

Hypnotherapist Valerie Austin claims to have cured 95% of her patients of their smoking habit in just one hour. So we sent her the ultimate challenge – nicotine worshipper **Simon Hattenstone**

The last cigarette?

I'm sitting in the waiting room thinking ambivalent thoughts. Do I want to give up smoking? The idea makes me nauseous. A life without cigarettes does not bear thinking about. Do I want to give up smoking? Of course I do. I can't stand the smell of my mouth. Yes, of course, I've counted how many extra CDs and books I could buy a year with the money. Yes, it would be great to give lung cancer a miss. Yes, I have seen people dying, rasping their last, saying: "Don't make the same mistake I did."

I love smoking and I hate smoking, and in one hour hypnotherapist Valerie Austin will have cured my habit. Not addiction – habit. If it were an addiction, like heroin, I'd share withdrawal symptoms with other reforming addicts. But most of her recovering smokers don't have side effects. She is so confident that she has called her new book *Stop Smoking in One Hour*.

Austin claims to stop 95% of smokers in this hour. I'm staring at the book cover – it shows a mouth being used as an ashtray, with fags and ash dumped unceremoniously between teeth. It is supposed to be a deterrent, but I find it sensual.

The book teaches us how to hypnotise ourselves into kicking the habit. Austin admits it's less effective than having an expert hypnotise you. For one thing, you never know when you've managed to hypnotise yourself.

She says hypnotism is so different from popular perception – there are no dangers, no peculiar feelings, just a sense of being relaxed. According to

to do things they don't want to – so my ambivalence is a problem.

A colleague told me that he visited a hypnotist for an hour and then stopped smoking for four years. He had no withdrawal effects. "The strange thing was, my life was about as bad as it could be, everything was disintegrating, yet I still felt no desire to smoke. I didn't feel envy or panic or hostility when I smelled smoke; I simply thought, 'Isn't it funny, I used to do this thing.'"

Austin discovered hypnosis when she suffered hysterical amnesia after a car crash. She could remember yesterday but not the day before, and her life was in chaos. Eventually, she recovered her mind through hypnosis. She then did a course in hypnotherapy, discovered she was good at it, and built a career. She worked in Hollywood and Malaysia before returning to Britain and a Harley Street practice – still a fair distance from her Blackpool roots. She says she has always had an eye for a story, which is a nice word for self-publicity.

Austin likes her analogies. She says I should imagine I'm a computer with a virus, and I am calling out the engineer. There is nothing magic about hypnosis. It's simply about winning over the subconscious. She tells me of a 91-year-old surgeon friend who has done 4,000 operations with patients under hypnosis. "There are videos of him sawing someone's leg off and the woman's lying there singing!"

The session is split into half an hour's explanation and half an hour's hypnosis. She asks me to focus on a



Valerie Austin... 'There's nothing magic about hypnosis'

wards from 500, tighten and relax toes, calves, thighs, shoulders, face.

Suddenly I'm desperate for it to work. I shut my eyes as fiercely as possible. I'm becoming seriously relaxed, mindlessly relaxed. "You have now made one of the most important decisions of your life... Colin... to save your life, by giving up smoking, giving up polluting your lungs..."

Unfortunately, I'm not called Colin, and I close my eyes even harder so as not to giggle. Austin knows she's boobed and Colin becomes a stammered Simon.

In a gentle monotone, she tells me of the many ways I'm corrupting the planet. She tells me to think instinctively of three substitutes for smoking. I list football, reading and sex. The sex

never refers back to my substitutes. She asks the old, stinky, fag-addled me to step inside an imaginary 3ft television. "How d'you look?" I know she wants me to say gross, so I try to create as horrible a picture as possible. "Not nice," I say. I replace fag-addled me with the fit, reformed me. "How d'you look?" "Great!"

Who am I to disappoint Austin? She's spending time with me, and if I weren't a journalist I'd be spending a huge amount of money on her (£500 a throw). For a second the cynic gets the better of me: if you've saved up for ages for this one last-ditch attempt to quit, you're hardly going to walk out of the session and light up, are you?

Austin says I'm suggestible, and I'm not quite sure how to take it. Suggestible tends to be used pejoratively – you may as well say gullible – but in the world of hypnosis, if you're suggestible you're as good as it gets – an ideal candidate.

Austin brings me out of hypnosis. She doesn't click her fingers or say a magic word, she simply tells me to open my eyes, which I do because it would be churlish not to.

When I tell her I don't think I was hypnotised but it was very nice thank you, she gives me a heard-it-all-before look. Anyway, she says, my eyes were flipping up and down at great speed, which can only happen if you're in a state of hypnosis or if you're Ann Widdecombe. Austin isn't about tricks and showmanship.

"OK, if you want to see a trick I'll show you one," she says. She asks me to place my arm out straight and

it. I push up, she pushes down; I'm slightly stronger. She makes a vertical sign, and says: "Try now." I push up as hard as I can, she crushes it with ease. Spooky. She casually explains that she has redirected my negative energy.

On the way out she says I must come back if it hasn't worked; she doesn't want me ruining her reputation. I consider lighting up on the way out, but that's daft if I don't want one. Why don't I want one?

Give it a chance, I tell myself – wait till you've forgotten about Austin, and you light up instinctively. An hour later I find myself reaching for the fags. I light up with relief. *Stop Smoking in One Hour?* More like *Stop Smoking for One Hour*.

I enjoy the cigarette, and look forward to the next. But maybe not just now. Over the next few hours I pull out my cigarette box regularly, consider lighting up, and save it for later. I finally have my first cigarette since my first cigarette just before going to bed. Tastes fine, but the cigarette box feels heavier, more burdensome than it used to.

Some days have passed. I haven't stopped smoking. That brief treatment didn't work. And yet... and yet... the idea of giving up doesn't make me so nauseous now, and I do seem less desperate for fags. Last night, I dreamed, for the first time, that I had cancer and woke up screaming that I didn't want to die. Who knows? Perhaps I will go back to see Austin again.