

TOTAL BODY RELAXATION

Like many people, I battle with my weight. Or rather, I battle with a very specific bit of weight – the wodge of flab around my middle that simply won't budge, no matter what I do.

I eat a ludicrously healthy diet (and not that much of it) and exercise like a maniac. I've tried every regime under the sun, including the most stringent fasts and the toughest bootcamps, but my tubby tummy stays put.

So I was intrigued to hear about the Body Retreat's Stress Reset. Run by clinical hypnotherapist Juls Abernethy and fitness expert Julie Brealy, the aim is to equip you with tools and techniques to put stress back in its box. While it's not billed specifically as a weight loss regime, losing pounds and inches is pretty much guaranteed. "It's not the emphasis of the retreat but it's a nice by-product," says Juls. "We have seen some women lose four inches from their waist in just five days."

I drive down a maze of tiny Somerset lanes to reach my home for the next four nights – a comfortable, stylish, modern house set in the middle of fields. The silence is bewitching. Groups are kept purposely small (no more than six) and, with our bedrooms all tagged with our names, it has the feel of a very luxurious boarding school. Sitting on a big sofa, sipping mugs of herbal tea, Juls explains that the programme revolves around four pillars – behaviour, exercise, nutrition and R&R (rest and relaxation).

Meditate regularly...

...because brain-imaging research has shown major stress can reduce the amount of grey matter in the regions of the brain that regulate emotions and self-control. This in turn can make it harder to deal with stress in the future. But experts say regularly practicing stress-management techniques like meditation can help reverse this.

Jane Alexander kills two birds with one stone in Somerset: stress and the dreaded belly bulge



STRESS IS DEVASTATING

She explains that, while a certain amount of stress in life is fine, when it becomes chronic our hormones fall out of balance. For example, the stress hormone cortisol is naturally released throughout the day. It should be at its highest in the mornings on waking, to help you wake up and get up, and should gradually taper off through the day so you can fall asleep at night. However, chronic stress not only increases overall cortisol levels but disrupts the natural cortisol cycle with a whole series of knock-on effects, raising blood sugar levels, making you crave sugar, reducing your ability to burn fat, increasing the speed at which you store fat and causing other hormones and neurochemicals to fall out of sync. Above all, this cascade of reactions causes fat to be stored around the abdomen – giving you the typical stress belly, but it also making your liver fatty.

BEAT THE BULGES

The retreat kicks off with a gentle detox to help support the liver. Days start quite early, with a gentle knock on our bedroom doors, and a cheery "Good Morning!" (no stressy alarm calls required here). We wander out, in our bath robes, to take a mug of hot lemon before withdrawing back to our rooms to sip our drinks and engage in a good session of vigorous body brushing (to help stimulate lymph flow for the detox effect).

Then it's downstairs, where Julie puts us through a short sharp burst of circuit training. She explains that although there is a lot of exercise here (about five hours a day) it's all either low intensity (long walks out in the surrounding lanes and fields, yoga, Pilates) or concentrated bouts of higher intensity exercise. My two-hour exercise frenzies are doing me no favours, she says. More than

BODY SHOCKER

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45 minutes of intense exercise spikes cortisol levels and panics the body into laying down abdominal fat.

After our workout, there's twenty minutes in the sauna (more detoxing) and a quick splash in the pool before breakfast. The food is delicious here and surprisingly plentiful. It's all about balancing hormones and blood sugar levels, so there are three main meals a day and three small snacks in between. Portions are never exactly huge, but you don't really feel hungry.



LIFESTYLE RETHINK

The penny starts to drop. I'm eating too little and exercising too hard. I'd expected hours of lounging around, chilling, but the days pass in a blur of activity and a slew of different classes from both Julie and visiting experts. The idea is that you aren't left on your own to worry about your stress. In between there are talks on nutrition, mindfulness and stress in general, including a visit from nutritional therapist Kate Delmar-Morgan. When we do have the odd hour or two free, we all (without exception) fell asleep. Mindfulness is another major component of the retreat with dedicated sessions teaching us how to focus on being in the now. "It's all about building new healthy habits," says Julie. "Little changes accumulate. I like to think about little steps leading to big changes."

A session of bodywork is included (from superb local therapist Pippa Canney) and every day ends with a dedicated sleep hypnotherapy session with Julie. We get ready for bed and snuggle up in blankets on sofas and are guided

into a deep state of relaxation during which Julie gently persuades us to focus on making healthy, helpful changes. At the end of the session, we're silently ushered off to our rooms and can fall straight into bed and deep restful sleep. Good sleep is another vital factor in combating stress and weight gain. Sleep deprivation also elevates cortisol levels and, just to make it worse, research has found that even one night of sleep loss can increase your appetite.

I came to realise that, whenever I visit a spa or retreat, I find myself stressing about what I'm supposed to be doing or where I'm supposed to be, but that feeling vanished here. Everything is organised for you, leaving you free to relax, totally. It is a wonderful feeling.

My parting consultation with Julie was a revelation. I'd lost an incredible eight pounds in weight; six inches in total from my hips, waist and chest and two percent body fat. My fellow retreaters lost equally impressive amounts (our average was seven pounds). But, more importantly, we'd learned absolutely invaluable lessons about how to deal with stress and how to lose the bloat.

Shift your stress weight

The low-down on losing that uptight tummy

As the retreat showed, you can lose a lot of weight very swiftly. But Juls points out that, to make real inroads into beating the stress bulge, you need to take a longer viewpoint. "Studies suggest that it can take up to six weeks to lose visceral fat while laid-down subcutaneous fat can take up to six months to shift. But you can shift it." Here are the Body Retreat's top tips for losing stress weight.

The low-down on losing that uptight tummy...

FACTOR 1: DIET

Reduce dairy, wheat and red meat which are hard for the body to digest.

- Ideally cut out foods which stress the liver, such as alcohol, sugar and all processed food (or cut right down).
- Cut out caffeine which stresses the adrenal glands. Use herbal teas instead.
- Have regular detoxes to allow your internal organs the chance to rest and recover.
- Keep your meals balanced – a sensible mix of vegetables, protein, low GL carbohydrates and good fat.
- Eating regularly throughout the day balances blood sugar levels. Think in terms of three balanced meals and three small snacks.
- Keep hydrated. Water helps to dilute toxins, increases energy levels and mental clarity. It also helps you feel full so you don't overeat. But drink water separately from meals as it dilutes digestive enzymes and stomach acid.

FACTOR 2: EXERCISE

- High intensity training is the most powerful tool for losing fat in general. But think in terms of short sharp bursts. Two 8-10 minute sessions five days a week are ideal, so Investigate HIT or Tabata training.
- Also ensure you have at least 30 minutes of low intensity physical exercise every day.

FACTOR 3: BEHAVIOUR

- Recognise that it's okay to take the time and effort to respect and protect your body – it's not selfish or a waste of time. If you feel uncomfortable with this, maybe consider talking to a counsellor.



DID YOU KNOW?

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Super smoothie

The Body Retreat loves smoothies. "They take pressure off the digestive system and allow the nutrients to be easily used by the body," says Juls. But she warns that they need to be vegetable based – and keep them small in size. This Super V8 smoothie is a stalwart of the Stress Reset retreat. Serves one.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 sticks of celery
- 1/2 cucumber
- 1/2 bag baby spinach
- 1 large handful parsley
- 1/2 baby gem lettuce
- 2 kale leaves
- handful seedless grapes
- 1 heaped tsp of matcha powder (not essential but this gives an extra boost of antioxidant power to your smoothie)

Blitz in a blender just before drinking. Sip it slowly and mindfully.

- Start becoming mindful – even if it's only for a few seconds every day. Practice mindful eating and being really aware of each mouthful you have.
- People who think they're stressed, are stressed. Reinforce the thoughts, 'I can cope. I have strategies that can help.'
- Make sleep a priority. Find behavioural patterns that work for you. Maybe having a bath with oils before bed, or listening to a relaxation track.

FACTOR 4: R&R

- Work on building your relaxation reflex so you can switch it on whenever you feel stress. Start by making time each week to do something you find relaxing (take a long walk in the park, a deep soak with aromatherapy oils, or have a massage).
- Make time twice a day simply to take three long slow deep breaths (this relaxes the diaphragm and stills your mind just long enough to begin to build up your reflex).

A Stress Reset retreat (4 nights) costs from £1,350 for a shared room in Somerset. Visit thebodyretreat.co.uk for full details. Jane Alexander is the author of *The Detox Plan* and *The Detox Pack*. *The Detox Plan* is now updated and available for Kindle.