

'How 40 candles shocked me into a new life'



A few years ago, hypnotherapist Ursula James, 44, felt unhappy and unhealthy. Here, she explains how she turned her life around

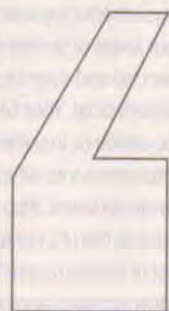
'RIGHT NOW, my life is just how I always dreamt it would be. I'm looking out of the study window of my cottage in France and might wander by the river later or just relax over some tea with my new husband, Phil. If you met me, you'd see a poised, balanced and happy woman. This isn't because I'm smug, though, it's because a couple of years ago I was a completely different person – and, thanks to me, I changed.

I turned 40 in 2004. In the run-up to my birthday, I tried to push it to the back of my mind, as nowadays there's this ridiculous stigma that says once you reach the big 4-0, you're bereft of all energy, drive and hope. And if you haven't achieved all your dreams, then that's it – your time's up! I'd seen people all around me pass the 40 mark thinking their life was over.

So I certainly wasn't looking forward to reaching the milestone myself. The thought

of seeing a whopping 40 candles on a cake filled me with dread. Even worse, I realised I wasn't anything like the person I wanted to be – I was sad, unfulfilled, lonely, overweight and desperately unhappy with my appearance. I'd been married and divorced in my early 30s, and coped by throwing myself into my work running a hypnotherapy training company. The hours were so long that I'd lost all my friends and I missed sharing my life with someone.

Not that you would have known by looking at me then. Like most women, I was desperate to give the impression that life was fantastic. I'd go shopping just for the nods of approval I got when other women spotted me laden with bags from expensive high-end stores. And I relished the fact that the only items in my fridge were champagne



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and pricey face creams. I wanted everyone, including myself, to believe I was fabulous at (approaching) 40, but it was all a front.

In reality, I was falling apart. My health was deteriorating – I had palpitations, couldn't sleep and ate badly. Despite my confident exterior, I didn't like myself and wasn't a nice person, either. I was business-like and cold, and careful not to let people get too close. And I kept up an image, even to my family, by calling them all the time pretending life was great.

One night, I was sitting on a radiator while chatting on the phone and drinking wine – and burnt my bum. I woke up the next morning with lines down each buttock, like a chargrilled steak. It was crazy; I spent my life helping other people improve themselves, but I couldn't do the same for myself. I also realised that if I acknowledged what was going on, I'd have to take action – that was a scary prospect.

Just before my birthday, I discovered a female colleague had turned 40 without telling a soul because she didn't want to celebrate. It got me thinking: what was

I going to do? I could arrange a party, but all my old friends had moved on and I couldn't really blame them.'

My eureka moment

'I woke up on the morning of my birthday with a strong feeling that I didn't want to be this person anymore. I had to do something to change. But how? I barely had time to do my washing, let alone achieve all my dreams. I didn't want life to carry on the way it was going, though, and I certainly wasn't prepared to give up on myself.

So it was now or never! I started to think that maybe this new decade didn't have to be a negative thing and I needed to work out how to make my future a positive one. It was a real light bulb moment.

Firstly, I hypnotised myself into seeing good things happen, as hypnosis gives specific suggestions based on the removal of unwanted thoughts, behaviours and feelings. I also made a conscious decision to take on the positive mental attitude I required to be proactive, telling myself anything is possible and refusing to let negative thoughts creep in. And once I started thinking about my life with a good state of mind, my goals became clearer.

It was time to put some kind of plan into action, so I systematically wrote down everything I felt was wrong with my life, like the long working hours and lack of partner, and then listed everything I wanted and what I had to do to get them. My list included a loving man to share my life with, a book deal, a nice car, a house in the country and a TV series. It was a long list, but I thought, "If I'm going to do this, I have to do it properly." I concluded that if the general belief is you can't do anything after 40, surely anything I can achieve from now on is a bonus.

Next I listed my skills, which isn't easy when you're lacking in confidence. "Good communicator" and "hard worker" came quickly, but when I started to dry up I imagined I was writing on behalf of someone who didn't exist yet. I realised I wasn't going to get anywhere unless I totally believed I could achieve my goals. And deep down, I really did. It was as if someone had flicked a switch and said, "You're 40! Time is running out! Get on with it!"

When it came to my to-do list, I picked the easiest thing to start with, which was phoning my boss to resign. I knew I'd be

nervous, so to avoid last-minute nerves I didn't think about it – I just did it. Once I'd done that, my confidence immediately lifted. Starting with the easiest challenge means you build habits, and when you have a habit of being successful, you want to continue with that success.

The next step was to invite some people to my birthday dinner, including a man I'd had my eye on for a few years. That guy is Phil, and we got married two years ago. I know it all sounds too easy, but I refused to let any negative thoughts enter my head.

Feeling better, I started to take care of myself properly, eat well and cut down on alcohol. As I hate going to the gym I chose the kinds of exercise I enjoy, like walking and swimming, so I knew I wouldn't give up. I also got back in touch with old friends and made new ones.

From then on, I made things happen one after the other. The book deals and TV work all fell into place. Once you start doing



Ursula in 1999



The new glam-looking Ursula



Phil and Ursula on their wedding day in 2006

things that make you happy, you get a taste for it, put an end to excuses and stop talking yourself out of success. For me, the self-pity went and I began putting myself at the front of the queue. Even though this might sound hard when you have a husband and kids, you can't help other people until you've helped yourself. People ask if I had doubts, but I didn't let myself have them. Everything I put on my wish list came true. Yes, some of it was hard work, but I did it through sheer positive thinking. Turning 40 was the best thing that ever happened to me, and now I can't wait to turn 50! When I look back at

my list I'm glad I had such high expectations, as I would never have achieved my goals had they not been so big. Now, when I work with people on positive thinking, they know I've been there, done that and got the T-shirt. We all have a demon that sits on our shoulder saying, "No, you can't do that!", but I think that's what keeps me going – being able to fight it and never giving up.'

● Ursula's new book *You Can Think Yourself Thin* (£9.99, Century) is out now. Contact Ursula on 020 7262 1659 or email ursula@ursulajames.com.

Ursula's 7 tips for making change happen

- 1 Every morning, just before you're fully awake, give yourself one positive suggestion for the day. For example, it could be making a phone call about a training course. Small steps are key.
- 2 Don't listen to the radio, watch TV or read newspapers and magazines for three weeks. This prevents information overload and frees up your time. It also stops you from getting depressed by some of the terrible stories in the news.
- 3 List your goals on a sheet of paper and display it where you'll see it every day. Also add them as your welcome note on your computer and write them in your diary – as many places as you can, so you never lose sight of your goal.
- 4 Make a visualisation board or book of your goals to get things clear in your mind. Write down your ideas and cut out photos from magazines.
- 5 Say what you want to achieve often enough and you'll start to believe it! And tell others so they can encourage you, too.
- 6 Get rid of 'toxic' friends. If you have people in your life who depress you or put you down, it'll make you feel negative, which will stop you achieving. So cut yourself off from them!
- 7 Set stepping stones on the way to your goal so you have small, achievable aims. Give yourself treats along the way, too. That way you can feel good as you're changing, not just when you've changed.