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By Lucy Cavendish



THE TIMES

FIRST PERSON

How a tantra course got my mojo back after divorce

Lucy Cavendish had lost confidence post-divorce. Could a solo session with a tantric therapist reignite her love life?



Lucy Cavendish, left, and the tantric therapist Kerry O'Sullivan
GEMMA DAY FOR THE TIMES

Lucy Cavendish
Friday July 07 2023, 12.00pm BST, The Times

I arrive at Kerry O'Sullivan's home on a leafy street in Maidstone, Kent, feeling rather nervous. It is a warm, sunny day and nothing about the tidy house with its gnomes and windmill ornaments in the front

garden gives any hint of what goes on behind her closed door. O'Sullivan might well be a Home Counties housewife and mother, but she is also a tantric health practitioner and healer. I am here to discover, with her help, what tantra is all about. More than this, I am here hoping to reawaken my sexuality.

I am 56 and post-menopausal. I am also single and dating and over the past few months, if not years really, having been divorced since September 2021, I have realised that I don't know how to flirt or be sexy and alluring to potential partners. I haven't had one since my split. What I need to know is how to turn my sexual mojo back on.

It's not that I don't like my body. I am actually on great terms with it after decades of not liking it very much. As a therapist and empowered woman I've done enough courses and deep diving into my psyche to have found the ability to appreciate my physical form. And yet maybe there is still a smidgen of nervousness at the idea of disrobing in front of someone new. The thing about long-term relationships is that you know each other's bodies so well.

Also, as a therapist, I often talk about tantra when couples come to me and reveal their sex life has got a bit stuck. Most of us of a certain age remember Sting saying tantra improved his sex life and gave him staying power. But tantra to me is about looking at intimacy in a different way. Rather than it being about straightforward sex, it's about a more conscious alignment of mind, body and spirit. It originated in India in the middle of the first millennium and it can be almost an art form — erotic, seductive, thrilling and expansive, helping us to get in touch with our deeper inner sexual self so we can ask for what we want from our partner. For most couples who go on tantra courses it totally changes the way they look at sex and opens them up to a new level of understanding and playfulness in their relationship.

O'Sullivan runs a variety of courses that help people to rediscover their sexuality (her one-to-one sessions start at £222 for 90 minutes), but there are hundreds of others across the UK who claim to help couples get in touch with their bodies — and each other — that I suggest clients look into. But could a tantra course help me as a single woman?

I first stumbled across O’Sullivan on my Instagram feed (@kerryosullivan_goddess), whirling around dancing rather wonderfully, and her website spoke to me. I liked how open and positive she looked and how she acknowledged that it might be slightly scary to go on a tantra journey and “put myself first”. An in-person experience seemed to be what I needed — many therapists don’t offer them to single individuals, just couples or in a group.

O’Sullivan answers the door looking exactly how I thought she would. She is wearing a lovely white dress and has a warm, inviting persona and amazingly large blue eyes that are quite mesmerising. I am rather nervous, so I start asking her a million and one questions about how she trained as a tantric healer.

O’Sullivan, who has a young daughter, tells me she was happy in her previous job as an account director at a media agency, but then “someone recommended I visit a tantra practitioner to help release sexual trauma I had experienced,” she says. “It was phenomenal, and led me to my own sexual awakening and to then go on and train as a tantric practitioner. I just knew I was supposed to be doing something else.”



Lucy Cavendish: "Part of me feels it might be an easier option just to give up any idea of sex"
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Most of her clients, she says, are women both single and in relationships. "I'm seeing more women mid life who are realising the importance of making more time for themselves," she tells me. "Their aim is to listen and connect more deeply to their bodies." She has a long vetting call with all her clients first.

We begin with O'Sullivan gently asking me to talk about the answers I have given to the questionnaire she had sent me. Am I in a relationship? What would I like to get from my tantra journey? What stresses do I have in my life? Where are my boundaries in terms of

being physically touched? She is tuning into what I might need. “I think you’re exhausted,” she says. I nod. I feel like crying. She seems to understand me instantly, and it’s a bit overwhelming.

We talk about my sexual history. Many women, she says, come to her because they have had traumatic sexual experiences they want to work through. Others, such as myself, come to explore their own feelings around sex and to reawaken their sexual energy.

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I find myself pouring everything out to her — how, when I was growing up, the messages were “don’t sleep around”, “don’t be a slag”. There

“don’t sleep around”, “don’t be a slag”. There was no sense that sex could be enjoyable, sensual, pleasurable. It was all about putting up with it all and desperately trying not to get pregnant. No one told me about the joy of sex or how to be in touch with and love my body, or anything about lovemaking.

That doesn’t mean to say I haven’t enjoyed loving sexual relationships, but it has been a while and I am nervous about having sex again. Part of me feels it might be an easier option just to give up any idea of it. As I tell my therapy couples all the time, most of us live sexual lives that merely skim the surface rather than truly experience the power, the joy, the sheer exuberance of sex — as well as the dark places some might wish to go to. I *know* it. I just don’t *feel* it.

O’Sullivan tells me we will be going through a “body awakening”. She runs me through what will happen, making it clear that I am in charge and that I will play an active part in asking for what I want from the experience. She tells me that, for her, tantra is about getting women (mainly) to put themselves first.

The first thing I do is have a shower. O’Sullivan gives me lotions and potions, a towel and a sarong. Then she invites me to sit on a mattress on the floor in her quiet, private room and to partake in some “eye gazing”, which involves me staring into her eyes for a few minutes. I often ask my couples to do this with each other when they come to me for therapy. It increases connection. But many find it very difficult as it is also exposing, so I feel a bit nervous. I look into O’Sullivan’s eyes, and after a few minutes I start crying.

I tell her I am beginning to feel an interior panic about my life. My intention is to have a long-lasting intimate relationship with another human being, but how can I do that when I am so out of touch with my sexuality?

O'Sullivan holds my hands. "This is why you are here," she says.

All sorts of things happen after this. I wear my sarong for part of it. I don't wear my sarong for part of it. I lie down. All the time O'Sullivan is touching me, here and there and wherever, but constantly checking out if it's OK first, so I feel very safe and very held. There is something very hypnotic about it. As she moves and massages my body, she encourages me to feel what it is saying to me. The idea is that I connect with my deeper sexual power. "You can only do this through the body and touch," she says.

She tells me that the benefits of breast massage — which I can also do for myself — include releasing blockages to love, pleasure, joy and happiness as well as feeling pain that is suppressed in the body. She asks me continually what pressure feels good. As she goes on I begin to realise something is shifting. I am aware of a deep pain inside of me.

O'Sullivan suggests I make some noise to release this but I find that difficult. I'm not great at being this uninhibited; maybe this is the problem.

There are other areas of my body that also ache with pain. Other parts feel frozen. O'Sullivan explains she also does yoni massage, an intimate massage that helps release tension and emotions that may have been held for many years due to painful sex, trauma, childbirth or other emotional experiences. She asks if I am OK with this and I agree, despite my nerves and reservations, which are nothing to do with O'Sullivan herself but about my own inhibitions. I remind myself this is what I am here for, telling myself there's no point in ducking out now.

As the experience deepens I find I am becoming far more aware of feelings other than pain — there are tingling, tiny bubbles in my body and then a warm sensuality floods over me. It's like being bathed in warm honey. My whole body feels alight, as if a bright flame is burning within me. It's really energising and an exquisite feeling. It's not an orgasm; more an awakening of a long-dormant feeling.

At the end of my four-hour experience I feel amazing — calm, rested, alive and buzzing with so many different sensations all at the same time. It really feels as if something has shifted

within me. O'Sullivan suggests I shower again and then she meets me in the room and we share fruit and chocolate. She tells me to expect some changes in my body and myself. "Drive home safely and treat yourself gently," she says. We hug goodbye.

She suggests I keep practising some techniques at home — I can massage my body or soothe it in any way I like, such as having a hot bath, going swimming, stroking sensitive areas like the inside of my arms, all the while in touch with my sensuality. She also suggests visualising myself as a sensual goddess — maybe even doing something pretty radical for me like dancing naked around my bedroom, or prancing around a bit in high heels. Also, of course, meditation, where I scan my body and see how I am feeling internally.

On the way home I reflect on the fact that I have spent a day having a very intimate interaction with someone who was essentially a stranger. In some ways it feels weird, especially as it is totally out of character for me. How can I have gone from feeling dead inside to a glowing goddess? And yet I know something has fundamentally shifted.

A week on I still feel amazing, as if I am on a high. I ask O'Sullivan how long the effect will last. She says it really depends on how attuned I am with my body and how much I want this to continue — practising really listening to my body more and “feeling” into it, rather than shying away. I'm not sure how confident I feel about whirling around my back garden in a state of ecstatic dance as O'Sullivan does — some inhibitions remain — but I do understand what she means.

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I go shopping and buy the sorts of clothes I wouldn't usually buy — figure skimming dresses, a pencil skirt and a white silk shirt. And I do find I start walking differently. I go to the food market in my local town and the man selling the cheese winks at me and then produces a chocolate bar from his back pocket. I go to a party and a man I have known on and off for years looks at me wolfishly. “You look good,” he says. “You look different somehow.” Whatever was switched off seems to have come to life again — finally.

To truly test it out I go on a date. I dress up, put make-up on and try to remember to tune into my body. I tell myself I am a mistress of seduction, full of allure and passion. As soon as I walk into the restaurant I know I feel different — more confident, less shy and awkward. Fortunately the man I am on a date with happens to be rather dashing and debonair. He twinkles at me and I find myself twinkling back. For the first time in a long time I actually *feel* something. I find myself being flirtatious and it feels great. I don't know what O'Sullivan has done to me, maybe it's all in my head, or just about having a new attitude to myself and my body. Or about being given a reason to feel more confident. But long may it last. As for the date — put it this way, I am hopeful that my tantric sex goddess is fully awakened.
