

FILL a cup with water and hold the cup in your hand for half an hour, suggests author and wellness guru Debbie Mandel.

Feel how heavy it starts to get. Notice how your arm begins to ache. Then put the cup down. Let it go. Enjoy the relief.

That's exactly what happens when we let go of the stress that we daily — and often unconsciously — haul around with us, says the New Yorker.

"One thing is inevitable," she says. "There will always be something destabilising our lives."

And — with the current economic turbulence, darkening recession and doom, gloom and national outrage which have descended upon this country lately — so say all of us.

New year 2009 dawned with little more than the promise of 120,000 job losses, excoriating cutbacks in pay, entitlements and government services and a formidable tightening of the strings where credit is concerned. It's all downright scary.

And that's on top of all the humdrum worries which can send our stress levels zooming on even the most normal of days.

Dr Abbie Lane, consultant psychiatrist with the Dublin County Stress Clinic, has noticed a new trend in the kind of client being referred to her for help since the downturn began.

"There has been an increase in the number of people referred to us because of stress related to occupational difficulties or financial circumstances or to simply being concerned about the future," she says.

"Previously we'd have seen people who were stressed because they were over-stretched by the demands of their job. Now we're seeing people who haven't been able to get the contracts they need or whose partners have run into difficulties, or people who have trouble telling their families about their difficulties.

"The foundation of their lives, work, financial situation and career have been shaken. Their security has been shaken — and people like a certain degree of security and a sense that they are in control of their own destiny.

"Once the shock of their particular situation wears off we try to help people take a realistic look at it. They have to change the way they think about it. We look at re-framing it to see how it might be an opportunity to do something different.

Dr Helen Greally, senior clinical psychologist with Cancer Care West, says: "It's about turning the negative into something more positive or hopeful. We would work with people to help them get a sense of the reality of the situation they are in — sometimes we can think things are worse than they are. People in their mid-20s are particularly vulnerable to the

Facing a mountain of worry? Depressed about the downturn? It's time to simply let go, writes **Ailín Quinlan**



sense of shock that is now flooding the national mindset.

"They've grown up without any real knowledge of what a downturn is," she says.

"During the boom we became a very 'immediate' society where you could get the things you wanted very quickly, for example, credit, cars and cheap holidays, and one of the biggest transition we will go through is getting used to not being able to have what we want straightaway. We were used to easy borrowing. Now, even if people do have access to money they're scared to spend it.

"I think that's the biggest stressor for young people who were used to having what they want — it is very scary and extremely stressful but there's one key word we must rely on — resilience.

"People have a lot of resilience they don't know about. We must have belief in ourselves and not be overwhelmed by the doom and gloom. We should sit down on a regular basis and decide what is our biggest source of stress — is it financial, uncertainty or a relationship? Try to bring it down to the smallest manageable piece. We all like the idea that life is predictable or controllable. What happened in Dell, for instance, shows we are not in control of it, however."

Explains Mandel, 58, who has just published her new book, *Addicted to Stress: "Life is a series of recoveries, whether on the physical level or whether there have been tragedies in our lives. For any kind of loss, stress management really prepares us for these obstacles. There will always be obstacles. There will always be de-stabilisers."*

"You have to set up coping strategies and ways to re-frame your experience, she says — and it's crucial to let go of that cup you insist on carrying around with you.

Mandel has had her own life challenges. Both her parents suffered from Alzheimer's while she was raising her three children, now aged 33 to 19. "I reinterpret negatives into positives and ask: 'What can I learn from this?' From Alzheimer's I learned to let go. Alzheimer's forces you to let go and live in the moment."

Mandel, who is also a radio presenter, does this partly through her passion for gardening. "Spring, summer and winter, I garden. I love gardening for me it is a moving meditation." Along with gardening she is committed to a dynamic fitness regime, in true New York fashion. "I exercise for 45 minutes every day. I like to do exercises like squats, lunges, abdominal crunches... these activities put me in focus and make me fluid in activities of daily life."

■ *Addicted to Stress, A Woman's 7-Step Program To Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life* by Debbie Mandel, Wiley, €18.



Debbie's tips to stay on top

■ **Plan ahead:** Conjure up recurring stressful situations, then mentally script them with a calmer dialogue to take out the sting. Rehearse the dialogue before the negative situation occurs. This will provide you with the "experience" to solve problems.

■ **Listen to what your body is telling you.** When your neck hurts, are you unyielding in an argument? Do your shoulders hurt because you're shouldering too much responsibility? Do you have acne because you're erupting in anger?

■ **Eat healthily, exercise daily, establish boundaries, express yourself naturally, ask for what you need and delegate chores. Listen to others. Reactivate your compassion by helping others.**

■ **Have a healthy work-life balance which**

leaves space to do the things you enjoy.

■ **Breathe.** Sit or lie with closed eyes. Inhale two long counts through the nose, exhale four long counts through the nose. When you inhale, imagine inhaling a clean, fresh white mist. As you exhale, imagine releasing a dark mist of used up stuff.

■ **Be a healthy narcissist.** Assume you deserve more out of life and go for it.

■ **A good fight with your spouse may actually be good for your health — brooding about a hurt or burying your anger causes physiological trouble down the road.**

■ **Exercise:** "In a jobless economy we can neglect the physical, yet we can move stress

out of our body with exercise." Exercise according to the intensity of your stress, says Debbie Mandel. A few minutes is not sufficient — realise that you could need an hour.

■ **Reframe — learn to cope by using an attitude of resilient optimism and work out how to find the solution.** "People do come back from adversity, it's about looking at your own strengths and abilities as a person and how you might problem-solve."

■ **Objectify it:** "Objectify something that has happened to you by pretending you're advising a friend."

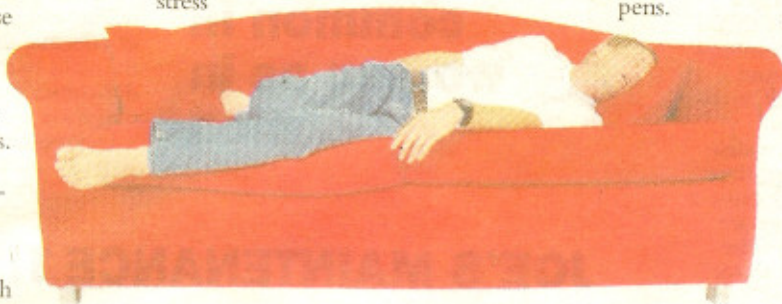
■ **Recognise the fact that we control very little in our lives — so don't beat yourself up when something bad happens.**

■ **Remember, laughter is our inner treadmill — it has great benefits, one of which is stress release.** "Keep in touch with your free-spirited younger child, the playful side which is not entirely programmed."

■ **Turn your stress into strength.** Learn from your previous experiences of surviving adversity. Prepare yourself mentally for success by rehearsing a positive outcome mentally, much in the same way athletes do before a competition — visualise, rehearse and see a successful outcome.

■ **Don't focus on uncertainties — focus on your strengths.** Stop yourself from descending into the abyss. "When you're at your lowest, go back to your earlier successes. Find the qualities that brought you success and call them back to life."

■ **Diet:** "Certain foods create a feelgood chemistry. For women, multi-grain breads, brown rice, oatmeal, colourful fruits and berries and oily fish all affect your thinking in a positive way."



TEST YOURSELF ON YOUR ADDICTION TENDENCIES

HOW can you tell that you're a stress addict and not merely busy, responsible and reliable? Answer the following questions with a yes or no:

1. Do you tune out during conversations?
2. Do you feel rushed wherever you are because you feel you ought to be completing the next task somewhere else?
3. Are you irritable with others?
4. Do you rate yourself according to the opinions of those with whom you interact? Do you seek a "wow" as a response for what you do?

5. Are you unable to ask for help?
6. Do you perceive being on the receiving end as a sign of weakness?
7. When you exercise do you do it for longer than 30 minutes five days a week?
8. Are you always on your mobile — even when taking a walk?
9. Do you constantly check your appearance in the mirror?
10. Do you feel uncomfortable, worried, nervous in your

mind or body when you don't have something you must absolutely do now?

If you answered yes to:

3 questions: You're out of balance.

5 questions: You're losing your sense of self.

10 questions: You're in the crash-and-burn zone.

