

CASE STUDY

THE BRAIN BEATS PAIN

A therapist's prediction that Tanya Fitzpatrick would become a yoga teacher came true, says **Joy Orpen**, and the Dubliner has since spread her holistic wings wider with an innovative technique that helps heal chronic pain

Hope is at hand for those enduring chronic pain. The partners in Align, a Dublin therapy centre, say their innovative methods — learned in the US — have produced good results in treating people with back and neck pain.

Tanya Fitzpatrick, 38, explains that our brains cause the muscles situated around injuries to contract, leading to stiffness. Our modern lifestyle also adds to the problems. Muscles tighten when we are engrossed at our computers, while many of us have poor posture.

"If the muscles don't get a message from the brain to relax, they forget how to release," says Tanya. "This affects how we move, stand, sit and lie and can lead to further or prolonged pain."

However, she says somatic movement education (SME) can help to loosen the contraction, allowing the muscles to lengthen, and consequently allows better, pain-free movement.

The secret of somatics, she says, lies in finding the source of the problem and then gently releasing the tension caused by it. This is done with the active participation of the client, who learns to become sensitive to the tensions within his or her own body. Tanya is so enthusiastic about this whole process she plans to make it her life's work.

Yet, this distinctively glamorous Dublin woman began adult life as a stylist, putting together the details for fashion shoots, advertisements and pop concerts. "Westlife was one of the first bands I worked with," she says.

The evidence of her first professional incarnation is evident in her stylish look. She wears a fitted, tailored, Sixties-style dress in grey, with mulberry-coloured tights and slick black shoes. Her hair and make-up are reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties. Heads turn when Tanya unselfconsciously glides through

the foyer of the hotel for her interview.

However, much as she loves high fashion, styling just didn't do it for her.

"I loved that world, but I got to feel it was all about making beautiful women even more beautiful and that wasn't satisfying," she says. "I wanted to give something back."

So, in 1999, Tanya and her then boyfriend went to India, where she had her first experience of Thai massage. "The session was two-and-a-half hours long. It stretched my muscles like no other massage had before," she recalls. "The next day, the therapist took me to a yoga class given by an Indian man in his garden and I felt like I had come home. The therapist then predicted I, too, would become a yoga teacher."

Tanya was sceptical at first, but nine months later, she did indeed fulfil that prophecy when she closed her business and flew to Thailand to learn massage techniques. She also began to practise yoga on a daily basis while she and her boyfriend were travelling around East Asia.

However, calamity befell them when, on a small island off the Philippines, her boyfriend broke his leg in a motorcycle accident. Enterprising Tanya managed to find a small Cessna to airlift him to hospital on the mainland. Once he was discharged on crutches, they continued with their travels.

However, the leg then became infected; they made their way to Australia for treatment and, ultimately, back to Ireland. Soon after, Tanya was fortunate to get a much-coveted place on a two-year diploma course in yoga and soon after she qualified, she began teaching up to 14 classes a week. She believes her sessions were popular because she set realistic goals. "It wasn't about reaching enlightenment, but about how yoga could help you cope with daily life," she says.



GERRY MOONEY

'Finding somatics was my ah-ha! moment. It's the fastest and most sustainable therapy I have ever experienced'

As the years rolled on, she and her boyfriend began to see the attraction of setting up a centre offering yoga-themed holiday breaks. They found the perfect venue in Croatia, but they couldn't get the funding they needed.

But, in 2006, they finally fulfilled their dreams. "That summer we sold our stuff, bought a camper van, moved to Portugal and started Free Range Holidays. Basically, we were a success from day one," Tanya recalls. "We did gourmet vegetarian food, surfing, boot camps to detox and yoga, of course."

It was a lot of fun, but a couple of years later, Tanya again felt the call to greater challenges. "I reached a point where I wanted to do something more profound than holiday yoga," she says.

However, in 2009, fate intervened when Tanya went to New Zealand to assist widely acclaimed author and yoga teacher, Donna Farhi, with a workshop.

"That's when my energy disappeared," she says. "I don't know what exactly happened — I think my fuses blew because I had been doing the work of seven people in Portugal and I was completely exhausted and drained."

Eventually, Tanya returned to Ireland, but no one could pinpoint exactly what had happened to her or why she had collapsed. So she was forced to look to herself for her own recovery and that led her to the School for Body-Mind Centering in California.

"I had saved up some cash through the SSIA scheme, so this was my 'rainy day'. I trained for two years. The course embodied anatomy and yoga — demonstrating how movement can facilitate healing," Tanya explains.

"I then discovered somatic movement education (SME), which teaches techniques for neuromuscular release; in other words, you train the brain to release pain in the body.

"Discovering SME was my ah-ha! moment," she says. "It's the fastest, most sustainable therapy I have ever experienced."

However, Tanya warns people with chronic problems not to expect quick fixes. "Painkillers will do that, but they won't fix the core problem. Some