

With Winning in Mind

Often our minds can be a major hurdle to achieving our goals. So, what if there was a way to address issues around confidence, motivation, anxiety and fear without even raising a sweat? Well, maybe there is. *TMSM* editor Rob Hay addresses a fear of open water swimming to investigate the merits of hypnosis.

Words: Rob Hay | Images: Thinkstock & Delly Carr

I'm clenching my right fist as I stand in the soft, wet sand of Melbourne's Dendy Street Beach. In front of me a steel-grey sky is reflected in the relatively calm waters of Port Phillip Bay. In contrast, a brightly coloured procession of the area's famed 'bathing boxes' crowds the beach behind me. Like the clash between the muted tones of the sombre sky and the happy hues of the bathing boxes, I too feel conflicted. I've had three hypnosis sessions to address a fear of open water swimming – or more precisely, a fear of the unseen and toothsome creatures that make their home out there in the salty brine. During the process, positive feelings of confidence and calm have been anchored to the action of clenching my fist. I close my eyes, take three deep breaths and tell myself, 'relax now' – another technique I've been armed with to reduce any fear or anxiety that might rear its head like some

primitive leviathan from the deep. Still though, I'm feeling trepidation mixed with excitement.

The water is cool and clear as I wade out. I'm eyeing a boat marker post around 200 metres offshore. Swimming around this should give me an idea as to whether the hypnosis sessions have been successful – and still allow me to get back to shore before my parking ticket expires.

My fear of the ocean is not overbearing. I have no problem competing in open water swimming events and I have spent countless blissful hours playing in the surf over the years. But the fear comes to the fore from time-to-time – usually when I'm alone in the ocean with my bony white feet dangling from the sides of a surfboard. I've always reasoned that another person in the water reduces my chance of shark attack by 50 per cent.

On this morning, however, I'm alone. I fix my goggles to my face and dive in.



Hypnotism 101

It's hard to put together a potted summary explaining what hypnotism is and how it works, as the phenomenon is still a bit of a mystery – mainly because the inner workings of the human mind are still a bit of a mystery. There has been some empirical evidence put forward to show the hypnotic state does exist, however.

In 2011, researchers at universities in Finland and Sweden published findings from a study conducted into the eye movements of an easily hypnotised subject (scan this page using your In-Site app to see video footage of the subject entering and exiting the hypnotic state). To cut a long study short, the researchers concluded that their results fulfilled the strict empirical criteria (immediate induction and cancellation, objective confirmation through measurements, and inimitability – their words, not mine) to demonstrate the existence of a special hypnotic state.

While this rather unremarkable-sounding study does not have the same appeal as a stage show hypnotist convincing someone they've just laid an egg, it does represent an important step in legitimising a phenomenon that is more often than not greeted with scepticism. But it appears the tide of popular opinion may be turning.

In recent years, hypnotism has begun to gain acceptance in the medical community as a way to manage pain and some dentists now offer hypnosis in place of an anaesthetic. There is also no shortage of anecdotal evidence suggesting hypnosis can be a valuable tool in treating addictions, phobias and other psychological conditions.

Both my father and a close friend successfully quit smoking with the help of hypnotherapy after a number of failed attempts using other methods, such as nicotine gum and patches.

But does it have any applications for the endurance athlete?

The hypnotist

On arriving for my first of three sessions at Melbourne Endurance and Sports Hypnosis, I'm greeted by Dr Fraser Carson. He's affable and looks more like a sports psychologist than a hypnotist – no deep-set piercing eyes, cheap suit or silver pocket watch. It's reassuring, as being ushered into the hypnotic state by a stranger with dubious credentials would be a touch unnerving. He makes me feel immediately comfortable.

Carson is a UK native and his accent retains some of the lilting tones of his Irish heritage. He earned his PhD in sports psychology from the University of Hull and also holds an MSc in coaching and education from Ohio University. He is also a sportsman. His current interest is



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iron-distance triathlon and this year he will tackle his first – Ironman Melbourne. He cut his teeth, however, on the rugby league field and played professionally for a period with the Sheffield Eagles in the British Super League. Injury took its toll, however, and he shifted his focus to his academic career.

While hypnosis is not seen as a particularly academic pursuit, Carson says he found that through hypnosis he was able to achieve results much faster than with more conventional relaxation and visualisation techniques.

The process

It's time to get down to business. Seated, with my feet planted flat on the ground my hands palm down on my thighs and my eyes closed, Dr Carson begins with a series of instructions designed to relax me and shut off my conscious mind. I imagine a tall building. One floor at a time in a descending order the lights go out. Next I'm floating into the air; looking down the world below becomes increasingly small. I'm travelling faster and faster up into the air until I'm rocketing through space with the earth now almost invisible. Throughout the different visualisation and relaxation exercises my conscious mind is trying to stay focussed on Carson's voice, but the question, 'Am I hypnotised yet?' keeps popping up. As we continue, my shoulders slump further; my hands feel like they're melting into my thighs, I'm certainly relaxed. After a while I'm convinced I have made it to a hypnotised state. It is a sensation similar to what I have felt before on certain occasions. Usually just before dozing off on a couch on a Sunday afternoon, aware of sounds around the house, someone talking on a phone, the sound of a televised cricket match – but your mind is elsewhere. In the hypnotic state I still feel in control though, that if I wanted to open my eyes and shake off the drowsiness I could.

The first session with Carson is designed to introduce me to the hypnosis process so I'm





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more relaxed and receptive during the second and third sessions. As such, we don't work directly on my fear of open water. Something he does do while I'm hypnotised, however, is tell me that following the session the colour red will appear more vivid than usual. This gives me my first taste of the power of suggestion possible during hypnosis.

On leaving the clinic, I'm immediately drawn to some bright red designer furniture in a shopfront window. As I cross the street I notice a late-model red Mini Cooper. Walking to my car, I see two fire hydrants, a stop sign and a bright red Vespa. And it's not simply a case of being more aware of the colour red as you might become more aware of a particular model of car after buying one yourself; it is as if all of these red objects are, for some undisclosed reason, suddenly imbued with a new level of significance.

The session – and the two that follow for that matter – leaves me feeling relaxed and in a positive frame of mind. It is not surprising to discover many people turn to hypnotherapy simply as a means of relaxation. Carson later tells me that a 15-minute hypnosis session can provide similar benefits to a three-hour sleep.

The next two sessions are similar to the first, although now I'm aware of what the hypnotic state feels like it's easier to get back there. Now Carson can get to work on my fear of open water.

One technique he uses is to have me clench my right fist and remember a time when I felt confident and in control. The idea behind this is that when I clench my right fist in future I'll be reminded of these feelings. This process is referred to as anchoring.

We also look into letting go of any fears from the past associated with water. His questions prompt me to recall when I was three and fell in a duck pond.

In the deep end

Back on Dendy Street Beach, it's time to face my fears. Below the surface it is calm and clear. The cool water seeps into my wetsuit as I stroke out toward the boat marker post. Below me, schools of small near-transparent fish shimmer and dart in well-rehearsed unison. I feel relaxed and the sandy seafloor is clearly visible below. The only thing that makes me feel anxious is looking up to site the boat marker post. I'm aware of how far away it is and how much deeper the water will likely become before I reach it. But before I know it, I'm there. I stop and have a look around underwater and then swim down to the bottom, which is still visible. I'm surprised as it is deeper than it looks. I feel a little bit anxious when swimming down to the bottom, but once I turn

and swim for shore, I immediately feel relaxed and entirely comfortable in the water. The swim back is a pleasure.

The findings

When my father quit smoking through hypnosis I was surprised when he said he still had the urge to 'light up'. This didn't seem to fit with the 'miracle cure' narratives usually associated with the marketing of these sorts of self-improvement services and products. But hearing it wasn't an instant cure-all, made me think it was probably an effective treatment, which it has proven to be.

My experience of hypnotism is similar. I don't feel it is a miracle cure, but I do feel that my fear has been minimised. When I took to the water after my sessions, I didn't have the feeling that my fears had vanished; rather, I felt like it was perfectly normal to be swimming in the ocean and that there was no reason for it to be a cause of anxiety. This might sound like splitting hairs, but it seems an important distinction.

It has been exciting to discover that, for me, these deep-rooted psychological blocks can be dislodged and don't have to be a hindrance.

The implications of this are significant for triathletes. While Dr Carson says his service is popular with athletes who fear open water swimming, he also sees people who suffer from performance anxiety and anxiety associated with returning from injury. So, if you're looking to improve your performance, address anxiety, or increase your confidence or motivation, hypnosis could be worth looking into. You're getting sleepy...very, very sleepy... 

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