

Stressed-out people in France know exactly what to do in order to feel better. They book in an appointment with their sophrologist. This technical-sounding title derives from *sos*, which means serenity or harmony in ancient Greek, *phren*, which means spirit or consciousness and *logos*, which means science or study. By means of deep breathing, visualisation and simple movements called 'dynamic relaxation', the sophrologist aims to get you back into balance, in both the mind and body.

I arrive for my appointment in a flustered state as I was early and so went for a mooch and then discovered that I was cutting it a bit too close. I am five minutes late and I always hate being even a tiny bit late so I enter the calm treatment room of Florence Parot in a bit of a state, apologising and blustering.

There is nothing in the room but a table and two comfy chairs facing each other. I wonder if this will feel like a psychiatric session. Florence is beaming at me and explaining some of the history of sophrology.

"It was originally developed in Spain in 1960 by Professor Alfonso Caycedo, a Colombian neuropsychiatrist. Prof. Caycedo wanted to find a way to heal depressed and traumatised clients with the least possible use of drugs and psychiatric treatments." 'A-ha,' I think, 'so not like a psychiatric evaluation at all.' In fact Prof. Caycedo travelled extensively learning more about yoga, Zen and Buddhism and, from these learnings, developed a 12 level training programme that combined the philosophies and practices of the East with the relaxation techniques of the West.

How does it work?

We do a few exercises to give me a taste of a sophrology session. Florence does not ask me about my problems but asks me to rate my level of stress and discomfort. Then we stand up and, combined with specific breathing instructions, we hunch up our shoulders and then release them down. It has an immediate effect on my stress levels and my earlier scattiness dissipates.

Interestingly I am not expected to share my suspicions of what might be causing my stress or insomnia with Florence and she makes no judgements about what I'm feeling or even offers any solutions based on talking therapy. Instead she gives me some practical techniques for what to do when stress engulfs me in a normal day.

Then we do a guided visualisation, with a strong emphasis on noticing where you can feel certain things in the body. I find that I am finding it hard to breathe at one point, like there is something pressing down on my chest. It is at a significant part of the guided visualisation and usually, with practices like shamanic journeying, I would expect to get some clarification on why I am feeling this way at that particular time but sophrology does not attribute meanings in this way. Instead the techniques aim to get you to a place of relaxation where you can hear your



SOPHROLOGY *to soothe*

This holistic therapy is widespread on the continent but relatively unknown here in the UK: Florence Parot is aiming to change all of that, as Tania Ahsan discovers...

own intuition and wisdom on how to act and find a solution to how you're feeling. You do give feedback on how you felt during the exercises but there isn't this analysis in the way you have with psychiatric treatments.

The benefits

Sophrologists say that their clients first notice that they sleep better after a session. I suffer on and off from bouts of insomnia, especially when I am particularly busy at work, and this benefit sounds immeasurably good. I do find that I feel a bit sleepy and tranced out even during the session itself.

Sophrology can be taught in group sessions or in one-to-one sessions, both aim to teach you techniques that you can then use yourself at home and in daily life. You have as many sessions as you need to deal with your issues, be it something like burnout, depression, addictions or even something

like IBS. In fact Sophrology is often used in hospitals

on the continent in order to help with pain management, birthing preparation, and even in the psychiatry department. As its popularity grew in France and Spain, sophrology began to be used by sports coaches and doctors in order to help with performance and training programmes as the visualisations can have the effect of allowing you to cope with stressful scenarios.

At the end of my session, I had a toolkit of helpful techniques to help me cope when things get on top of me. I left with the strangest sensation of detachment. However, in true sophrology tradition, I did a quick body scan. This is when you focus on individual body parts, from head to toe, relaxing and becoming separately aware of each part. The muscles then relax and your mind becomes calm.

The second I relaxed my eyes, I no longer had this weird sensation of dislocation and I returned back to a relaxed, happy, alert state of mind. Let's hope this science catches on quickly in the UK and we get more practitioners as it really does work. 



More information

Florence Parot is a sophrologist, health life coach, nutritionist and director of the Sophrology Academy, the first school in England specialising in training sophrologists. She is based in Ashford, Faversham and London. For more details visit sophroacademy.co.uk or call 07861 420 059.