

This woman, a clinical hypnotist, claims she can fix troubled marriages in three easy sessions. But is it really that simple? Lucy Etherington and her husband go under to find out

Look into my eyes...

Hypnosis has been an integral part of psychological research for more than 100 years. Sigmund Freud used it to unlock the id; Ivan Pavlov described it as 'partial sleep'. So it surprises me that intelligent people still think of it as airy-fairy stage magic, and the hypnotist somewhere between Paul McKenna and the Master in *Doctor Who*. Ursula James is clearly neither – nor is she draped in crystals and hemp. She's a bit of a fox, in fact, in a polished, successful businesswoman way. She's quite bossy, too, I am about to find out.

'You look like an actress,' I say when my husband, Nigel, and I arrive at the mews house in west London where James's practice is based. 'Don't say Miranda Richardson,' she says, fixing me with the kind of look you don't want to challenge. 'My best friend calls me Queenie!'

Our reasons for visiting James are, in truth, quite dull. We did once have more interesting reasons for seeking therapy – we've been together 18 years so it's not that surprising – but they were sorted a couple of years ago at Relate (which sounds blasé but in reality was six months of really hard work). At this point, we're stuck in the sort of rut people find themselves in when they're trying to juggle childcare and careers and personal stuff, and there never seems to be any time. All of which makes us typical candidates for James's unique blend of probing hypnosis and practical advice.

A recent study found that hypnotic 'suggestions' relieved pain in 75 per cent of 933 subjects, while other clinical tests

have proved again and again that hypnosis is an effective tool to aid weight loss and treat anxiety, IBS, OCD and addictions. But hypnotherapy as marriage guidance – can it really work?

James certainly thinks so. Not only does she claim impressive results, but the treatment is remarkably quick – only three sessions each, over nine weeks, which, after Relate, seems like a walk in the park. She also has impressive credentials – the author of the *Clinical Hypnosis Textbook* (the first book of its kind for doctors) and a visiting teaching fellow in clinical hypnosis at Oxford University medical school – both of which have so far put Nigel at ease. Today, however, he seems to be having second thoughts. 'I don't think I can be hypnotised,' he tells me. 'It's probably going to be a complete waste of time.'

I leave him in James's clutches for an hour, while I go and get a coffee, and wonder whether he's steadfastly refusing to go under by reciting the names of the entire Chelsea football team, or whether he's weeping helplessly over some childhood trauma, like poor Woody, the male half of one of the rowing couples featured in James's new television series, *Sex, Lies and Hypnosis*.

When I return from my break Nigel emerges seeming perfectly happy. 'I feel strange,' he says, smiling benignly. 'Like I've overslept.' 'Drink lots of water,' James urges him, as he wanders off in a daze. 'So it worked,' I think with relief, briefly wondering what he'll say when I get home.

My turn. 'What happened with Nigel?' I ask as casually as possible as I'm invited to sit in a soft leather reclining chair. 'I can't tell you,' James smiles. 'That's the thing with couple therapy. Your sessions are completely confidential. But isn't he a lovely man!' 'Is he?' I reply. 'I mean, he is. Yes.' 'And he loves you very much,' says James. 'Good,' I say, then remember to add, hastily, 'I love him, too.'

Before I 'go under', James asks about me and explains what she does. It's an important part of hypnotherapy that you feel comfortable with the practitioner, and it's part of clinical hypnosis that you are told specifically what will happen in the session. We discover we both studied English and drama at Goldsmiths, after which she went on to work as a counsellor for the Ministry of Defence, helping families of soldiers and civil servants. It wasn't until she tried to give up smoking that she discovered hypnosis, and herself went on to train as a clinical hypnotherapist. She has now become, she says, 'evangelical'.

She has even used her programme on herself. 'When I hit 40, I had a crisis,' she says. 'Don't get me wrong – I was very successful. I had the nice handbag and the lifestyle trappings. I loved my work. But, like a lot of therapists and psychiatrists who deal with troubled people, I was working too hard and drinking too much, and had virtually no social life or outlet.'

A personal tragedy – a friend who was also her business partner dying of cancer very young – forced things into focus. 'People have their epiphanies in different ways,' she says. 'I decided to compile a list of the changes I needed to make, and that list grew into the book and CD, *You Can Be Amazing*. I followed that course as I wrote it, and listened to the CD myself – I'm the proof it works!'

It may have been a coincidence that, shortly after her self-hypnotherapy, she met and fell in love with one of her students, now her business partner and fiancé, Phil Benjamin. 'Would you ever use hypnotherapy on each other?' I ask. 'We don't need to!' she grins.

All well and good, but how can hypnosis help my marriage? 'Couple therapy is a fusion of hypnosis and life coaching,' she says. 'It came about when I was working with individuals whose lives were changing dramatically; it often had a negative impact on their partner,' she explains, and goes on to tell the story of the woman she helped lose weight, whose husband then became jealous. 'To avoid a relapse I had to treat both partners. I don't treat a relationship, ever. That's dangerous because it doesn't exist, it's an abstract. I treat two individuals who happen to be in a relationship.'

"I become a conduit for the information couples want to pass on to each other but can't"



Lucy Etherington with Nigel, her husband, and their two children

She does this by using hypnosis to take the patient back and release them from whatever seemingly inconsequential event from their past is making them less confident. In later sessions she gives them 'tools' – nuggets of positive, can-do wisdom – to become the person they've always wanted to be. 'When you're comfortable with yourself, you will draw out the characteristics from another person you most need,' she says.

The next stage is to make sure both partners understand what each other wants. 'I once treated a couple who had been together 11 years. He wanted to travel; she wanted babies. They had never discussed it, because she assumed he should know this about her by now. Just because you've been with someone a long time doesn't mean they can read your mind.'

James encourages couples to share what they have learnt under hypnosis. 'I become a conduit for the information couples want to pass on to each other but can't. So next time I will pass on to you something Nigel might not be able to say to you himself, and vice versa.'

'People forget that a relationship has to be worked on constantly. If you don't evaluate it, if you don't give a framework

to discuss dreams and plans, it'll go stale. Couples come to me when their kids have left to go to university and they suddenly realise they don't know each other. They're looking at heading into retirement with a stranger. Sometimes I'll ask women if they have ever planned their husband's funeral. And the amount of women who have! They've sorted the music and everything. I say, "If you think the only way you're going to move on is if he's dead, then you're not prepared to make any change in the relationship, and I cannot be bothered to see somebody who cannot be bothered to take responsibility." That's why I get results, because I'm quite confrontational.'

It's decided I need to be more confident to make the necessary changes in my life, that we need to unblock whatever is holding me back. I'm asked to lie back in the designer recliner and stare at something until my eyes want to close. Her voice is very soft and soporific, and I'm sinking, sinking, but then she asks 'Other Lucy' to raise my right hand, and I'm very awake, thinking, 'What Other Lucy? What is she going on about?' My hand is not moving. 'Come on, hand,' I think, in desperation. 'Move!'

'Your hand is tingling,' intones James. 'Yes, it is,' I realise with relief. 'It feels weightless.' 'No, it doesn't,' I think, and resign myself to just lying there, doing nothing until my time's up. How dull. But then suddenly, it really does feel weightless and – there it goes. Yes! Up like a balloon.

'Is that Other Lucy?' she asks. 'Oh, Christ, this is nuts,' I think. But then I giggle, like a child. 'Describe yourself,' James demands. And I find I'm describing my 11-year-old self – mousy, gawky, with braces. Parents just divorced, being made to go to a rough new school and painfully shy. (It's funny, but after the session I realise that, even though the brace has gone and I've learnt to walk tall and act confident, that awkward, ugly-duckling 11-year-old is how I still see myself.)

'What can you do to make Other Lucy feel more confident?' James asks. I struggle and feel myself saying life-coachy things that are quite out of character, which is maybe why that part of the hypnosis is harder to recall.

James counts me back to the present and I wake, feeling a little woozy but quite cheerful. 'How long do you think you were under?' she says. 'Five minutes?' I guess. 'Try nearer 45,' she says, checking her watch. I'm genuinely shocked.

James says it takes a few weeks for the first session to take effect, during which time we will talk again, either at her practice or – for the busier, higher-flying clients – via webcam. She will also give us tasks such as writing each other letters.

In the next session, James plans to deal with our relationship as it is now. 'It's about bringing the passion and fun back,' she says. 'For example, one of the things I do is get you to tell him what you'd like him to buy you.' (I begin mentally compiling my list.) The final session,

in nine weeks' time, is about visualising the future.

'They're not all happy endings,' she warns. 'This is not about getting people back together. This is about getting people to see whether they want to be together or not, and giving them the tools to either deal with a make-up – or a break-up.'

Luckily, she doesn't seem to think Nigel and I are heading for the latter. Indeed, she can cite several inspiring success stories. 'I'd say the majority of people who come to me remain together,' she says. 'The fact they've come at all is a positive statement. The amount of women I've helped get back into the career saddle and remain great mums – which obviously has a positive knock-on effect on their marriage – or the amount of couples who need confidence to make dramatic changes, such as moving abroad. Life should be exciting – and so should marriage.'

When I get home, feeling unusually positive myself, the house looks like *Ideal Home* is coming round to do a photo shoot. Nigel has tidied up, put the kids to bed and cleared out the drawer where we shove the stuff we don't know where else to shove. He is also cooking me dinner. 'I wonder if it's the hypnosis,' he muses. 'She did say I'd be more focused...' I'm beginning to feel a little evangelical about hypnosis myself. ☺

'Sex, Lies and Hypnosis' is on Channel Five on Mondays at 10pm. The nine-week course costs £1,500 (ursulajames.co.uk)

Ursula James in London
Photograph by Neil Drabble