

# LOOK into my EYES

Hypnotherapist Gemma Morriss talks to *Village* writer **January Carmalt** about 'happy birthdays' and the power of the subconscious mind in the delivery room



PHOTOGRAPHS: Glen Wilkins

**D**uring my freshers' orientation week at uni an hypnotist came to entertain and wow our incoming class. When scanning the crowd in search for his hapless victim I sank lower in my seat, fearful of what possible humiliation lay in store or secrets he might lure to the surface from the inner recesses of my sub conscious.

A misguided anxiety to be sure, as the naive 18-year-old product of a sheltered childhood, there was little intrigue to divulge. But it made me wonder, what sort of mind-bending, hocus-pocus sways one to abandon all individual will and submit entirely to the whim of another?

I have sat down with hypnotherapist and *Village* resident Gemma Morriss, pictured, who plans to enlighten me.

"It's often one of the first things I address with new clients," she replies, a majority of whom are mothers-to-be seeking help preparing for one of the most daunting and still largely misunderstood rights of passage for many women – giving birth. "All hypnosis is self-hypnosis," continues Gemma and she is quick to point out that nobody – not even her – can make anyone do something they do not want to do, declaring the likes of such "hypno-performers" as Paul McKenna and Derren Brown to be 90 per cent meticulous observation and 10 per cent trickery.

Gemma has been practicing and teaching hypnotherapy for over seven years in south London. Her objective remains simple – teach clients to wrest whatever fear and anxiety they may harbour and provide the necessary tools to control it going forward. Affirming this early and swiftly helps banish popular misconceptions surrounding hypnotherapy, permitting her to work hand-in-hand, proactively with clients towards their given goal, be it to lose weight, quit smoking or provide anxious soon-to-be mums the control and peace of mind they need to provide their newborns a very 'happy birthday'.

Often new clients arrive at her doorstep with an open mind and willingness mingled with a pinch of skepticism surrounding what is still considered by many an alternative therapy. Alternative, perhaps, albeit one becoming more and more popular as people seek healing that avoids conventional medical intervention in favour of something less prescribed and more organic.

So what compelled her towards hypnotherapy, and more specifically, hypno-birthing? Being one of eight children and the mother of five (yes, FIVE – though you would not guess it) ranging in age from 24 to seven, Gemma is a people person with a genuine love and enthusiasm for helping others. Once upon a time a nine-to-fiver, she soon swapped the office for full-time motherhood. Having birthed five children it is clear she not only talks the talk, but also walks the walk.

"I had covered the spectrum of birthing experiences, from epidural, gas and air, pethidine to absolutely nothing." (YIKES!) When number five was on his way she'd had enough of hospitals and medically-assisted labour in general and wanted

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her youngest to have a drug-free, stress-free entry into the world. Understandably so. Through the advice of a midwife she came across hypno-birthing and since then has never looked back, embracing its ethos and training to become a hypnotherapist herself, soon after.

I first met Gemma in early 2012, then nearly eight-months pregnant with my second child. Having bumped into another expectant friend, I could not help but notice she was positively glowing – calm, cool and completely prepared for a drug-free, pain-free birth. I asked what her secret was and she put me in contact with Gemma. I had heard of these Zen-like labours but dismissed them as urban myth. (Indeed, there is even speculation

our very own Prince George may be the product of such a labour). Yet, still scarred by the birth of my first born (literally and figuratively), I gathered I had nothing to lose and so gave her a call.

Upon our first introduction Gemma greets me like a long lost friend – warm, chatty, bursting with positive energy and yet still imbued with a calming influence that automatically puts me at ease. Despite being a bit late to the game, she re-shuffles her schedule to allow me a few sessions before the due date, a rather abridged version of her full course, but worth it all the same. During my time with her she gently takes me through a series of helpful breathing and visualisation exercises,

“  
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”

whilst also dissecting my own worries about the impending birth and baby. By listening she swiftly allays my concerns and provides me the control I felt I had lost as a consequence of my first labour. I always left her feeling completely relaxed, floating away on a fluffy cloud of serenity.

And so at the first flutter of contractions I did not panic, but instead armed with the necessary tools greeted each one with confidence and ease. Ok, ok. In the spirit of full disclosure, I confess as they notched up a gear I opted for the drugs on offer. But importantly, I did so on my own terms, not out of some uncontrollable necessity or worse – fear.

And this is the great thing about Gemma – she is not militant in her approach.

“Nobody gets a medal for rejecting the drugs,” she insists. Indeed, she is not in the ward giving us marks out of 10 – there is no exam at the end just – all being well – a healthy mother and baby. There is no judgment on her behalf, only that which we too often reserve for ourselves.

It stands to reason in the target-rich environment of the Village, that hypno-birthing remains Gemma’s specialty, but her repertoire is broad and also includes therapy for addiction, phobias, weight-loss and even IVF patients.

Surpassing all this though, Gemma’s real USP lies in a sincere concern for her clients, not to mention accessibility uncommon from most therapists both before, after and sometimes even during the birth (or other respective treatment). Her ‘after-care’ involves coffee mixers for parents and little ones, an opportunity to snack on tea and homemade cake whilst swapping war stories and battle scars. When quizzed on her favourite part of the job Gemma does not hesitate. “It’s definitely seeing the babies.”  
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