

HEALTH



START TRAINING YOUR MIND!

Hypnosis is a natural state of mind that some elite athletes use to improve their sporting performance. But could employing a hypnotherapist boost your running? **TINA CHANTREY** investigates

Hypnosis, also known as the 'trance state', occurs when a person is relaxed but their mind is alert. Most people have been in a natural trance state at one time or another. Have you ever been so absorbed in a book or film you didn't notice what was going on around you? If so, then you have been in a state of hypnosis.

"In many ways the brain is similar to a computer and most normal brains are like each other in their structure," says Thomas Connelly, Secretary of the British Society of Clinical Hypnotherapists (BSCH). Individual brains are different due to the programmes that run within this system. "Each life experience is unique, generating 'brain software' programmes particular to that person's life," adds Thomas. "Most programmes are useful and work so that once a valuable piece of knowledge or life skill is learned it doesn't need to be learned afresh each time it's used. For example, once you learn to drive a car you can consciously forget about the process of driving as it's become automatic."

Unfortunately it's also possible to learn and create programmes that aren't useful to the individual; phobias fall into this category. "If these programmes are not conducive to good physical performance there is an internal barrier to success which is every bit as real as a physical disability," says Thomas. Often changing or removing these 'early learning obstacles' can release a person's full potential.

"The same principle applies to things we say to ourselves, which have the power to undermine our confidence, self-esteem, or ability to succeed in life," adds Lynda Panter, a Clinical Hypnotherapist, with experience in sport psychology.

Self-fulfilling prophecy

"An interesting aspect of the subconscious mind is that it doesn't recognise negatives, such as not, don't or mustn't," says Lynda. "So in order to 'not' think about something we have to think about it. I don't want to hit the wall in the last six miles of a marathon is heard by the subconscious mind as I want to hit the wall. This is usually accompanied by a Mental Disaster Movie depicting exactly what the individual doesn't want, thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"The process of hypnotherapy is to discover, access and change these programmes which are running beneath the level of consciousness," explains Thomas, "to facilitate more useful, appropriate and successful behaviour."

When in the trance state you are very receptive to positive suggestions and can access the resources of the unconscious mind (that looks after and controls the body). Hypnotherapy uses this natural state to effect changes for you. It can be helpful for a broad range of both physical and psychological issues.

Athletes of all levels must be fit and healthy in mind as well as body in order to maximise performance. "You are unlikely to perform at your best if you believe you're going to lose a race or lack the mental energy or motivation to train appropriately," says Dr Ruth Dyson, a GP Partner in Basingstoke who also practices as a Clinical Hypnotherapist at The Natural Practice in Winchester. "In fact the added pressures of a punishing training schedule would make it all the →

more important to ensure you maintain your psychological well-being."

Anyone who has watched professional sports-people will know the power of the mind in sporting performance. "Think of Johnny Wilkinson before an important kick, Tiger Woods before teeing off or any athlete in the starting blocks!" says Dr Dyson. "Hypnotherapy can be used to aid mental rehearsal, to help people focus on the current race or shot (forgetting the crowd or any previous failures) and to help maximise performance and training."

"The power of positive visualisation is now an accepted psychological practice and modern athletes 'imagineer' success as part of their ongoing training," adds Thomas. "The difference between success and failure in modern athletics can be measured in hundredths of a second. While there is no doubt that hard and intelligent training accounts for the majority of physical fitness, it's the mental component which carries an individual into first place."

Studies have shown that hypnosis increases shooting precision in biathlon athletes, as well as improving general sport performance in basketball players and long distance runners.

"Hypnotherapy helps people improve their physical state by eliminating negative thoughts and distractions that are counter-productive for the physical performance," says Dr Rumi Peynovska, a Medical Hypnotherapist who leads a Hypnotherapy Clinic at Charing Cross Hospital, London. "It can also install feelings of calmness and peace, complete mind control and utilize the individual's imagery and self-visualization to prepare mentally for the victory or goal by offering them active mental rehearsal."

Getting the mind on board

"Mental fitness is critical," adds Ursula James, author of the Clinical Hypnosis Textbook. "Self-belief at certain levels of performance is crucial. If you are not focused and confident your physical skills will be diminished. All athletes understand the inner game, and future pacing. Hypnotherapy helps them to refine these skills. By using hypnosis to focus the mind we tap into an instinctual 'fight or flight' capacity, and can harness it for explosive bursts of energy, or to improve stamina."

The use of hypnosis in sports performance is not primarily about anxiety reduction and relaxation, as many athletes value the adrenalin edge that being psyched-up or pumped-up gives them. "The emphasis is more on teaching them how to channel their anxiety and perform better in spite of it," says Lynda.

"Although visualising success is important, it's even more important for an athlete to develop flexibility in their mental strategy, perspective, or resources, which then allows them to deal with any problems that may arise during an event," she says. "There is no point in having a perfectly honed body if the mind is not on board."

"The success of hypnotherapy in relation to sports performance depends on the issues that people have to work on and the individual," states Dr Peynovska. "Hypnotherapy is a very powerful tool which uses the power of one's mind, but it's not a miracle treatment. In order to achieve and maintain the results of the therapy one has to practise techniques learned during the sessions, and incorporate the necessary life changes appropriate for each particular case. Otherwise the results will be short-lived."



Mental fitness is critical

WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN A GOOD HYPNOTHERAPIST?

"Check their qualifications and whether they are registered with a professional body such as the British Society of Clinical Hypnosis," advises Dr Dyson.

"I advise clients to speak with several qualified people until they find the one that feels right," adds Thomas. "This usually means there is an unconscious chemistry which can often make the therapy more speedy and successful."

Both the British Society of Clinical Hypnosis (www.bsich.org.uk) and the British Association of Medical Hypnosis (www.bamh.org.uk), incorporating medical doctors who practice hypnotherapy, insist all members have been trained to a professional standard, are covered by full indemnity insurance and adhere to a strict code of ethical practice.

CASE STUDY

TANYA CHARLTON returned to running in 2009 after a three year break following the birth of her third child. Earlier this year she entered her first marathon, but wanting a little extra help, visited Lynda Panter for a series of hypnotherapy sessions.

"Firstly we identified Tanya's goals," explains Lynda. These were:

- 6.5 minute miles in shorter distances (5 miles, 10k)
- 7 minute miles for slightly longer races (10 miles, half marathon)
- 7.75 minute miles to achieve 3 hours 30mins in a marathon
- Being injury and illness free.

"Secondly we identified the issues holding Tanya back," says Lynda. These were:

- Feeling tense and muscles being held tight
- Balancing home life with desire to run competitively
- Negative self-talk and imagery around running

- Issues surrounding her father, who was an accomplished marathon runner, and performance comparisons.

Thirdly we defined specifically how Tanya wanted things to be different when running. This included:

- To be relaxed whilst running to improve times
- Replacing negative self-talk with positive suggestion and imagery
- Releasing fears around her father and not being a good enough runner – to run free without the past running along with you
- Increasing self-belief and confidence in ability.