

got a desire deficit?

Tanalee Smith discovers that Tantra is about so much more than sex – it's about enhancing intimacy in all aspects of your life as well as your relationship.

Tantra certainly has a reputation: one that revolves around deep-breathing, mind-blowing sex. However, people who have learned the art find that the real benefits lie in deeper intimacy with their partner. "Tantra can indeed yield mind-blowing sex," says Diane McCann Mathews, who conducts Tantra workshops with her husband, Robert, in Adelaide and Bali. "But it's really more about bringing the couple into balance with each other."

Tantra is an ancient Indian practice that, at its simplest, involves making a conscious connection with your own energy, and then passing that on to another person. Tantric workshops teach exercises that focus on becoming one with your partner, via breathing, eye contact, awareness, and communication – for example, 10 minutes of gazing silently into each other's eyes, or tracing each other's spines. The Mathews also teach couples how to move their chakra energy and even devote an entire session to kissing. "People think they know how to kiss, but kissing in Tantra is an art form," Mathews laughs. "It's not the entrée – it's the icing that goes over the whole cake!"

Be a luscious lover

"We are actually designed to have exquisite sexual pleasure," says sex therapist and workshop leader Jacqueline Hellyer. "Our society is obsessed with bigger, harder, faster ... but let's explore the slow, gentle and sensual, and discover the ecstatic things that can happen."

Hellyer, who also runs separate female and male workshops, says she gets two types of couples at her "Luscious Lovers" sessions: those in a good relationship who like to try new

things, and those whose relationships need work. "It's often the woman who drags her man along, but almost always, they both rave about the experience."

Hellyer's day-long couples' workshops offer ancient Tantra with a modern vibe, rather than its hippy stereotype. Comfy couches and chilled lounge music provide a soothing backdrop to Hellyer's "connecting exercises", such as "the melting hug", where the couple has to hug in a particular way for a very long time. "I talk them through how their energies are moving through each other, and what masculine and feminine energies feel like," she explains. Other connecting exercises include heightening sensual arousal, with one partner being blindfolded while the other feeds them delicious treats, and giving a partner a sensual hand or arm massage, not just for their pleasure, but for your own. "Too often, people having sex are thinking about the other person, and are not really present in themselves," says Hellyer. "The aim of Tantra is to improve your own sexual awareness as well as your connection to your partner."

"In the West, we see foreplay as the valley, and orgasm as the mountain. In Tantra, it's the other way around: the valley is the orgasm - but the mountain is everything else you can have."

TIFFANY'S STORY

Tiffany Cowling, 33, had been abused as a child and couldn't move past those issues to share a rewarding sex life with her husband. When a therapist suggested a Tantra course, Tiffany said she shrivelled inside.

"I didn't think I'd be able to cope, but I had a feeling it would be what I needed. I was hoping that my idea of what intimacy and making love was would be different. I was hoping to reframe it." Tiffany and her husband

signed up for a course in Bali with Diane McCann Mathews and Robert Mathews, who have been running Tantra courses for 23 years.

"I cried the first two days. It was so confronting. But by the third day I learned what intimacy was supposed to be," Tiffany says. "I learned that men weren't all about wanting sex, that they were actually after intimacy as well, I learned that it was safe to be close with someone, and that there was so much healing that could be gained from

being close, and the ancient specialness of it all."

Her sex life now, she says, is amazing. "It's so much deeper and more connected. Our sex used to be a quick hurry up and now it lasts forever - we'll just lie together for two hours. We both get so much more out of it."

Tiffany says they are also now closer as a couple outside the bedroom. "We're much more in tune with each other, more honest, more open. We get over difficulties easier. I feel

DON'T BE NERVOUS

Some people worry that they'll have to strip, practise positions or be given a partner. No! In most workshops, you come as a couple, stay clothed and practise intimate massages on a non-intimate part of the body, like the arm. You mingle with other couples only as much as you are comfortable, and you don't have to offer personal details or explain why you are there.

empowered as a woman. I feel whole. And sexually I feel ready and able to give and receive, and I've never been able to receive in my history."

Tiffany and her husband attended a second workshop this year, this time as a pregnant couple. She says, "I wanted to instil in my unborn child that sex was a beautiful thing. It has been absolutely transforming. I don't know if we'd still be together if we hadn't done the course."

NEED MORE INFO?

Tantra Australia: 5½ days couples' workshops; Adelaide in January 2011, Bali in August 2011; www.tantraaustralia.com

Luscious Lovers: One-day workshops in Sydney; www.jacquelinehellyer.com

Australian School of Tantra: Sydney, Perth, Melbourne; www.australianschooloftantra.com.au

Oz Tantra: NSW, VIC; www.oztantra.com

Tantric Blossoming: NSW, Victoria; www.tantricrossoming.com