

HIGHLY SENSITIVE

IN THESE recessionary times, sales of perfume have gone through the roof. It gives an instant feelgood lift and it can be a relatively inexpensive gift, important as more people tighten their purse strings. But what if scent leaves you cold — or worse still, what if a mere whiff of the stuff turns your stomach, brings on a migraine and puts you out of action for weeks? It sounds extreme, but for an increasing number of people this is a reality.

Multiple Chemical Sensory Syndrome (MCSS) is a crippling condition which renders sufferers helpless in the face of countless everyday smells — cleaning materials, paint and even beauty products can have serious effects on their health and wellbeing.

Derval Dunford, 42, suffers from this rare disorder and for the past six years has faced a daily battle as she attempted to live a normal life in a world awash with man-made chemicals.

"I first became aware of the problem in 2003 when I developed a massive migraine after painting a room," recalls Derval. "It progressed from there as I began to feel increasingly unwell."

Nausea, headaches, exhaustion and dizziness were just some of the symptoms the Westport woman incurred as she became more intolerant of the world around her.

"I went to visit a healer who suggested I might be suffering from MCSS. Putting a label on it was helpful, but it was also scary," says Derval. "So I got allergy tested and discovered that I was allergic to so many products and foodstuffs — basically, anything that had chemicals in it. My energy levels were the lowest the allergist had ever come across."

So she set about changing her lifestyle — but it wasn't easy. "I work as a beautician, so straight away I had to get rid of most of the products I use — I now work with completely natural ingredients like rosewater, witch hazel and home-made clay masks," she says.

At home, I replaced all cleaning substances with natural alternatives and I had to go on a strict candida diet, cutting out anything with additives, sugar, yeast, dairy and wheat. It wasn't fun, but it was essential — and my partner and grown-up son joined in too, which made it easier to stick to."

After six months on this strict diet, the Mayo woman began to reintroduce foodstuffs gradually. She also began to practice yoga and meditation — this, combined with living in a chemical-free environment, made a dramatic improvement to her health.

"I feel so much better now," she says. "But I still use natural products, eat organic wherever possible and try to avoid places where chemicals might be used."

Her family and friends have been very supportive and even her clients in the salon have agreed not to wear perfume when coming for treatment. This has helped to restore her quality of life and the mother-of-one has even started holding meditation sessions for others with stressful lives.

"When I was very ill and couldn't leave the house, I started yoga

and meditation in a bid to stop myself from worrying about my condition. Achieving a few minutes of complete stillness brought peace of mind and relaxation."

For most people, tranquility seems like an unrealistic goal, so Derval has created the first Irish-voiced meditation album, entitled Sui.

Set against the background of soothing music, the CD is a compilation of several meditation tracks of varying lengths to fit in with whatever amount of spare time listeners might have. Some of the pieces include Derval's voiced instructions while others are simply made up of calming sounds.

"Most people don't have the time to meditate and it can be a very difficult thing to do on your own," she says. "This CD talks you through the process and there are options ranging from five to 30 minutes, depending on how much time you have."

"I have totally changed my life over the past few years — if you give yourself a couple of minutes each day to unwind, you really will notice the difference too."

■ Derval Dunford's meditation and relaxation double CD and booklet is available from health stores and book shops or online at www.sui.ie. Costs



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Facts about MCSS



■ MCSS is the name given to a variety of symptoms which may present after someone is exposed to a range of conditions or chemical substances.

■ Symptoms include headaches, fatigue, dizziness, nausea, various skin rashes or hives, breathing problems and some memory difficulties.

■ Medical bodies do not recognise MCSS as a condition because there is currently a lack of clinical evidence to support the cause of symptoms. Also, sufferers don't develop antibodies in response to their exposure, as is usually the case with an immune deficiency or allergic reaction.

■ The current medical debate over whether MCSS is a physical or psychological condition has made it difficult to prescribe an effective treatment.

■ If you feel you are suffering from this condition, it is advisable to seek the advice of your GP.

Information from Dr Bernadette Carr of VHI. For more information, visit www.vhi.ie.