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Men's Fitness

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Self-Hypnosis for better gains: this mind-expanding fitness aid can cool you out while building you up –

Mental Edge - use of hypnosis for physical fitness

by **Ben Kallen**

Of all the fitness-promoting mental techniques available, hypnosis may be the one men are least likely to try. And that's too bad. When used correctly, hypnosis can be a highly effective way to improve your workouts, not to mention perform better on the playing field and in the workplace. Athletes from Tiger Woods to a variety of Olympians have used hypnosis to help visualize optimal performance and overcome self-doubt. But if you want to get more out of your time at the gym, it can help there, too. All in all, hypnosis may be the most fitness-friendly thing you can do while parked on a couch.

If you're reluctant to try hypnosis, you should know that the way it's portrayed in the movies or onstage--a guy swings a watch and you suddenly find yourself quacking like a duck--is a far cry from the way it's actually used by sports psychologists. "Hypnosis is controlled by the individual, not the therapist," explains Arreed Barabasz, Ph.D., director of the hypnosis lab at Washington State University and president-elect of the American Psychological Association's hypnosis division. "In a sense, all hypnosis is self-hypnosis; it's something you do yourself, not something that's done to you."

THE BENEFITS

What can you get out of hypnosis practice? These are just the highlights.

Relaxation: One of the primary success busters an athlete faces is nervousness. Imagine you're at the free-throw line, calm and brimming with confidence. You have at least a chance of getting the ball through the hoop, right? Now imagine the same situation, but you're full of worry that you'll miss--your odds just went down considerably. Accordingly, one study of college basketball players found that shooting accuracy improved significantly after hypnosis training.

Performance enhancement: Hypnosis can help you control physical sensations such as pain. It can also put you into a more effective place mentally, providing relaxed concentration, also known as "flow" or "getting into the zone." In fact, Barabasz contends that "maximum performance can only occur with variations in mental state or control." That includes workout performance, since completing those difficult final reps--the ones that push your body into building more muscle--is as much about mental will as it is about physical ability.

Visualization: Practicing something in your head, whether it's a bench press or a presentation at work, can mean the difference between a mediocre performance and a spectacular one. "The brain thinks very much in pictures," says New York City clinical psychologist Benjamin Fialkoff, Ph.D., director of the New Jersey-based Center for Peak Performance. "If you can call up a picture in your mind, you have a powerful way of getting something done." Hypnosis can intensify that mental imagery, Fialkoff adds, making it much more vivid and lifelike.

Gaining overall confidence: Not going for a goal, missing that final rep--or, for that matter, not asking someone out--often is the result of a failure of nerve that hypnosis can help you overcome. A therapist can give you confidence-building suggestions, or you can call up a mental picture of a time when you felt especially confident or achieved something important. You can then "anchor" that feeling to a bodily gesture so that when you make a fist or curl your toes you'll experience it again.



Ending bad habits: Hypnosis can't make you suddenly give up your vices, and attempts to use it for weight loss have had less-than-perfect results. But if you don't expect all the work to be done for you, it can be a helpful tool. For instance, if you've had trouble sticking to your workout program, hypnotic suggestions might help you get over your resistance. Barabasz says he's used hypnosis to change the taste of foods so that clients enjoy steamed vegetables as much as, well, steamed vegetables with butter. Of course, this isn't magic. "It works for people who want to make dietary changes," he says.

GETTING STARTED

While it's possible to self-induce a trance from a script or an audiotape, you're better off starting with a professional. A therapist can help you reach a deeper level; more important, if you have any repressed traumas, it's possible that hypnosis will bring them out. If that happens, it's imperative to have a trained mental-health professional on hand to help you through it.

The therapist will first learn your goals and get to know you. Then he or she will lead you through an "induction" to help you reach a hypnotic state. Once there, you'll be given suggestions to help you achieve your goals. After two or three sessions (or more for high-level athletes), you'll be handed a tape with a personalized induction on it, or be given suggestions that make inducing a trance (and bringing yourself out of it again) simple.

Of course, if you stop there, you probably won't get very far. "You can't just do it once," says Fialkoff. "As with any skill, the secret is constant practice. You need to do it every day, even three times a day if you're working toward a goal."

Keep at it, though, and you may find your performance improving, in the gym and everywhere else. "Just about everyone can use some extra confidence," Fialkoff says. "This is one way of helping you work to your full potential."

BOOST YOUR WORKOUT NOW

You don't have to see a hypnotherapist to relax your way to better workouts. Here's a visualization technique that will improve your results today.

1. Sit in a quiet, comfortable place and close your eyes. Take in 10 deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. (If you feel dizzy, breathe normally for a while.) By the 10th breath, you should be nice and relaxed.
2. Visualize the place where you work out and the equipment you use. Use all your senses: See the space, hear the other people, feel the gear in your hands.
3. Visualize one exercise, such as a dumbbell curl. Feel the strain in your biceps as you lift the weight. Make sure you see yourself doing the movement perfectly--if you're having trouble, imagine yourself as someone else you've seen doing the movement well. See yourself going through a whole set without getting tired, and feel the power flowing through your muscles.
4. As you do this, think of positive words, such as strong, confident, energetic.
5. When you finish, go on to another exercise, or open your eyes and gradually bring your awareness back to your surroundings.
6. When you're actually doing your workout, try to re-experience those feelings of confidence and strength.

WHO TO SEE

Anyone can attend a weekend seminar and call himself a "hypnotherapist." What you want is a credentialed sports psychologist or psychotherapist who also works with hypnosis. To find one, contact the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (847-297-3317) or the sports-psychology division of the American Psychological Association (202-336-6013). Prices range from about \$50 to \$120 per hour.