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Jane is the author of *Wellbeing & Mindfulness*, *The Energy Secret*, *The Weekend Healer* and many other wellbeing titles. See her Amazon author page.

Meetings without masks

JANE ALEXANDER

Our holistic hero tries a dating class with a difference

Dating is difficult. You can't judge people by looks alone yet that's all that standard speed dating events and apps like Tinder seem to offer. It feels superficial, totally lacking in heart and soul.

So I was intrigued by Meetings without Masks (meetingswithoutmasks.com), a one-day workshop for singles. It was developed by relationship expert and *Natural Health* contributor Jan Day who recognised that people were yearning for the chance to meet in a different, more holistic, way.

I turn up feeling shy and awkward. I've never been good at the dating game. About thirty of us (equal numbers of men and women, aged mainly from late 30s to late 50s) sit down in a large circle. "The main idea of today is to have lots of fun," says Jan. "It's about dropping the idea of perfection and showing up exactly as you are."

She gets us playing silly word games and, within minutes, everyone's laughing. The ice firmly broken, we move swiftly from one exercise to another. The day is ingeniously planned so we meet pretty much everyone without it ever feeling contrived or awkward. Sometimes we work in pairs; sometimes we work in groups of three or four.

Superficial small-talk is firmly off the menu. We share the simple things that make us really happy; we talk about how we envisage our ideal relationship. We confess what we love as well as what we find difficult about the opposite gender, then we get up and dance. "All the men copy how the women are dancing," Jan shouts over the music. I launch into a full-on 'Kate Bush' flailing

arms routine and the guys round me fall about laughing. Then it's my turn to laugh as they attempt to copy my moves.

After lunch we venture into more serious territory. "We're exploring two words – yes and no," says Jan. "Often we say 'yes' when we mean 'no' because we're scared of hurting people's feelings," she explains. "Equally, we can squash down our 'yes' because of early experiences." We pair up and practise moving towards our partners, responding to their cues – one signal for 'yes, come closer' and another for 'stop right there'. We focus on how we feel, whether we feel comfortable with the other person up close or firmly at arm's length. It's a great exercise in feeling and finding our boundaries.

Whenever we spend time with someone, we write a short note saying what we enjoyed about our encounter. These are popped into named envelopes. If you feel courageous you can also drop in a request to meet up afterwards – maybe for a coffee or to go dancing. It all feels deliciously sweet and innocent.

I left with a broad smile on my face and a spring in my step. I hadn't met my soul-mate but I had felt a deep sense of connection with a whole bunch of lovely people. As I read the notes people had left me, I felt my heart glow and my soul smile. Beat that, Tinder!

Jane Alexander blogs at exmoorjane.com and is on social media as [@exmoorjane](https://twitter.com/exmoorjane)