

LIVE healthy

↑
Think through
those laps
and shave
seconds off
your time.

Picture Yourself Healthier

Forget “No pain, no gain.”
Scientists are proving that
simply visualizing what you
want can help make it a reality.

By JUNO DEMELO



LET'S GET ONE THING OUT

of the way: No, fantasizing about David Beckham isn't going to make him appear at your door. But imagining yourself sculpting sexy arms might just lead to definitive results. "Psychologists have known for decades that the images you create in your mind can have a potent effect on your body; now researchers are proving it," says Traci Stein, PhD, a clinical psychologist and adjunct professor at Columbia University's Teachers College in New York City.

It sounds woo-woo, yet mounting evidence shows that visualization really works. For example, Cleveland Clinic scientists discovered that people who performed "mental contractions" of the abductor muscle in their little finger over the course of 12 weeks increased its strength by 35 percent—

not far from the boost in strength experienced by people who did actual little-finger exercises (53 percent).

"Visualization activates the same neural networks that actual task performance does, which can strengthen the connection between brain and body," explains neuroscientist Stephen Kosslyn, PhD, author of *Top Brain, Bottom Brain*. Indeed, an MRI study in *The Journal of Neuroscience* found that whether people performed physical finger exercises or just imagined doing them, activity shot up in the part of their brain where nerve pulses initiate muscle movement.

"There's no question that this mental processing results in real-life improvement," adds Kosslyn. Case in point: Soccer star Carli Lloyd credits visualization for her hat trick—that's three goals in a row—16 minutes into last year's World Cup final.

Besides helping you hit your targets, visualization has been linked to better sleep, less inflammation and lower blood pressure and stress levels. Sold?

Here are a few easy ways you can use this Jedi mind trick to achieve almost anything you want.



Imagine eating healthier

And do it in detail: People who vowed to up their intake of fruit and pictured every step of the process—seeing an apple, reaching for it, smelling it and then biting into and chewing it—were twice as successful as folks who envisioned only the eating part, according to a McGill University study. The technical term for this strategy is *process imagery*. "It results in better planning, which in turn results in higher goal achievement," says the

study's lead researcher, Bärbel Knäuper, PhD. Turns out, a blow-by-blow mental rehearsal better preps you to take action in real life.



See yourself getting in awesome shape

Research shows that "motivational general-mastery imagery"—in which you imagine yourself conquering that huge hill or kicking ass during the bike portion of your upcoming tri—may help you push your limits and thus get fitter. "This kind of positive visualization lets you eliminate nerves and self-doubt," explains Margaret Ottley, PhD, professor of sport and exercise psychology at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Use it to tack an extra mile onto your run by picturing yourself sailing past your usual turnoff point.

Take a minute to picture yourself stronger and smarter.
→



Envision landing a promotion

Before you knock on your boss's door, see yourself confidently asking for a raise while making eye contact and sitting up tall. If you're not quite there yet, "imagine how someone super confident—whether that's Oprah, Beyoncé or your fifth-grade teacher—would say it, then work toward channeling her poise," suggests Stein.



Picture yourself stronger

"Building physical strength is more than just accumulating muscle mass," says Brian Clark, PhD, professor of physiology and neuroscience at Ohio

University. "Visualization enhances neural pathways in your brain so it's easier for your nervous system to activate those muscles in real life." Clark studied volunteers who wore an elbow-to-finger cast for four weeks. Half of those people did a mental wrist workout (they visualized themselves flexing their wrist muscles) five days a week. The other half did nothing. At the end of the study, the folks in the first group had lost 50 percent less strength. Next time

you're at the gym, try using your breaks between sets to imagine yourself clenching your butt in a glute bridge or tightening your abs in a plank twist.



Visualize keeping calm

Say you feel annoyed every time you're forced to interact with a certain neighbor or co-worker. You've probably been trying not to dwell on those exchanges. But do the opposite: Picture your last encounter and fully immerse yourself in the

scenario. The idea is to elicit the same nervous system responses that accompanied your real-life angst. In your mind, see, smell and hear all your usual triggers—from her perfume to the sound of her condescending snicker—while (this is key!) breathing deeply into your belly. This trick can help retrain your body to keep its cool, says Stein, so that when you run into her in person, your blood pressure will barely budge. ■

→ See that? It's you, healthier than ever.

3 Mind Trick Mistakes

These seemingly helpful moves can really backfire.

1

FANTASIZING

► Pinning pictures of celebrity dream bodies can make your personal goals seem less attainable, a Dutch study suggested. Break out of la-la land: Forget your vision board and make an action board instead, advises Neil Farber, MD, author of *The Blame Game*. Write down your goal and why it's important to you, give yourself a deadline and break the journey down into manageable steps. Celebrate as you accomplish each one and be your own #fitspo!

2

TRYING SUPER-TOUGH LOVE

► Instead of coming down hard on yourself for skipping kickboxing, focus on what you *have* achieved that day, even if it was "just" passing up the bagels in the break room. A 2014 meta-analysis in the journal *Health Psychology* linked self-compassion—taking an accepting stance toward yourself when you're derailed by temptation, distraction or failure—to health-promoting behaviors, such as exercise and a good diet.

3

BEING WAY OPTIMISTIC

► It's great to aim high, but ignoring the hurdles between you and your goals can trip you up, says Gabriele Oettingen, PhD, author of *Rethinking Positive Thinking*. Pollyannas may want to try the WOOP (wish, outcome, obstacle, plan) strategy: Specify what you want, visualize the best result, identify barriers, then figure out how to overcome them. And, yes, there's an app for this (available for free on iTunes and Google Play).

SIMPLE STEPS, HUGE RESULTS!

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