

“I found the courage to create space in my life... and discover the real me”



We all wonder if courses or coaching can make a difference, so a year after Elaine Kingett experienced the Hoffman Process – which promises to help you let go of the past and create the sort of future you desire – we asked her what had changed in her life

Recently I've started a novel, cut my hair, joined a dating agency and changed my brand of washing powder – all by myself.

I've stopped phoning my friends – and they love it!

“Have you heard from Elaine?”

“No.”

“No – neither have I.”

“Ah, Hoffmann!” they chorus.

Like the characters in the Bisto advert, they heave a collective sigh of relief.

A year ago, things were very different. I sought advice and reassurance about everything. I bombarded friends with deeply personal information – good or bad – and couldn't change a light bulb, let alone my life, without referring it to an outside committee.

Without doubt, I had to change – but I reckoned I was far too entrenched in my ways for any real improvement. Well, what d'you know? Fourteen months down the line

and I'm still surprising my friends. But this time, for all the right reasons.

Booking in for the week-long spiritual and personal development retreat called the Hoffmann Process had meant sharing my life 24 hours a day with 21 total strangers, men and women aged between 25 and 72, in a detached house on the windswept South Downs in Sussex. I'd had to share a room with two other women I'd never met, accept a rota for the showers and no phoning home.

At that stage in my life I was scared and confused – scared of growing old and confused about my future role. I had felt desperately alone since my husband died three years previously and, although initially I'd been excited about my freedom and the possibility of a new relationship, the thought of being a single, independent person – maybe for the rest of my life – had thrown me into turmoil.

The truth was, I realised, I had never known who I was or what I was meant to be. From

an early age I had become quite adept at role-playing to cover up my chronic insecurity. As long as I was acting the part of middle class Mum or confident career woman, I thought I was fine and no one would uncover what a fraud I was. I feared they would see me as I saw myself – a frightened schoolchild of ten.

I was terrified of slowing down as I felt that was a sign of getting older. What was to be avoided at all cost was space, in my head or on the calendar. A week ahead with no work or social events made me sweat buckets. I said yes to everything and everyone, convinced I would never get asked again. Noise was also a constant factor. Turn up the music in the car, the kitchen – chaos was good, I thought. It meant action. It meant stuff was happening.

Without doubt, the scariest thing I had to do in the whole week during the Hoffman Process was to spend 12 hours in complete

silence. At the end of one session, when we were all gathered together, exhausted physically and mentally after a particularly strenuous session of bashing our demons out of big, fat pillows with plastic baseball bats while screaming abuse at our imaginary parents, we were told we were not allowed to talk until the following day. I panicked. Silently.

I thought if I couldn't talk, I couldn't entertain. No one would find me interesting. What role could I play? We filed into our communal dining room, staring wide-eyed in shock and horror. I sat down to eat and actually choked on my soup. My throat was constricted with tension.

What I learnt by going through that week was that it's not what I add, but what I

subtract from my life that's important. I left a lot of emotional baggage behind me at Hoffman. Stuff – about self-esteem

and whether I could be accepted as the real me – that I'd been lugging around for years and never had the courage to address. Somehow when I came home I realised I was no longer frightened by space or silence.

More fascinatingly, my new-found equilibrium was obvious from the different way I began to behave. Friends and family were surprised.

Some of them didn't show up for a party I was having? Ah well, I was able to say, another time. A friend forgot my birthday? They must have had a lot on, I told myself... and them. Daughter not fed the dog? Ah, but she's doing some course work.

“You've moved on so much,” they began to say. Then, as the new me emerged more strongly, “You seem so much happier.” I hate to admit it but I think I've finally grown up. By allowing my head and my diary to be

empty – the classic mantra of having space to allow things to come to you – I've been shown that nature really does abhor a vacuum. Things, whether work or socialising, have come to me. And when they haven't, I no longer feel anxious.

In many ways I did it the hard way. The Hoffman Process scrapes you down to the bone and publicly exposes you. You can't hide or bring a note from your mum. You have to stand up before your group and admit all your fears and insecurities – everything you've ever been ashamed of doing, saying or feeling. But the sky doesn't fall down around your ears. You cry, your mascara runs down your face, you look a wreck – but people *still* like you! Shock!

“The Process scrapes you down to the bone and publicly exposes you”

Amazement! My self-esteem just grew in leaps and bounds.

Above all, I now have the confidence to stop acting like a child and have stopped being treated like one. I have the courage to walk away from things that I relied upon to make me seem “interesting”, to conceal not only my wrinkles but the real *me*. The type of work that I accepted, the type of friends I clung on to despite the way they behaved, addictions to an extra drink to boost my morale, to unsuitable men and as always, Touche Éclat!

My staying still has also allowed my kids to blossom and move on, my real friends are no longer repelled by my centrifugal force – they have started inviting me back. I'd wound myself up so tight over the years, trying to be all things to all people that I had turned

into the human version of the fairground rotor – spinning so fast my friends were climbing the walls to escape my frantic, “interesting” lifestyle.

On my birthday last year, my husband's sister phoned me for the first time since his death. Sadly, at a time when we'd needed each other so much we had grown apart, emotionally and geographically. Later in the day, a beautiful, extravagant bunch of flowers was delivered with tears and an apology by a girlfriend who had ignored me for over a year.

The Hoffman Process isn't a conventionally religious organisation with a specific affiliation, but it does place great emphasis on spirituality and ritual. A lot of time is spent on visualisation and periods of silent reflection.

As a confirmed atheist, I was prepared to dismiss any talk about my spiritual self as a load of old twaddle, but during one exercise – sitting eyes closed in a semi-circle, soothing music wafting in the background – we were asked to look inside ourselves for our Spirit Guide. Despite feeling embarrassed and sniggery, I conjured up an image of someone in my subconscious who I now turn to for advice in times of trouble and indecision. It may sound daft, but it works for me!

Sometimes we have to suspend belief in our lives. We tend to be intensely practical and analyse everything but we need more magic; the unexplainable and the unexpected. It's bad and impossible to try to control everything.

I learnt on the Process that I can change, that I haven't been programmed for life. I don't have to repeat the negative Pavlovian response to a friend not phoning, or a shop assistant ignoring me. I can and have changed my outlook. I've also learnt that being alone doesn't have to equate with being lonely. I always thought I needed a partner and now I've found someone. **W&H**

DO TRY THIS AT HOME

Of course, not everyone, financially or practically, can drop everything to go on a retreat. Hoffman Institute manager Clare Gilson reveals how to pave the way to a happier you at home...

THE PERFECT START

Begin each day by “checking-in” with yourself to make sure your four elements – spiritual, intellectual, emotional and physical – are in balance. This will help

you to remember to nurture those areas throughout the day.

ENJOY WORK, REST AND PLAY

Fun shouldn't end when you hit double figures. It's vital to give yourself some playtime to counteract stress, whether building sandcastles or paragliding – moments of abandon and carelessness are key to a happy life.

DON'T HIDE BEHIND A MASK

Be aware of what you're doing and

why you're doing it. Often you are trying to please others and wearing a mask to disguise your true emotions. Step back and assess your actions – you may be surprised at what you discover about yourself.

The eight-day course costs £2,050 per person and includes accommodation and meals. Courses run once a month at Florence House, Seaford, East Sussex, BN25 4JS and selected venues in the UK and Ireland. For details, call 0800-0687114; www.hoffmaninstitute.co.uk.