

## LIVING

# Still looking for love? Let's have a show of hands...

Faced with the perils of modern dating, *Cosmo Landesman* learns to respect boundaries at an intimate 'touch' workshop

It's early Sunday morning. I should be having a lazy lay-in or a jog in the park, but I'm busy at an "intimacy workshop", touching and stroking strangers – and strangers are touching and stroking me. To some, this may seem like a Sunday in hell. But for the 60 or so who have come to the workshop run by the personal-growth guru Jan Day, it's heaven.

The kind of intimacy we are addressing today is tantra 2.0 – a word that still brings to mind Sting and his wife Trudie doing you-know-what for days on end. But, thankfully, times have changed. In the early Seventies, workshops like this were seen as a force for personal freedom and social liberation. But in our current sexual climate, romance is subjected to strict rules and regulations. Critics of MeToo complain that discussions about consent have snuffed out the spark that ignites love and sexual passion. No wonder, they say, young people are having little sex and not much romantic love either.

Today's workshop is being held at a swanky Kensington hotel, and we have come from all parts of the UK to become more alive to the "sensuality of touch". I was expecting a motley collection of the bearded and the beaded; forlorn middle-aged blokes and menopausal women with chunky jewellery; tree-huggers, emotional misfits and the sexually excluded.

Not so. There are handsome men

and attractive women of all ages. Yes, there's a sprinkling of New Age types, but most people I talk to are educated professionals – teachers, designers, therapists and charity workers.

But why are they here? The most common misconception is that workshops like these are for damaged or unhappy people. Not true, says Jan Day. "Most people who come to my workshops are quite happy. They may have fulfilling careers and relationships, but don't feel fulfilled. They're not

living up to their full potential. They want something more."

Daniel, in his late 30s and single for the past two years, has experienced a series of online dating disasters. Why is he here? "I know that it's a cliché, but unless I can learn to love myself, how can I expect others to love me?"

A lot of people have come in the hope of finding love. Wendy admits it's like a superior form of speed-dating. "Workshops like these are great places to meet men and really get to know

In palm's way: *Cosmo* (centre) and fellow workshop attendees take part in an exercise with therapist Jan Day (second left)

someone very quickly. Yes, I've found love – my problem is keeping love."

I ask her if the men she meets at workshops are different from the men she meets in the workplace? "They're a different species – less sexist, for starters. Men here are keen to improve the way they relate to women."

She's right about the men. What they all share is a supersensitivity to the women's feelings; they are anxious not to cause offence. They want to be blokes, but still respect a woman's boundaries.

Michael, handsome, soft-spoken and in his late 20s, would like to find a partner but believes he needs to do a lot of work on himself first. "It's very difficult to understand what women want these days. Act on impulse and you're a creep. Be sensitive and you're a wimp," he laughs.

Jan Day understands his predicament. "Men say they are afraid and ashamed of their sexuality, and worry how it will be perceived. It's very healing to have men and women in a circle talking about that. Women realise that some of their attitudes are causing men to shut down. Bringing it all out in the open creates an atmosphere of trust."

To foster that trust, she will put us through a series of exercises, from simple mindful meditation of your different body parts – "feel the life force in your feet..." – to more challenging physical forms of touch and stroking.

But first, we need to pick a partner. This is always tricky for men: do we go for the beautiful blonde with the trusting smile, or the older woman, wise to blokes like us? I choose the latter.

We are told to stand about 10 feet away from each other and, using hand signals, take turns inviting the other person to come right up close and touch and stroke our hands. Or, alternatively, we are not invited to get close or touch hands. It's up to you to say yes or no.

And as we approach our partner, we signal what we are experiencing by touching our head, our heart, our stomach or even our crotch – not in a lewd way, but a simple recognition of our sexuality. You have to move very slowly and get permission for each step. I signal my partner to approach. I should be thinking of higher spiritual matters, but all I can think of is: will she express her sexual awareness? If not, does it mean I'm un-fanciable? My partner slowly approaches and touches first her head, then a step later, her heart, two more steps and, very quickly, she places her hand by her lower part...

I want to shout "Yes!", fist-punch the air and high-five the entire class. And then she begins stroking my hands – and it feels very nice.

Then it's my turn. She signals for me to approach. I move one small step at a time, worried that I will do something wrong. I haven't experienced such anxiety in approaching the opposite sex since I was 16 at the school disco. I touch my head, my heart, my belly. I'm getting very close. Shall I do it and touch down below? Will she be offended if I do – or insulted if don't? I tell myself in a Jan-like voice: "Go on... be in touch with your feelings." It's your life force speaking, not your lust!

But at the last minute, I chicken out. I'm too old-fashioned. Still, she invites me to stroke her hands and seems pleased with the result.

After each exercise, you talk over the experience with your partner and I realise it's only then that real intimacy occurs. Some people, overcome with emotion, finish exercises in tears. One Earth Mother type goes around dispensing hugs. I watch as she clasps and brings a small, bald and rotund bloke into her ample bosom. They carry on hugging for minutes. He looks so happy, I feel like tapping him on the shoulder and saying: "Excuse me, sir. May I cut in and have go?"

It's easy to be cynical about workshops like Jan's and dismiss them as spiritual day trips for the privileged. But training men – and women – to respect each others' boundaries, while still finding a place for fun, sensuality and sexiness, is surely something the world of dating and romance badly needs right now.

Names have been changed

Details: janday.com



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Tantric twosome: Trudie Styler and husband Sting

