

BEAUTY

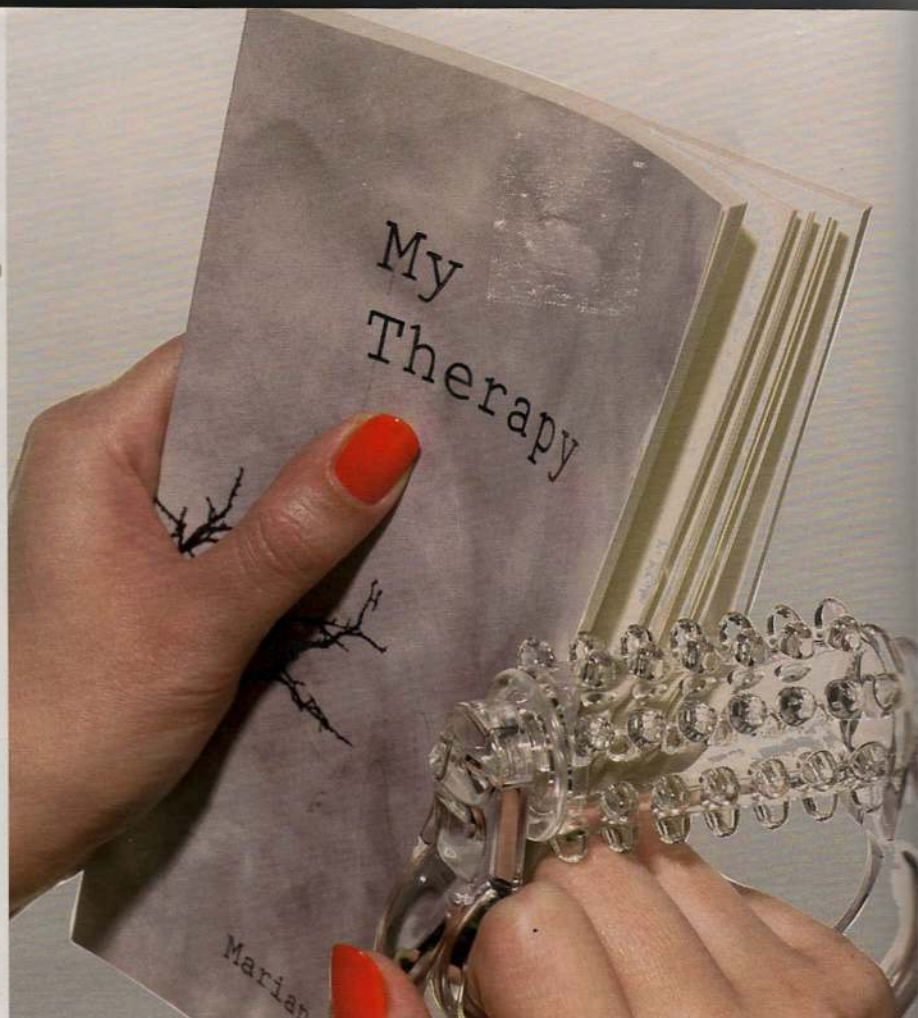
TRICK OR TREATMENT? PSYCHO-DYNAMIC MASSAGE

Will a new form of counselling with the human touch reveal Helen Brown's positive side?

THE ACCEPTED THINKING IS THAT TOUCH HAS AS MUCH OF AN EFFECT ON THE MIND AS IT DOES ON TENSE MUSCLES. Yet while the majority of massages do this by stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's mechanism for triggering deep relaxation, few make a feature of the fact that massages can start to break down emotional blockages, or allow the vocal outlet that is needed for them to be thoroughly dispelled. I've often been drawn to voice my innermost feelings while on the massage table, but offloading on a masseuse isn't exactly good spa etiquette.

Thankfully, just as psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, a contemporary of Freud, introduced touch into his treatments in the 1920s, now a new breed of massage, intended to treat both psychologically induced aches and the issues that cause them, is cleverly borrowing from the shrink's couch. Psycho-dynamic massage is one such fusion. The brainchild of psychotherapist and naturopath Natascha Van Zyl, this counselling massage treatment was developed to help clients for whom conventional talking therapies weren't working. She's used the technique to treat a host of ailments from IBS to depression, so I had high hopes that my issues – a mix of self-doubt and wavering motivation, adding up to general gloominess – would be a cinch.

The first session involves a lifestyle consultation and chat about the psychological reasons for my visit.



'THE WARMING, CIRCULAR MOTIONS ALLOW ME TO FOCUS ON MY FEARS RATIONALLY'

Despite Van Zyl's effervescent persona and non-judgemental attitude, it is hard to rev up the confessional engine as I try to squeeze in enough back details to portray the full extent of my concerns, eager to get up onto the massage table for some escapism. Yet, when the hands-on part begins, far from transporting me from my woes, the warming, circular motions allow me to focus on my fears rationally.

Van Zyl works on acupressure points in my head and neck, known to help relieve stress and anxiety, and reassures me in near hypnotic tones that what I'm going through is both natural and transitory. Afterwards, I feel profound calmness.

Sadly my resolve to keep up the de-stressing breathing techniques and meditation doesn't last beyond a few days. Real life creeps in, and with it negative thought patterns. I realise I've held back

important issues. So, in session two, I manage to open up more, and I receive such sound and supportive practical advice from Van Zyl that I'm glad I did. It's clear that the success of this treatment will depend on how actively I participate. Over the week that follows, I make time for deep breathing and notice that the calmer I am, the better others respond to me and the happier I am as a result.

By session three, I'm finding this New Age counselling fun. While the initial massages focused on stilling my mind, this time, Van Zyl pummels my shoulders into submission, seemingly ridding my body of the burdens that have been lodged there. I'm also asked to pick an Angel card from a pack to represent my current situation, and it does so with remarkable precision. Sceptics may say I'm reading into it what I want, but the fact is, this massage/counselling combo has made me want to live like a buttercup at daybreak – open and ready to let the sunshine in. *The Hale Clinic, 7 Park Crescent, London W1 (020-7631 0156, haleclinic.com). The initial two-hour session costs £160, subsequent one-hour sessions cost £90.*