

One of the best ways to do this is apparently with CBT, which stands for cognitive behavioural therapy and not, as one friend who's a member of the BDSM community recently assumed, 'Cock & Ball Torture'. Just so we're clear.

CBT is a form of psychotherapy originally designed to treat depression, but now used for a wide range of issues – from panic attacks to problems with low self-esteem. It aims to change unhelpful thinking and patterns of unhealthy behaviour, replacing these with new habits that can actually help us. It's also a popular form of relationship therapy – and is even used to help build confidence in dating and starting over after a split.

Veronica Walsh is a cognitive behavioural therapist who has specialised in this and she's also the most no-nonsense Irish woman you could ever hope to encounter. So I get in touch for some tips I can pass on to Recent Dumpee and a newly divorced friend who's having a rough time.

'Dating is stressful and change is hard,' she kicks off briskly, 'and many single clients still strive for what they describe as "a normal life", by which they mean a monogamous, long-term relationship, usually marriage. But this isn't the norm any more. We're not our mothers' or our grandmothers' generation. Many of us don't marry – and nearly half of those who do end up getting divorced. The idea of a relationship for life is often not going to happen, so shouldn't be an absolute *demand* on ourselves that we pursue at all costs. Once we get our head around this, it frees us. Because being happy single is always better than being unhappy with someone else.' This is a sentiment I've long agreed with, having grown up with a solo mum and seen various friends split up over the years. Developmental molec-

ular biologist Dr John Medina has studied the impact of stress on the brain and found that being in a bad relationship, long-term, is akin to sleeping in the same bed as a sabretoothed tiger. For years. This is because our brains are built to deal with stress that lasts about thirty seconds – enough time for the sabretooth to eat us or for us to run away. What we're not built for is prolonged stress, which has been proven to make us sick and even shrink our brains.

'Hoping that something will work out won't *make* it better,' says Veronica of 'toxic' relationships, 'and positive thinking doesn't work when it's not true and we don't believe it. We're not robots. Or the Dalai Lama. So while it's normal to get stressed or angry, if you're always stressed or angry, you need to make a change.'

Veronica tells me that the key to success in relationships is the same as the key to success in 'life generally': 'It's knowing how you're wired.'

'CBT is about the awareness and management of how we explain the world to ourselves – because when stress becomes a disorder it distorts thinking. CBT *undistorts* it. So I get people to track their thinking in a journal and examine it for unnecessary negativity and distortions. Then you need to consider how believing those thoughts impacts on your feelings and behaviours,' she explains. 'The real magic happens when people reframe that thinking – when they examine it for evidence and undistort it. You ask yourself questions like, "What drama do I actually create for myself? Do I self-sabotage? Do I try to read minds, imagining that I know what other people are thinking?"'

'Loads', 'Yep', and 'Of course!' spring to mind when I think of my own answers, so I'm reassured when Veronica

adds: 'And if you're guilty of some – or all – of these, that's perfectly normal: we are irrational beings. But we're all irrational in our own ways, so it's important not to predict what someone else is thinking or feeling. I see a lot of people making magnifying statements or restricting the way they think – so they'll say: "Oh, men only want to date twenty-year-olds", or, "I'm not successful enough to find a mate," or whatever. But these statements are never true.'

Never?

'Never,' she insists. 'Something may be twenty per cent true, fifteen per cent of the time – but those kinds of beliefs and statements are never a hundred per cent true. Men and women aren't so different when it comes to dating. I see men who are lonely, who have been cheated on, or who think they have no luck dating – the same as I see women like this. So you can't make statements that are black or white about what men want or what women want. And actually, when you put pen to paper and examine the evidence in a more detached way, people usually come to this conclusion by themselves.'

This is heartening.

'Next you have to ask yourself, "Is there an alternative view? A different way I could approach this?" The answer's usually "yes". So you write that down, too. And once you're thinking differently, you'll feel and behave differently, too.'

Veronica guides me through the advice she'd give Recent Dumpee.

'You need to approach the whole dating thing with a sense of humour – especially online. You're essentially exchanging romantic ideals with someone you don't know and imposing your life-rules and expectations on a stranger, so it's impor-

tant to allow yourself to be amused – even *bemused* – by the situation.'

Veronica advises clients not to think of a first meeting as a 'date' at all: 'It's not courtship – you don't know them! And there's no use emailing for ages beforehand and falling in love with a fantasy of someone. You need to meet in real life and treat the online part merely as a useful tool to bring about an interesting experience.'

'Okay,' I say, 'so you're meeting someone new, you're not expecting much and you're trying not to judge. What then? What if you start feeling wobbly?'

'Well that's when you use your new skills to become your own coach,' she says: 'I get people to ask themselves, "What would I advise my best friend here?" Because we're always kinder and more generous to our friends than to ourselves. Then you go back to your thought tracking. You can do this during the meeting to stop you mind-reading or negatively predicting, and then afterwards to work through any negative thoughts that might have other explanations. But mostly, you should try to enjoy yourself – remember, it should be fun!'

I thank her and hang up, keen to relay these pearls of wisdom.

Recent Dumpee accepts her assignments to try tracking her thoughts and keeping a journal with far less reluctance than I had feared. A week later she drops into conversation: 'Of course, one of the key self-sabotaging behaviours in my last relationship was picking fights, but really it was all down to my fear of abandonment . . .' I blink several times in wonderment, before she cottons on: 'Yeah, okay, it's been *slightly* helpful. I suppose . . .' She's getting better at coming up with alternative ways of seeing the world, too, and by

writing these down, she recognises that she can sometimes be (her words) 'a bit bonkers'.

'It turns out that the guy on reception at work wasn't ignoring me because he'd heard something bad about me—'

'What? How did you come up with that?'

'I just reckon he must know stuff, what people say when they wait for the lift, that sort of thing. Anyway, turns out he just had conjunctivitis. But the good thing is,' she goes on, 'I'd stopped worrying about it *hours* before I found this out because I'd been writing down alternatives for why he wasn't making eye contact.'

'Was conjunctivitis one of them?'

'No. Although "sudden diagnosis of a life-threatening tropical disease" was.'

'Overdramatic, much?'

'Maybe I'll work on that one next . . .'

And so she does. And the next time we speak she sounds dangerously Dalai Lama.

After a couple more months, Not-So-Recent Dumpee tells me she's ready to 'get back out there'. Despite reminders that it's okay to be single, that there is no 'normal' any more, and that being in a relationship means having to share your Netflix with someone (annoying), she wants in. And having reached her mid-thirties without taking a shine to any of her friends or her friends' friends, she's prepared to try her luck online. So I wave her off into cyberspace, like a nervous parent packing off a child on the first day of school.

One in five straight couples and three in five same-sex couples now meet online and there are sites available to cater for every preference – from the conventional Match.com or OK Cupid, to Uniform Dating ('*for singles in uniform & for*

*those who like them*'), Clown Dating ('*everyone loves a clown – let a clown love you . . .*'), and Gluten Free Singles ('*enjoy life with a GF partner*'). I wasn't aware you could imbibe gluten *that way* . . . but still, you live, you learn). Were I to have my time again, there is a wealth of uniformed, gluten-free, clown-based riches I could scarcely have dreamt of when I last dated.

I discover that it's a pretty good time to be taking a leap online, for both women and enlightened menfolk, with biological anthropologist Dr Helen Fisher recently proclaiming that: 'The era of the macho man is over'. Many men are now apparently looking online for women who are intelligent, ambitious, self-sufficient and not too good-looking. Really. Because if you're unambiguously beautiful, most men – or women – will assume that there'll be competition, so are less likely to make contact. Uploading a profile picture that actually looks like you, flaws and all, means you'll appear more accessible and there won't be any 'surprise reveal' when you meet in person.

An encouraging 86 per cent of straight men surveyed from online dating sites said that confidence and self-assurance were what they're looking for in a woman. Single straight women online said they wanted more time with their friends (64 per cent of those surveyed), more personal space (90 per cent), and to pursue their own interests (93 per cent). Essentially, many women seem happy being single. Perhaps they're just online for the craic.

Despite the old clichés about women wanting commitment, the *laydees* surveyed expected to date someone for one or two years before living together, while single men wanted to cohabit after six to twelve months. *Like massive keenos*, I

think. Having recently become alerted to the phenomenon of 'wife eyes' – whereby professional men in their late twenties adopt a mad scanning technique in any new social setting as they cast around for marriage material – this comes as no surprise to me.

Of course, not everyone online is a liberated metrosexual. Internet dating famously offers extra opportunities for lying. '*I enjoy kickboxing, A Question of Sport, and eating baked beans from the tin while picking my toenails*' said no one, ever, on an online dating profile. A staggering 81 per cent of us lie about our height, age and physique and a third of daters' profile pictures are misleading.

'All a profile really reveals is whether or not someone can spell and master basic grammar,' Recent Dumpee reports. "'Your" vs. "you're" is a classic.' We both agree that it's vital to instantly reject anyone whose stated hobbies include 'banter', since proficiency at human interaction and a decent grasp of conversation should be a given.

'And I'm blocking anyone who sends unwanted photographs of their genitalia,' she tells me.

'Why would someone *do* that?'

'You'd have to ask Craig from High Wycombe,' is all she says, darkly.

Would-be daters whose profile pictures include the arm/torso/cheek of their ex are similarly discarded, because if someone hasn't been single for long enough to have a solo photograph taken, then they haven't been single for long enough.

If a gent meets these basic requirements (i.e. they can spell, look vaguely human, and avoid 'banter' and pictures of their ex and/or penis), Recent Dumpee will progress to phase two:

meeting up. Numerous studies concur with Veronica that it's good to meet sooner rather than later so you don't fall madly in love over email and then realise they look like Shrek in real life. Unless of course, Shrek works for you and you just don't know it yet. Because researchers from Northwestern University in Illinois found that, just like in the real world, online daters don't always know what they want in a mate, despite thinking they do. We have such a strong idea in our head of the 'type' of person we're after that we routinely overlook positive characteristics in people who may actually be good for us.

Resolving to keep an open mind, Recent Dumpee gets Out There to meet potential suitors IRL (in real life).

A week later, she tells me she's had coffee with an opera singer, beer with a banker and carrot juice with an Olympic rower. It's all very exciting.

'So? How did they go?' I am near bursting with vicarious date-curiosity. Date-osity, if you will.

'Not bad,' she says: 'I just thought of each of them as new people I was meeting, then if I got the fear or worried about whether they noticed the huge spot that appeared on my nose midweek, I imagined you telling me that I looked "okay" anyway . . .'

'"Okay"? Surely my virtual voiceover of encouragement in your head is more complimentary than that!'

'All right then, "nice—"

'Try again.'

'"Hot"?'

'Better.'

'Right, so I imagined you telling me I looked *hot* and that I was funny and interesting and that cockwomble had his

own issues and that was probably why he dumped me, and that we're all a bit mad in our own ways, but that it was going to be all right. And then – it was.'

'That's great! And were they nice guys?'

'Mostly,' she says. 'I mean, one had Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" as his ringtone, but you can't win them all. Right?'

'Right.'

A fortnight later she tells me she's going on a second date with someone who 'doesn't appear to be a mentalist . . .' This is progress.

Unfortunately, all is not bliss in the Russell household with work deadlines and sleepless nights (teething child + insomnia + jet lag = heady combination), so my week culminates in an almighty row with my other half over domestic arrangements, family and money. It often starts with one of these and gradually expands to include all three, which is a treat ('I hope you step on a Lego brick in bare feet!' 'You take that back!' 'I will not!'). After twenty minutes or so of simmering silence, the special cap goes on and I hear the Lemonheads starting up.

*Oh God . . .*

'It's time,' I tell the dog, who nods, solemnly. The hour has come to take a closer look at my own relationship to see if I can make some much-needed changes.

Impressed by the impact of CBT on my friend's dating life, I contact William Phillips, psychotherapist and director of Think CBT, an independent organisation specialising in cognitive behavioural therapy in the UK. I explain my predicament ('it's the hat I can't stand . . .') and he suggests I start

by filling in the free online 'conflict questionnaire'<sup>10</sup> to help assess the not-so hot spots in my relationship.

This is a twenty-question multiple-choice delight where users rate how often they're guilty of things like using over-generalisations during disagreements, blaming each other when things go wrong, or using sarcasm – asking me to choose between '*Never*', '*Sometimes*', '*More often than not*' and '*Almost always*'.

I scroll right for an option that reads along the lines of '*Wait, what? There's another way?*', then get the feeling that neither my husband nor I are going to come out of this well. So I do some laundry instead, then run the Hoover around, then decide my desk needs a re-org. Finally, I get on with it and answer the questionnaire as honestly as I can bear – quickly, and in the manner of someone pulling off a sticking plaster. The results appear instantly, indicating that I may be experiencing '*moderate levels of interpersonal conflict*' in my relationship, as well as '*regular negative behaviours*' and '*increasing difficulties*' in the way my husband and I relate to each other.

By the time I speak to William, I'm nearing despair. I tell him it's as though I've just taken a quiz that's told me my life's a bit shit. He assures me that this isn't the intention and that the questionnaire just provides a basis for focusing on some of the specific behaviours that may be 'maintaining conflict' in my relationship.

'For a start, the fact you're talking about it is a really good sign. It shows the relationship is valued and worth the effort

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<sup>10</sup> Treat yourself, here: <https://www.thinkcbt.com/couples-conflict-relationships?catid=55>.