



t a k i n g i t s l o w

Can an amped-up, stressed-out mother of three young children learn to relax in just three days? **Sian Briggs** is up for the challenge.

I'VE GOT DAFT PUNK CRANKED — doof-doof-doof — and I'm slapping my leg to the beat between gulps of blue Gatorade. I think I'm chilling, even though I'm leadfooting it down to Dunsborough with a mind as still as a meerkat on crystal meth.

This is what my definition of relaxation had been reduced to: belting down a highway sculling electrolytes, being jolted by loud music. And here's why. Five years ago a rumbling black cloud rolled into Siantown, a place once filled with light. Down came the rain and it didn't stop. IVF, three children in 13 months, a baby diagnosed with cancer and a rare autoimmune condition, major dental work after a nasty stack, a parent diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and a marriage breakdown. That's the pleasant version.

Suffice to say, the phlegmatic pace with which I'd once cruised through life shot up a few million miles an hour. I went from a girl with pink cheeks and a carefree stroll to a wan headless chook. Adrenaline has eaten me alive; I weigh as much as a whippet (according to my neighbour, this is because I derive from the warriors who did the fighting, rather than the fighting. This rather makes me feel like painting my face blue and yelling, "they may take our lives but they'll never take ... OUR FREEDOM").

My core muscle strength is woeful. My diet, once so meticulously balanced with almonds and carrot sticks and hummus and rye, has been reduced to toast crusts, sips of cold tea, bites of processed meat and handfuls of Smarties. I'm too mortified to

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confess how much fast food I consume. Let's just say I had reason to be very alarmed when the McDonald's card scam hit the headlines. (For the record, when you're managing two three-year-olds and a four-year-old, you can easily convince yourself that a Macca's pickle counts as a serve of vegetable).

But I'm not thinking about any of these unfortunate circumstances or ill choices as I make my way to Living Synergy for a "dip your toe in" health retreat. They have become so normal I no longer blink at them. Truth be told, I am just excited to be three days sans children so I can drop a morning constitution in peace. I'm keen for a bit of sunrise yoga and am champing at the bit for a full body massage. I am also nervous. Can I do a downward dog without snapping? Can I stomach raw food? Can I make it through without a bacon and egg sarnie? And should I have slipped some beer in my case?

The retreat is held at the home of Jenny Keenan, a 38-year-old former real estate agent who was once crippled with chronic fatigue syndrome. Over the course of the weekend I discover her fascinating story — her Gump-like resume includes getting her pilot's licence at 18, studying engineering and living in Portugal — that led her to this tranquil Dunsborough abode and a new, sedate life that also includes distributing nut milk bags around Australia.

Leaving the big smoke (not to mention meat, bread and hot food) behind, Jenny >

retreat & revive

Feeling wrung out and in need of guidance to get back on the right path? Here's a taste of where you can rejuvenate (for a price).

"Dip Your Toe in" Introductory Retreat at Living Synergy, Dunsborough

An intimate retreat that encourages deep rest and aims to show how plant-based foods, massage, meditation, yoga and the force of life work to renew and enhance quality of life. From \$725 for two nights, livingsynergy.com.au.

Gwinganna Detox Retreat, Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, Gold Coast, Queensland

The "Rolls Royce" of Gwinganna's range includes organic meals, lifestyle seminars, massages, facials and cooking demonstrations. Claims that you'll leave with "whiter eyes, increased vitality and glowing skin". From \$2905 for seven nights, gwinganna.com.

Stress Management Retreat, Authenticity Health and Wellness Retreat, Port Elliot, South Australia

An introduction to balanced nutrition, improved fitness, breathing and relaxation techniques and emotional balance. The program also includes vegetarian food, a daily class of yoga, exercise or meditation and unlimited use of the outdoor spa and swimming pool. From \$400 a night, authenticity.com.au.

Mother and Daughter Retreat, Gaia Retreat and Spa, Brooklet, NSW

A getaway designed to create a pampering and bonding experience between mothers and daughters. The focus is on truly listening and seeing one another. Includes all meals, a facial, manicure, body polish, massage, daily yoga and full use of facilities for mum and offspring. From \$3620 for three nights, gaiaretreat.com.au.

Transformation Retreat, Samadhi Wellness Spa and Health Retreat, Daylesford, Victoria

Combines a luxury getaway with a professional therapy program and customised body treatments. Enjoy a half-day escape or extend to a five-day retreat. Includes daily counselling sessions, vegetarian and organic foods and healing body therapies. From \$550 for a half day, samadhiretreat.com.au.

Total Tissue Cleansing Program, Ubud Sari Health Resort, Ubud, Bali

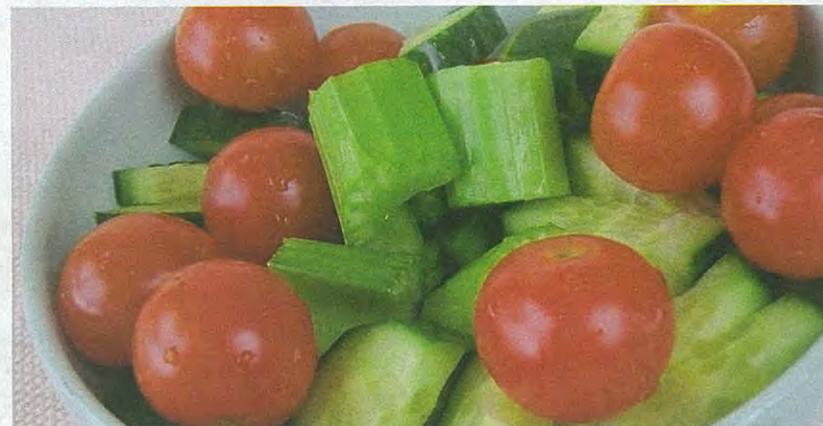
Six days of nutritional supplements, fasting (bar natural juices), daily colonic hydrotherapy and massage. The resort promotes itself as a place for people to "enhance their physical, emotional and spiritual life" and encourages health and wellbeing to be an ongoing goal. From \$605 for five nights, ubudsari.com.

Yoga Synergy Retreat, Kamalaya Resort, Koh Samui, Thailand

Days are filled with one-on-one customised yoga and meditation sessions and Ayurvedic massage from experienced Indian therapists. Suitable for both novice and seasoned yogis. From \$1720 for three nights. Price includes all meals and use of the steam cavern and plunge pools, kamalaya.com.

Sha All Round Rejuvenation Program, Sha Wellness Clinic, Alicante, Spain

The godfather of wellness retreats is designed to "optimise your health and add many years onto your life". Includes diagnostic testing and a specialised treatment program that includes ozone therapy and lymphatic drainage. The world's only macrobiotic spa, it has hosted Naomi Campbell and Kylie Minogue. From \$12,782 for 13 days, shawellnessclinic.com.



It's vibrant green, green as green can be; I'm too scared to ask what's actually in it.

< felt her energy and health catapult back at unprecedented levels. Now she's keen to share the lifestyle tweaks she's picked up while providing a getaway for stressed city folk. With her clear eyes and peachy glow, she's a good advertisement for her business.

The retreat is about stepping out from the stresses of your everyday life and bringing yourself back to baseline. It's not just about "curing" yourself with additions — green juices, fruit smoothies, raw food, yoga, bush hikes, swims and massage — it's about subtractions. No television, no radio, no newspapers, no technology. I have no idea how noisy my mind is until I'm confronted with the stillness and silence. At first it's kind of disturbing and I find myself tapping my feet and fingers a lot. But by day three, a technological detox means I am more at ease minus the chaos and gadgets.

The house where the retreats are held sits on 1.6ha of undulating bushland between Dunsborough and Yallingup, with panoramic views over Geographe Bay that take my breath away. It's a good start. Then Jenny bounds up with a beaming smile and green juice in hand. I try to look cool.

This may sound uber childish but the idea of the green juice makes my stomach turn. It's vibrant green, green as green can be; I'm too scared to ask what's actually in it. I wonder if Jenny will be offended if I stick a

peg on my nose. But I chide myself to suck it up (literally). To my surprise, it's good. Very good. (Green juices have since become my best friend, but more on that later.)

The next few days go a little something like this: A long dusk hike at Meelup beach. Soaking in aromatherapy salts in a warm spa. Hot water bottles in bed. Green juices, fruit and nut milk smoothies, organic buckwheat granola, kale chips, raw pizza, salads, seaweed, chia pudding. Lessons in making nut milk, raw meals and juices (all surprisingly easy). Lunch dates at Samudra, the vegetarian cafe in town.


And yoga. Blissful sunrise yoga. Aly, the teacher, is exploding with inner light and vitality. She guides my weak body through a hatha session, pointing out my strengths (hip flexibility — one bonus of carrying twins) and weaknesses (feeble shoulder and back muscles, hamstrings as tight as a drum). The next day she persuades me to up the ante with ashtanga. She assures me I can handle it. She's right. I feel empowered.

But perhaps even better than the yoga is the massage. Or should I say, THE massage. Late Saturday afternoon, Jenny gives me the most magnificent muscle knead I've ever experienced. Every muscle is pummelled into submission. Afterwards I sit, an oily, jelly mess, watching the most sublime sunset. The sky is on fire. I get a bit emotional.

The retreat comes to a close over a brunch of buckwheat pancakes on Sunday morning. I'm so relaxed my eyelids are drooping. I comment to Jenny that I'm soaring, that I've never felt better. The thought of a bacon and egg sarnie makes me want to barf (I even grab takeaway dahl and quinoa from Samudra for dinner later). "I can't work out if it's the juices or the yoga, but I can practically feel my cells coming back to life," I ponder.

In her gentle, non-preachy way, Jenny replies: "Don't forget about the things you haven't done as well." She's right. This weekend, I haven't raced the clock for the first time in five years.

So good news, people — if this stresshead maximus can manage to relax in three days, then so can you. And I'm happy to report that, post-enlightenment, I've stuck with a fair few changes. I eat breakfast every morning — organic almond butter on rye bread, washed down with a cucumber, spinach, cos lettuce, kiwi, lemon and ginger juice. I make my own nut milk and drink at least half a litre a day. I snack on granola and buckwheat crackers. I do Ashtanga yoga every Saturday.

I still eat pasta and drink wine and hell will freeze over before I give up my Quarter Pounders, but there's no doubt I'm feeling a helluva lot better. 

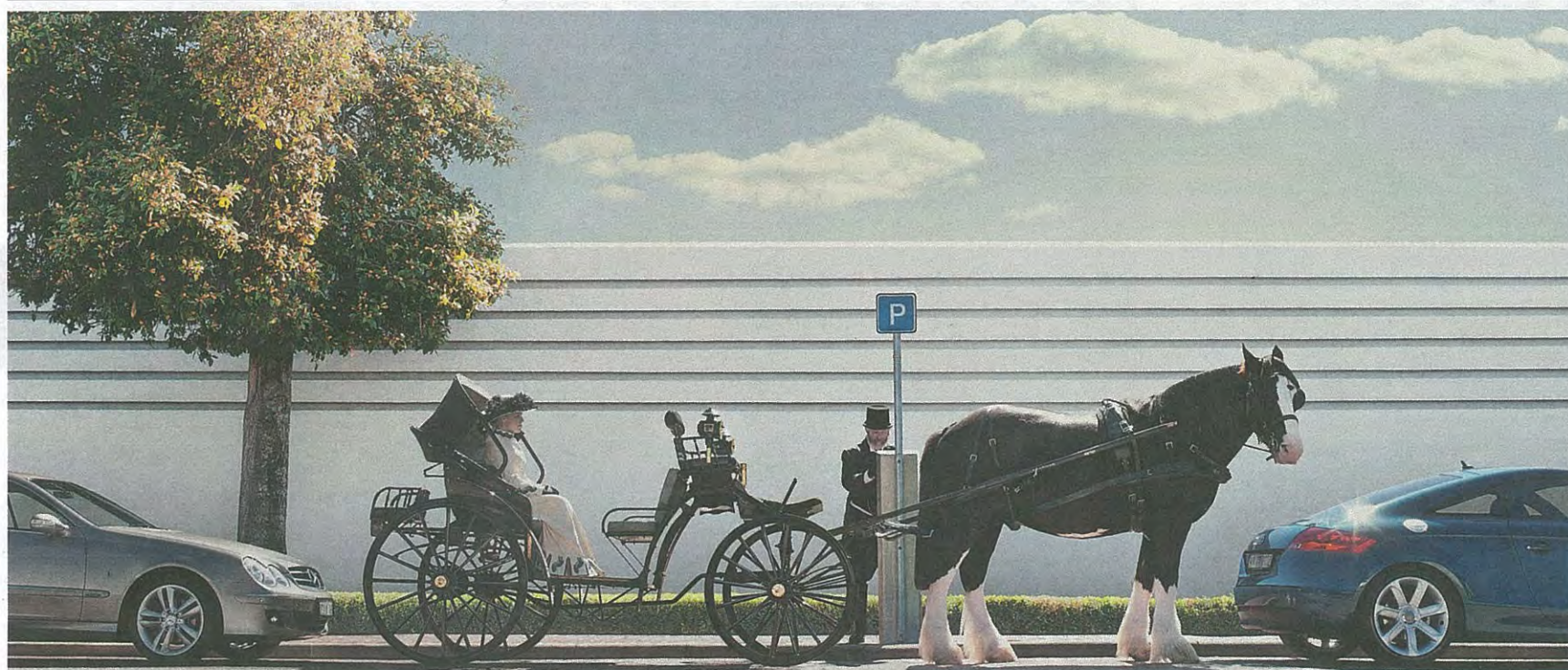


tips & tricks

It's not easy to stay healthy inside and out. Jenny Keenan (left) has some helpful hints.

- » Eliminate processed foods from your diet.
- » Eat more fresh fruit and veg (especially greens) and try to have some raw — good staples include green juices, green smoothies, blended salads and fresh salads.
- » Drink plenty of good-quality water, especially when you first wake up.
- » Move/exercise regularly — find what you love to do and do it.
- » Reduce the amount of chemicals and toxins in your home and in what goes on and in your body — including food, laundry, personal care and cleaning products.
- » Get out in nature and soak up the sunshine regularly.
- » Eat early and sleep early, especially when you are tired.
- » Get plenty of fresh air. Sleep with your window open.
- » Enjoy quality time with yourself and those close to you and don't be afraid to be honest with yourself and others, even when it can sometimes feel uncomfortable.

Photos courtesy Living Synergy Retreat



Traditional has returned

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