



Close encounters

Beatrice Kerr and her husband loved one another, but big life challenges and the daily grind had eroded their closeness, and sex was flagging. Could an intimacy workshop change things?

Saturday afternoon in a house in Hertfordshire and I find myself doing something I haven't done in a long time. I'm looking into my husband's eyes. Not just for a moment, but for 10 whole minutes, as he gazes back into mine. For the first time in months, we're connecting. I feel love. And as Sam and I look at each other, the intimacy is so intense that I start to cry.

We've been married for seven years and have two small children, one with a disability. The love and affection we feel for each other have always been strong, but, last autumn, I felt the

intense demands of everyday life were pushing our relationship to the bottom of the priority list. Most nights, after the children fell asleep, I collapsed on the sofa watching TV, while Sam, a musician, disappeared to his study to listen to music.

We talked to each other every day, yet I was often irritable with Sam; I wanted time alone, but also felt sad that we weren't as close as we once were. We hugged and kissed, yet something was missing: intimacy. Tiredness and stress had turned us both off sex; we slept in separate beds because of Sam's snoring and felt like >>>

>>> ships passing in the night. On top of the general exhaustion of bringing up a family and trying to earn enough money to live on, our life together had been through some major challenges. Our eldest child was born with health problems and his first years were full of medical crises. Then, just as his health finally started to improve and I became pregnant with another baby, Sam's mother fell very ill and died a year ago.

Was it any wonder, then, that we both felt emotionally drained – too worn out to have even a proper conversation? I desperately wanted to reconnect, to feel that passion and togetherness we once had. So, having stumbled across the idea of intimacy workshops, I found one that didn't seem too hippy-dippy, held over a weekend in the home of relationship therapist Priya Tourkow. I asked Sam if he would do it. As one of life's cynics, he cringed at the idea, but he agreed to give it a try.

Breaking the ice

As we walked up the path to Priya's house on Saturday evening, we assured each other that if it was terrible (visions of us being told to undress and make love on the carpet, or having to hum 'Omm' for hours), we would run away.

To our relief, Priya turned out to be perfectly down-to-earth; a warm, curly-haired mother of two grown children. We nursed cups of tea on the sofa and she broke the ice by telling us about how, as a psychotherapist, she had started running these workshops – both bespoke ones for couples, like this one, and group sessions for several couples at a time. She had noticed how often relationship issues came up for her clients. Couple therapy became her specialism, and she

trained in tantra and psychosexual issues, she explained.

Acknowledge the positive

It was time to get started with our first exercise. Sam and I took it in turns to, as Priya put it, 'acknowledge positives' about each other. I felt myself glow as I listened to Sam say how he loves the way my eyes light up when I smile, that I'm kind, and a good mother. These were all things I knew deep down that my husband

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appreciated, but to hear him say them out loud created a feeling of bonding. I couldn't wait for my turn to compliment his rock-like presence in a crisis, as well as his intellect, his originality and his sense of humour.

Sam and I were now holding hands and smiling at each other. We told Priya about the shared interests that initially brought us together, and everything we'd been through. Priya remarked on how much loss we had experienced and we discussed how the fun seemed to have drained away with so many responsibilities and challenges. I explained how I grumpily pushed Sam away when he approached me – I wanted something more from Sam, a grand gesture of passion, and he needed me to be gentler and kinder.

We spent half an hour sitting very close together, our legs entwined,

gazing into each other's eyes as music played, and gently stroking each other's faces. When I heard pan-pipes, I knew Sam would be groaning inside and I worried he would switch off yet, miraculously, he didn't let it bother him. In each other's eyes we found the tenderness we had both been missing, and as my tears fell, an unexpected transformation happened. 'We' were back. The Sam and Beatrice we used to be. We left the session uplifted, with a fresh feeling hovering between us. Our negative pattern already felt broken.

We continued the next morning. Facing each other, we maintained eye contact as we voiced what we find attractive in each other. I was touched to hear Sam compliment various parts of my body I didn't know he still noticed. We then took it in turns to stroke each other from head to toe – we were so relaxed that we weren't even worried about Priya being there. In fact, having a witness to make the exercise structured and formal was the catalyst we needed – as Sam usually keeps quiet about his emotions. 'Sex is a loving, deep connection most of us want,' Priya explained, 'but sex needs and loves intimacy.' Intimacy, she added, depends on honest communication.

Crossing the bridge

Our next guided exercise was called 'crossing the bridge'. Facing each other again, one of us volunteered to 'cross the bridge' of our relational space to 'visit' the other. I felt the impulse to visit Sam, and first I needed to ask Sam formally if that was all right. I had to leave all my mental baggage on my side of the bridge and then 'cross over' to him with a completely open mind.

Then, Sam was asked to choose one thought or issue he would like



to share with me, in a word or two. He thought for a while and then said 'volatility'. Priya asked him to explain, simply, what this meant to him, focusing on himself (using words like 'I feel' rather than 'You do this'). As we maintained eye contact, Sam went on to talk, bit by bit, about how he was affected by my grumpy moods, and his need for more creativity and lightness in the midst of the daily grind.

I wasn't allowed to interrupt while he was speaking. Every time Sam delivered a 'chunk' of information, he was asked to pause. Then I had to summarise what I had heard him say – not responding, or adding anything – simply acknowledging that I had understood what he was expressing.

Next it was Sam's turn to 'cross the bridge' and listen to me. My word was 'initiative' and I found myself expressing something I hadn't ever grasped before, which is that I would

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be less grumpy if Sam took more initiative in our life. We felt we were communicating deeply and reached the core of our relationship issues.

Finally, we talked also about practical things such as how we could reduce Sam's snoring and sleep in the same bed again. I asked how we could keep this revived spark alive. 'The key is to build on what you already have that's good,' said Priya, 'and add in more. Affection leads to intimacy –

talking about feelings – which leads to sensuality, which leads to sexuality. You two are a team – drop your expectations of each other; your only mission is to be close to each other.'

A month later we are still feeling that new closeness. I am less volatile, and Sam is taking more initiative, although we have also taken in that what we demand and expect from each other is less important for our bond than simply the honesty of communicating: expressing feelings and truly listening. It's working; we are no longer bickering, and feel united. We smile more and laugh more; we're even starting to get intimate again physically. It feels like this is only the beginning of our new life as a couple.

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