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# Curing a fear of heights

Don't be held back on your travels by a fear of heights – help is at hand, says Nick Thorpe.

Nick Thorpe

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Forget ski-lifts. Forget the view from the Eiffel Tower. Forget bungee-jumping, gorge-walking or even changing your own light bulb.

“My brain wants to do these things, but my body won't let me,” says Suzanne O'Brien, one of hundreds of thousands whose holiday choice is limited by a terror of heights. “It's incredibly frustrating. My legs go dead and feel as if they weigh a hundred tonnes, and the shaking in my hands is uncontrollable. I love to walk in the mountains, but if I came suddenly upon a steep descent, it would need mountain rescue to get me down.”

Until recently, that is. Thanks to a range of therapies now gaining acceptance, the 33-year-old veterinary nurse recently joined nearly 50 volunteers in a previously unthinkable leap of faith — off a 100-foot ledge.

Billed by its organisers as a kind of mass-hypnosis, the experimental event at the world-class Edinburgh International Climbing Arena combined neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and hypnotherapy with an aerial assault course that would tax an acrobat, let alone an acrophobic: a zip ride launching into mid-air, followed by a scramble across nets and wooden structures dangling from the arena ceiling.

“I was pretty sceptical beforehand,” admits Holly Archibald, a 14-year-old participant hoping to overcome a terrifying abseiling experience and her failure to reach the top of the Eiffel Tower. “But it really worked. It wasn't like I was in a trance or anything when I jumped. I looked down and it was just the ground a long way below me, and that was OK. There were people there who couldn't previously have looked out of their upstairs window, and they were doing it too.”

Gary Flockhart, co-founder of Brain Train, the Scottish company that organised the event, explains that his combination of hypnotherapy, repeated mantras and guided visualisations was devised to unseat the deeply ingrained memories that lie at the root of most phobias.

“Basically, an initial experience creates a pattern in the mind,” says the NLP master practitioner, who trained under the hypnotist Paul McKenna. “So that next time they have a trigger and remember that physical experience, they go into



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the same state: terror. It's an irrational response they have no control over."

Suzanne O'Brien believes her phobia originated in a childhood trip up Edinburgh's Scott Monument at the age of eight. Leaning on the blackened stone balustrade for a view 200 feet above the city centre, she heard her father say: "Don't do that — it might crumble." It didn't — but her confidence did.

"I've been terrified of heights ever since," says O'Brien. "I can't go near the edge of anything in case it gives way."

Flockhart accordingly took each client back through such experiences as if on a mental movie screen, while adding hypnotic suggestions to reverse their effect. "If Suzanne gets rid of that belief it's likely to have a knock-on effect in many areas of her life. When you clear up the original fear, everything else crumbles."

So it would seem. Once mentally prepared and strapped into her harness, O'Brien was the first in her group to attack the assault course after taking a running jump off the edge of the launch platform.

"That bit was absolutely fine," she recalls. "It got a bit scary climbing on something that wasn't steady beneath me, and I found my arms and legs shaking again. But I went straight back to concentrating on breathing from the stomach, and chanting 'sit and glide' as Gary had instructed, and it worked." Out of 44 participants, an impressive 42 completed the course with her.

An important ingredient was the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) — involving a curious repetitive tapping of the forehead and other "meridian" points on the body — which has attracted widespread claims of success in its own right.

Until 2005, for example, Frankie Kelly was unable to cope with ladders, far less rollercoasters. "I remember going to a funfair in Portugal on holiday," says the 48-year-old civil servant from Carlow, in Ireland. "My 10-year-old son was waving at me to come on this ride with him but, looking at all the loops and twists, there was just no way. I thought 'you coward', but I just couldn't do it. I was nearly in tears, it felt so limiting."

Sceptical but desperate, he later took a course with two EFT practitioners, Val and Paul Lynch, who administered light tapping while he recalled formative traumas, including the day he almost fell from the top of a ruined castle as a child. The result astonished him. He has since been back to scale the castle, taken 20 hours of gyrocopter lessons in Carlisle, and plans to conquer the rollercoaster in Portugal later this year with his now 18-year-old son.

"It's nothing to do with willpower," he concludes. "It's like a psychological version of acupuncture. You're tuned into a particular occasion and by tapping on meridian points it somehow gets rid of that negative emotion. People find it hard to believe that something so simple can be so powerful, but it does the trick."

The National Phobias Society, a charity catering for the estimated four million British citizens suffering from specific phobias, has heard many similar claims and now offers reduced-fee treatment from a range of vetted EFT, NLP and other therapists. But it also counsels caution in a largely unregulated market.

"I would stay well away from practitioners who have taken a weekend course and now claim to be able to cure someone with a 10-minute session over the phone," says Nicky Lidbetter, the organisation's chief executive. "A good practitioner should be able to offer you essentially a tool-kit of skills and techniques that you can then employ yourself when you're feeling anxious, to try to bring down your anxiety levels."

Months later, those involved with the Edinburgh climbing experiment remain impressed with the effects. "At Christmas I hung the baubles at the top of the tree, and crossed a 60-foot aquaduct near my house — no problem," reports Holly Archibald. "Now I fancy some extreme sports. Paragliding looks a lot of fun, and I've always wanted to go bungee-jumping..."

Suzanne O'Brien, meanwhile, is making up for lost time in her passion for hillwalking by signing up for the Three Peaks Challenge in August — a group attempt to climb Ben Nevis, Snowdon and Scafell Pike in 24 hours.

"I'm not convinced that the fear is completely gone," she says. "But I think I've got the tools to tackle it — chanting,

focusing on my breathing — which at least means I can get myself back down safely.”

Curiously, the experience has had an unexpected effect on another ingrained affliction: her 15-a-day cigarette habit. “It’s weird. I wasn’t intending to give up but something must have switched in my brain, because I haven’t wanted a cigarette since. So get rid of your fear of heights — you never know what else you might lose in the process.”

- For more information on coping with phobias, try the National Phobics Society (08444 775 774, [www.phobics-society.org.uk](http://www.phobics-society.org.uk) (<http://www.phobics-society.org.uk>)); Brain Train (0845 450 2251, [www.brain-train.co.uk](http://www.brain-train.co.uk) (<http://www.brain-train.co.uk>)); or Val and Paul Lynch (01323 505263, [www.the-heart-centre.com](http://www.the-heart-centre.com) (<http://www.the-heart-centre.com>)).
- Edinburgh International Climbing Arena: 0131 333 6333, [www.adventurescotland.com](http://www.adventurescotland.com) (<http://www.adventurescotland.com>).

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