



Spiritual dating Unmasked



We tried speed dating, then looked for love online, but the latest trend for lonely hearts is spiritual dating. Singleton Kate Delamere dares to let her guard down at a Meeting Without Masks workshop

The word 'dating' sends shivers down my spine. It's fraught with unexploded landmines - one false move and you could find yourself trapped by prejudices and expectations, or suddenly detonated by emotional baggage. The relationships in my life have usually started as a friendship that grows deeper over time, or from a burst of physical chemistry, rather than as the result of a formal 'date'.

But when an invitation to a spiritual dating workshop called 'Meetings Without Masks' lands on my desk, I realise that neither of these possibilities are on the horizon at the moment.

So one grey Sunday morning, I head to the Light Centre in central London to join 23 other singles aged from their twenties to their eighties - yes, really! - all ready to lower their metaphorical masks.

Surreptitious looks over tea and coffee give me a flavour of the participants: an even number of men and women, some with arms and legs crossed defensively, others extroverts who are holding

court. There are beards, glasses and bald pates, and a blind man with a gorgeous golden Labrador called Winnie.

Moving through this hopeful bunch is workshop leader Jan Day, dressed in radiant orange and red, colours that stimulate sexuality and emotions while keeping us grounded.

The themes of sexual healing, self-acceptance and loving kindness are central to Jan's life and work. A relationship expert and intimacy coach who draws on the spiritual discipline of tantra, she helps people explore what they want in a relationship and shows them new ways to meet people by breaking old habits and considering qualities they might have overlooked.

Jan begins the workshop by telling us: 'Today we're going to do naked dating.' Pardon? Surely that moment comes after a few dates?

'But that doesn't mean you need to take your clothes off,' she smiles. Phew. However, the middle-aged man next to me lets out a disappointed wheeze.

'It's about taking off your everyday masks and armour,

and relaxing into yourself, so you can experience a deeper relationship with yourself, with the people you meet and with Spirit,' Jan continues. 'This workshop aims to help you connect with your feelings, sexual nature, heart, being and soul, and help you develop the capacity to listen to yourself and others, letting go of conditions and judgements.'

Jan turns to her German partner Frieder. 'I was married twice, and then single for 12 years,' she tells us. 'Then 10 years ago, Frieder walked into my life. He was someone who didn't fit into my idea of who to be with. He wasn't someone I'd normally be attracted to. I didn't fancy him.'

We examine Frieder to discover the source of his unattractiveness. His devoted gaze towards Jan doesn't waver.

'I want you to seek out people who are different from what you're normally attracted to,' Jan says. 'You may not have strong sexual chemistry, but don't screen them out because they may make better partners for you. It's these people who



Look of love: Jan and her partner, Frieder

will teach you the most about relationships and help you break old habits.'

Having grouped together with the people I'm least physically attracted to, we take it in turns to list the items we value most, putting them into an imaginary basket. Jan encourages us to write down what we appreciate about each other's stories.

Tony, 63, puts a pebble from the Scottish island of Iona into his basket to represent his hopes and dreams for the future. Eighty-something John chooses his camera, which went on adventures worldwide with him and his wife until her death two years ago. Yumi, 32, from Japan, would put in her family, who she sees once a year in Tokyo. Being an amateur astronomer, my chosen item is my telescope, which reminds me to keep an eye on the bigger picture.

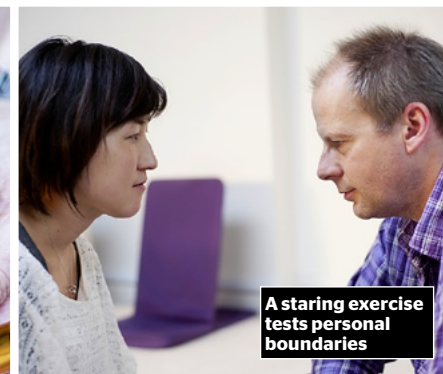
As someone with a busy head, I find this exercise a salutary lesson in switching off my thoughts and recognising how special it makes people feel when they're listened to.

Next, we form new groups of four to discuss what's important to us in a relationship. Andy, who is blind and in his forties, likes playfulness. Arnaud, in his thirties, from Belgium, values trust, and Jackie, 47, from London, is looking for respect.

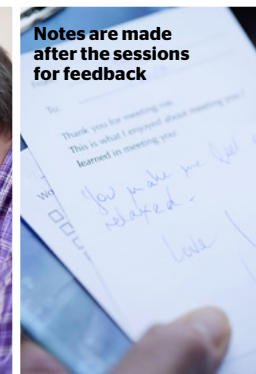
Girls and boys then divide into two groups to discuss what



Textures and touch are key to the lessons



A staring exercise tests personal boundaries



Notes are made after the sessions for feedback



Sucking on a cherry is an erotic way to open the senses...



...but it makes Kate blush

we love about the opposite sex. Jackie loves tall men, and a pretty girl with black corkscrew curls says she likes to feel protected, while a single mum in her thirties loves the way men handle their emotions in a calm, controlled manner.

Jan then asks us to each go up to a man and tell them what we love about men. Feeling somewhat awkward, I tell Tony that I love how men's minds

Tom, he's hoping to break the habit of getting into short-lived romances.

Then Jan encourages us to connect with our bodies by touching each other's hands. I feel self-conscious as Aban's and mine cavort in a semi-wild dance in front of our bodies. But not nearly as self-conscious as when we're given an erotic exercise with a cherry...

'Observe it, lick it, touch it

greater the pleasure,' John whispers in my ear, a tad too intimately.

I'm paired with John for the next exercise, which is also about awakening our senses. Blindfolded, I have to trust him to introduce me to a variety of sensory pleasures. My fingers explore the texture and shape of a pine cone and the velvety material of a cushion, and the smell of sandalwood is teased under my nose. I learn how responsive my body is to touch and smell and how sensuous they can be. I start to relax.

Jan pairs us off for the last exercise of the day, honouring the god and goddess in ourselves in meditative silence.

Sitting with Tony, I struggle at first to see beyond his patterned rainbow jumper, but I figure that even Greek gods appeared in the shape of men. It's about time I gave someone a chance.

So what did I learn? That Mr Perfect doesn't exist, but Mr Unattractive could be perfect. Before you love someone else, ensure you love yourself. And

People who are different from what you're normally attracted to will teach you the most about relationships

often work in a more sequential, logical way than women's, who tend to think laterally. And I'm amused by the way men skilfully duck emotive issues. In fact I love the way they like to find solutions, whereas women just talk about problems, on and on, and round and round...

But now Tony's eyes are glazing over. 'Women talk too much,' he mutters. He tells me he loves the way women are softer, more caring and mysterious. I beam at him, enigmatically of course, until my jaw aches.

Jan rescues us with an exercise to establish boundaries. We're to hold a partner's gaze as we move closer to them, then put up a hand to stop once we feel uncomfortable.

I stand opposite Tom, a good-looking cameraman in his thirties. He says he's here because he's fed up of meeting the same type of woman, going through a short-lived physical attraction, only to discover they have nothing in common.

We settle comfortably a foot apart. It feels good to set firm boundaries, give clear signals and be unafraid to show it.

I move on to Aban, 32, an Iranian who works in IT. Like

against your skin, break the cherry's skin, suck the juice,' says Jan, giving us a demonstration.

Jack, the Italian baker, begins some impressive tongue gymnastics, but my focus is broken by a loud snap as Jackie takes out her plastic brace. My mouth falls open in surprise and my half-eaten cherry falls to the floor.

'The lighter the touch, the

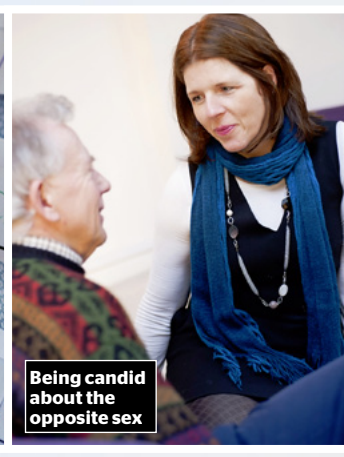
Senses are heightened using sandalwood essence



Concentrating intently on the laws of attraction



Participants could send each other notes



Being candid about the opposite sex



WANT TO FIND OUT MORE? Meetings Without Masks workshops with Jan Day take place at the Light Centre in Belgravia, London, priced £62 per person. There are upcoming workshops on 14 July and 15 September. Call 020-8123 9831 or visit www.janday.com