING: 3/5

A session of four weekly two-hour Relaxation Classes at the Relaxation for Living Institute costs from £60. Enq (020) 7439 4277; rfi.co.uk

**THE MASSAGE/
COUNSELLING SESSION
TESTER: KERRY POTTER**

Stress gets an unfairly bad press, I think. I'm as stressed as the next woman – I live in a lightning-paced city, have an arduous commute, a busy job, worry about said job being made redundant, fret about my work/life balance, and so on. But isn't this just how life is? Call me perverse, but I view stress as a badge of honour – it speaks of a life lived to the full, of challenges and achievements. So it's with mixed feelings that I visit Tasch Van Zyl at London's Hale Clinic for a two-hour Psycho-dynamic Massage treatment, an anxiety-alleviating process that combines massage and counselling – the former to release physical blockages, the latter emotional ones.

Tasch, however, wins me over with her personable manner. We chat about my symptoms: I have lower-back pain that gets worse with stress and I'm suffering from insomniac periods, during which my mind races as I forward-plan the coming day in my mind in meticulous detail. Tasch tells me that I thrive on stress, but I need to learn when to give myself a break.

We move on to a blissful massage, which covers my back, feet and head. While Tasch works, we do a visualisation-meets-meditation exercise. I am told to imagine a scenario in which I am relaxed and encourage stray thoughts to leave my mind. When my mind starts racing in future, she wants me to remember this moment. Soon, I'm lying in the sunshine, gazing up at a blue sky, watching helium balloons (my unwelcome thoughts and stressful moments) float away. Tasch talks to me throughout. I can't remember what she says and then, suddenly, I'm back to real life. The room seems lighter and brighter, as do my mood and body. I may

have arrived a stressed-out sceptic, but I leave feeling unfeasibly serene.

VERDICT: A week on, my backache and insomnia have lessened. My ability to let things go has improved and I feel a lot calmer. Yes, it's an expensive treatment, but I would happily forgo a sorrows-drowning night out for this.

RATING: 4/5

A one-hour Psycho-dynamic Massage is £90 at The Hale Clinic. Enq (020) 7631 0156; haleclinic.com

**THE WORKOUT
TESTER: HANNAHSWERLING**

As PA to the editor in chief of ELLE, life can be stressful. A never-ending to-do list and unrelenting schedule ensure that I rarely take time to stop and breathe. This frenetic activity is what I love about my job, but it's also a source of anxiety. As a result, I'm becoming easily frustrated (God help the next person who gets in my way as I tear through Bond Street tube station on my way into work), and I'm finding it difficult to switch off in the evenings. My supposed stress reliever is a t'ai chi class, which should help me become calm, centred and grounded. A Chinese method of self-development, t'ai chi is meant to combine graceful movement, effortless power and self-discipline via a mix of meditative, medical and martial expertise.

After a particularly hectic day, I rush to my class from work, praying that salvation awaits me in a school hall in west London. I'm greeted by my instructor, Derek, possibly the calmest person I have ever met. There are 20 other students in the class and Derek explains we will be practising a sequence of actions called Eight Pieces of Silk Brocade, all moves designed to stretch the body and calm the mind. The cynic in me is on high alert. Can I possibly take moves called 'Shoot the Golden Eagle' and 'Cow Looks Behind at the Moon' seriously?

Am I the cow? As we begin, Derek shows us how to breathe deeply, to lower our heartbeat and blood pressure. He explains that the stretching relaxes tense, stiff muscles, while practising coordinated movements improves balance and brain function. After just five minutes, the rhythmic breathing and gentle movements lull me into peaceful distraction.

VERDICT: I loved the relaxed and supportive atmosphere of the class and have just signed up for the 12-week course. The basic principles have helped me learn to live in the present, instead of constantly anticipating my next task. The relaxation techniques are already helping me cope with the daily chaos.

RATING: 5/5

A 12-week T'ai chi Course at the Mei Quan Academy of Taiji costs £108. Enq 07957 430145; meiquan.co.uk

**THE HYPNOTHERAPY
TESTER: SUSAN WARD
DAVIES**

I'm confident in most situations, but I react totally irrationally when it comes to public speaking. The fear came out of nowhere, years ago. I'd arrived late to

'The cynic in me is on HIGH ALERT. Can I possibly take moves called "Cow Looks Behind at the Moon" seriously? Am I the COW?'

speaking on a panel at what I thought was an informal press conference. But when I arrived, it was like the UN and I had to sit at a massive U-shaped table complete with microphones and simultaneous translators. As it came to my turn to speak, my palms were sweaty, my mouth went dry, my heart practically went into orbit and my voice emerged as a tremulous squeak. The memory still makes me anxious and since then I've tried my best to avoid such situations. In fact, it's got to the stage where I don't even like everyone ➤