

PLEASURE PRINCIPLES

WOMEN ARE BEGINNING TO DICTATE THE WAY WE MAKE LOVE.

Mention the word “tantra” and what pops into your mind? Chances are it’s images of hairy couples in rust-coloured fabrics exchanging bodily fluids in a room hung with ethnic drapes. Because tantra is regarded by most of us as something slightly sleazy dressed up in a package of “spirituality”. This discomfort can’t be put down to a collective national prudery — if that were true, EL James wouldn’t be a squillionaire — but is more likely due to tantra’s unfortunate associations with ageing rockers. People who take it seriously, however, have worked on the idea to create a new movement in psychosexual therapy called conscious sexuality. This is to tantra what mindfulness is to meditation: a contemporary take on an ancient eastern principle to make it more relevant to a modern western audience.

“There is only a tiny handful of people teaching tantra properly in this country,” says Jewels Wingfield, a relationship coach specialising in conscious sexuality. “Thanks to all the second-rate teachers out there, it’s not surprising it has become associated with swinging and hot-tub sex.”


Wingfield describes conscious sexuality as a way of “accessing emotional intimacy and sensuality that goes beyond the standard sex a lot of couples have — late at night, eyes closed, a bit tired, after a few drinks”. She’s not one to mince her words: that, she says, is really no more than using another person’s genitals to masturbate against. “But you can get the same sort of escapist pleasure from stuffing your face or drinking a few beers.”

Jan Day is another intimacy and relationship coach who, like Wingfield, is seeing a surge in interest in conscious sexuality. “As an ancient art that originated hundreds of years ago in an eastern culture, tantra and its aims don’t fit our cultural needs,” says Day, who believes that conscious sexuality is a reaction to something that started in the 1960s, when sex burst overtly into everyone’s lives. “But there had to be a counter to free love, and I think that’s coming out as a desire to bring awareness to sexuality and lift it out of the purely physical.”

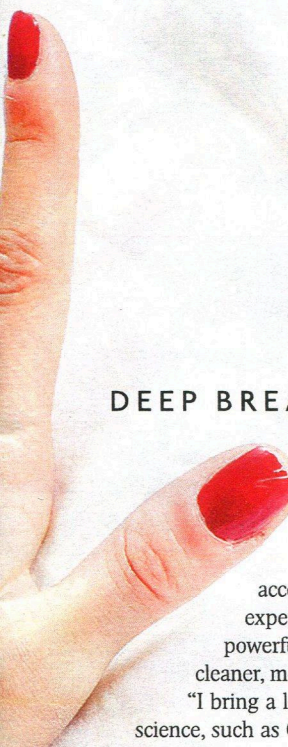
Day’s personal journey started more than 20 years ago, in her twenties, after an upbringing that had left her with a sense that sex was “disgusting”. She studied science at Oxford, but then discovered yoga and moved to America, where she joined the ashram of Osho, a mystic, guru and spiritual teacher.

Day is a trained mediator and coach: she runs singles and couples coaching sessions both in person and over the phone, and hosts group workshops, teaching more than 500 people a year. Although these attract their fair share of alternative types, they also bring in

GALLERYSTOCK



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DEEP BREATH, NICE AND SLOW... CLOVER STROUD REPORTS

accountants, teachers, entrepreneurs, IT experts and engineers, all drawn to the powerful way Day reworks tantra to give it a cleaner, more contemporary image.

"I bring a lot of the tools of modern psychiatry and science, such as CBT and analysis, into my sessions. They aren't part of the ancient principles of tantra, but they make sense to us today," she says.

And if tantra is usually associated with lengthy sessions of slow, penetrative sex (thanks for that, Sting), conscious sexuality is something different. "It's not about chasing arousal and thrills, but showing a deep, loving kindness to one another," Day says. "There doesn't have to be anything spiritual about it — though there can be if you wish."

"We're hooked on excitement within our cultural expectations of sex, so I work on stepping out of those predictable ruts. You don't have to be perfectly resolved, or in a good mood and unstressed, to enjoy sex, but people make the mistake of thinking they do, to the detriment of their sex life and, eventually, their relationship."

To the sceptic, this sort of talk might appear to veer back into new-age mumbo jumbo, but fans of conscious sexuality are evangelical in their praise of its transformative effects on all aspects of their lives. Emma, 50, who manages investor relations within an IT group, first attended one of Day's workshops two years ago to overcome her body dysmorphia, combined with psychosexual anxieties towards intimacy that made relationships difficult.

"I had no sense of myself as someone sexy or feminine," she says. "I thought I was disgusting and gross, despite the fact I'm a size 10. It was linked to having been brought up with the idea of sex and physicality as something dirty and a bit shameful — basically, the normal middle-class, heterosexual view of sex."



THERE IS A DESIRE TO BRING AWARENESS TO SEXUALITY AND LIFT IT OUT OF THE PHYSICAL

She found the workshop so enlightening that she began 18 months of training with Day to concentrate on her self-image. "It was like having a blank sheet of paper on which I could look at myself, my body and my sexuality, but doing that within a group in which I felt totally safe." So, no swinging, partner-swapping or group sex, then? Emma laughs.

"It has absolutely nothing to do with that, but it is about dealing with issues around passion, power and love." Exploring conscious sexuality enabled her to "completely rewrite my sense of self", which meant "reframing the definition of what sex and sexuality are. That means being in the moment with my partner, and being very present in a completely whole-hearted and honest way, as you are when you meditate or practise mindfulness." Emma maintains that Day's sessions have transformed her life. "I'm now in a happy relationship thanks to this, but it has paid dividends in all areas of my life, including my work."

Wingfield believes that conscious sexuality strikes a chord with women now because it reflects a growing sense of disenchantment with living in a patriarchy. Most people at her workshops are women; those men that do turn up have usually been dragged there by a partner.

"Women have this deep, primal understanding of intimacy, sexuality and eroticism, but it's been messed around with by the male-dominated system we live in," Wingfield says. "No wonder there's been such a reaction

against it. Now women are working out ways they can empower themselves. I think we feel that particularly deeply in our sexuality, as that is the area in which we've been most abused and hurt. It's women saying, 'Can we have a strong heart connection before we get on with the f*****?' — which has to be a good thing." ♦

jewelswingfield.com; janday.com

THE LANGUAGE OF CONSCIOUS SEXUALITY

Sexual shadow The parts of ourselves or our desires that we keep in the dark.

Mature sex Sex that goes beyond lust, where a couple takes the time to honour each other and the sexual act they are sharing.

Full-body orgasm State of arousal where the entire body is given time and attention to becomes aroused in a less site-specific way.

BDSM The exploration of the erotic role of power in sexuality.

Emotional intimacy Sharing vulnerabilities and shadow sides so that we can truly relate to one another.

Slow sex Sex without friction. Requires a depth of connection and presence, and can make for a different dynamic in the relationship.

Leftovers The boring zone we're left with, especially in long-term relationships, if we don't delve into our vulnerabilities.

Sexual boundaries Agreements about parts of our bodies that we do not want to be touched. This permits lovers to relax and totally surrender, and is recommended for new relationships.

