

## Family therapy in the comfort of your home



Therapists Jean-Claude Chalmet and Caryn Nuttall Rii Schroer

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## A new style of therapy — seeing everyone together where they live — promises fast results for troubled families

### Anna's story

Having seen a slew of psychologists for various issues throughout my twenties, I'm happy to plonk myself on the couch for analysis. But the thought of inviting not one psychotherapist but a pair of them into my home, for ten hours, to pass judgment on my family, marriage, and parenting skills — not to mention the state of my bathroom — is chilling.

We all fear that if an expert watched us interact with our children and partner behind closed doors, they'd be horrified. Well, now I'm about to find out. I've agreed to allow the crack team of psychotherapists, Jean-Claude Chalmet and Caryn Nuttall, to "provide a

helping hand” in the comfort of my own home. Their in-house therapy service evolved when a client wanted to undergo family therapy, even though his nearest and dearest were scattered in Geneva, Brazil and London. The simplest solution was for everyone to convene under one roof.

Jean-Claude and Caryn realised that seeing people in their own home was brilliant for diagnosis. “When people come to your practice,” says Jean-Claude, “everybody’s on their best behaviour. The dynamics take a lot longer to come out. In the home environment, it’s very different. The masks are off. All the patterns, the alliances, are there.”

The psychotherapists will arrive at my door at 9am on a Saturday, stay till 7pm and, should I wish, return the following day. The longest they’ve remained on-site with a family, talking to parents and children alone and together, fathoming the dynamics, unknitting the issues, helping to resolve relationship difficulties and finding a more harmonious way forward, is four and a half days. I’m hoping it isn’t quite that bad.

Often, the families they work with so intensely are in crisis — parents on the verge of divorce, a young child, teenager or adult suffering emotional abuse that’s led to severe mental health problems — but as Jean-Claude says, cheerfully, “Every family is a little bit dysfunctional; any family can benefit.”

Phil and I married a week after Princess Diana died. Between the happy times, we’ve weathered our share of difficulties. We don’t always agree on aspects of discipline, or screen time. Occasionally our shouting embarrasses the neighbours. There is discord between the boys. When we eat together, I’m critical: “Don’t abandon your knife!” We do feel that anxiety has permeated our parenting. We confess our concerns to Caryn and Jean-Claude via e-mail, before meeting at Jean-Claude’s London apartment for a chat a week before our in-house session.

“What would you like to get out of this?” is his first question. I want to change the tone of our existence. I’m too tense, too often. But when I bellow orders, my children ignore me. Then I sulk. I confess this sin, and brace myself for condemnation. “What it is to be human!” says Jean-Claude. They are instantly likeable — but what about us? If they expected the guinea-pig journalists to have a mere light sprinkling of show issues they were in for a shock. And what about my children? Is it wrong to expose them to this? What if the experts conclude that something is wrong, that we have damaged our darlings with our bumbling approach, that normal kids don’t fight this much? I will feel worse than I already do.

On the day itself, not a moment is wasted. After a pancake breakfast — Caryn brings maple syrup and nearly no one snatches — Jean-Claude enquires of our children, “If there was one thing you could change, what would it be?” He’s instantly besieged with complaints about service, siblings and rationed screen time. Jean-Claude asks Conrad, 9, why he thinks his father has such rules. “He wants us to be clever,” says Conrad, as we both cringe. Challenged as to how they’d do it differently, our sons claim they wouldn’t change much.

The children are more ferocious about each other. I’m terrified that one of them will say something incriminating and shock the therapist. How is it being the youngest, Jean-Claude asks Caspar, 7. “Boring,” he replies. “Yeah,” says Oscar, 11, “he hardly gets any

attention.” But I realise there’s great truth in Caspar’s answer. I discover that Oscar likes being the eldest — despite complaints about always getting blamed. Caryn notes that the boys’ habit of answering for each other is a prime source of friction. “You like needling each other,” she says. “What’s that about?” Caspar says, “It’s all because of Oscar!” I realise I expect disapproval — but there is none. Jean-Claude and Caryn are nurturing, respectful, appreciative of the nerve it takes to be candid about your failings, to allow strangers to poke about in your private life.

I opt for full disclosure: I’m not consistently warm with my children. Will they feel my love was conditional on their behaviour and achievements? I feel I am half a good parent, half awful, but Jean-Claude says, “This is a house with a lot of love in it. Because otherwise your children wouldn’t behave like this. They would be too fearful. This is a boundary issue.”

Showing people where they’ve gone wrong in their closest personal relationships is a delicate line to walk, but they are toe-curlingly perceptive without being critical. Jean-Claude, who has 13 years of experience as a family therapist, made observations that were so astute I felt the same horrified delight as you might watching a magician saw his assistant in half. Of my eldest: “He will push and push and push and push until he believes you’re going to give up because you’re tired of his pushing.” And of my flapping-chicken style of discipline: “Your children have intelligent parents. They know they have to go the intellectual route to get your interest. But to get what they want, they play on the emotional. Very often, I see they try to guilt-trip you. That works a treat with you. The moment they see that going on, they put all hands and feet on the button, because they know they stand a chance of getting what they want.”

When your therapist is drinking coffee with you, admiring your cat, confessing that your little house feels wonderfully “safe”, it quickly builds a bond, a “safe intimate environment”. It’s easy to offload all my fears, because I feel I am talking to friends or, indeed, uncritical parents. Happily, Jean-Claude is not a therapist who nods and smiles and says nothing for seven years. I want expert opinion, swift results, and this is what he and Caryn provide. They suggest that my shouting is linked to guilt, of what I feel I can’t give my children (say, skiing holidays in Italy or indeed, Bulgaria). They call it “fear-based parenting”, but they also help me to see that a fabulous jet-set lifestyle is not what kids crave. “Children are always looking to connect. Why do they form relationships with things that are unhealthy — computer games, drugs? Because they aren’t getting that connection with their families.”

Jean-Claude says, “You are a normal, close, connected family”. Diagnosis is speedy, because, lolling round the lunch table with children grabbing rolls, it’s impossible to maintain a convincing front. Meanwhile, Caryn quietly observes. When I look at all three children bent over screens, and bleat, “We usually don’t allow this in the middle of the day,” she says: “Are you justifying it?” I reply, “Er, yes.” She and Jean-Claude access the grit of our psychology and fast. And yet it’s so deftly done. They ask the right questions. They challenge us, without raising hackles. We had billed the exercise to the boys as “a visit from doctors in how people think, who’ll help us get on better”. After our gloom about the fractiousness and friction in our house, their capability and wisdom, their benign, comforting support, feels almost magical, but as Jean-Claude says, “It’s not a walk in the park”.

To address dysfunction requires great courage. “It’s never really the children’s fault,” says Caryn, “we screw them up.” Indeed, if a child is struggling, it’s usually because of the parents. Last week, our middle child fought with his little brother and retreated to his room. He cried, and we couldn’t comfort him. It felt traumatic. “Tell me, Anna,” says Jean-Claude, “when you and Phil argue, does this mimic the way you respond?” I’m forced to consider that angry silence and withdrawal is sometimes my own response to conflict. Difficult truths are exposed, but gently. “We’re not going to sit a whole day listening to people lie to us,” says Jean-Claude, who confesses himself “a maverick; an interventionist”. He adds: “I will use anything that works to help a client.”

Their goal is for “people to feel safe enough to speak to each other”. If there are relationship difficulties, they observe, ask questions, make suggestions. If children are too afraid to speak truthfully in front of their mother or father, the therapists talk to them alone. Occasionally, parents use money to force their kids to conform. Mostly “they want to buy love, but some just want power and control”. If so, Jean-Claude and Caryn’s goal is “to free the children” from guilt and shame. “Children pay a tremendous price for their family loyalty,” adds Jean-Claude. If a relationship is irrecoverable, they can help couples to separate peaceably.

Meanwhile, Caspar, 7, is more interested in whether a Spitfire could knock down a whole SWAT team than in airing his relationship laundry. Yet when Jean-Claude asks what would make life calmer, Caspar suggests listening and sharing. Later, he tells us that the boys must have frequent experience of adults listening and sharing to suggest it as a solution. The values are there, even if they appear to be latent. I realise the frequent parental moan — that one’s children are angels in public and devils at home — is a sign of success. They know what’s right and how to behave, but feel secure enough with you to ease up on the social niceties.

The psychotherapists’ kindness and humour makes a challenging, often painful process bearable. They have both lived abroad — Jean-Claude works in English, French, German, Greek and Dutch — and much of their in-house therapy is international, in Europe, the United States and Asia. Summoning two highly experienced therapists to your home for ten hours a day can cost thousands, but I suspect a poisonous divorce is pricier. Afterwards, they can liaise with clients’ therapists, or recommend someone to work with, if required. They also see individuals and couples at their London practices.

The day injects us with a brilliant burst of self-belief and optimism. Jean-Claude says, “Your children are not afraid of showing who they are — they’re not afraid to express themselves”. I feel less anxious. What I crossly regarded as virtual anarchy in my house is, I now see, partly the wise practice of allowing children to be themselves. I feel proud, rather than frustrated, about the boisterousness of my non-stifled kids and more capable as a parent. When Oscar wants to stay up late to watch a programme on a school night, Phil and I confidently refuse (before, we’d have felt guilty, and capitulated). I parrot Jean-Claude’s words: “I know what’s best for you. I know you might not agree . . .” To my astonishment, after a short heartfelt burst of resistance, my 11-year-old trots upstairs with a book and, five minutes later, gives me a hug. Afterwards, while Phil says he feels as if he’s been run over by a truck — it’s emotionally draining to face your demons — there’s jubilation.

Everyone is high on a surfeit of bespoke attention. Oscar declares, “Those people were the coolest people. I loved those people.” Conrad bestows the ultimate compliment: “They were like grandparents.” He says he feels “fabulous” and tidies his room. I realise that my squeezed middle child is particularly gratified. As Phil says, “it was a gift” for the whole family.

### **Phil’s story**

My first thought is that this is the best way of having therapy. No arduous process of trying to explain what things are really like at home. No feeling of being misrepresented. The therapists enter the house like old friends and immediately win over Oscar and Conrad, who speak honestly, as if being questioned by a kindly policeman about a lost balloon. Caspar does spend much of the time driving his toy BMW around, but it’s all a front and I can tell that he’s listening to every word.

Then attention is turned on the adults. We’ve had far longer on this planet and are therefore much more confused by it. I answer a lot of questions, feeling like the usual suspect. I’ve had problems in the past with addiction and seem to be carrying around a huge amount of guilt. I can be too strict with my sons, as I don’t want them to repeat my perceived failures. I hate it when I do this, but it seems like a default setting that I click into. Everything has to be done my way or we are all in danger of slipping backwards into chaos. I feel like a grumpy, intractable old gorilla.

Jean-Claude provides clarity: “Parents go wrong when they don’t explain to children why a boundary is set.” But he allows me to see that I haven’t done a bad job. “Your kids,” he says, “are lovely.” He adds that our responsibility is to neither crush our offspring, nor allow them to become monsters, but to find balance, to raise “children who are able to be assertive when needed. Can we raise children who are emotionally mature in line with their age? Emotional maturity consists of five qualities: emotional awareness, emotional self-regulation, ability for self-motivation and delayed gratification, empathy and communication abilities.”

Meanwhile, Jean-Claude observes, then recommends small behaviour adjustments. Over lunch, I annoy Oscar as he builds himself an Edam and smoked-salmon sandwich. “That’s not a good combination,” I say. As we clear the table, I note that Oscar has left the Edam on his plate. My son replies, “You put me off”. Jean-Claude suggests that I might have let him discover that Edam and smoked salmon are a bad combination for himself: children don’t have to be instructed, warned and micromanaged; it’s better for their confidence and resilience if I allow them to explore, to realise their own mistakes.

Jean-Claude can tell that I’m dogged by the idea that my past choices mean I will never be good enough. This is heavy, depressing stuff, and Jean-Claude picks at these ideas throughout the day. Over this time my respect for him grows. His insights and experience give him authority that some therapists simply don’t possess. He will probably hate this but there is something of the secular priest about him. When he finally tells me that it is OK to let this guilt go, I fully accept his words and something departs me. Even a week later I am calmer and more patient around the family. I feel like someone has unscrewed the top from a bottle of soda.