



## Introduction

Do you want to improve an important aspect of your life? Perhaps lose weight, find your perfect partner, obtain your dream job, or simply be happier? Try this simple exercise....

Close your eyes and imagine the new you. Think how great you would look in those close fitting designer jeans, dating Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie, sitting in a luxurious leather chair at the top of the corporate ladder, or sipping a Pina Colada as the warm waves of the Caribbean gently lap at your feet.

The good news is that this type of exercise has been recommended by some in the self-industry for years. The bad news is that a large body of research now suggests that such exercises are, at best, ineffective, and at worst, harmful. Although asking you to imagine your perfect self may make you feel better, engaging in such mental escapism can also have the unfortunate side effect of leaving you unprepared for the difficulties that crop up on the rocky road to success, thus increasing the chances of you faltering at the first hurdle rather than persisting in the face of failure. Fantasizing about heaven on earth may put a smile on your face, but is unlikely to help transform your dreams into reality.

Other research suggests that the same goes for many popular techniques that claim to improve your life. Attempting to 'think yourself happy' by suppressing negative thoughts can make people obsess on the very thing that makes them unhappy. Group brainstorming can produce fewer and less original ideas than individuals working alone. Punching a pillow and screaming out loud can increase, rather than decrease, your anger and stress levels.

Then there is the infamous 'Yale Goal Study'. According to some writers, in 1953 a team of researchers interviewed Yale's graduating seniors, asking them whether they had written down the specific goals that they wanted to achieve in life. Twenty years later the researchers tracked down the same cohort and found that the 3% of people who had specific goals all those years before had accumulated more personal wealth than the other 97% of their classmates combined. It is a great story, and frequently cited in self-help books and seminars to illustrate the power of goal-setting. There is just one small problem – as far as anyone can tell, the experiment never actually took place. In 2007, writer Lawrence Tabak from the magazine Fast Company attempted to track down the study, contacting several writers who had cited it, the secretary of the Yale Class of 1953, and other researchers who had attempted to discover whether the study had actually happened. No one could produce any evidence that it had ever been conducted, causing Tabak to conclude that it was almost certainly nothing more than an urban myth. For years, self-help gurus had been happy to describe a study apparently without checking their facts.

Both the public and business world has bought into modern-day mind myths for years and, in so doing, may have significantly decreased the likelihood of achieving their aims and ambitions. Worse still, such failure often encourages people to believe that they cannot control their lives. This is especially unfortunate, as even the smallest loss of perceived control can have a dramatic affect on people's confidence, happiness, and lifespan. In one classic study conducted by Ellen Langer at Harvard University, half of the residents in a nursing home were given a houseplant and asked to look after it, while the other residents were given an identical plant but told that the staff would take responsibility for it. Six months later, the residents who had been robbed of even this small amount of control over their lives were significantly less happy, healthy, and active than the others. Even more distressing, 30% of residents who had not looked after their plant had died, compared to 15% of those who had been allowed to exercise such control. Similar results have been found in many areas, including education, career, health, relationships, and dieting. The message is clear – those who do not feel in control of their lives are less successful, and less psychologically and physically healthy, than those who do feel in control.

A few years ago I was having lunch with a friend called Sophie. Sophie is a bright, successful, thirty-something who holds a senior position in a firm of management consultants. Over lunch, Sophie explained that she had recently bought a well-known book on increasing happiness, and asked me what I thought of the industry. I explained that I had serious reservations about the scientific backing for some of the techniques being promoted, and described how any failure to change could do considerable psychological harm. Sophie looked concerned, and then asked whether academic psychology had produced more scientifically-supported ways of improving people's lives. I started to describe some of the quite complex academic work into happiness, and after about fifteen minutes or so Sophie stopped me. She politely explained that, interesting though it was, she was a busy person and asked whether I could come up with some effective advice that didn't take up quite so much time to implement. I asked how long I had. Sophie glanced at her watch, smiled, and replied 'About a minute?'

Sophie's comment made me stop and think. Many people are attracted to self-development and improvement because it offers quick and easy solutions to various issues in their lives. Unfortunately, most academic psychology either fails to address these issues or presents far more time-consuming and complex answers (thus the scene in Woody Allen's film 'Sleeper', where Allen's character discovers that he has woken up 200 years in the future, sighs, and explains that had he been in therapy all this time he'd almost be cured). I wondered whether there were tips and techniques hidden away in academic journals that were empirically supported but quick to carry out.

Over the course of a few months I carefully searched through endless journals containing research papers from many different areas of psychology. As I examined the work, a promising pattern emerged, with researchers working in quite different fields developing techniques that help people achieve their aims and ambitions in minutes not months. I collected together hundreds of these studies drawn from many different areas of the behavioural sciences.

From mood to memory, persuasion to procrastination, resilience to relationships, together they represent a new science of rapid change.

There is a very old story, often told to fill time during training courses, involving a man trying to fix his broken boiler. Despite his best efforts over many months, he simply can't mend it. Eventually, he gives in and decides to call in an expert repair man. The engineer arrives, gives one gentle tap on the side of the boiler, and stands back as it erupts into life. The engineer presents the man with a bill, and the man argues that he should only pay a small fee as the job only took the engineer a few moments. The engineer quietly explains that the man is not paying for the time he took to tap the boiler, but rather the years of experience involved in knowing exactly where to tap. Just like the expert engineer tapping the boiler, the techniques described in this book demonstrate that effective change does not have to be time consuming. In fact, it can take less than a minute and is often simply a question of knowing exactly where to tap.