

HOW I BEAT MY depression

Anne Marie Scanlon thought depression would get the better of her. But then she tried the Hoffman Process...

I should start by mentioning that I am highly cynical. And at times in the middle of, say, battering a cushion with a bright yellow bat, I had my moments of doubt. However, I'd heard about the Hoffman Process through a friend of a friend who raved about it, and at the start, I made a commitment that I'd do whatever I was asked and have faith in the teachers, which is essential for the process to work. I figured I had the rest of my life to be cynical.

For those who've never experienced it, depression feels like some creature is sucking out your very soul. It's different from the blues or feeling down because it's more than the absence of joy – it's the absence of hope. It's not just feeling bad, but the absolute certainty that you'll never feel happy, or alive, ever again. The worst bout I ever experienced was ten years ago when I was living in New York. I'd cry in the shower every morning, go to work, then come home and lie on the couch, crying until bedtime. There was no trigger – I had a great job, good friends and an active social life, yet I felt as though I'd fallen into a big black hole and couldn't see any way

out. After five months, I started seeing a therapist and taking antidepressants and, within a month, began to feel better.

I thought I'd be a candidate for post-natal depression, but the year after I had my son, Jack, in 2007, was possibly the happiest time of my life. Then just as before, when everything seemed fine, it came back. I had to keep functioning for my son's sake. But once he went to bed, I shut down physically and emotionally. I let calls go to the answering machine, emails went unread and I stopped socialising or even caring too much about my appearance (and me, a former beauty editor!). Then I heard about the Hoffman Process.

A month before the course, I was sent a 32-page questionnaire about my medical history, my personal and family history, and why I wanted to do the course. I had particular difficulty answering the questions that related to my father because my parents' marriage ended when I was a baby.

The Hoffman Process – how it works

Named after Bob Hoffman, who created it in 1967, the Hoffman Process is an eight-day intensive residential therapeutic treatment. The basis of it is that we are all victims of Negative Love Syndrome, the theory of which is that we absorb our parents' negative traits and patterns, either consciously or unconsciously, in order to gain love and acceptance from them. Every child does this: we all learn how to function in the world by mimicking our parents,

and pick up negative patterns as well as positive. The process works by helping to identify negative patterns and adopt new behaviour. Techniques include physical, group and written work, and guided visualisations. **Cost: £2,550, includes accommodation, food and about 100 hours of therapeutic interaction with three follow-up meetings. There are some scholarships for people facing financial hardship. Call 01903-889990; hoffmaninstitute.co.uk.**

“When I had to share my story with a group of strangers, I was so nervous that my legs trembled”

PHOTOGRAPH LIZ McAULAY HAIR & MAKEUP CARLOS PALMA STYLING JILLIE MURPHY ANNE MARIE WEARS TOP: HOBBS; TROUSERS: HER OWN; NECKLACE: KLESHNA; BANGLES: GEORGE

His absence had a major impact on my life, and I have always had a near-allergic reaction to any form of commitment.

The course was in Florence House, a beautiful house on the cliffs in Seaford, East Sussex. There were 24 other people, ranging from early twenties to late sixties, almost equally divided between men and women.

I knew in advance I'd have to share a room with someone. I wasn't too happy about this, but my room-mate Sarah was wonderful, and I now count her among my closest friends. Days start early with breakfast at 7.30am and sometimes don't end until 11pm. I had to relinquish my phone, computer and even books, to leave myself free of all distractions and focus entirely on the work of the process.

I didn't tell anyone what I was doing. There's a stigma attached to depression and even I – who have lived in New York, a city where therapy is practically compulsory – felt a bit ashamed about seeking professional help.

One principle of the process is that the nuts and bolts of the course are kept secret from participants – you don't know what you'll be doing until you're actually doing it. This is to keep the focus on the now. Some of the techniques are already in the public domain; some of the techniques seem utterly barmy.

We had three teachers (each assigned to work with a group of eight): two women and a man. They are all Hoffman graduates who have done further training, and were all very kind and eager to put us at ease.

I was terrified at the first session – I had no idea what I'd let myself in for, and my stomach churned with anxiety. When I had to share my story with a group of strangers, I was so nervous my legs trembled and I felt like throwing up. However, I felt a huge amount of support from the rest of the group, as though they were all willing me to succeed, which in fact they were.

At the end of the first day, I went to bed sobbing. Day two was pretty bleak, and I lost count of the number of times I bawled like a hungry baby. I didn't discover any horrible buried secrets, but I did see things from a different perspective. I realised that things that are trivial by adult standards can be hugely important to a small child

and will remain significant to them. By the third day, my feelings had begun to change; I didn't know how much anger I'd been holding on to, especially towards my father. Giving vent to that rage was very empowering. I felt energised and alive, something I hadn't felt in a long time.

By the time I left, after a week of many group sessions, with a daily one-on-one with my individual teacher, I was much happier and far more confident. I've always had issues with procrastination, which I now realise were totally fear-based. The aim of the process is not blame. You don't leave with a list of grievances against your parents, rather an understanding of them and compassion for them. I now have a

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better relationship with my son and my mother. I see them both as individuals, rather than just as my son and my mother. My relationships with others have changed too, as I now allow myself to be compassionate and caring. In the past, I had a deep-seated fear of rejection that made me keep an emotional distance from others.

Afterwards, there's a monthly meeting for three months and an e-support group. I had some of the bleakest moments I've ever had in Florence House, but I also had one of the best days of my entire life. I formed very close bonds with my fellow participants and am still in touch with most of them. Sharing my fears and secrets was not easy, but it was incredibly liberating. I will never be entirely free from depression – it's in-built, just like my eye colour, but the Hoffman Process helped me reconnect with myself and with the world at large. **w&h**

Are you worried you may be suffering from depression?

The NHS has an online symptom checker available at [nhsdirect.nhs.uk](https://nhs.uk/nhsdirect). CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy), commonly known as “talk” therapy, can be available via referral from your GP. The NHS has also recently launched the Credit Crunch Stressline, a dedicated national helpline to help people experiencing stress, anxiety and depression as a result of the economic downturn, and direct them towards the support they need. Call 0300-1232000, 8am to 10pm, seven days a week.

Other charities that can help

- + THE SAMARITANS provide a 24-hour helpline. Call 08457-909090; [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org).
- + DEPRESSION ALLIANCE provides support for those who suffer from depression through self-help groups and publications. Call 0845-1232320; [depressionalliance.org](https://www.depressionalliance.org).
- + DEPRESSION UK (Formerly known as The Fellowship of Depressives Anonymous) is a self-help group. Visit [depressionuk.org](https://www.depressionuk.org).
- + MIND is a national and local network providing support and information about mental health issues. Call 0845-7660163; [mind.org.uk](https://www.mind.org.uk).
- + SANE raises awareness of mental illness, and provides info and help to those who suffer. Call (020) 7375 1002 during office hours; SANEline 0845-7678000 (6pm to 11pm); [sane.org.uk](https://www.sane.org.uk).

HOW TO HELP YOURSELF

Serena Laurence co-founded The Hoffman Institute UK in 1995 with her husband Tim, who studied the process with founder Bob Hoffman. She gives her tips...

EXERCISE A short walk will get you out of the house and into the wider world, which is important, as depression thrives on isolation.

TALK Speak to trusted friends about how you are feeling. You'll often be surprised to hear that they've experienced something similar.

FOCUS Stay in the present. Try not to project fears and worries about the future.

IGNORE Tell the negative voice in your head to “shut up”. Even saying this out loud will help. Remember feelings are not facts and that voice has no authority over the truth.

GIVE The best way of helping yourself is by reaching out a helping hand to others. It doesn't have to be a grand gesture; it could be offering to help an elderly neighbour.