

ON THE COUCH

by Anna Pasternak



WRITER Anna Pasternak has been seeing a therapist to sort out her disastrous love life. Here, in the last of her columns, she describes how she has finally conquered her fear of loneliness.

THE modern *cri de coeur* for single women is that there are no good men out there. Or, if there are, they're already taken. This used to be my self-pitying justification for being on my own. Because Dr S has encouraged me back into the realm of relationships, I now see how short-sighted I was. There are plenty of single men out there looking for love — I've met a handful in the past six months.

The internet is teeming with them. Encounters pages in newspapers are bulging with them. The problem isn't the lack of available partners, it is that men and women are so out of balance nowadays that having a relationship is like trying to kiss from opposite ends of a see-saw. Independent women like me have lost touch with our feminine sides. This has less to do with our physical appearance and more to do with our emotional make-up. We know how to compete with men, but we don't know how to meaningfully connect with them.

Meanwhile, we see men as weak; they view us as strident. Resentment runs rampant.

Last week I went on a two-day workshop near Brighton to balance masculine and feminine energies. Now, that may sound like most people's idea of the weekend from hell, but it was, in fact, the best £130 I have ever spent.

It totally restored my faith in men. Firstly, I was surprised that out of 20 participants, eight were men. I expected maybe a token two males — weedy, lentil-munching New Age types. Yet all were what I would call proper men: strong, attractive, stand-up (as opposed to flaky) guys in their 30s to 60s. They ranged from an architect, to a building site foreman to a film-maker.

Run by psychotherapist Andrew Wallas and relationship coach Brigitte Sumner, the workshop was more practical than intellectual. We weren't lectured to.

We participated in a number of exercises to explore our masculine and feminine sides and energies.

Andrew explained: 'Every woman and man embodies both energies. We all need a balance, and yet the balance is not 50:50. It is different for each of us and you don't need to know what your exact percentage is, but you intuitively know when it's right for you.'

MASCULINE energy, yang, is frequently described as focused, logical, action-orientated. It is 'doing' energy. Feminine energy, yin, is frequently described as intuitive, receptive, unorganised. It is 'being' energy.

If we skew too heavily towards our masculine side, men and women can be aggressive, independent, controlling or violent. Similarly, if we are coming from an overly feminine place, we can be weak, insecure, needy and manipulative.

We spent the first day exploring these ideas and sharing our personal stories. I don't think I've ever cried or laughed as much in 48 hours.

My story was one of loneliness. How my independence and fear of being hurt and let down by a man has left me alone.

It was inspirational being in a group of such emotionally honest, brave men and women. I found it fascinating — and sexy — to see grown men openly weeping as they admitted to their fear, pain and loneliness. That night, I stayed up late with three of the guys, chatting around a camp fire.

I felt like I was back at university, because as we laughed ourselves silly, batting banter, we were equals not rivals. I felt like I used to feel 20 years ago: uninhibited around men, attractive and funny. The next day we looked at

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what qualities embody the balanced masculine and feminine. The masculine side is powerful, protective, supportive and loyal, while the female is open, creative, accepting and loving.

When Andrew read out a poem on what it is to be truly loved by a man, I sobbed myself hoarse. I was profoundly touched because I realised that I'd never been loved in that strong supportive way by a man in my life.

One woman wept because she said she'd never experienced such female solidarity in a group. She'd never had a best friend, which shocked me and made me ache on her behalf. I still don't understand how it worked, but, by the end, we all had experienced some sort of alchemical shift.

Andrew Wallas is like a modern wizard; he transforms your energy. I left feeling vulnerable, but some block to my heart feels released.

On the train to see Dr S, I was struck that for the first time in ages, I wasn't looking for a man. I wasn't thinking: 'Will a dishy man come and sit next to me?' Or: 'Will he, over there, be The One?'

It made me realise how much energy I've wasted fretting about being single, instead of enjoying happy moments of connection, like around that camp fire.

'Wow, that's great,' smiled Dr S. 'It seems that finally you've got a real sense of satisfaction with yourself.'

'You've moved on to a place where you feel more wholly accepted and that's given you peace. You are going forward, aware of a new identity, a new sense of integrity and you've found interesting individuals who share your life values.'

It's easy to make the workshop sound cheesy. In some ways it was, but so what?

When the sexiest man in the room came up to me and whispered in my ear that I didn't need to be lonely any more, I believed him.

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Perfect balance
The concept of female yin and masculine yang is a primary principle of traditional Chinese medicine and martial arts