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# Mail on Sunday

## WIND? *One weekend to fix your*

The Landmark Forum - or 'group therapy on speed' - is a three-day course that claims to permanently improve your life. Does it work, asks Nikki Walsh... and what does it actually do?

by Nikki Walsh

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It is a Friday morning in a hotel in Dublin. More than 150 people have gathered in one of its conference rooms to attend a course, known as the Landmark Forum. A man, the forum leader, stands up and asks if there is anyone in the room who would like to talk about their life. One by one, people take the mic. They might talk about the difficulties they are facing in work, an unresolved relationship they have with a parent, or a conversation they need to have with their partner. The forum leader reflects back on what they have said, challenging presumptions or fixed ways of thinking. There can be tears, anger, denial. More and more people stand up. Later that evening — the course ends at 9 or 10pm — they are sent home with an assignment. They must write a letter to someone they care about or make a call to someone they love. The next day there is more of the same, and the next.

This three-day — and one-evening — course is run by Landmark Education, set up by a group of personal development professionals in 1991. Working on the fundamental principle that people have the possibility not only of success but also of fulfilment and greatness, they created a series of programmes using a model known as 'transformative learning', which gives people an awareness of the basic structures through which they know, think, and act in the world. From this awareness, it is possible to create a shift in thinking and it's this shift that is the essence of Landmark.

It's big business: since the company was founded, it has become a global brand with programmes in more than 125 cities, and a revenue, in 2010, of \$75m. Every year 175,000 people participate in their Forum, their flagship preliminary to other courses, and the Landmark course (and often a necessary it work? costs €400. But does

Mike Power, 44, 2005, on the girlfriend. 'I thought it American mumbo-says, 'but I was curious cynicism at the door. three most empowering was up at the mic, talk about. Since then improved. Before I went down a longterm and I are still together,

How does this Ruth (not her real teacher. She attended myself before I went I But by Saturday I was had all this stuff I hadn't to get it out there was to the mic: you get breakthroughs you just people in your daily life.

What I really doesn't have any meaning and attach it to meanings must be your life of these became aware, very quickly, of the limitations I'd imposed on my life, and how fixed my view of things had become.'

Could much of this be put down to the intensity of the experience? 'It's not called group therapy on speed for nothing,' laughs Ruth. 'If you take 150 people and put them in a room for a 10-hour stretch, get them talking, make them see the flaws in their thinking and the effect it has had on their relationships, then you have a huge release of cathartic emotional energy.'

David Cunningham, a senior programme leader of the Landmark Forum, explains how it works. 'Landmark Education gives you access to what you don't even know that you don't know,' he says. 'Things happen as we're growing up. We have school experiences, experiences with money, experiences with success, experiences with failure. And as children and young adults, we make decisions based on those experiences. Decisions about ourselves like "I'm good at this", "I'm not good at that". Decisions about circumstances in life: "this is possible", "that's not possible". Decisions about other people: "people like this about me", "they don't like that about me". And it's the decisions we make, what we add to those life circumstances, that colour or limit our choices.

'What affects us today are the conclusions we have drawn about those events. Although we can't change the past, we can change what we decided about the past. Then the cascade that leads to real breakthroughs can start.'

## 7 SECRETS FOR BEING REMARKABLE

- **Be racket-free:** Give up being right, even when you know you were.
- **Be powerful:** Be straight in your communication and take what you get.
- **Be courageous:** Acknowledge your fear (you don't necessarily have to get rid of it) and then act.
- **Be peaceful:** Let go of the interpretation that there is something wrong.
- **Be charismatic:** Give up trying to get somewhere. Be entirely fulfilled in the present moment.
- **Be enrolling:** Share your new possibilities in such a way that others are touched, moved and inspired.
- **Be unreasonable:** In expectations of yourself and others beyond what you would think they are capable of.

did the Forum in the spring of recommendation of his was going to be a lot of jumbo nicey-nicey stuff,' he and I told myself to park my I'm glad I did. They were the days of my life. By Saturday I talking about stuff I didn't really every area of my life had there, I wasn't able to hold relationship, but my girlfriend and what we have is magical.' change in thinking happen? name), 37, is a mother and the forum last year. 'I told was not getting up to the mic. compelled to go up. I realised I worked through, and the need urgent. It's liberating going up coached and you have don't get talking to other

took from it is the fact that life meaning. We create that all kinds of stuff. These challenged. Once you strip meanings, you get clarity. I

And the effects of these breakthroughs can be startling. People find themselves reconciled with parents, exes and friends. They have conversations they have wanted to have with their families for years; they meet people or get promoted in work.

Olivia Seery, 67, a Sligo-based mother of four and a medical scientist, did the Forum in 1998. 'I had become utterly disillusioned about my work. I was so overworked, my health was deteriorating. I wasn't sure I could go on. But watching people take the mic, and listening to the forum leader work through their thinking, I realised it wasn't the job that was bad; it was my attitude to it.

'After that, my work changed completely. It was like having a completely different job. I realised I was making a difference, and so were my colleagues. I could see the value of it and that was a good thing.'

Once a person has completed the Forum, they can attend seminars, included in the fee, that help them to reinforce everything they have learnt. From there, it is possible to do an advanced course and a self-expression and leadership programme. Some go on to become Forum leaders themselves.

Ruth clarifies that it is not a cure-all. 'People who are really fragile or have been recently diagnosed with a mental health condition or people on medication might find it difficult. Now I have done it, I have a few friends — not many — I would not recommend it to. But then again I think that people only go as deep as they need to go. Perhaps there is not a right person for Landmark but simply a right time to do it.'

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the door. They  
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The friendships formed on these courses seem to be incredibly enduring. 'You can talk to the friends you have made through Landmark in a way you just can't with others,' says Mike. 'There's a real honesty to it all that is lacking in day-to-day life,' Olivia agrees. Older friendships benefit too. 'You forgive,' adds Olivia. 'You put the past back in the past and when you do that, you begin to live life in the present and take action in whatever area of your life you choose.'

The effect it has on family relationships can be life-changing. 'I was able to be with my mother in a whole different way,' says Olivia. 'When she died, there was nothing left for me to say to her. She was at peace.' For this reason alone, claims that Landmark is cult-like make people who have attended the Forum laugh. 'Well, as one person said to me on the course,' says Ruth, 'it's the only cult that sends you back to your family.'

And its effects stay with you. Mike was diagnosed with cancer just as he was turning 40. 'It was a real shock. It came on quickly. I had to have eight months of chemo, but I was able to handle it. That's what Landmark gave me. Inner strength. I just kept telling myself I was connected, that I was powerful.'

*The next Landmark Forum takes place in Dublin this May; [landmarkeducation.ie](http://landmarkeducation.ie)*

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