

CALM DOWN DEAR

You know what makes Sharon Wright stressed? Pointing out that she's stressed, that's what



Just as I'm attempting to relax, the reflexologist prods a bit of foot and I let out a yowl. 'Hmm,' she says, 'thought so.' I raise my head anxiously, giving myself a nice triple chin. What?

If I'm not long for this world, do say. 'It's your solar plexus,' she sighs sagely. 'That's a sign of stress.' Well, there's a surprise. Any treatment involving rasping pan pipes and ylang-ylang starts with the news that you're stressed. Then you're told how bad stress is for you – as if you didn't know.

I've come to realise that nothing is more guaranteed to make me feel tense than treatments touted as 'relaxing'. I've barely inhaled a lungful of Serenity joss stick smoke before the alternative therapist's brow creases and the sighing begins. In a voice that suggests the Last Chance Saloon, I'm told about all the tension I'm 'holding'.

It used to be the hands-on gang – those who rub, wiggle or prod, batik tunic optional – who could tell I was uptight. Then I made the mistake of having my aura checked. It was awful, naturally. She did her best with some healing waving to the low moan of a Tibetan singing bowl CD but, well, there was a lot of work ahead, that's all she was saying. I imagined a sort of greenish Fungus the Bogyman-haze clinging to me, and asking my husband: 'Does my aura look flat in this?' So, as usual, I left more wound up than I arrived. Oh, and poorer. The scented, candlelit world of the stress-busting industry demands far from soothing fees before you shuffle off, feeling bad that you don't feel good.

The final straw came last month when I gave yoga a go. Everyone from Madge to the mums down the playground swears by it, so I went along in my new stretch pants and enormous sports bra, all eager for a bit of peace and tranquillity. I left with a throbbing at the temples.

There were four of us in the class and soon it was all too reminiscent of those painful PE lessons that put me off exercise in the first place. 'Sharon! Why are you looking out of the window?

Focus!' snapped the Yoga Ogre. Then, 'Sharon! Your left foot! Left!' Well, I thought, my teeth clenched, this is relaxing. When she shouted at me for having 'tense shoulders' and bellowed, 'You must relax!' I decided she was sending me round the wrong kind of bend.

Relax, they all say. Hey, what a good idea! Unfortunately, this laughably unrealistic advice takes no account of your real-world roles as lover, mother, bill-payer and wage slave. It's hard to practise nostril-breathing when you're rounding the corner at a gallop on the school run. Or sun salutations when your five-year-old is shouting: 'Mummy! Tamagotchi's done a poo!' And what exactly should you 'let go' – the washing, the overdraft, the demands of the PTA or this month's work deadlines?

Of course, alternative therapy is a way of dodging the obvious. We know, deep down, that a vigorous scrub of the oven or a stomp up a big hill would burn off a goodly amount of stress hormones, but neither offers the 'lying on a couch covered in towels' option, does it?

Truth is, I think we've lost the plot a bit over stress. Too often we confuse it with, well, life. My friend Emma went to a hen party recently where a guest told the bride-to-be she was looking stressed. 'Her face fell,' says Emma. 'It was just a totally inappropriate thing to say.' Indeed. Getting married is a big deal – you're supposed to get a bit worked up. Ditto moving house, tackling a new work project, whatever.

So this is where we're at: being stressed about being stressed. 'People use the word stress a lot,' says my friend Marie. 'But they seldom say excitement, do they? Excitement is a positive thing, so that's how I try to view things that give me the thumping heart these days.' And God knows she has plenty of 'excitement' in her life – teaching at an inner-London comprehensive. She's got nothing to lose and all those unspent alternative therapy fees to gain.

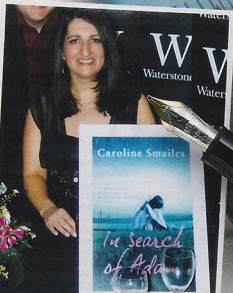
Me, I'm going to do less worrying and more staring out of windows. Just don't tell the Yoga Ogre. □

'Nothing is more guaranteed to make me feel tense than treatments touted as relaxing'

MY REBEL MOMENT



Caroline traded marking essays for book signings



Caroline Smailes

In Search of Adam

'I DECIDED NOT TO BE A NEARLY WOMAN'

When Caroline Smailes, 33, switched on daytime TV, she had no idea a career swerve was on the cards

I grabbed a sandwich and settled in front of the TV for a light-relief lunch break. It would have to be quick – I was knee-deep in marking and research. A repeat of *Richard & Judy* came on, talking about people not following their dreams, and as I half-listened, one phrase nailed my attention: 'She's a *nearly woman*.' I sat up with a jolt. 'Oh my God!' I thought. 'Is that me? Am I a nearly woman?'

All my life I've been writing – filling diaries, jotting down scraps of novels – but always in secret. I'd never had the confidence to become a 'proper' writer, choosing to be an academic instead. Two years ago, I was a lecturer in linguistics and studying for a PhD, while looking after my three children, Jacob, then seven, Ben, five, and Poppy, two. It was safe, but it wasn't my dream. At that moment, it hit me that I didn't want to look back on my life and think: 'I *nearly* wrote a novel.'

That night, I told my husband Gary I wanted to give up my university career to have a stab at being a writer. I thought he might tell me to get real, but when he told me to go for it, I was terrified and excited all at once. I felt irresponsible rejecting financial security, following my heart with no idea where it might lead. And I was worried – would it turn out I just had a restless nature?

There was one way to find out. In a month, we'd scraped together the £3,000 I needed to enrol on a two-year creative writing MA, and Gary and my mother-in-law agreed to juggle childcare when I was out. Everything

was in place – but as I walked into my first class, I panicked. Was I was deluding myself?

Having to submit 5,000 words every three weeks soon turned writing from a secret hobby into a priority. Slowly, my novel, *In Search Of Adam*, about a woman's search for identity, began to take shape. I'd scribble away in the car as I waited to pick up the kids from school and jot ideas on anything that came to hand – even tissues! Most nights, I'd stay up late writing, then heave myself out of bed at 6.30am when the children woke up.

In August 2006, the course finished. I handed in my novel and after months of writing, found myself at a loss. Tapping away at my laptop one day, I started a blog hoping for advice, and posted extracts from the book. Immediately emails pinged back, with comments like: 'Wow! I want more!' But I had no idea about how to get my book on the shelves – I had only sent it to my tutor. 'I need a fairy godmother,' I wrote. Then I received an email: 'Will a publisher do?' She read my manuscript and within days I had a contract. I could hardly believe it – things like that only happened in, well, books.

A precious memory from my book launch is of Jacob saying how proud he was of me. Now I'm in the middle of my second book and looking forward to a future as a writer. And I don't have to worry about being a 'nearly woman' any more. □

In Search of Adam by Caroline Smailes is published by The Friday Project (£12.99), specialists in finding writers through blogs.



You never know when inspiration might strike...



Caroline's daughter Poppy is her biggest fan

Have you had a rebel moment? If you'd like to share your own story in eve, email alix.walker@haymarket.com with a brief outline.