

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Breathe Easy

Dr David Lewis

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Breathe Easy

De-stress, build confidence and focus your
mind in seven days

Dr David Lewis



*Dedication: To Ricky and Liz in grateful appreciation of
all their help and encouragement in the writing of this book.*

Introduction

'Everyone has a will to win, but very few have a will to prepare.'

VINCE LOMBARDI – THE US FOOTBALL
COACH AFTER WHOM THE SUPERBOWL
TROPHY IS NAMED.

This is a practical book designed to serve a practical purpose. It has been written to assist you in achieving your goals by ensuring that, whatever the challenge, you will be able to function at the peak of your mental and physical potential.

Over recent years, sports psychology – pioneered with great success in the USA and former Soviet Union – is increasingly becoming recognized as a vital component of every serious athlete's training programme. More recently many of the procedures that have enabled athletes constantly to improve their personal best performances have been introduced into the workplace. This book explains why such procedures work, how to carry them out and what they can do to help you achieve your own personal best in any activity you attempt. Its goal is to help you become the person you want and deserve to be.

For more than twenty years I have been fascinated by similarities between the demands of sporting success and achievement in the world of work. Each demands intense focus and self-discipline, as well as courage, confidence and persistence in the face of frustrations and setbacks. In my research I have worked with élite athletes as well as executives and employees at all levels from major multinational companies. In the laboratory I have used specialist bio-monitoring equipment to study exactly what is going on in brain and body when people are confronted by a

personal or professional challenge. I have also been consulted by a wide range of private clients eager to achieve their true potential in life and unable to understand exactly what is preventing them from doing so. You can read some of their stories in Chapters One and Two. (Incidentally, as is customary when using case histories, all the names of my clients, as well as some minor personal details, have been changed in order to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.) In training workshops around the world I have helped participants achieve their personal best in activities ranging from managing multinational companies to their speed in athletics championships.

Some fifteen years ago I published the initial findings of my research in a book entitled *The Alpha Plan*, which formed the basis of many of my subsequent training programmes. It was also the subject of a BBC TV documentary in which four of my clients - including the programme's presenter - underwent training to overcome a variety of seemingly minor, but to them intensely frustrating, barriers to their future development. All did well and their eventual triumphs, which ranged from overcoming social anxiety to improving times in a cycle race, were duly recorded on film.

Since then I have continued with my research and training programmes, both in the UK and continental Europe, aimed at exploring and harnessing the power of the human breath to influence performance via its effects on electrical activity in the brain. The results, tailored to a home-based, easily followed training programme, are presented for the first time in *Breathe Easy*. It will show you how to ensure that every important activity you undertake in life, from playing a sport, attending a job interview or closing a multi-million dollar deal, is performed at the peak of your mental and physical potential. The training is based on three key findings:

1. A failure to realize our true potential is often due to barriers arising below our level of normal conscious awareness in a more ancient region of the brain known as the limbic system. This area of the brain, and the powerful influence it exerts over our thoughts and behaviour, will be fully described in Chapter Five.
2. These barriers cannot usually be removed by means of encouraging words, rational arguments or logical reasoning. This is because the limbic system cannot understand or respond to verbal instructions from the higher regions of the brain. Its language consists not of words but of vivid images, sounds, aromas and other physical sensations.
3. As these barriers originated in subtle changes to our rate or depth of breathing they can only be eliminated by learning new ways of breathing – patterns of breathwork that create a state of mind in which the limbic system is maximally receptive to new commands.

It is through the breath that these emotional barriers to achievement first arose and through the breath that they may be eliminated. For this reason I have termed the method by which this process occurs **BOTAU** or **B**reath **O**ptimized **T**ransactional **U**nlocking.

In the training programme that comprises Part Two of this book you will find six procedures for improving all aspects of performance, from reducing stress and enhancing concentration to removing emotional barriers to success. By selecting the one best suited to your current needs and practising for a few minutes each day you will be able to eliminate subconscious barriers to progress and achieve all that lies within your power to accomplish.

David Lewis,
Les Genet,
Var, France

Part One

NEW MIND – NEW BODY

If the human mind knew half as much as the human brain we would be twice as smart and ten times more successful.

CHAPTER ONE

How to be all you want to be

'To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life.'

*ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON (1850-
1894)*

I AM SITTING in my consulting room with a client named Jason and watching three coloured lines moving across the computer screen before me.

The first line is blue and traces a rhythmic pattern of hills and valleys representing the slow, deep rise and fall of his breathing. This information is being transmitted to the computer via two transducers that measure changes in the tension of broad elastic straps passing around Jason's chest and fastened behind his back.

The second line on my monitor is red and shows variations in the level of Jason's physiological arousal. Two small electrodes, each approximately a centimetre in diameter, are attached to his left palm and measure electrical resistance within his body. As he relaxes more and more deeply this resistance significantly increases. Conversely the more anxious or agitated he becomes the less resistance there is to the electric current. While the red line on my monitor continues to rise, I know that Jason's relaxation is deepening. If, however, it should start to drop steeply that would alert me to the fact he is becoming far more physically tense. The faster the line drops the more rapidly his anxiety would be increasing.

The third line on the screen, a green one, indicates electrical activity within Jason's brain. This EEG signal (Electroencephalogram) is being monitored by a series of electrodes attached to his skull through parted hair. These are measuring just a few millionths of a volt across a range of frequencies from very slow, so-called, Delta waves, to much faster Beta waves ranging from fewer than 4 cycles per second up to 35 or more.

I shall have much more to say about these brain waves in Chapter Eight but for the moment just note that brain waves with a frequency of between 8 and 14 cycles per second, called Alpha waves, dominate the EEG of people whose mental state is one of relaxed alertness.

At the moment we have joined Jason's therapy session, he is lying back in a comfortable chair with his eyes closed and, guided by my words, developing a vivid sensualization in his mind's eye. 'Sensualizing' is the name I give to a very special procedure for developing what amounts to a virtual reality world behind the eyes. Unlike a visualization, in which you merely seek to picture events, this procedure incorporates information from all five senses.

In his virtual-reality world Jason is walking across the golden sands of a beautiful tropical island he has learned to make his own private and personal paradise. It is a serene place where he feels secure and relaxed. Although it exists only in his own mind this island has become, during six treatment sessions, as vividly real as any other place he has visited on earth.

With his eyes closed Jason clearly *sees* himself on the sun-drenched beach and *hears* the surf gently breaking on the fine, golden sands. He *feels* the beach warm beneath his bare feet and the sun at his back. He *smells* the sweetly scented tropical flowers along the edge of the palm-fringed foreshore. When he swims in the crystal clear waters he *senses* its coolness around his body, as well as the

movements his muscles make while propelling him through the shimmering ocean.

As Jason lies back and becomes more and more completely absorbed by this sensualization all my instruments show him to be very deeply relaxed. The blue line tells me that his rate of breathing has come down from around eighteen breaths per minute to fewer than four breaths per minute. And from being light and shallow when he had entered the consulting room some ten minutes earlier, his breathing is now heavy and deep, with each inhalation drawing the air down into the lower lobes of his lungs and every exhalation expelling almost all the stale air. The red line is showing a state of almost complete physical relaxation. There is little or no unnecessary stress or tension in any of his more than 600 muscles. The green line of his EEG shows a brain in which the slowly moving Alpha waves predominate.

Like many busy, successful and ambitious men and women, such deep mental and physical relaxation is not something with which Jason has been very familiar. In his high-pressure career as marketing director for a rapidly expanding IT company, every day passes in a frenetic rush to keep deadlines, attend meetings and deliver on time. His working life includes almost constant travel combined with long hours behind a computer in order to keep ahead of the game in a relentlessly competitive global industry.

At thirty-nine Jason is an extremely fit man. Always a sports enthusiast he ran for his university and still works out three times a week in a gym, swims fifty lengths of his local swimming pool most weekends and rides a mountain bike whenever he gets the chance - which is why the sudden onset of panic attacks so profoundly unnerved him.

The first time it happened, immediately before he rose to present some crucial proposals to a group of investors, Jason believed himself to be having a heart attack. He could feel his heart pounding relentlessly and unevenly in his

chest. He broke out into such a sweat that the fluid poured from his face and soaked his shirt. He felt giddy and believed he was on the point of fainting. His breathing became so tight and painful that he thought he was about to suffocate. Pale and trembling he stumbled from the conference room and just made it to the lavatory before passing out. The next thing he remembers is the blaring of an ambulance siren as he was rushed into a hospital emergency room. But by the time he got there he felt perfectly all right again and the cardiologist could find nothing wrong with his heart. Deeply embarrassed and feeling a complete fraud, Jason returned to his office and put it down to food poisoning.

When the same thing happened on two further occasions, both times immediately before he was due to make an important presentation, Jason checked himself into a private clinic for a series of tests. After the doctors had finished their investigations and reviewed the results they told him there was nothing physically the matter. He was suffering from intense anxiety leading to panic attacks at the prospect of having to speak in public, a condition known as lalophobia.

At first Jason flatly refused to accept the diagnosis. It seemed inconceivable to him that anyone so physically and - as he believed himself to be - mentally stable could fall victim to anything which seemed tainted by what he regarded as the stigma of mental illness. It took two more attacks, the last one occurring as he was actually rising to deliver a rousing message to 500 employees at his company's annual conference, before Jason was prepared to accept that his difficulties had a psychological rather than a physical basis. This brings us back to his seventh session in my consulting rooms and the reason why he was wired up to my bio-monitoring equipment.

For the past six sessions I had concentrated on assisting Jason to relax deeply. Today I intended to move the

treatment one step further forward and begin exploring exactly what was going on when he prepared to speak in public. For this I began to guide him through a different sensualization. Now, instead of the tranquil tropical island, I asked him to imagine he was about to make a brief presentation on a very familiar topic to a small group of friendly colleagues. I started in this very modest and, hopefully, only mildly threatening way in order to identify at what point he would start to become fearful. Almost as soon as he started sensualizing the scene, however, my instruments told me that Jason was growing anxious.

On my computer screen I observed three things happening almost, but not quite, simultaneously. First, and the sequence of events is important, his rate of breathing slightly and subtly altered. The smoothly flowing hills and valleys of each inhalation and exhalation suddenly became steeper and closer until they resembled a zigzag range of jagged mountain peaks. This clearly told me that his breathing was becoming faster, shallower and more erratic. Almost immediately after his breathing altered, the thin red line monitoring Jason's physiological arousal dived towards the bottom of the screen showing rapidly increasing anxiety. Finally, the output of Alpha waves yielded ground to faster Beta frequencies, indicating growing mental agitation. All this happened less than three seconds after he 'sensualized' public speaking.

Yet when I asked Jason how he was feeling, he replied that he was reasonably calm and perfectly capable of handling the impending challenge. Clearly his unconscious mind knew something of which his conscious brain was unaware. Not until almost 30 seconds had passed, during which his breathing became even more rapid, erratic and shallow while his physical and mental arousal soared, did Jason report the sensation of a rising tide of panic. He abruptly opened his eyes and blurted: 'It's no good. I'm sorry. I simply can't deal with this. I can feel my heart racing, my

mouth has gone dry and all I could think of was to escape from the situation.'

I'll be returning to Jason and the reasons why he developed a public-speaking phobia in Chapter Two. For the moment let's just recap on the sequence of events within his mind and body immediately prior to his overwhelming sensation of total panic.

First the pattern of his breathing changed, only slightly at first but still enough to trigger subtle changes in the chemical composition of his blood. By removing more carbon dioxide from his bloodstream the rapid breathing stimulated his nervous system, so increasing physical arousal. This occurred as the 'fight or flight' response - a primitive and powerful survival mechanism - triggering a region of his brain called the limbic system. I shall be describing the crucial role of this primitive region of the brain in influencing performance in Chapter Five. Finally his brain waves altered from the relaxed but alert Alpha state to one dominated by the fast moving Beta frequencies associated with mental agitation. Note, however, that all this happened below his level of conscious awareness. Even after body and brain had switched into a 'prepare to panic' mode, the conscious part of Jason's mind remained reasonably cool, calm and confident. It was as if a householder were watching TV, blissfully ignorant of a fire gathering strength in his basement and about to burst through the floorboards beneath his feet!

The point I want to emphasise here is that Jason's *breathing* was the first thing to change and that it was this change that triggered the chain reaction that led to panic. This is not, of course, the way we normally view the sequence of events during any form of powerful emotional upset. Whether starting to get anxious or angry, we regard our conscious awareness of that emotion as a trigger for the other changes - rapidly beating heart, dry mouth, churning stomach, unsteady breathing and so forth - that

immediately follow. In other words we usually consider the sequence of events to occur as follows:

1. An awareness of rising emotion. We think 'I'm getting scared' or 'I'm beginning to feel annoyed'.
2. We become aware of increased mental and physical arousal. We notice our heart starting to beat faster, our muscles tightening, our mouth becoming dry and the air pumping in and out of our lungs more rapidly.
3. We stand and fight or turn and flee.

This seems such a common-sense chain of events that we seldom think twice about it. Unfortunately it is entirely and misleadingly wrong.

In the next chapter I shall explain what really happens and why a proper understanding of the sequence is vital for breaking through psychological barriers to personal progress.

By making a more detailed study of the case histories of Jason and another of my clients, named Jacquie, we shall be able to see exactly how barriers - I call them breath locks or b-locks for short - arise, and the damaging effects they can exert on personal and professional development.

CHAPTER TWO

How breath locks are formed

'Negative thoughts lead to a negative performance; the connection is as simple as that!'

*SALLY GUNNELL, OLYMPIC GOLD
MEDALLIST AND WORLD CHAMPION
HURDLER*

LET'S RETURN TO Jason the stressed out IT marketing director, whose panic attacks at the prospect of public speaking I described in the previous chapter. Given that the spark that initially triggered his public-speaking phobia was a build-up of work-related stress, what had originally set the scene for that psychological problem to arise? Jason himself had no insight into why he had suddenly, and for no apparent reason, developed these panic attacks. As far as he was concerned they had struck him out of the blue.

After ten weeks of therapy we seemed to be getting no nearer to discovering what was going on in his subconscious. But the truth came startlingly and unexpectedly to light.

I had just started guiding him through a new sensualization that involved him entering a tunnel leading deep into the side of a mountain. It is one I frequently use when helping clients explore mental processes outside normal conscious awareness. (In Part Two I will show you how to use a similar sensualization in order to break through any barriers currently limiting your own performance.)

We began by going through five minutes of deep diaphragmatic breathing followed by the relaxing breath procedure that I will be describing in Part Two (Procedures Two and Three). At that point in the session all the instruments showed Jason to be in a state of deep mental and physical relaxation. His breathing was calm and deep, his physiological arousal levels low and his EEG showed the smooth, slow Alpha rhythms associated with relaxed alertness.

No sooner had Jason started down the tunnel into the mountainside, however, than I saw an abrupt and unexpected change in all these responses. His breathing became faster and his EEG was suddenly dominated by higher Beta frequencies indicating rising mental agitation. At the same time, the red line on the computer monitor, tracing Jason's bodily tensions, plunged precipitously showing a switch into the highly aroused 'fight or flight' mode. In the safe and comfortable surroundings of my consulting room Jason's brain and body were reacting as if he had suddenly come face to face with a ravenous tiger!

This was completely unanticipated on my part since there was no good reason for that sensualization to make him the least bit alarmed. Before we started I had naturally checked, as I always do, that he did not suffer from even mild claustrophobia, since such fears can easily be provoked by imagining oneself entering even the widest and most spacious of tunnels. Jason had assured me he had no such concerns and so the session began. It took several seconds before Jason became consciously aware of these mental and physiological changes. When he did so, his eyes suddenly opened wide and he sat up in a state of startled bewilderment, as surprised as I had been by the unexpected reaction. We ended the session with neither of us any the wiser about why this innocuous sensualization should have triggered such a rapid and profound increase in anxiety.

During the following days Jason reflected on what had happened and tried to work out why he had become so alarmed. But it was not until almost a week later, the day prior to his next appointment, that he woke up in the middle of the night with a vivid and terrifying memory from his childhood.

The more he reflected on this long forgotten incident the more certain Jason became that it was responsible for the subconscious barrier that was ruining his professional life more than thirty years later. When he came to see me, and recounted the events that had taken place when he was five, I too felt that it might well be what had originally created the barrier in his unconscious mind.

Jason's Story

As a small child Jason had lived with his parents on a farm where his father was the manager. Near to the farmhouse was a barn filled with bales of straw where he often played. By early summer many of the bales had been removed, leaving narrow tunnels into the centre of the barn. The darkness and the dust-filled air proved no deterrent to a small, energetic five-year-old and Jason had soon constructed a secret camp deep inside the building. Because it was so dark inside his hideaway, Jason borrowed a torch from his father's office. One morning, unable to find the torch, he took a candle and matches instead. Inside his camp Jason struck a match and, the next instant, the dust-filled air exploded in flames around him. Within seconds the whole barn was ablaze.

Screaming in terror the child began a desperate crawl to safety through tunnels into which flaming brands of straw were falling. Gasping for air as the acrid white smoke filled his lungs, bare knees raw and bleeding from scrambling over the straw, he could feel the searing heat of the flames at his back. Coughing and sobbing he finally emerged into

the open air where his distraught father snatched him to safety.

'I remember lying on the ground, yelling my lungs out as my Dad, his boss and some of the other farm workers looked down at me. Their expressions were almost certainly those of fear and relief, but to my confused and guilty mind they were all staring at me accusingly!'

The barn was totally destroyed and only the prompt arrival of the fire brigade saved the farmhouse itself from destruction. 'I was never punished for what I had done. Indeed nobody mentioned it again. But now that I have finally remembered the incident, I understand why I panic at the thought of speaking in public. I now realize that I see before me not my actual audience but that circle of angry and accusing faces.'

Two things may strike you about Jason's graphic account of that near fatal childhood accident. First, is it conceivable that an event so traumatic and terrifying could have been totally forgotten for more than three decades? Second, how can we be sure that this event - horrifying as it undoubtedly must have been - was the trigger that led to panic attacks, under totally different circumstances, so long after the event?

On the first point, there is good evidence that the more traumatic an incident in early childhood the greater the likelihood of it being forgotten, or to use a psychoanalytical term 'repressed.' Such repression is a natural defence mechanism designed to protect the psyche from further pain. However, unless brought to the surface and defused it can remain undetected for years, like a ticking bomb waiting to detonate with devastating effects as soon as conditions are right. As to whether it caused his panic attacks when trying to present to a potentially hostile audience we can never know for sure. However, for the purposes of successful treatment it was enough that Jason *believed* this was the case.

Jason's Therapy

Having brought that memory to the forefront of Jason's mind we were then able to remove the b-lock it had created - using a procedure you will learn in Part Two (Chapter Sixteen: Procedure six). He then went through further sensualizations while in a relaxed mental and physical state. In these he was encouraged to see himself delivering various presentations, starting with a small friendly audience and a topic with which he was very familiar, to, after several weeks, confrontational presentations before a large and somewhat hostile audience.

This well-established cognitive behavioural approach, known as 'progressive desensitization', can be likened to training for a marathon, by starting with short runs that are just within the athlete's capability and then increasing the distance a little each day as fitness improves. Later Jason was also encouraged to accept invitations to speak in public and asked to keep a diary of his thoughts, feelings and behaviour immediately before, during and after each presentation. The information these notes contained were then built into subsequent sensualization sessions. In addition he practised with the relaxing breath procedure ([see here](#)) and focused on breathing correctly throughout the talk.

Within three months Jason's public-speaking phobia almost totally disappeared. While he remained slightly apprehensive prior to a presentation this was a normal and easily managed level of arousal that enabled him to give his best possible performance. As I shall explain in the next chapter, a certain level of physical and mental arousal is essential to achieve our personal best when confronted by any challenging activity.

Let us now consider a psychological barrier created not as a result of a single traumatic childhood experience but

through the harrowing daily experiences of a young girl brought up by a domineering, critical and insensitive father. It is the story of an intelligent and ambitious woman whose happiness and self-confidence were blighted by an inability to stand up to a bullying and over-bearing husband.

Jacquie - Ambitious Executive and Domestic Doormat

Jacquie, a bright and ambitious high achiever in her early forties, works as a senior buyer for a major high street retailer. An excellent 'people person' she can be firm without appearing pushy and assertive without ever coming across as aggressive. While dealing with staff and clients she was always cool, calm and totally in command of events. At home, however, it was a very different story. Friends and relatives were astonished and bewildered at the transformation that took place whenever her front door closed behind her. From being a confident and assertive executive, she allowed herself to be reduced to a state of childlike helplessness by an overbearing bully of a husband. It was he who made all the decisions, usually without even bothering to consult her, and then rode roughshod over any objections she might attempt to raise.

Whenever friends urged Jacquie to stand up for herself she would just shrug, smile and say it was John's way of showing how much he loved her. Rather than provoke a row or, worst fear of all, risk him walking out on her, she was prepared to go along with his demands, no matter how selfish and unreasonable they seemed to outsiders. For over seven years she fell back on the comforting myth that it was his way of demonstrating his deep love for her. Not once during that time, she later confessed to me, had she questioned, or perhaps dared to question, *why* she felt so compelled to accept as normal such bullying arrogance in her private life when she would not have tolerated it for a

single moment at work. So what did transform ambitious executive Jacquie into a domestic doormat?

Jacquie's Story

'My father, Eric, might well have been a clone for my husband John,' she told the group. 'His word was law and my mother never questioned his right to make every decision for the family. Until the time I left home at eighteen, to go to university, I meekly accepted that this was how all fathers behaved and that, as a dutiful daughter, I must always fall in line with his demands, respect his wishes, and strive to live up to his high expectations.'

A clever and highly articulate university professor who used withering sarcasm to devastating effect, Eric took a delight in playing word games with his daughter. Like a prosecuting counsel he would lead her into saying things she didn't really mean before pouncing delightedly on any contradictions or logical flaws in her arguments. 'Looking back I can see that every conversation I had with my father was like a game of chess. I knew from the start he would end up by check-mating me and sarcastically shooting my arguments down in flames - it was just a question of how long it took.'

As a result grown-up Jacquie, when dealing with her equally domineering husband John, regressed to that 12-year-old child in the presence of her father. If she ever thought of standing up for herself and challenging his decisions, guilt, anxiety and self-doubt would flood into her mind and paralyse her will. Any desire she might have had to behave differently, to assert her rights as an individual and to demand a genuine say in decisions that affected both of them, was blocked by memories of her childhood relationship with her father.