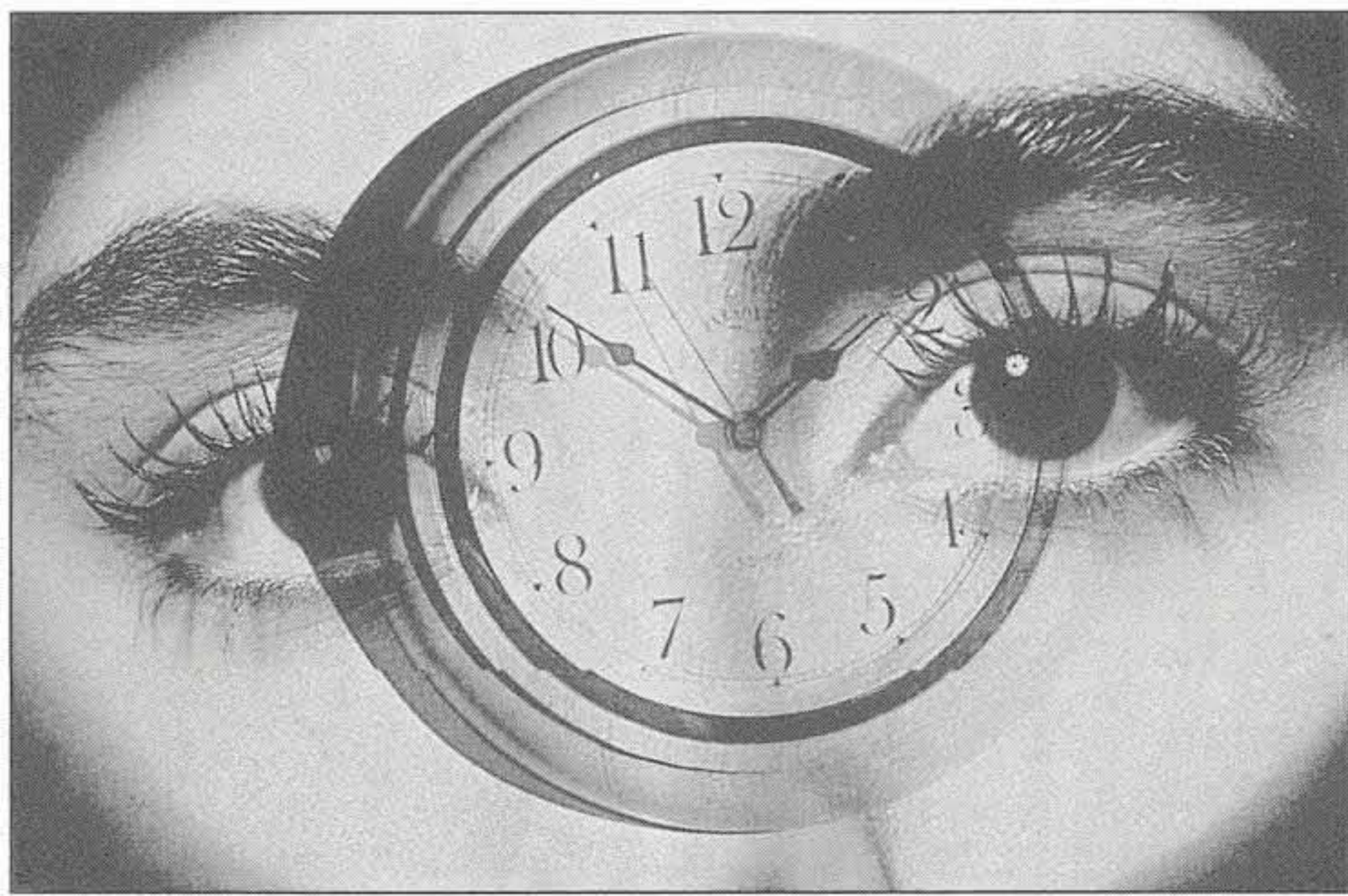


'I lost track of time; I'd even forget my son existed ...'



Science Photo Library

As many as 12,000 Britons are affected by amnesia every year. It nearly ruined Valerie Austin's life, but she has pulled herself back from the brink with the aid of hypnotherapy. She talks to **CATHERINE BASSINDALE**

VALERIE Austin used to have an excellent memory. Her job, as a sales representative, depended on it. But a near-fatal car crash left her with "hysterical amnesia" and a memory span so short that, after 24 hours, events blurred into a "mental fog". She couldn't hold down her job. On a bad day she'd forget to go in; on a good day she'd forget to pick up her wages. Relationships were a non-starter; she couldn't remember who she was dating. She had a 14-year-old son from a former marriage, but was barely aware of his existence.

Doctors could find no physical cause for her condition; despite hurting her back badly, she had not suffered head injuries. In desperation, she turned to hypnotherapy — and was astounded by the results. "I went from having no memory to a full memory in an hour and a half," she says, as she sits overlooking the Thames in her houseboat.

The session made such an impact that she trained to become a hypnotherapist herself. Now, 18 years after the accident, she specialises in helping people with memory disorders, and describes hypnosis as working like "a search engine", which can pluck memories from the unconscious. With the help of taped hypnosis sessions, she can now piece together her past; photographs on the walls serve as prompts.

Valerie, 52, used to travel all over England, selling advertising space for newspapers. Late one night she was driving home when someone ran across the road. "I swerved to miss them, went into the central reservation, overturned and plunged into a ravine."

SHE was rushed to hospital, at "Stratford? Stratford? Stratford?" Names are often a guessing game, as I discover. "The doctor said I touched the pearly gates and came back." She had no idea she was suffering from memory loss, but friends soon noticed something was wrong. "They'd say, 'Remember last night?' And it would be blank. They'd say, 'You know, you talked to so-and-so?' It would still be blank. Then it dawned on me that I didn't remember yesterday at all."

Valerie would even forget she had a son. "I recognised him, but then I could go away at weekends and forget he



Recovering: Valerie Austin

existed." She'd lose things and spend hours looking for them. "I could spend a morning looking for keys, and then forget to go out. It was a nightmare, but you just don't remember you're doing these things. I lost track of time; I was so busy looking for things I couldn't do much else."

She also used to play the guitar, but after the accident couldn't play a note. Even her dress sense was affected. "I couldn't remember colour schemes so I would sometimes dress a bit oddly, with clashing colours." She went through a succession of jobs, including an unsuccessful

stint as a secretary. "If I had a piece of paper to file, I'd file it, but then I'd forget my filing system." She tried working in a bar — but could never remember drink orders or how to add up — and then moved on to doing demonstrations in stores. It was a success, until she forgot to go in. "I was going round in circles, virtually unemployable."

It is, she says, very difficult for others to understand. "People tell you to write things down, and you feel like strangling them, because you do write them down, all the time. Then you forget you've written them."

DURING this period she went through "quite a lot" of lovers. "I could go out with somebody and then the next time they saw me, they'd put their arm around me, and it was as if some stranger had come up to me." It didn't get her down: "I'd forget to be unhappy."

On holiday in Los Angeles, she met John Austin, a showbusiness reporter. "It was love at first sight. He proposed within a week and we married a year later." The day before the wedding, on 1 April 1981, she had the hypnosis session that changed her life. Overnight she went from being "what looked like a frivolous scatty blonde" to "an astute businesswoman".

She moved to "Brentford? Brentwood?" to live with her husband, but used to make regular trips to England to see her family. Her long-term memory was much improved but her hus-

band wasn't taking any chances. "He was very nervous when I went on holiday. If he didn't phone me, I would forget he was there."

Then, on one trip abroad, a family tragedy triggered a relapse. Her father fell head-first off a ladder and onto concrete; her mother died "of a broken heart". "I remember I was at a station, paying for something, and I think I didn't have a credit card. I burst into tears and thought, uh-oh, I'm going to lose my memory ..."

Valerie spent the next four years in a "mental fog", and never returned to her husband. "I forgot to go back," she explains. "I didn't miss home, I didn't think about it. I forgot I had obligations." It was easy to let time drift. "It's a nice cosy little area, where there's no responsibility, and it's hard to come back into the wide world."

She tried hypnotherapy again in 1989, with the same "extraordinary" effects. She can now cope with day-to-day living but there are still some surprising blanks. For instance, she thinks she is still married. "But we're divorced," a surprised John Austin told me from LA.

Valerie is terrified her amnesia may come back with a vengeance but, for now, she can cope with the occasional lapse. "It's almost like an electrical short: I forget things more when my back is bad. But without hypnosis, I don't know how I'd exist."

For consultations with Valerie Austin, ring 0181 569 7192. Her book, *Free Yourself From Fear*, is published by Thorsons, at £6.99, on 27 April.

LOWEST PRICES

	5P	BT STANDARD 24p
USA	5P	24p
Hong Kong	23P	58p
India	39P	120p
Japan	18P	67p
South Africa	30P	79p
Malaysia	25P	77p

For down-to-earth prices and a worldwide service to over 200 countries.

You can call from any touch tone phone throughout the UK with massive savings up to 85% on calls from payphones and hotel phones.

There's only one choice
0800 376 6083

AGENTS AND DISTRIBUTORS
URGENTLY REQUIRED

First Choice
Telephone

A DIVISION OF
THE EUROPHONE GROUP PLC

AMNESIA: THE FACTS

Amnesia is usually caused by damage to the brain, whether as the result of a head injury or due to a degenerative disorder such as Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia. It can also be brought on by infections such as encephalitis, thiamine deficiency caused by alcoholism, brain tumours or strokes.

"Hysterical amnesia" has no obvious organic cause, but can occur with some psychiatric illnesses. It is thought to be a defence mechanism against severe stress. Treatment often involves counselling or hypnosis.

Hypnosis produces a temporary state of altered consciousness, which is not fully understood by experts. It can help patients relive experiences, triggering an emotional release known as an "abreaction". Therapists claim it can also promote a positive approach to life. The technique carries risks and should only be carried out by qualified practitioners.

For further information, contact the National Register of Hypnotherapists and Psychotherapists on 01282 699378.

ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE IN FOUR WEEKS

The Alexander Technique is the highly effective method of reducing stress and tension and improving balance and co-ordination. By learning and applying the technique you can improve your posture and gain relief from a stiff neck, aching back and other poor postural habits.

THE FOUR WEEK INTENSIVE COURSE

of daily, private, 30 min sessions is highly recommended to provide the maximum benefit within a short time. Further sessions once weekly for 2-3 months are recommended to promote lasting benefit.

"It has simply changed my life."
JOCHEN REDKE, conductor

NOËL KINGSLEY, M.S.T.A.T.
CAVENDISH SQUARE, W1.
0171-491 3505

VARICOSE VEINS
SPIDER VEINS-HEAVY LEGS
MOST VARICOSE VEINS ONLY
REQUIRE

SCLEROTHERAPY

Until Dec.98 1st consultation
including DUPLEX SCANNING &
SCLEROTHERAPY performed by
experienced vascular specialists:
£45

LONDON VEIN CLINIC
HARLEY STREET
0171-467 8326

UNPLANNED PREGNANCY

Immediate appointments
0800 716 390

LONDON CENTRES

MARIE STOPES
CARING CLINICS SINCE 1921