

BY DOUGLAS FLEMONS

Finding Flow

Embracing your worst can bring out your best

UP AGAINST A DEMANDING tennis opponent in the last game of the set, you're connecting with the ball like never before, smoking it into the corners with precision and ease. You're halfway through a workshop you're teaching, and the participants, excited by your material, are peppering you with questions. Your answers surprise you—you hear yourself saying things that you didn't know you knew.

Playing jazz piano with your trio, you feel like all three of you are mind readers. As your fingers improvise an edgy melody, the bass player and drummer stay right with you, anticipating and complementing your every move.

Got flow? When you do, everything falls into place. With in-the-moment total-focus ease, intent and execution merge: tennis balls go where you aim them, ideas and words appear out of nowhere, and jazzed collaborations take on a life of their own. Even if you're sweating like crazy and your heart is pounding out of your chest, everything feels so *effortless*. Is there a more blissed source of joy? Can't be. Which explains the frustration and cranked-up angst among flow aficionados—athletes, public speakers, creative performers—who've lost their magic touch.

As a psychotherapist specializing in hypnosis, I work at times with such elite performers—people who've spent long years learning and honing a skill that they can carry out with precision and grace. Except when they can't. Except when, with their mind and body out of sync, they lose concentration, coordination, and confidence.

Petra, a black-belt martial artist, wanted to move up from her current division ranking of sixth place in international competitions. A few tournaments back, she'd fumbled her weapon a little at a particular point in her solo routine, and, since then, she hadn't been able to perform without worrying that she'd make the same mistake in the same place. Nervous and distracted, she'd lost her edge, and despite her largely successful efforts to correct the glitch, she'd been unable to expunge the persistent concern that it could happen again.

On tournament days before she competed, Petra would fret about what she was facing, and during the demonstration itself, the potential glitch became a reference point for the entire process. As she'd begin with the weapon, she'd anticipate the forthcoming "moment of truth"; when she arrived at it, she'd focus on not messing up; and as soon as she got past it, she'd assess how well she'd managed. With such constant, worried monitoring going on, her flow had curdled.

Nevertheless, Petra had set her sights on placing first in the year's culminating world competition, and, with that end in mind, she'd been working like crazy to get back in the zone—practicing intensely, visualizing success, and admonishing herself to get it together. But the loss of flow in high-stakes circumstances creates a challenge that no amount of teeth-gritting determination and effort can overcome. As the novelist Mary Gordon once said, the injunction "'Try and relax' is a three-word oxymoron." If you're an out-of-sync performer, you can't willfully manufacture effortlessness, no matter how good you are at what you do or how hard you're prepared to try.

You can, however, change strategies. If, instead of trying to *control* your inner experience, you find a way to *coordinate with it*, you create the necessary conditions for flow to return. Nothing works better than hypnosis for initiating such a dramatic shift in orientation, and nothing works better than self-hypnosis for maintaining the change and allowing it to develop. Typically, I offer my clients both. I spend our first appointment gathering a detailed description of where they excel ►



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and where they struggle, both on- and offstage, and I devote the second to introducing hypnosis.

Over the course of that second session, I offer my clients the following six self-hypnosis guidelines, and, in the process of explaining and illustrating the points, I invite them into trance. They thus leave my office with a taste of the hypnosis-shaped transformations they can anticipate, as well as an outline for how to keep experimenting on their own. During subsequent sessions, I check on how their practicing is going and use hypnosis to help them discover and establish further changes. Here are the guidelines:

1. *Find a place where you can sit comfortably and enjoy relative privacy for 5 to 20 minutes.*

I suggested that Petra practice self-hypnosis at least once, and, if possible, twice a day in a place where she could ensure some alone time. It helps when clients don't have to worry that someone will think that they're acting weird, so by closing and locking an office or bedroom door, they take care of that concern. Those without access to much private space can make do with a bathroom stall. I recently worked with a professional racecar driver, Skip, who, on his way to competitions, would practice self-hypnosis during his plane flights and in airport lounges, but also when he was strapped into his car, waiting for the next race to start.

2. *If necessary, you can shut your eyes straightaway. But, if possible, experiment with finding somewhere to rest your gaze and letting your eyes linger there until they, at some point in the ensuing minutes, decide on their own to close.*

Elite performers such as Petra and Skip need to be able to count on their body in high-stakes circumstances, so when it fails them, their confidence is shaken and they're left asking questions about what'll happen the next time. Indeed, because of the way consciousness works, most of us are at odds with our body much of the time, trying to corral urges and banish uncomfortable thoughts, sensations, and emotions. When anxiety ramps

up, this ordinary mind-body split widens considerably—our everyday sense of self-conscious detachment intensifies, and we become outsiders to our own experience, attempting, and largely failing, to stifle or steer whatever is happening within us.

From the outset, hypnosis reverses this state of affairs, giving priority not to *your* decisions, but to those of your body. By letting your eyes decide when to close, you initiate a relationship with your experience that isn't predicated on you (that is, your conscious self) calling the shots but, instead, on tuning in to what and how the rest of you (your body) is thinking.

Of course, many performers, unable to predict or control the thoughts, sensations, or emotions that sometimes derail their absorbed involvement, dismiss their body as stupidly "irrational." From a hypnosis perspective, it is, on the contrary, brilliantly "relational." As I put it to Skip: "You've done your best to try to ignore the anxiety when it hits, and you've discovered that it responds to your efforts in a predictable way. If my kids ignore me when I want their attention, I tend to raise my voice or find another way of increasing the intensity of what I'm communicating. Your body wisely employs a similar strategy. The more you ignore it, the more insistent it becomes, making sure you can't just blow it off."

3. *Don't bother trying to relax or to visualize some peaceful scene. There's no need to try to make anything happen.*

In the minutes just before the beginning of the last several races, Skip had sternly coached himself, going through a list of reminders of what he needed to do, and admonishing himself to relax. At these times, he never said anything that he didn't already know in his bones, and the admonishments didn't produce the intended calming effect. However, compelled to do something to deal with his peaking performance anxiety, he persisted in trying.

Petra had previously seen another hypnotherapist, who'd invited trance with detailed descriptions of the beach: sparkles of sunlight on the waves; warm, soft sand; the dappled

shade of palm trees; and refreshing breezes off the water. This had worked reasonably well in the therapist's office, but Petra had had trouble conjuring up the images when she felt nervous, particularly on the days leading up to a big tournament, so her success had been limited by her inability to visualize on demand.

Becoming relaxed is an excellent way of moving into trance, as is getting caught up in a vivid visualization. But if you purposefully set out to use either as a way of experiencing self-hypnosis, you end up caught with one part of yourself trying to dictate to the other, and this will always preclude flow. The alternative is to use whatever you're experiencing at the very moment as the entry into trance, and you do that by using your breath to get in sync with it.

4. *Find and follow your breath in the movement of your body and in the movement of the air as it passes in . . . and out . . . and in . . . and out. . . .*

If you were to draw a Venn diagram of conscious and unconscious processes, devoting a circle to each, you'd locate your breathing (along with your blinking, walking, thinking, and swallowing) in the area where the two overlap. Whenever you decide to, you can purposefully alter your breathing pattern, bringing it under your conscious control; however, you can also choose to let your breath happen on its own.

Your breath is thus an excellent starting point for initiating the mind-body coordination that makes both trance and performance-flow possible. Take a moment now and bring your attention to the rhythm of your breathing, to the sensations that accompany it. Listen for the sound of air passing in and out, and notice the discrete effects of this movement in your nose or mouth. And then allow your noticing to drift down to the rise and fall of your chest and the more subtle kinesthetic shifts in your shoulders, your back, your diaphragm, and your arms. Become aware, too, of the turning points, the moments when in becomes out, and out, in.

It's tricky—isn't it?—to do nothing more than watch what's happening, to

avoid even inadvertently changing the timing of your breathing. For as long as you're watching, your breath is, in a sense, performing, and everything we do feels different when it's being scrutinized. But if you continue aligning your awareness with your breath, something curious starts to happen. As the two keep moving in unison, the boundary between them starts to fade, and they dissolve into one another. Without effort, you find yourself mindfully breathing.

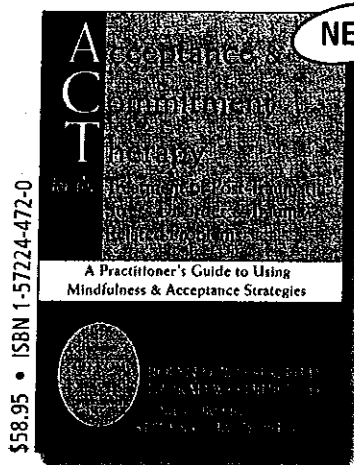
5. *Use the movement of your breath as a rhythmic foundation for extending this nascent mind-body synchrony. As you breathe in, notice whatever is grabbing your attention—a sound, skin sensation, smell, thought, tension, image, discomfort, memory, emotion—and, as you breathe out, acknowledge its presence. Discover on your next inhale (or the one after that—no need to rush) whatever is then coming to your attention, and devote the subsequent exhale to acknowledging it in turn.*

If you're ever driving in West Texas and you see a man in a pickup heading toward you, keep your eye on the top of his steering wheel. As you approach him, he'll lift his index finger, offering you the speeding-along-the-road version of a tipped hat or a voiced "Hi." When I lived in Lubbock for a couple of years in the 1980s, a feeling of warm inclusion came over me whenever I was the recipient of this minimalist gesture. Each time it happened, I, an immigrant from Canada, would feel welcomed onto the road and into the culture. I discovered that even subtle acknowledgment dissolves difference.

This realization stayed with me, and today it informs my suggestion to my clients that they, while breathing out during self-hypnosis, simply acknowledge whatever it was that became of central importance during their last breath in. I clarify that they needn't strive for a demonstrative embrace or manufactured acceptance of something they're struggling with. All that's necessary to bring recognition to this specific experience at this specific time is a West Texas finger lift, a slight nod, or perhaps a few silent words.

"So," I said to Petra, "as something makes its way onto the screen of ▶

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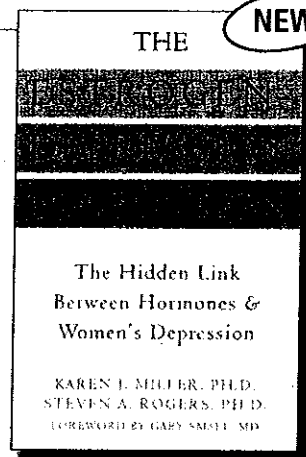
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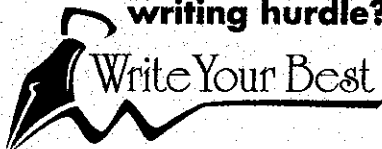
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your awareness—whether those people talking outside the door, . . . a thought about the sticking point in your form, . . . or that nausea you were feeling earlier—go ahead and devote a breath to silently noting its presence: hallway voices . . . the damn glitch . . . intense fluttering. Each can be recognized, one at a time, . . . one with each breath.”

Hypnosis allows you to reverse the logic of how you respond to anxious thoughts and sensations, both in preparation for and during a performance. Rather than needing to get your act together by keeping yourself apart, rather than feeling victimized by what, beyond your ability to predict or control, is being visited upon you, you can begin to actively coordinate with it, mindful breath by mindful breath. Through such developing alignment, you blur the boundary dividing you from the anxiety, which simultaneously dissolves its identity as a separate force that unpredictably takes action against you. Without such defining edges, it's freed up to begin changing in yet-to-be-discovered ways.

6. *As you continue this mind-body matching process, encountering and coordinating with whatever's happening, notice and follow any shifts that develop in the sequence, expression, or location of your experience.*

Here's the delicious irony of approaching self-hypnosis in the way I've been describing: by rhythmically coordinating with whatever has been interrupting the flow of your performance, you get in sync with the very things that have been keeping you out of sync. Flow coagulators—worried thoughts, fear of failing, outside distractions, distressing body sensations—become flow initiators.

In the agonizingly slow minutes prior to the start of the last few races, Skip's body would almost become numb as waves of fear rose up from his stomach. In an effort to keep things from getting out of hand, he'd run through his demand list of everything he needed to remember to do, and, as he apprehensively stared at the light that would soon be signaling the start

of the race, he'd develop tension-induced tunnel vision.

Once he became adept at practicing self-hypnosis, however, Skip was able to align himself, perception by perception, with the various manifestations of his performance anxiety, acknowledging each of the sensations and thoughts that had been shutting him down. Both in rehearsals in my office and on the actual track, he started approaching the fear as if he were an impatient surfer, waiting to catch a wave, and when it came, he'd ride it for all it was worth.

Now encountering the anxiety with anticipation and playfulness, Skip no longer needed to counter it with serious admonitions to himself. This, in turn, freed him up to take in, rather than stare at, the starting light, and to unselfconsciously absorb himself in the process of driving. Soon after, he won his first national event, and he later told me that he was feeling confident, able to easily adjust to any problems with the car or pressure from the team owner.

When Petra first came in, she was afraid of the glitch in her form—afraid that every time she made the same mistake during run-throughs, she was hardwiring it in place. Such a concern obviously made practicing a dangerous activity, and it precluded the possibility of her losing her self-consciousness in absorbed enjoyment. During our hypnosis together, however, she discovered that the glitch was a more nuanced teacher than her sensei, as it could illuminate from the inside how she was moving, centering, and projecting her energy. She once again started looking forward to practicing, which we organized to involve not only her form, but also self-hypnosis. We decided that once she was experiencing trance, she would, in her imagination, run through the form in slow motion, three times forward and then once in reverse, each time attending both to the articulation of each move and the trajectory of the whole.

With her practice transformed into a safe opportunity for learning, Petra no longer needed to protect herself from making a mistake. The flow of

her form, and of her involvement in it, returned, taking her all the way past the glitch, all the way to the last move of her form, and all the way to the last competition of the year.

Petra's original goal was to appear more confident, and to this end, she'd been trying hard to visualize herself in the winner's circle of the year-end world tournament, wearing the robe of the first-place finisher. During the time we worked together (eight sessions in six months), she instead *became* confident, and she moved from trying to focus on the conclusion of the tournament (probably, in part, as an effort to keep from focusing on the glitch) to entering and reveling in the tangible feel of the performing itself—the flow of it.

After the competition, Petra called with the news. The bad: she missed first place by one point. The good: she performed "flawlessly," better than she ever had, and the next day, in the first tournament of a new competition year and a new, higher division, she came in first over 16 far more experienced women.

Finding flow involves the blurring of the consciousness-carved division between observing and doing, and this can only begin when, instead of maligning what you consider irrational symptoms of anxiety, you start aligning with what you recognize as embodied ways of thinking. Such mind-body synchrony allows your performing, whether in sports, lecturing, or the expressive arts, to feel nonvolitionally free—timeless, effortless, integrated.

CASE COMMENTARY

BY DAN SHORT

DOUGLAS FLEMONS's work integrates elements of behavioral assessment, Zen meditation, and paradoxical strategy, combined within a hypnotherapy-based approach. Because hypnosis isn't and shouldn't be used as an all-purpose intervention for all people under all conditions, the first element—behavioral assessment—is critical, followed by careful discernment of how and when to use it. Accordingly, in Petra's case, Flemons

carefully analyzes the sequence of her behavior and determines her immediate and long-term goals, her response to previous treatments, and her ideas about her emotional experience and subjective realities.

What Flemons describes as "flow" is identical to the Zen practice of "mindfulness," in which individuals strive for "nonattachment" to their goals of action by focusing entirely on the action itself. This ancient practice of mind-body coordination is used by Flemons to help Petra stop obsessively and negatively evaluating her activities directed toward a particular goal. This technique is most helpful for clients struggling with the problem of performance anxiety. In fact, research indicates that it's the anticipation of negative evaluation that heightens anxiety and causes individuals to perform at lower levels.

Flemons then actually uses hypnosis as a vehicle to deliver a strategic intervention. Readers seeking to replicate his hypnotic work must recognize the core suggestion he makes, which—presented in the best style of Milton Erickson—is easy to miss because it isn't stated directly. Essentially, Petra is given the paradoxical suggestion that she should reverse her ordinary logic by actively embracing unwanted thoughts and sensations, and thereby enhance her performance. In other words, she's convinced to embrace performance anxieties in order to perform better. Flemons's strategic intervention distracts her from her preoccupation with evaluation and interrupts the spiraling of negative expectancies and unwanted behaviors, a vicious cycle Victor Frankl termed "anticipatory anxiety."

The only point on which I disagree with Flemons is his comment that nothing works better than hypnosis for this type of problem. While I appreciate his skill, any technique—hypnosis included—must vary with the needs of the individual. Regardless of whether one employs hypnotic procedures, broader dynamics should govern clinical decision-making.

Nonetheless, I appreciate Flemons's painstaking care in preparing his

clients for hypnosis and his skill in applying it. In addition, self-hypnosis can be a fine way to empower a client, and it can become a catalyst for developing previously unrecognized potential within a person. ■

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