

A DIFFERENT WAY TO GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD



Matthew Todd tries the Hoffman Process — a lifetime's worth of therapy in one week

Regular readers might remember I wrote a piece in 2010 about dealing with the trauma of growing up in a homophobic society. It's the subject of my forthcoming book *Straight Jacket: How to be Gay and Happy*, out in June. After listening to scores of people's opinions on what would heal my anxiety, I decided to try The Hoffman Process — a retreat-style week of therapy — run by The Hoffman Institute and named after Bob Hoffman, who started it in the US. I did it in the summer of 2012.

I arrived at the picturesque country house where the process was being held to discover — horror upon horror — that I would be sharing a room with a stranger. Yes. Really. Luckily, he was nice: a straight chap who I immediately decided would be expecting me to try to molest him.

The next day Serena Gordon, who runs the UK Hoffman Process, welcomed the 15 of us — from all different walks of life — and then, more horror, took away our phones and anything else that connected us to the rest of the world. No telly, radio or computer. (Yes, I know, even the thought of not being able to tweet would bring some people out in a cold sweat).

The week is severely regimented. Pretty much every hour is assigned. We all gathered in a room, and the two facilitators

explained the concepts of the process.

Everyone had a private session in which we established what our “core shame” was.

The course focuses on childhood experiences and relationships with good old mum and dad. Over the week, every aspect of our lives was discussed, unpicked and, with any luck, released. The Hoffman process is famous for pillow bashing where attendees are encouraged to scream from their guts about the things that have held them back in life while smashing a baseball bat into a pillow. The idea is that this releases repressed emotions that might be causing anxiety or stress. It sounds horrendous but, believe me, we all soon got into the swing of it.

I can't tell you about what happens during the rest of the week because I'd have to kill you. I wouldn't actually, but it would spoil it. What I can tell you is I spent a lot of time crying. In a good way. I wasn't brainwashed and it isn't a cult. Nobody sacrifices a goat (although the food was amazing). And it did change me. I made friends including my roommate, who, unlike what my neurotic self had expected, was someone who had gay friends and family members.

The Hoffman Process may sound like the stuff of nightmares for us British who apparently hate talking about our feelings,

but we all needed this. On the last day, both sad and optimistic about leaving, I was given back my phone, which bombarded me with texts and news stories about the woes of the world. I may have been terrified of losing that connection when I went in but I wasn't too happy to have it back when I emerged.

Did the Hoffman process cure all my problems? No. That's partly because I couldn't spend the following first few days in peace and also because my exceptionally busy job (this magazine doesn't run itself) means I couldn't take the time to chill and do the follow-up stuff that is recommended. But mainly because the trauma suffered by many of us gay people growing up, sadly needs more than a week to fix.

However, the Hoffman Process is the most powerful single thing that I did in my ongoing journey of recovery. It was emotional and magical and I learnt a lot about how important it is to focus on emotional and mental health.

It's not cheap — it'll set you back £2,950 — but if you are trying to heal some of the pain of the past and can afford it, give it a go. As for me, my journey towards finding peace continues onwards.

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Straight Jacket: How to be Gay and Happy is published by Bantam Press on 16 June.