

ALL THE RAGE

There's a reason the Hoffman course has become so fashionable – it changes lives. Therapy connoisseur Helen Kirwan-Taylor braves the process and bashes through the shadows of her childhood tragedy

Good journalism is usually about research but, when I signed up for the week-long residential Hoffman Process course, I hadn't read a thing. I just pitched up at a retreat facility in Essex feeling sick. I was right to be anxious. Had there been a spaceship parked outside with green aliens clutching clipboards, I'd have been less astounded than I was two days into the programme.

The Hoffman is famous in many fashionable west London circles. It is – from the minimum I had bothered to find out – a detox week for the soul (that's what the website says, at least) which focuses on releasing the demons from our childhood. The techniques used (which I knew nothing about) are a hodge-podge of new age therapies blended together to form a unique cocktail; they are guarded enough about these to make you sign disclaimers when you arrive (this bit I really didn't like). The process was created by an American psychotherapist, Bob Hoffman, who died in 1997 but who – from what I experienced – must have been a pretty fun-loving guy.

I have been writing about and exploring psychological issues for over 20 years. Though I have done many courses and workshops, none came close to the intensity or chutzpah of the Hoffman. There are, as far as I know, no psychological programmes quite like this. Why did I sign up? I didn't, actually. My

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temperamental bouts were getting too frequent. I was feeling gutted at the prospect of son number two going to boarding school and I couldn't think of anything (apart from old age, disease and death) to look forward to. 'You have to go somewhere,' my husband said. He was thinking of a spa. I suggested the Hoffman. He signed me up that day.

So, in March this year, I pitched up at the rickety front door of Oxon Hoath, expecting a five-star country hotel with porters in penguin suits. Instead, I had to drag my own suitcase up four flights of stairs to a room that would have made a homeless refugee happy perhaps, but not someone who had just paid more than £2,000. All around me were grey-faced men and women looking like they would rather be entering prison than hanging about waiting to see what weirdness would unfold. My first thought was: 'I don't belong here.' I wished I had flown off to a Golden Door spa instead and called home immediately, but my husband talked as if he had had me committed. 'You will be fine,' he said in that way people do when they think someone's insane.

That afternoon 30 of us, aged from 26 to 60, sat in a circle listening to our five 'teachers', as they are called. This appeared to be perfectly normal group therapy and I relaxed. We wore name badges like businessmen at conferences. It felt ordinary.

By day two, normal was gone. Up at 7am and feeling like a college student, I entered the living room expecting to take notes. Instead, the teachers explained that we would now all stand up, walk to the centre of the room and confess exactly what weird, sad set of events in our lives had transpired to land us in this mess. Oh, and the Hoffman way is 'no holds barred', 'spill every single ounce of pathetic truth' (while sobbing or cursing) and 'make it audible, please'. My

stomach went into knots. One by one, members of the group stood up and confessed to addictions, physical and psychological abuse, suicidal depression, infidelity, violent behaviour... Heck, one man had even been in prison. I promise that if someone had said, 'I burned down a small village,' I wouldn't have been surprised.

That was the last of anything even faintly familiar to me. By the afternoon we'd been stripped of our name badges (which were replaced with something really odd), and basically I'd been initiated. I say this affectionately. Like the movies, the Hoffman is about the suspension of disbelief. One exercise, involving plastic baseball bats, large cushions and primal screams, had me and a brilliant former experimental psychologist suffering from existentialist depression ready to pack up and leave. In the end we decided to 'trust' the process. Frankly, that wasn't easy. The Hoffman is about feelings, not thoughts. Releasing anger and pain was the first few days' mission. In order to generate a hyperstate of arousal, the Hoffman Process uses tricks (I speak in code because too much prior knowledge defeats the point – the element of surprise is huge). I couldn't access my anger easily and found the whole exercise contorted. My teacher took me aside and remarked that I wasn't trying hard enough. Furious at her for telling me off, I went at my cushion like a petulant five-year-old. I suddenly realised she had manipulated me. Rebels are a well-known species to the Hoffman. With 40,000 graduates around the world, they have seen everything.

By day three, various members of the group were falling apart. I found it excruciating to see grown men (some of them boxed-up public-school boys) sobbing. One man ran a large fund somewhere; here, he was often to be found in the foetal position. The Hoffman is a last-resort place for people whose lives and relationships are disintegrating, or whose depression has resisted everything else. Most are pretty desperate. I was often in tears listening to terrible stories of parental abuse, sexual molestation and God-awful neglect. To fix all the past hurt meant going back over intolerably painful details. Normal therapy would have you talk and pop drugs; here, you literally kill off and bury your demons.

For me, this meant murdering the man who murdered my sister Tasha 25 years ago, therewith also killing my family. I never grieved (I wasn't allowed to) and I believe many of my issues in life (anxiety, bouts of depression and ME) stem from that horrific incident. My parents let us suffer in silence; they were too broken to offer any emotional assistance. We are all badly cobbled together now. I was wary of how dangerous summoning the trauma could be, but Donna, my teacher, urged me to try. And so I took a baseball bat, stood up and, with my eyes closed, I started beating him (ie, cushion). I could see him hovering on all fours, bleeding. I beat harder and harder. I could hear his screams and his pathetic pleas (my sister must have pleaded for her life too when he tortured her to death). I bashed his bones into a hole in the earth and continued bashing until my hands began to blister. Then I stood up (heaving with tears and snot) and spat repeatedly on his grave. Then I stomped. My heart was pounding. I'm not sure – therapeutically speaking –



Helen Kirwan-Taylor, June 2009

that this was kosher but, at a certain point, I felt a shift. It was over. I sat down (still sobbing), closed my eyes and spontaneously summoned up a picture (on an Austrian mountain top no less) of my family all holding hands with a living, smiling Tasha. This picture would replace the terrifying but constant vision of her open-casket funeral. We can reprogramme our memories, I subsequently learned. This is exactly what I was doing.

They keep you busy at the Hoffman. One minute you're writing 12-page letters to your parents and the next you're clutching cushions to your breast. I stopped questioning the logic by day four. My first attempts at guided visualisations (they do many) failed completely, but then I started doing variations. I managed to summon up my spiritual self dressed in a white Dosa dress and Pippa Small gold necklace. She danced with my spiritual guide – the Hoffman believes we have four aspects to our being: spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical. From then on, when asked to see my spiritual self in the 'light', I effortlessly floated off. This was my biggest breakthrough.

Before you can heal, you must hurt. Vulnerable, exhausted and ashen, we dragged ourselves around. When people really speak from the 'heart', the usual nonsense of class and profession go out the window. Though there were clearly a few millionaires among >

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◁ us (from all over the world), I didn't even notice. We were just hurt, sad people trying to fix whatever damage our parents and life had inflicted upon us. The group quickly became inseparable and this, more than anything, is how the Hoffman gets such amazing results. We were so low that anyone could have knocked us over. We would hug each other while making cups of tea. The wonderful thing about being human is that very few of our problems are unique. We became like a flock of geese: when one went down, the rest stopped and waited until he or she was strong enough to go on. One woman had a major panic attack during a transference exercise. We were all scared that this was more than the Hoffman team could handle. But after 10 minutes, she stood up and walked back to her chair. We all belted and clapped. She started smiling after this.

Days five, six and seven are about joy. I had several 'Aha!' moments. Stripped of my cynical intellect and critical 'dark side', as they call it, I became so happy that I was high (I couldn't sleep). I became playful to the point of annoying the group. The child that vanished when my sister died at age 13 magically resurfaced. Liberated from the restraints of the British stiff-upper-lipism that states one should always be a boxed-in adult, I felt free. I was bursting with song (I even started writing a jingle about the Hoffman) and humour. But being 'response-able' is what we were there to learn. I decided my emotional, childish side could come out as often as she likes – providing she exerts a bit of adult discipline now and then. For this, the Hoffman has tools, tricks and exercises aplenty. I loved drumming out my negative side using a shoe. In fact, when we had our manic 'happy' day, I hardly noticed how crazy we had become. Had they said, 'Take off your clothes and roll in the mud,' I'd have done it. Most of us were reluctant to leave. After seven nights together, we were family. But the process really only kicks in when you leave, though they set up three reunions in the months after and our own email forum. Many members have experienced life changes – some good, some bad – since.

What I realise now is that Bob Hoffman was a genius. When he was experimenting with EST, NLP, gestalt therapy, meditation and shamanism, the science was non-existent. Now we know that anything that can alter our state of consciousness not only opens new

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receptors in the brain but triggers lasting 'shifts'. The more we went into trances and meditation, the more we stimulated the 'God spot' (where we feel connected to a higher being). The aim of the Hoffman is to get us to heal wounds from the past and emerge strong, peaceful and loving. By recognising patterns in ourselves and others, we are also able to change our responses to the world. I have been back for two months and though my dark side has emerged and I occasionally take the evil left rather than virtuous right fork, I am much more peaceful in myself. I avoid the company of people in the 'dark' (this includes anyone overtly ambitious or judgemental). Most of all, I try to be in the moment. Armed with a magical mental sanctuary where I can retreat when things get on top of me, I feel able to handle life's jolts. And I have 30 new friends prepared to drop anything to stop me from becoming the arrogant, brash, angry person I was when I pitched up that first morning.

We had our second-month reunion at my house last night. I still didn't know the first names of many of the group but we bonded immediately. The most appealing aspect is the complete lack of judgement. I know that going back to where I was before is not an option. So even when I trip up, get angry, drink too much, lose my temper or feel the dark side gnawing at my shoulder (where it pecks regularly), I think: 'OK. Get the toolbox out and get to work.'

I firmly believe the Hoffman Process should be available on the NHS (they are trying). Many of my group members had been to rehab. All said they wished they had done this a long time ago. The Hoffman is undergoing clinical trials: they have already found that one year after the process, only 17 per cent of graduates with depressive symptoms relapse (it's 50 per cent with most other treatments). In the end, I think I met 30 of the most courageous people I know. It's much easier to be insincere, manipulative, selfish, backstabbing, fearful, snobby and cold than to be loving, accepting and kind. Once in the light, though, there is no turning back. They don't ask you to, but you do end up recruiting. I think one week of Hoffman should be mandatory for all British public men (like military service is for Israelis). Mr Brown: if you are reading this, that includes you. □ Ring 01903 889990 or visit hoffmaninstitute.co.uk.

IS THE HOFFMAN FOR YOU?

- You are right for the process if you really, really want to change something in your life for good because you are perilously close to the edge.
- Ideal candidates still have lingering family (or trauma), relationship and control issues and a history of depression or any kind of

- anxiety, including shyness. Everyone has some sort of 'pain'.
- If you feel you are passing your own pain onto your children.
- If you are feeling frustrated about being unable to sustain a healthy adult relationship.
- It works best for those prepared to

- throw themselves in wholeheartedly. Many come determined. It is all about pushing buttons and forcing yourself out of your comfort zone.
- It is not for dabblers and spiritual tourists. The Hoffman is extremely hardcore. It is not 'pampering'.

PRODUCTS FOR PEACE OF MIND



Prescriptives Comfort Night, £35. A peptide-packed night cream that reduces the flush of irritation and blotchiness.



Decléor Hydra Floral Moisturizing Gel Cream For Eyes, £22. De-puffs and hydrates eyes with flower essences and essential oils.



Les Fleurs de Bach Vivacités de Bach, £60. A new line of mood-enhancing scents made with organic Bach flower essences, which are used to boost confidence and take the edge off stress. This mustard-flower and gortz spritz has a punchy, peppery smell that lifts the spirits.



Figs & Rouge Organic Lip, Face & Body Balm, £4. This wax can be applied all over the body to tackle stress-related skin flakiness.



This Works Survive Kit, £26. Contains five problem-solving products: Turbo Balm to moisturise lips; One For All, a calming antiseptic oil that works on anxiety-related breakouts; Stay Cool, a soothing eye serum; Quick Spritz, a feelgood, rose-scented face spray; and Breathe In, a calming inhaler with notes of frankincense and eucalyptus.



Shiseido Zen Eau de Parfum, £51. A comforting blend of earthy patchouli – which is said to help the wearer feel grounded – mixed with hints of magic Shiseido ingredient the Blue Rose, which unusually for rose adds a positive citrusy burst.



La Prairie Anti-Ageing Stress Cream, £110. Calm in a jar, this deliciously rich cream contains valerian root, a natural relaxant that works on frowns and worry lines.

