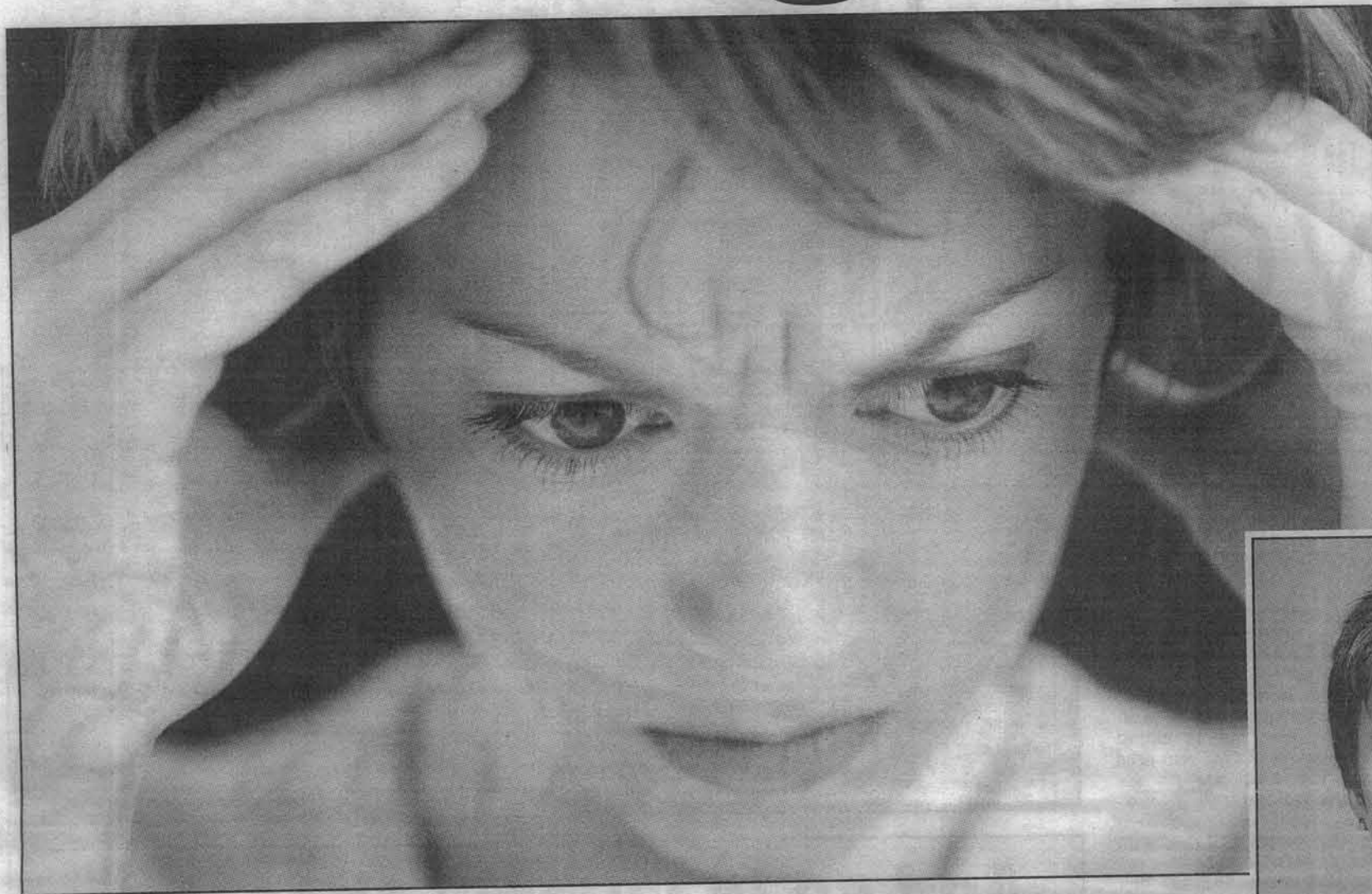


Wow!

Beating stress



STRESSED OUT? Carolyn Curtin (below) gives you some simple solutions to achieving a more chilled out state of mind.

Stress! It's the swearword of the 21st century. Carolyn Curtin, who runs Empowering Workshops in Cork City, gives a lowdown on the condition — and offers advice on how to beat it using simple breathing techniques



KEEPING body, mind and soul together has always been important — but never more so than nowadays when the pace of life seems to grow faster and faster.

There is huge emphasis on keeping fit and healthy and people are becoming more conscious of the importance of taking time out from a busy schedule to relax and renew, whether that is going for a massage or a walk by the sea.

Still, for some, finding the time for these things is not a priority in their lives until they become sick. Depression, panic attacks and asthma are just some of the illnesses that are on the increase. What can we do to protect ourselves from ill-health?

Well, there are many things — like a positive outlook, listening to the needs of your body and responding to these needs. For example if you feel like you may be getting a cold or flu, at the first signs include extra vitamin C in your diet, drink more water to flush out any toxins, keep the body hydrated and take more time to rest to help the body heal. Often this will be enough to allow for a quick recovery. Or if you are feeling very run down and tired, look to your lifestyle and see what it is you need to change.

Long-term stress can put all the organs in the body under extreme pressure, especially the heart and digestive system. But there are ways you can counteract the stresses in life and one of those is 'conscious breathing'.

You see, when you are in a stressful state your heartbeat quickens, your breathing becomes shallow and the body responds to this by producing the stress hormone adren-

alin. You can undo all this by simply changing your breathing pattern in that moment by taking long, slow deep breaths, not breathing too fast or too slow, but at a calm and easy pace that is comfortable. As your breathing becomes slower and deeper your body will return to a relaxed state.

An easy way to do this is by counting. For example as you breathe in, count one and two and three and as you breathe out, count one and two and three. Once you begin to calm down and relax you may be able to count to four. Then after a few more breaths try to add an extra number to the out breath e.g. breathing in — one and two and three and four, and breathing out — one and two and three and four and five. That is called deepening the breath.

Often people find they have been breathing very shallow and fast for years and may suffer more from lung infections because of this. The lower lungs, which are damp and contain stale air when we are not breathing deeply, can become infected more easily. Another easy way to train yourself in deep breathing is to place your right hand on your tummy and the other on your sternum, in the middle of your chest. Sit up straight and be conscious of keeping your sternum raised, even as you breathe out.

The wonderful thing is that you will find that in order to do this properly you need to use your diaphragm muscles, pulling these muscles in to empty the lungs and expanding them to help fill the lungs. Not only will this massage your internal organs, giving them a fresh supply of blood, but it will also tone up your tummy muscles!

Deep breathing also revitalises the body by bringing more oxygen to every cell in your body. So overall it is very good for our mental and physical health. The next time you are sitting in a traffic jam, practice your deep breathing and I promise you traffic jams will no longer be as stressful.

Using affirmations and/or visualisation with these breathing techniques can be a great benefit to anyone suffering from anxiety, depression or insomnia. For example, if you are anxious about something practice the breathing technique above and as you are breathing in think the words 'I am' and as you breathe out think of the word 'peaceful' and continue doing that until you feel yourself become more peaceful.

If you are finding it difficult to get to sleep at night, practice the above technique and visualise that you are lying on warm sand. Imagine the sound of the ocean waves as they lap against the seashore and feel the soft warm breeze caress you. You will drift off to sleep quickly and in a relaxed state of mind, ensuring a good nights rest.

These are only a few of the techniques you can learn at a six week Meditation/Creative Visualisation evening course beginning this month in Cork.

Other courses available are Louise Hay's 10-week course called You Can Heal Your Life and a six-week course entitled Discovering Your Ideal Career.

For more information on evening courses or day workshops in Cork, Clonakilty or Mallow, see the website www.empowering-workshops.com or phone Carolyn Curtin on 087-6419912.