
TRAVEL

You can't cure burnout in one weekend, but this retreat is a powerful first step

BY ELLEN SCOTT

2 HOURS AGO





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How much good can a weekend retreat dedicated to self-care and stress relief really do you? Ellen Scott shares her experience.

We all know what we're supposed to do to manage our stress levels. Finish work on time! Have properly restful weekends! Find healthy outlets for your emotions! Talk it out! Prioritise sleep! Exercise! Eat well! But the tricky thing is this: once you start getting into the stress spiral, the obvious things to do become unclear. You can't see the right path forward, thanks to the big old fog that descends when under stress. So you work late most days, you try to 'catch up' at the weekends, you bottle up your feelings, you stop sleeping, exercising and eating well.

We also know that preventing burnout is not a one-and-done job, but daily practices and a series of wise choices. But – again, there's a but – the warning signs of burnout can so easily go under the radar until you need to take big, dramatic action.

For me, that big, dramatic action was saying 'yes, please' to a dedicated self-care retreat run by Wellbeing Escapes. I viewed it as a much-needed reboot; something to interrupt the unhealthy patterns I'd stumbled into and was struggling to get out of. Of course, my work-obsessed brain liked that this was a retreat that took place over just a weekend – meaning there was no need to take any annual leave.



The retreat took place at the stunning Tofte Manor in Bedford and began on Friday evening with a pre-dinner get-together in the drawing room. Sat on plush sofas in front of a roaring fireplace, a group of 15 or so women shared what had brought them to this place. The answers varied in their detail, but all came back to one commonality: we were all feeling a little lost, stuck and in need of guidance on a healthier way forward. As we spoke, we sipped on tasty oxymels (herbal tonics with apple cider vinegar, intended to aid digestion) and browsed through a bowl of gemstones, marked with a sign urging us to take whichever crystal we connected with.



Then, dinner. Throughout the weekend, the food on offer was vegan, nourishing and absolutely delicious. To drink: herbal teas and water that had flowed through the grounds' labyrinths (more on them later). After eating, a pre-sleep gong bath. We trudged out to the yurt, laid out our mats and got under cosy blankets. Claudia Roth, a quantum energy coach, led us through the soothing, immersive sounds of the gongs. I lay there, and as thoughts about work and all the things I had to do when I got back to my room attempted to creep in, I redirected my attention to the here and now. It turns out gongs ringing through your entire body are a good way to keep you present. Once the hour-long sound bath was complete, Claudia and the founder of Wellbeing Escapes, Stella Photi, urged us all to hold on to the quiet by walking back to the main house without talking to each other or going on our phones. As I walked

back, I looked up at the sky. Free from the London smog, the stars and moon were so clear I stopped in my tracks. I had planned to sneakily do some work on my laptop before bed. Instead, I had a herbal tea, brushed my teeth and sank into the deepest sleep I've had in a long time.

My typical Saturday is spent staying in bed for as long as humanly possible. I'm usually so wiped out from the busyness of the week that I can easily sleep for 12 hours. This Saturday, however, I'm up at the first ring of my alarm and ready for the first activity of the day: qi gong with Kate Henley, an acupuncturist and an expert in Chinese medicine. Don't balk at this like I did when I saw the prospect of exercise; qi gong is a gentle way of waking up the body that leaves you pleasantly energised, rather than sweaty and exhausted. After we tapped different parts of our bodies and stretched out any morning stiffness, Kate asked the women how we felt. I answered that it was something I'd never experienced before: energised, but in a calm, peaceful way. I realised in that moment that my typical experience of 'energy' was mostly pure adrenaline and panic; I am always rushing around, kept afloat by my own violently paddling legs. This was something completely different. I wanted more of it.



Kate then took us through a workshop about the power of eating seasonally, and afterwards we had a few hours of free time. I used this to head straight to Tofte Manor's library, where I curled up in a comfy armchair and read through a novel (*The Lamb* by Lucy Rose, in case you're interested. Would recommend). I realised it had been a while since I'd just sat and read for pleasure, without any background TV or multitasking activity. I also

realised just how much I loved doing this; my rumination is quickly quietened when immersed in a book. I vowed to make this part of my weekends going forward.

After lunch and more reading and resting, it was time for a workshop about tools for stress relief with Stella. We began with a self-assessment questionnaire, with each experience to be scored on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). As I marked down more 4s than I'd like to admit in response to prompts like 'I feel overwhelmed or that I cannot cope with the demands of daily life' and 'I feel fatigued even after getting a full night's sleep', I know my total score was creeping up. Still, I was more than a little taken aback to have totted up 110, putting me firmly in the 91-120 range identified as 'severe stress'. Oops. Stella explained that doing this questionnaire can be confronting and uncomfortable, but that it's often a necessary wake-up call. Tick, tick, tick.



The methodology Stella ran through in the workshop won't be for everyone. Her explanations of the 'HeartMath teachings' didn't quite work for my cynical, resistant brain. But the basic practices she recommended are solid: showing yourself true kindness and self-love, interrupting the negative chatter that runs through your mind and using audio meditation guides to slip into a more mindful state. I didn't leave the session running to search for more HeartMath, but I did make a note to give the self-hypnotherapy clips I used years back another go.

The session was followed by yoga – again, gentle enough that even my stiff body could take part – then dinner, another gong bath and, yet again, an excellent night's sleep.

There was no time for Sunday scaries on the next and final day of the retreat, which kicked off with

a conscious labyrinth walk. Tofte Manor is known for its two labyrinths: one is in the grass; the other is made of sand and takes you into a waterlogged cave (there are wellington boots to borrow). After a talk from Stella and each selecting an affirmation card (mine was oddly apt), we began with the grass labyrinth, which we were told represented the male 'yang' energy, walking slowly in silence from the entrance, all the way to the centre, then back out the same way. I was sceptical about the benefits of labyrinths, thinking of hedgemazes and horror films, but very quickly was struck by how calming the stroll was. The route took us within touching distance of the centre, then way back out again, prompting thoughts about how, while we might feel like we're off track and meandering, we're in fact getting closer to the destination. That's quite a powerful mindset, right? Plus, being outside in nature is always a good idea.



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Afterwards, I put on boots and did the second labyrinth, the female ‘yin’ energy. This, too, was more beneficial than I expected. The centre of the path is pitch black, inside a cave, and with water past your ankles. As I felt around for the stone seat someone had mentioned, I felt absolutely zero itch to check my emails or go on social media, urges which are usually a constant roar. Instead, I sat in the darkness, listening to the birds outside and the faraway windchimes. When I’d had my fill, I walked all the way back along the same sandy path out. It would have been easy enough to just hop over the path and take a shortcut, but I had no desire to. For once, I didn’t need to rush. I could take my time – and I felt so much better for doing so.




The final session was a self-love journaling workshop with Claudia. At multiple points

throughout the lesson, Claudia instructed us to find a quiet spot and write in response to a prompt for 10 minutes. Each time, I went to the library and was stunned by how easily the words came out and the time flew. I was equally amazed by how easily I seemed to resolve some issues that had been bugging me for weeks once I was given the brain space to do so. Claudia gave each of us a 28-day guided journal to take home.

When I got back to London that evening, I expected the stress and dread to hit me like a ton of bricks. But over the course of the next few weeks, the weight never landed. It wasn't that the weekend had cured me of all my issues or prevented me from ever experiencing stress again, but I took away some regular actions and mindset changes that I'm still using today. I learned that I'm allowed to slow down, that I can be kinder to myself, that I can take the time for calm and choose peace and quiet over overwhelm. All the tools I've continued to use are free and might seem obvious – journaling, breathwork, walking outside in nature – but I was so wrapped up in my own stress that I couldn't see them. It was only by being taken out of my routine and forced to live in a different way – even



only for one weekend – that I was able to see the way through the labyrinth. 

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