



After a series of family tragedies overloaded her with grief, Rosalie Higson decided radical therapy was needed to get her life back on track.

Hand on my heart, I never thought I would be bellowing the c-word and beating out my most personal pain in the company of a dozen near-strangers all experiencing a similar catharsis. In the windowless room, the intensity levels shot up to fever pitch as we dredged up screams, yells and growls from our deepest hidden places. Sometimes, as weariness set in, we groaned imprecations or muttered repeated obscenities. A couple of men tore off their shirts. Bodies leaked tears and sweat, and hands began to blister as we laboured on and on until we reached exhaustion, or a second wind set us off again to reach new heights of rage.

And that was only day two. The group – a dozen people of varying sizes, ages and nationalities – all carried troubles and neuroses. Some were the survivors of devastating experiences, of abuse, war zones or families at war. All of us were stuck in harmful or unproductive habits, or bad relationships, or were unable to love, or feel alive, or to just walk in the world.

Sceptic that I am, I was surprised how easy it was to slip into the Hoffman Process, eight days of private and group therapy and physical workouts. I was ready to do whatever it took because, at the time, I was an emotional wreck.

How can I have arrived, at the venerable age of 60-ish, with such a load of unexpressed grief, anger and shame weighing me down? Well, it originated from the legacy of suicide in my family: my mother, my grandmother, a cousin. Suicide of a loved one leaves a long-lasting, painful trail of guilt hanging around like a black cloud on the horizon, or the infamous black dog.

Children blame themselves for bad things happening in the family: my two brothers and I had received a double dose of emotional toxicity, passed on through the generations. And my family refused to acknowledge this. After Mum died, we didn't share, we didn't even talk; we denied, big time, long time, full time. Denial is a habit that's hard to break, because secrets beget shame.

Last year, by chance, I discovered that my younger brother Peter, an alcoholic, had died alone in 2010. No one traced his relatives, so his body was cremated in the modern version of a pauper's funeral. His ashes are scattered around the gardens at Sydney's Rookwood crematorium. His role in the family was the black sheep. And mid-this year, I received a phone call with shocking news. My older brother had taken a rifle, laid on his bed and shot himself. Philip was the good son, the brave SES cliff-rescue expert, the helpful, generous man with a loving wife and daughter, and yet the family curse had touched him, too. I was the good girl turned rebel, and now the last woman standing.

The burden of losing my brothers became intolerable and the following days and weeks were hell. At times I thought I would choke. It was time to ask for help because I did not want to go down the same road as Peter and Philip. The buck stops here, I decided.

Before signing on for the course (which costs about \$5000, although this journalist was offered it gratis), I'd done what any thinking person would do. I Googled, in case I was being lured into a cult, or one of those crazy courses where they scream at you and forbid toilet breaks. None of that turned up; in fact, everything I read was positive. Moreover, the way course developer Bob Hoffman condensed long-term therapy into a shorter, sharper experience appealed. The literature talked about reconciling body, soul, emotions and intellect (the Quadrinity) and showing "a path to personal freedom and love". And meditation. I like meditation. I was nervous, but up for it. I was also deep in denial when I thought, "How hard could it be?"

As one wise therapist said, if it was easy, everyone would do it. The work started well before I set foot in Sangsurya Retreat, just outside Byron Bay on the NSW far north coast. First, I had to be accepted into the course via an interview

with veteran psychotherapist and Hoffman teacher, Volker Krohn. Krohn, who was trained by Hoffman, has shepherded people through the process since 1990.

Next, a massive – and intimidating – questionnaire arrived in my inbox. Questions about myself, family, relationships, work, children, personality traits and habits, good, bad and indifferent. Nothing escaped notice. This kind of task made me want to whitewash my life but, bravely shucking off the family trait of denial, I went down memory lane, recalling scenes and events from earliest childhood and how I felt at the time and how they had affected me. As my tally of miserable traits and unsociable habits grew rather alarmingly (hey, I'm really a good person!), I wondered how I had managed to inherit so much from my parents even though I had been determined not to be like them. Of course, there was a box to tick for that, too.

After hours of concentration, and tallying up the answers, I realised I was way short of the total the Hoffman Centre recommends, so I had to pick over my life once again, thinking harder, drilling deeper. There was nowhere to hide. But then I pressed Send and tried to forget about it – hard when I was incredibly self-critical (thanks, Mum), and worried that I'd done it all wrong (thanks, Dad) and would be outed as self-deluded or a show-off (thanks, Mum). One of the questions was, "Do you lie?" To that I wasn't able to put an honest or dishonest answer; it just seemed too complicated. When? Socially? To myself? Of course the answer was yes, I just didn't want to admit it. I mean, everyone lies, right?

Revisiting the old history brought nightmares. Alongside the warm and fuzzy memories, such as watching the sun set riding on Dad's shoulders, some real shockers rose up out of the mists of time, from when my mother was in the grip of alcohol and possible insanity: her dragging me around and ripping out big hunks of hair, or trying to smother me in bed. Nevertheless, as Socrates so aptly said, and I had come to realise, the unexamined life is not worth living, so on I pressed.

Bob Hoffman was an intuitive, clever and somewhat brash retired Jewish tailor who was part of the personal-development movement that emerged in Berkeley, California, in the 1960s. Hoffman's thesis was that we tend to reproduce the behaviours, good and bad, we learn from our parents to earn their approval, attention and love. (To take my case, for example: I not only had my mother's eyes, but also her traits of self-criticism, impatience and vindictiveness, plus my father's workaholicism and resulting abandonment of those close to me, whether I realised it or not.) Hoffman argued that we unknowingly repeat those patterns in our own lives, or spend a lot of energy rejecting them, or attracting those with the same patterns.

Over the eight days of the course, that old rhyme, "Wherever I go, whoever I see, I see Mummy and Daddy, and they see me", came sharply into focus. I realised this was why I could never get my tax in on time: the authority figures in my childhood were so erratic and dangerous that engaging with them mostly did not end well. I'd transferred that fear onto many other authority figures, no matter how remote – even the tax man. I also recalled my mother's ridiculous (or so it seemed to me as a rebellious teenager) reverence for priests, politicians and police. Plus ça change ...

Participants gathered in groups and in one-on-one sessions with facilitators to identify their patterns, then worked through them, at first with anger – or, as in my case, incandescent rage – then understanding and moving to forgiveness. Meanwhile, we were led to recognise the power of emotions, and how interactions between body, spirit, intellect and emotions affected us. We all know people whose intellect rules, and others who are slaves to their emotional inner child (I've worked for a few). The Hoffman Process provided tools for identifying and sorting out the feelings that have a negative impact on your life, where they come from, how they manifest in your body (for example, I clench my jaw, and my back aches in times of stress) and how to shift them.

There was also "therapy" of a light-hearted kind, with much silliness and crazy, childlike group projects. I hadn't laughed that hard in years, literally, and it felt exceptionally good, even liberating, because over the past few years every time I laughed my throat would close up and I would begin coughing. As I unguardedly yahooped and yelled among the mayhem, I suddenly recalled my mother's thin, high voice, squeezed through a throat tight with tension ...

In Australia, 5000 people have gone through the Hoffman Process. But proselytising by those who've done the course is not really encouraged: which is probably why it's not so well known. And also because it's deeply personal and serious work: as Krohn said, "We don't take people who are upset because daddy won't buy them a Porsche."

So there we were, high above Byron Bay at the serene Sangsurya Retreat, where gardenias and jacarandas bloomed among the eucalypts and palms, and the only sounds were the wind swooshing through the trees and the boom of distant surf on Tallow Beach. Not so much as a flushing loo disturbed the harmony, because the toilets were the Swedish composting type: just throw in a handful of sawdust and close the lid.

I unpacked and looked around my accommodation: the shower room had a wall of glass looking over a rainforest valley where bush turkeys forage. So peaceful. But first-day nerves set in as I looked around the communal dining room at my fellow intake. “Oh Lord, I’ve made a big mistake. Who are these people? Help!” Everyone was quietly eyeballing everyone else. We all made snap judgments, then found out later how wrong we were.

And so our journey began: through Mother’s Day, then Father’s Day – highly emotional times devoted to analysing and freeing our anger about each parent, which involves cathartic exercises like hitting a big blue cushion with a bright yellow bat, over and over. Then calming days to restore and integrate all we’d learnt, and days to have some fun and initiate projects together, then back to the serious stuff, of how to bring all this new knowledge into our lives. We worked from 8.30am to 10pm each night, plus homework. We had excellent meals and great coffee and plenty of toilet breaks. But no phones, no iPads, no internet, no sex, no books, no distractions – these were the rules – and precious little time to worry. I used my phone as an alarm clock and didn’t even glance at the number of messages, emails or missed calls; I was so deep into the work the outside world had completely receded. Every minute of the day is planned and accounted for. I have my suspicions that even the wildly popular comfort-food dessert at dinner on day one – apple crumble with custard, cream and ice-cream – was part of the master plan.

We all signed a confidentiality agreement. So within this safe environment, the group began to open up, and soon even the most buttoned-up dropped their inhibitions. From the first day, rapport built steadily. But old habits die hard: on the second evening, after a long and emotional day, I finished my dinner and went to leave the dining room. At the door I turned, and everyone else was hugging, giving each other empathy and support. I just walked out – I wasn’t quite ready for this. But that night I told myself not to be so stupid: isolating oneself (aka “poor me”) is a negative and vindictive habit. Next morning, when one of the group members opened his arms, I jumped right in.

Inevitably, this type of experience stirred up many feelings. Sometimes I felt a flash of irritation, occasionally my energy would flag and the tasks seemed all-consuming. There was no chance to sneak off to the beach or skip a session. I slipped on gravel and had a black toe and barked shin, then got a cold and coughed all through meditations. Others had wobbly moments, too, but none of my worst fears materialised: no one gasped in horror or turned away when they heard my story. As Krohn says, everyone thinks their shame is the worst.

My cynical side occasionally popped up. “Pan pipes?” it whispered one afternoon, when I was deep into a beautiful meditation full of music and poetry. “Seriously, pan pipes?” But those killjoy moments were few and far between. A couple of compassion exercises using pen and paper – writing long screeds about your parents’ childhoods, and conversing with them as if they were children – left a lasting impression. I had always examined Mum and Dad’s lives through a sociopolitical lens – the effects of the Great Depression and World War II, the strictures of the conservative Irish-Catholic working class, women’s role in 1950s suburbia – which allowed me to stand back, I now realised. This work cut to the chase: your parents were once vulnerable children, who had also suffered greatly, and had repeated the patterns they learnt from their parents.

Then, suddenly, the week was done. my group, my new close friends who knew more about me than anyone else, stood in the car park clutching graduation certificates, a thick “instruction manual”, and a bunch of drawings. I hugged everyone for the last time, feeling like a chick just out of the egg. It was strongly recommended that graduates spend the next two days in a quiet retreat, alone, in order to gently ease back into business as usual. Good advice, because suddenly the world was in my face, cars ripping up the streets, people everywhere, phones demanding attention. In my hotel room, I felt briefly terrified and teary and raw. The next day was less shaky, although I had a tendency to be amazed at everything: the rising sun, my breakfast cinnamon toast, a magazine illustration, a passing baby. As the day went on, I gradually came back to earth, enjoyed a fish dinner, walked by the Richmond River, took a plane home.

Has my life changed? It’s only been a few weeks. I can say I am stepping lightly on the earth: that great weight of toxic grief, shame and guilt I carried has gone. In its place is a sense of calm. Of course, I will always be saddened by what happened to my family, but I no longer blame myself – or them. Some of the old Rosalie is back, vital and energetic – and wiser.

Lifeline: 13 11 14.

This story originally appeared in Good Weekend. Find Good Weekend on Facebook at [facebook.com/GoodWeekendMagazine](https://facebook.com/GoodWeekendMagazine)

The story Deconstructing Rosalie first appeared on The Sydney Morning Herald