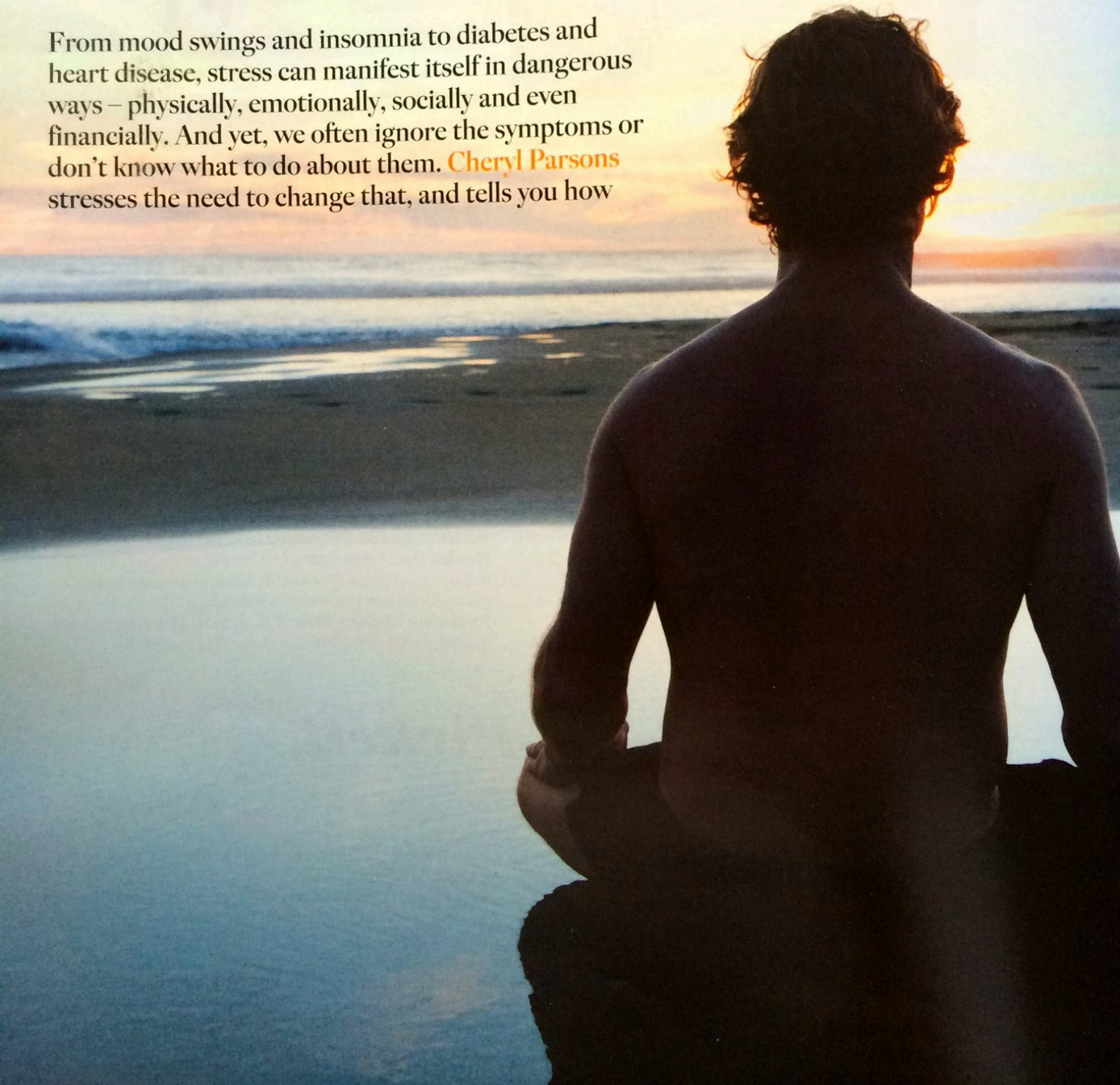


Melting point

From mood swings and insomnia to diabetes and heart disease, stress can manifest itself in dangerous ways – physically, emotionally, socially and even financially. And yet, we often ignore the symptoms or don't know what to do about them. **Cheryl Parsons** stresses the need to change that, and tells you how



I was told I was in danger of a heart attack and I hadn't even hit 40. I was moody and getting very little sleep, and the sleep I did get through exhaustion would be filled with nightmares. I would wake up in a cold sweat, sometimes crying uncontrollably," recalls Peter*, a restaurant owner and divorcé with two children. The pressure of running a business and the debt of owning a house that had plummeted in value, combined with the stress of a divorce, had pushed Peter to the verge of a breakdown. "I started to have dizzy spells, feel flutters in my heartbeat and shortness of breath during work. But I felt I had to keep things to myself, so as not to worry my family – I felt like I was going to explode."

If we had the flu, a chronic headache or even suspected cancer, the first thing we would do is call a doctor. But, all too often, stories of stress unfold behind closed doors, beneath the faces of seemingly "happy" people – until one day the pressure gauge hits a dangerously high level. "I think in today's society, we often undermine the effects of stress on the body – we have a 'buck up and move on' attitude. We wait until our bodies break down before getting the help that we really need," says Dr Saliha Afridi, a clinical psychologist and the managing director of The LightHouse Arabia, a Dubai-based community mental-health clinic. "Today, many governments are focusing on issues such as obesity and diabetes, not realising that stress is at the root of many of these problems. In reality, over 80 per cent of all diseases are caused by the body experiencing more stress than it can handle."

A few years ago, Chris's* father passed away and, a month later, he had to liquidate his company because of the recession. Shortly after that, he moved to Dubai with his pregnant wife and two children, where he took on a demanding role on a major commercial project. Little did he know at the time that his body and mind were undergoing major stress: "I pulled up to work as normal one morning but just could not physically get out of my car. My mouth was dry, thoughts were spinning in my head like a washing machine. I couldn't deal with anything. For a few months up until that day, I hadn't been sleeping too well and had avoided socialising with anyone."

'Yoga and psychology helped me get over the stress of losing my baby'

I had a miscarriage at 16 weeks. Apart from my husband and an old boss and friend, I hadn't told anyone – not even my two kids. I could only cry at home in my bed – that was the only moment that I had to myself. I lost my confidence and was highly emotional – sometimes I just wanted to scream. Eventually I went to a psychologist, and that, combined with yoga, helped me tremendously, teaching me to be present, to accept my body and let go of all the "what-if" scenarios. The final savasana [resting pose] in yoga class became my stress release – the tears literally fell like a fountain. Afterwards I felt as if I had dropped my bag of stress – I felt released. The day I realised that no matter what, I would always remember my baby in my heart, I could truly let go. It's been a few years on and I now have a beautiful daughter.

Eva*, Dubai

USEFUL CONTACTS

Zen Yoga: www.yoga.ae, 04 367 0435

The LightHouse Arabia: www.lighthousearabia.com, 04 380 9298

Lifeworks: www.counsellingdubai.com, 04 394 2464

"I had to go to my new boss and tell him I was unable to function and did not know what to do. I couldn't understand what was happening to me – it was frightening. He advised me to go home and consult a professional psychiatrist, which I did that very day. She helped me make sense of my thoughts, by encouraging me to write down everything that was causing me stress. Any problem I could not control or influence, I had to try and ignore."

Alarming, such accounts of stress have become too common. On a physical level, stress can manifest itself in a multitude of health problems, from chronic insomnia, inexplicable aches and pains and weight issues to autoimmune diseases and digestive problems.



It's important to recognise the signs that you are stressed before you find yourself overwhelmed.

Left to spiral, stress can lead to diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease – all a direct result of placing our bodies under too much stress.

Emotionally, symptoms include anxiety, restlessness, irritability, depression and eventually the feeling of total “burnout”. A person under extreme stress may also withdraw from social groups and even turn to alcohol or drug abuse.

“Marriages can fall apart. Individuals can lose their jobs. Stress truly has far-reaching negative effects if not managed well,” says Afridi. “Schools, corporations, and ministries all need to take ownership of this – it is a major problem. Our unhealthy relationship with electronics is also largely to blame; we are constantly living in a virtual world that is pumping us with all kinds of information, which is often useless. We are ‘mind full’ and not mindful at any given moment.”

“With the advent of mobile phones, instant messaging and emails, there no longer

appears to be a clear boundary between the self, home and working life – people do not have the downtime or the space that is so necessary for stress repair,” agrees Helen Williams, a personal development consultant and the director of Lifeworks in Dubai.

“People lose the connection to their own sense of self, which then leads to a breakdown of their physical, mental and emotional health. Stress, depression and anxiety become the normal way of feeling.”

Williams describes stress as “a cycle of helplessness and loss of power”, but it’s a cycle that you can break out of. Whether you are feeling burnt out or on the edge of an emotional or physical breakdown, or even just uncharacteristically off-balance, there is no shame in seeking help. The important thing is not to leave it until it’s too late.

**All names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals*

Cheryl Parsons is a yoga instructor at Zen Yoga and a writer who has been based in Dubai for nearly a decade. Visit her website: www.thepeacefully.com

Reducing stress

- 1 EXERCISE** – at least 30 minutes three times a week; the positive effects are significant.
- 2 SLEEP** – it’s the first thing to get affected when we are under pressure, so we must be very protective of the quality and quantity of our sleep.
- 3 THE GOOD LIFE** – go to a comedy, hang out with light-hearted friends, spend time with your kids – basically inject your life with periodic doses of the things that bring you joy.
- 4 SHUTDOWN AND REBOOT** – most of our lives are hyper-scheduled. Have some unplanned time every week to allow yourself a few precious moments of shutdown.
- 5 REFLECT AND MEDITATE** – even five minutes a day is highly beneficial. Try the guided meditation app Omvana (www.omvana.com).
- 6 CONNECT** – it’s ironic how disconnected we have become despite being wired in almost all the time. Turn off your devices and connect with the details of the moment rather than using your phone to capture it.
- 7 SACRED SPACE** – allot sacred times and places where devices are not allowed.
- 8 EYE CONTACT** – look at each other when you talk, and listen wholeheartedly.
- 9 GET TOGETHER** – chat with your friends and families about world rather than sitting together looking on your tablets or phones.
- 10 ASK FOR HELP** – feeling overwhelmed? Share your feelings with loved ones and get the help you need.

Saliha Afridi, clinical psychologist