

## Workplace therapy helps to beat office stress, says Penny Cottee

It was during the interview for her current job as an office manager that Ally Watson first heard about the latest stress management boom. "When they told me they gave their staff free massages at work, I couldn't believe it," she says. "I remember thinking, 'What a great place to work'."

For the past 18 months she too has enjoyed a monthly massage in the office from corporate wellbeing therapists Stress Angels. Watson books the treatments for herself and 11 colleagues at Creative Partnership Marketing, in Notting Hill, London.

"The therapist sets up her portable massage chair in a quiet room and we each have around 20 minutes with her," Watson says. "It's a fantastic way to relax and recharge. I thought it would make me fall asleep at my desk, but it gives you a real energy boost."

More workers, especially in and around London, are enjoying on-site therapies.

"It was once a perk in advertising and PR firms, but we now work with finance houses, charities, IT firms, and local government," says Katherine Ginsborg, the co-founder of Stress Angels.

A bonus for company bosses is that treatments are easy to manage.

"We bring all the equipment, massages take place through the clothes, and we don't use oils," says Philip Davies, an acupuncturist and reflexologist who co-founded Reviveuk two years ago to offer revitalising therapies.

"All that the firm provides is a meeting room or quiet area," he says, "but if space is tight we



Flexible friends: marketing executive Suzannah Donnelly, left, strikes a pose with her after-work yoga teacher, Claire Best

# Message in a massage

can massage staff at their desks."

Although the most popular services are head-neck-shoulder and full-body massages, corporate wellbeing firms also offer other therapies, such as reflexology and aromatherapy. Some provide lunchtime or after-work classes, too, including tai chi, yoga and Pilates.

Ailon Freedman, one of the pioneers of corporate yoga classes, has been a yoga teacher for 17 years, and has also worked extensively in management.

"I used to feel awful after hours spent hunched over a

desk, and only yoga would revive me," he says. That is why he set up The Lotus Exchange 18 months ago to bring yoga and a wide range of wellbeing services direct to office workers.

Suzannah Donnelly, a marketing executive with a newspaper group, approached yoga as an experiment.

"Nine months ago we booked The Lotus Exchange to see if yoga would help with our breathing and delivery," she says. "We were hooked immediately. Now six of us have a weekly after-work class. It's great to relax after sitting at the computer all day." Donnelly's

yoga group was initially paid for by the company. "They now subsidise it, and it's still very reasonable," she says.

Some companies carry the full cost of staff treatments, and others make premises available while gradually letting keener employees pay their own way. Costs vary depending on such considerations as the size of group and treatment, and therapy firms will price each group's needs individually.

But is all the on-site de-stressing just another gimmick? Absolutely not, the practitioners say. "It's a serious issue. Firms lose millions of days a

year to ill-health," Freedman notes. "It's about stress management, and building health and immunity, as well as freeing up energy and creativity in people."

Ginsborg agrees. "Even 15 minutes a month can help to stop problems by relaxing tense muscles and keeping aches at bay," she says.

Watson confirms this. "I stopped wearing high heels and swapped my shoulder bag for a rucksack when the therapist explained the damage these can cause."

Davies sounds a note of caution. "Make sure all thera-

pists are trained and registered with their respective health bodies, and ask about insurance, too. Reputable firms are happy to provide all information."

On-site therapies are a visible way of rewarding employees. "It's such a luxury to have a therapist coming to you, and it does make you feel valued," Donnelly says.

*The Lotus Exchange: 020-7463 2234; [www.lotus-exchange.com](http://www.lotus-exchange.com).  
Reviveuk: 020-7837 3578; [www.reviveuk.co.uk](http://www.reviveuk.co.uk).  
Stress Angels: 020-7976 6191; [www.stressangels.co.uk](http://www.stressangels.co.uk)*