

# Unleash the mind-altering power of fantasy

**By Ruth Ostrow**

FOR years I have been practising a technique for getting my hormones and chemicals moving that I thought was unique, only to discover that my private motivational tool has been the subject of much scientific exploration over the decades.

Whenever I have felt down or depressed I've gone into a sort of daydream and created a situation which immediately seemed to change my physiology, either inventing a challenging scenario which has amped up adrenalin, or a pleasurable one.

The other day I had a chance to see the direct impact of my thinking. While standing on a treadmill, my gym instructor got me to hold some fancy device in my hand that he claimed would register heart-rate. He said I had to maintain a certain level in order to get fit.

Not happy with the rate I was achieving, he told me to walk faster and try to get the rate up to a number he recommended. I was too tired to go faster and decided to test the power of my mind instead. Shutting my eyes, I thought of a wickedly enjoyable situation. I felt myself flush and my heart-rate rise a little. But I was absolutely amazed to hear the instructor's voice: ``Yes. That's it, wow! Keep going, your heart-rate has leapt right up. Great."''

When I was a sex and relationships writer and radio broadcaster, I spoke to several experts on the subject of the power of the mind.

The academics and psychologists I interviewed for a 1999 feature were unanimous in their belief that when we fantasise, we go into a hypnotic state that triggers memory and leads to arousal. If it is a sexual fantasy then the arousal is sexual; if it is of being eaten by a lion, then the physiological reaction is fight-or-flight. So powerful is the mind, that it can even override physical deficiency.

Apparently, there has been interesting research done in recent years which has shown that women with spinal cord injuries can still create feelings of sexual desire by using their minds and imaginations.

One biochemist explained that the mind often cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality, therefore certain thoughts trigger the same chemical reactions we have to real events. Sexual or romantic fantasy helps flood the bloodstream with opiates which produce a euphoric effect and amphetamines which act like the drug Speed. Our fantasies can give us very real feelings and can be quite addictive.

They are also arguably part of nature's plan to dose us up with extra feel-good hormones -- those wonderful rose-coloured glasses we humans seem to need to get us down the aisle and procreating.

So too with other forms of fantasy. Thinking of someone who makes us angry will certainly make the blood boil. But by using this technique, I was able to turn my body into a ball of adrenalin which provided me with superhuman power and strength during a recent kick-box class.

Later I noticed the sweat I produced actually smelled quite different, more acrid, which my gym instructor explained was the scent of fear and anger.

It isn't just imagined ``emotions'', rather all sorts of thoughts and visualisations, that can aid performance. Sports coaches have been using mind control for years. I recently heard a story about a trainer who was working with swimmers who couldn't get up to speed. He asked them to shut their eyes and visualise their feet and hands as big flippers. The results were apparently quite stunning with the swimmers surpassing their best records.

Meanwhile, there is a clear correlation between muscle and mind. A friend who teaches yoga says she always gets her students to sit with their legs out and try to touch their toes. Then she gets them to lie back and imagine themselves going further than they ever believed possible. When they return to do the exercise a second time, with the visualisation in their heads, they all extend beyond their original limits. This is how she teaches them that the greatest muscle to exercise is the human brain.

Using this premise, it is obvious to see how important mind is to total health. As the cliché goes: ``We are what we think''.

But perhaps more important is to be aware of how much damage we can do to our bodies each day when we unknowingly think negative, fearful, or angry thoughts which deplete our adrenal glands and organs, and demeaning thoughts which trigger stress reactions and lower immunity.

Latest research on meditating monks shows that when we think compassionate, loving and calming thoughts we can settle the heart-rate, create feel-good hormones, and oxygenate the bloodstream. All of which leads to increased wellbeing. With this being my last column for 2004, I can't conceive of a more perfect way to say: ``Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year'' than to remind all my valued readers to think in a way that makes their lives more blissful. Joy is the best health tonic.

Ruth Ostrow's latest book *The Gift* is available at all leading bookstores (Hardie Grant publishers \$19.95)

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