

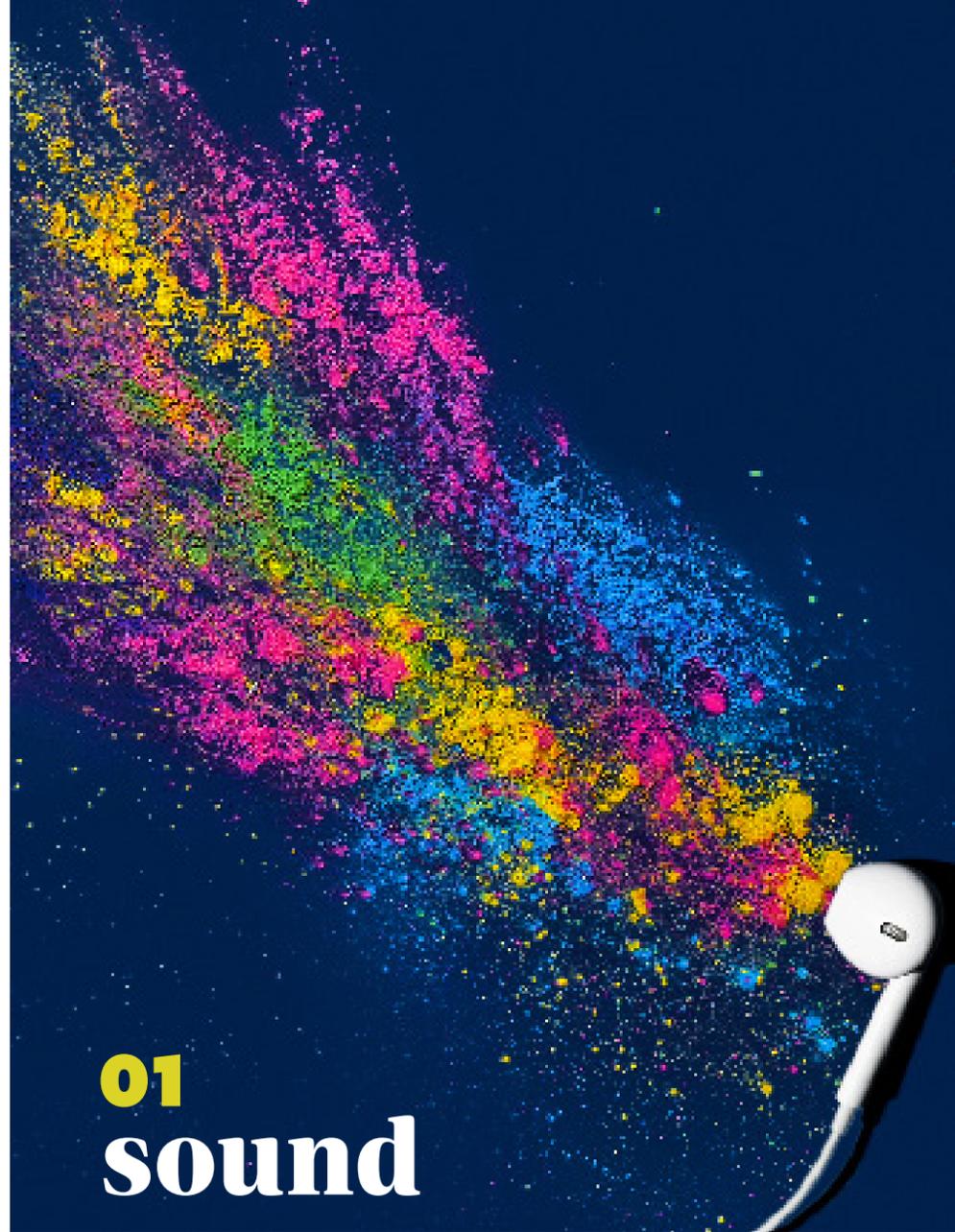
mind

How To Really Relax

Utilise each of your five senses for deeper and more satisfying levels of calm



There's something unique about the level of frazzle that hits at this time of year. Wrapping up the latter part of the year while battling fatigue, getting your head around what the next four months might bring; there's little hope to dampen the brain's constant whirring. Real calm, it turns out, is hard to find. As neuroscientist Dr Tara Swart explains, when your body is stressed – even when sometimes doing nothing – you're in fight-or-flight mode. "The difference between the non-relaxed mode and the relaxed mode is your stress hormone levels," says Dr Swart. "When cortisol is high, which happens when you're really focused, switched on, busy or stressed, that prevents your body from going into rest-and-repair mode because it's trying to make sure that you can meet any challenges," she adds. "It's so important that we learn to encourage a switch to recuperation mode, using the parasympathetic nervous system, which helps us rest and digest." Unsurprisingly, given the last two years the world has weathered, making this switch is proving harder than ever. And while regular yoga classes and a Netflix binge can help in the short-term, how can you make real change for the long haul? Dr Swart suggests honing in on each of the five senses in turn to focus on what you're experiencing, rather than multitasking, as everyone's guilty of doing. Here's how...



01 sound

There's a reason why they play gentle zen music in spas; certain sounds, especially those from nature, are scientifically proven to help you relax. Researchers at Brighton and Sussex Medical School have found that playing natural sounds affects your body's fight-or-flight response, increasing the resting activity of the brain. Sound therapy is a holistic treatment that uses sound, vibration and different frequencies to put you into a deep state of meditation, says Farzana Ali, founder of sound healing organisation The Sound Therapist. "We use singing bowls, gongs and drums to generate sounds that wash over you, which is why we call sessions a 'sound bath'. Higher frequencies are the most stimulating and used when someone is feeling stuck or blocked, whereas slower

frequencies are calmer and more restful, so perfect for tackling stress and anxiety. Sound healing allows your brain to move from a beta-dominant brainwave state (when you're focused, concentrating or stressed), to a relaxed and restful alpha-dominant brainwave state. The sounds you hear also trigger your parasympathetic nervous system. Your breathing becomes relaxed and your heart rate slows down, too. This will encourage your body to fall into a deep relaxed state. Therapeutic sound work can also improve your sleep, as well as help with pain management and even lower high blood pressure," says Ali.

To learn more about Farzana Ali's work, and for free online sessions, find her on Instagram @thesoundtherapist.

02 taste

This is the sense you tend to forget when it comes to relaxation, yet you'll know by now that sugar and caffeine stimulate your system. For the opposite, try chamomile tea to reduce anxiety; oily fish to regulate dopamine and serotonin, which have calming and relaxing properties; and dark chocolate, which contains flavonoids – antioxidants that improve blood flow to the brain – promoting its ability to adapt to stress. Dr Swart says: "[Author] Deepak Chopra taught me the idea of putting a grain of sugar in your mouth and savouring it; imagining the sugar cane field where it came from and how far it has travelled; connecting to that sense in a deep way. That is very relaxing, because when you're just focused on that one taste, you're not worrying about yesterday or tomorrow. You become present."

Dr Tara Swart has created a neuroplasticity-based visualisation and mindfulness app; see sparkup.io



03 smell

"The olfactory nerve connects to the part of the brain associated with memory and emotion," says Dr Swart. "That's why you'll be able to think of a smell that evokes a childhood memory quite easily. It's also why scent is so powerful. You can use different scents to create links in your brain – an obvious one is lavender, which is associated with sleep. Citrus scents are used for energising and rose for optimism. It's about discovering what works for you." Try Lavender & Vetiver Sleep Relaxing Hair & Body Wash, R180 – a floral blend with an aromatic scent – and Total Body Massager, R320 (both from Thebodyshop.co.za). Frankincense has been used for centuries to help relieve anxiety. Amy Bonfield, education and business manager at natural skincare company Aromatherapy Associates, says it has a relaxing effect on the diaphragm, encouraging deeper breathing and lowering stress levels.

For more information, go to Aromatherapyassociates.com

04 sight

"Often we only see what is right in front of us," say authors of *Everyday Confidence*, Nik and Eva Speakman. "By expanding your scope of vision, you distract your mind, which can help you relax. Try looking at five things you wouldn't usually notice, such as the stitching on your sofa, the curve of the skirting board or direction of the carpet pile. To intensify the experience, close your eyes and imagine observing the intricacy of the face of a loved one, the petals of a flower or the ripples of an ocean." Another way to harness this powerful sense is through art therapy. "Art can be therapeutic as it allows people to experience and understand their own emotions in new ways," says Sarah Stein Lubrano, designer and faculty member at The School of Life. She recommends looking at three paintings (below), as a way to reset emotions.

The art of calm "The people depicted in *The Garden Of Earthly Delights*, an oil painting by Hieronymus Bosch, are getting up to all kinds of bizarre things. It suggests that human beings and their follies, pleasures and wrongdoings are far more strange than they might first appear," says Stein Lubrano. "This piece makes me feel less ashamed of my own peculiarities and more forgiving of other people's." She continues: "There's something hopeful about the *Proun Series* by Russian artist El Lissitzky. In his abstract drawings with implied movement, which help us think differently too, he portrays a future free of problems. Indigenous art such as the Maliwawa Figures, found on rocks in Australia's Arnhem Land, were painted almost 10 000 years ago and show that people before us have seen worse and people born after us will, too. As a worrier, I find this helpful in allowing me to think about the future in less definitive ways.



05 touch

There's a reason massages are so relaxing. Skin is the body's largest organ and, as such, it's extremely sensitive to external stimuli. One of the fastest routes to relaxation? Warm it up – either in a bath or with the heat of the sun. Stretching your muscles is important, too. Yin yoga is great for going deep, but simply stretching for a few minutes per day can help you soothe stiff joints, reduce chronic stress, improve sleep and revive energy.

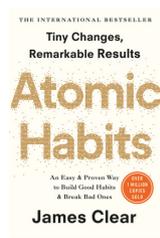
The best yoga pose for instant calm Set a timer for five minutes and move into a forward fold, bending your body over your head towards your knees. Dr Swart says holding a position for this length of time will move your body from the sympathetic nervous system, which is fight-or-flight, to the parasympathetic nervous system, which is rest-and-digest, and give you the same feeling you get after eating a nice meal or waking up from a good night's sleep.



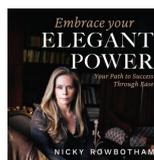
READ YOUR WAY TO RELAXATION



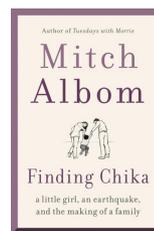
A Trip of One's Own by Kate Willis R234, Exclusivebooks.co.za
Get lost in avid solo traveller Kate Willis' whirlwind trips around the world. The aim? Total escapism that'll leave you giddy with excitement and, hopefully, have you dusting off your passport.



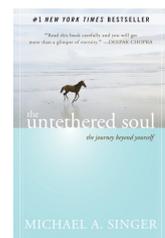
Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones by James Clear R350, Loot.co.za
Leading habit formation expert James Clear reassures us that changing your bad habits simply boils down to adopting a new system that'll elevate your habits to new heights.



Embrace Your Elegant Power: Your Path To Success Through Ease by Nicky Rowbotham R277, Exclusivebooks.co.za
This book had us at: "It's not about changing or becoming. It's about remembering and knowing that we are already enough." The author offers a refreshing take on success, saying it can be achieved through self-worth and self-love.



Finding Chika: A Little Girl, an Earthquake and the Making of a Family by Mitch Albom R215, Takealot.com
A tear-jerking memoir with two important takeaways: Families can be created using any material under the sun and love should never be tainted by religion, race, education or money. It's the little things.



The Untethered Soul by Michael A. Singer R334, Takealot.com
A blow-by-blow account of how to resist the urge to be driven by our egos as well as challenge the mind's tendency to overthink. *The Untethered Soul* is often praised for being a real life- and game-changer! We're coming for you tranquility!