Men'sHealth

# Could hypnosis change your life?

Hypnosis is gaining ground as an NHS-sanctioned treatment, but is just a quick fix?

**BY TOM WARD** **17/05/2017**

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You are feeling sleepy. Very, very sleepy. No one, you will be relieved to hear, has whispered these words into my ear since I decided to give myself over to regular hypnosis some two months ago. In fact, in many ways, the actual process of being hypnotised has been one of the most banal aspects of my journey. No one has swung a pocket watch before me, it has not been suggested that I start squawking like a chicken, and I'm yet to be invited to stare heavy-lidded into someone's eyes. But still, something has undoubtedly shifted inside my mind. And it is quite clear, to myself at least, that I'm no longer the person I used to be.

Allow me to explain. Not so very long ago, live hypnotism shows were a popular way of escaping the late-July rain in coastal towns up and down the British Isles. Then, with the advent of budget short-haul flights and last-minute package deals, mesmerism as entertainment lost its lustre. Fast forward a couple of decades, however, and hypnosis is back in the room – only this time it's being taken seriously.

Witnesses to the power of hypnosis are many. Kobe Bryant was routinely hypnotised before every match until his retirement, while Tiger Woods credited it with rediscovering his powers of concentration. Matt Damon recently admitted turning to hypnosis in order to kick a two-pack-a-day smoking habit. At the less fabulous end of the social spectrum, London's Harley Street houses a growing cabal of hypnotherapists, while hypnotherapy has become increasingly available to NHS patients. The purported benefits are manifold – hypnosis has been said to manage pain, enhance recovery, quash addictions, suppress IBS, relieve anxiety and boost confidence. Whether or not it can help secure a pay rise is unclear, but the odds appear stacked in its favour.

Not being the type to take things lying down, my editor tasked me with finding out whether hypnotism has firsthand legitimacy. Visit the lot, he said, from private practitioner to TV conjurer, and find out whether there's anything in it. And that is how I found myself visiting four hypnotherapists over the course of eight weeks in an attempt to cure my own particular complaint: glossophobia.

## Suggested Development

The fear of public speaking – 'glossa' is Greek for 'tongue' – is estimated to affect 75% of the UK public. For sufferers, the symptoms are very real – one survey of common fears found it rated consistently higher than death. A few years ago, I was to give a speech in front of a large room including a film director I admired. I was so nervous I cut my speech down to three lines and invented the word "studention" when I'd meant to say "student". The director stopped me on my way back to my seat to tell me he'd enjoyed the speech, chiefly for its brevity. Naturally, I've since retreated at full speed from any occasion that might require me to clear my throat in public.

To develop a brass neck through hypnosis, then, would be my aim. But before submitting to the dubious power of trance, I ask Rowland Manthorpe, co-author of the assuredly-titled book Confidence to shine a light on what being confident means. Manthorpe believes that to some degree, confidence – or a lack thereof – is self-perpetuating. "There's a theory that the people who are happier to speak in front of a group believe they have 'the right to voice' – in other words, you'll never speak well unless you believe you should be speaking," he says. "Ironically, the more you think about confidence, the more self-confident you become." I resolve to break this cycle as I head out to meet my first practitioner.

From self-taught beginnings, Rory Z now travels the world as an "international stage/street hypnotist" and a member of Hypno Bros. It is with some apprehension that I meet Rory at London's plush Royal Horseguards Hotel on a sunny summer evening. I needn't have worried. In town for a conference before heading off to perform in Las Vegas, Rory is softly spoken, wears a 'Keep Calm and Keep Hypnotising' T-shirt and bears a red tattoo reading 'Freak' on the inside of his wrist. We sit facing each other on high-backed chairs in an empty conference room. The British Society of Clinical

Hypnosis estimates that 85% of us will respond to hypnosis, so I'm hoping for the best. "Some people are naturally more suggestible than others," Rory says. "But the human mind is highly powerful."

There are many scientists who would agree. Recent research by Stanford University suggests that hypnosis has a profound effect on the brain. According to study leader David Spiegel, professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences, hypnosis is well on its way to becoming "a very powerful means of changing the way we use our minds to control perception and our bodies". Meanwhile, Avy Joseph, a fellow of the National Hypnotherapy Society, tells me that, "hypnotherapy has a proven track record in dentistry, pain management, phobias and skin conditions".

I explain to Rory that my complaint is slightly less serious. He nods, then, out of nowhere, claps me on the shoulder and shouts, "Relax". Strangely, I do. Then he starts speaking softly, telling me to focus on each part of my body, his voice drifting in and out. He tells me to picture myself standing at the top of a flight of 10 stairs, with each step I take making me 10% more relaxed. I then have to picture my "happy place". Lacking imagination, I visualise Ed Norton's ice cave from Fight Club. "Beyond this room," Rory's voice continues, "is a second room full of levers and dials, where you can control any part of your mind." I go into this room and look around. Rory tells me that the relaxation dial is set too low, while the anxiety lever is too high. I adjust them accordingly. I then return to my happy place where I picture a glowing, yellow ball of confidence in my chest, which I can access by squeezing my thumb and forefinger together whenever I want.

Rory wakes me up and asks me how I feel. I tell him I feel very relaxed. Strangely buoyant, I leave and resolve to put Rory's advice to work on Monday morning, in a staff meeting. A tense affair, the daily conference is an introvert's natural enemy. I try Rory's advice, pressing my fingers together, trying to find the glowing ball of confidence, but this feels puerile, so I abandon it and focus on saying something intelligent. By the time I've decided on my point, the meeting is over.

## Circuit Training

At Rory's introduction, I make an appointment to see Dr Kate Beaven-Marks, an academic who balances research with work on hospital wards, hypnotising patients with conditions ranging from pre-surgery anxiety to needle phobia. We meet at London's salubrious Royal Society of Medicine. In person Beaven-Marks is warm and talkative, which makes telling her my woes all the easier. Like Rory, she says that the aim will be to re-programme how I react to given situations. "For every event, our brain has a neural pathway it uses to carry out its response," she says. "But we can change this response by consciously opening up new pathways – or new ways of doing things – which in time become our 'go to', while the old route fades away."

The links to psychology are clear, but she stresses that hypnosis and traditional cognitive therapies occupy separate ends of the spectrum. “Psychology comes from the disease model, meaning practitioners approach a problem with a view to curing it. Hypnotherapy is based on behavioural psychology, but is more about alleviating symptoms and wellbeing enhancement.” Beaven-Marks has spent five years working alongside the NHS, where hypnotherapy sits next to reflexology and aromatherapy as a supplementary treatment to relieve high blood pressure, pain and stress. At present, however, it is not prescribed. A doctor may mention it is available, but a patient must put themselves forward for treatment. As for my hypnosis, Beaven-Marks asks me to close my eyes and, after some deep-breathing exercises, takes my mind down the familiar staircase, into the happy place and beyond to the switch room. Kate’s qualifications give me confidence, and I certainly feel relaxed, but if all hypnotists practise the same method, I’m left wondering just how tailored – and therefore useful – treatment can be.

As the session closes, she gives me a list of breathing exercises, as well as a mental exercise. “When you imagine giving a speech, instead of picturing all the ways it can go wrong, the key is to picture all the ways it can go right,” she says. “Things might not go to plan, but if you think about that in advance then you won’t be thrown off guard when it happens, and you’ll know you can move past it.”

I keep this in mind as I arrive at a small tech start-up in east London where I’ve been invited to speak on the ways in which technology impacts journalism. I stand in front of a room of 20 or so programmers and start talking. Words tumble out and I’m certain that as long as I keep going I’ll chance upon something they want to listen to. It’s a quantitative rather than qualitative approach to public speaking, but miraculously, the audience seems engaged and a few even hang around to ask follow-up questions. I’m not sure it’s what Beaven-Marks had in mind, but a mix of the confidence her mental exercise instilled and my own nervous energy means the event isn’t quite the failure I’d been dreading.

## Communication Breakdown

It becomes clear that if hypnosis is to help my personal as well as professional life, I must brave the fire, speaking publicly not as a journalist, but as a person.

In order to open myself up, I decide to go private and make an appointment with Aaron Surtees, a former Harley Street hypnotherapist who now runs the City Hypnosis clinic near Chancery Lane. Surtees – a broad man, with a warm, low voice – tells me that daily meditation at school began his fascination with the mind. A degree in psychology and sociology followed and he’s been refining his hypnotherapy technique ever since.

However, the problem is that despite being recognised by the NHS, hypnotherapy is not, as yet, government-regulated. Legally, anyone can call themselves a hypnotherapist. How, then, I ask Surtees, does the average punter make sure he isn't being short-changed?

"Look at a therapist's website and the reviews people have left," he offers. "You'd realise pretty quickly if someone was lying about their experience."

I'm not sure you would, I suggest. And who's to say whether the authors of the reviews can be trusted? He points to the General Hypnotherapy Register, an unofficial governing body listing recommended hypnotherapy training schools. There are 17 in London alone. The problem of regulation is a question I'd previously put to Avy Joseph. "People can become qualified hypnotherapists in days and the differences in the quality of training is vast," he warns. "But there are a few universities that teach hypnotherapy, including UCL, so always be thorough in your research." Much like an under-qualified personal trainer, a session with a hypnotic cowboy could do more harm than good.

My session with Surtees begins with me wearing headphones while he speaks into a microphone. It's the same old routine, only this time there's a lift instead of stairs. If the hypnotists I've seen aren't all reading from the same songbook, they're at least turning the pages in the same order. I resurface some time later. I've either been under so deeply I wasn't aware of time passing, or I've been asleep. That evening I try my public speaking again, at a small gathering of friends to celebrate the release of a book I've written. I think back to my session with Surtees for help, but my mind goes blank and the speech sputters out before it properly begins.

## Subconscious Effort

Nearing the end of my tether, I decide what's needed is a well-regarded expert with proven, life-long experience in hypnosis. I find this not in a clinic or university, but on the stage. After starting out on the club circuit, Paul McKenna re-branded as a self-help guru. Despite showing initial interest McKenna's people stopped returning my emails, so, instead, I opt for a man who trained McKenna, Andrew Newton. Newton is, he assures me, a big deal in New Zealand, and his website declares him "The World's Most Experienced Hypnotist". We meet in London. Newton – garbed in the uniform of the weathered entertainer: black shirt, open collar – fills me in on how an amateur interest in psychology led him into a lucrative hypnotism career. The switch from stage to treatment came when a TV series on hypnosis gave the game away, simultaneously curing people of the need to go and see it for themselves and forcing working stage performers to diversify or die. Three hypnotists down, I have my doubts.

We begin with basic exercises. I'm told to slouch and attempt to smile. I can't. I'm asked to do the opposite, standing tall with shoulders back while feeling sad, and I can't do that either. It's a simple lesson, but an important one. From now on, Newton tells me, I'll enter meeting rooms with perfect posture and (yet again) a glowing, yellow ball of confidence in my chest. The familiarities continue when it's time to be hypnotised, but instead of descending a staircase, I'm watching the lights turn off in a tower block as I sink into relaxation. Andrew then proceeds to tell me – in different ways – that I will be perfectly fine next time I have to speak in public. Later, it's the posture advice that sticks in my mind.

That weekend I'm invited to speak on a radio station about my book. I'll be doing it over the phone, but the idea is still daunting. I practise Beaven-Marks' breathing exercises and picture it going well, then just before the phone rings I use Newton's advice and straighten my posture and smile. My mood instantly changes and the interview goes without a hitch. "That was good," the producer says off air. "You should do that more often."

Having entered the world of hypnotherapy with an open mind, I've quickly come to the conclusion that the idea of being put to sleep, before waking up cured of the urge to smoke or eat profiteroles, is a fiction. But while the focus on positives and standing tall sounds like common sense, under hypnosis and without distraction I was able to see their worth. "Hypnotherapy helps to bypass the 'conscious critical factor' of our minds," says Rory via email from Las Vegas. "We more easily accept positive suggestions and act upon them, rather than thinking about all the reasons for them not to work." Or, as Stanford's Dr Spiegel puts it: "In hypnosis, you're so absorbed you're not worrying about anything else."

Reassuringly, it is Beaven-Marks' method – the NHS-sanctioned one – that has a lasting effect on my own condition. But it is the application of hypnotherapy to more serious problems that is most interesting. Spiegel suggests being able to dampen our ability to feel pain will have major medical applications, but it may be a long wait before hypnotherapy is widely accepted – or even understood. For now, as our collective appetite for wellness grows, we might all benefit from the ability to relax and listen to someone telling us that, whatever our hang-up, there is a solution. Even if it is all in the mind.

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