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Too fidgety to meditate? Try TRE — the new tension-release technique

The latest relaxation technique is perfect for people who can't sit still



Bridget Harrison with Steve Haines CHRIS MCANDREW FOR THE TIMES

If you have no patience for mindfulness and you're too fidgety to meditate, a new approach to tackling stress has just reached the UK's most fashionable yoga mats — and it might be for you. It takes the opposite approach to sitting still and trying to quieten your thoughts. TRE, short for tension and trauma releasing exercises, is a series of movements that encourage your muscles to shake, with the idea that this will help to release the tightness in your body that is caused by stress.

TRE was originally developed to help people affected by war in the Middle East and north Africa. It has been used to aid earthquake survivors in China and returning soldiers in the US. Now workshops that teach the process are popping up all over the world, from South Africa to Stockholm.

I am being shown TRE by the Geneva-based bodyworker Steve Haines, who has spent 15 years treating people with stress, anxiety, persistent pain and sleep issues, and has published a series of books on the link between stress, trauma and pain. He is just about to start a series of TRE workshops at the trendy Triyoga clinic in north London.



TRE is also known as shaking meditation CHRIS MCANDREW FOR THE TIMES

“Shaking is a primitive, unconscious mechanism which helps people let go,” Haines says when I meet him; he travels to London once a month to treat British clients. “After a session people find themselves feeling calmer and less braced against life.” The chef Lorraine Pascale recently said that she practises TRE. “It is a very powerful way to get rid of tension,” she said.

Stress is affecting more and more people in the UK, according to the Mental Health Foundation. In research carried out in 2018 three in four people in the UK said they had been so stressed at least once over the previous 12 months that they had felt “overwhelmed” or “unable to cope”. Such feelings have a physical impact as well as a mental one, Haines says.

“When people get overwhelmed, they get tight and stuck in fight-or-flight mode,” he explains. In this mode our bodies are braced for danger, with muscles tensed and jaws clenched. Our breathing is shallow and our heart beats fast. This state is fine in short bursts, but damaging if we can’t relax again and it becomes our most common state. TRE is a way for the body and muscles to release tension and to wake themselves up from this tightened state, says Haines, who charges £80 for an hour. Patients can then do the exercises at home (ideally 15 minutes a few times a week).

We begin with Haines asking me to stand on a yoga mat with one foot placed on the other. As I try to balance, he instructs me to take note of the way my muscles make tiny adjustments to help me to stay upright. He explains how tiny oscillators in our spinal cord are constantly talking to our muscles to control our body’s movements.

“Every time you walk or grasp something, your muscles are controlled-shaking. However, it’s so smooth you don’t really notice it,” he says. “The idea with TRE is to gently stress your muscles until that natural process of shaking becomes more pronounced.”

Next, with my feet apart, I am to reach down and stretch. After this I am to squat, but with my heels lifted off the floor, which is tricky. Then I am to put my back against the wall as if sitting on a chair. This is harder still, and after 30 seconds my thigh muscles begin to quiver a little. Good, Haines says, this sequence is supposed to gradually tire my muscles out.

Then I lie on the floor, place the soles of my feet together and let my legs drop out either side of me. This is called the butterfly position, the main posture for TRE. Haines instructs me to lift my knees off the floor, moving them upwards an inch at a time, pausing for a few seconds between each movement. My knees start to wobble as my thigh muscles begin to spasm. Soon my legs and pelvis are shaking unprompted.

“Think of this as a conversation between the muscle tension in your hips and your nervous system,” Haines says, pleased with the movement. “Gradually this shaking will help free up those structures that are tight, such as your diaphragm and those big psoas muscles.” Our psoas muscles are the primary connectors between our torso and legs. When they become tight and overstretched they can often be the cause of pain, because they affect posture and help us to stabilise the spine.

All too soon our 40-minute session is over. I feel wiped out. This sensation is strikingly powerful in light of what has felt like a gentle session with fairly minimal effort. I spend the rest of the day in a Zen-like haze, as if all my anxiety has drained away.

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<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/too-fidgety-to-meditate-try-tre-the-new-tension-release-technique-xvvgqt0j3>