

Mathematical hypnotherapy

Martha is a friend of mine, a vivacious 23-year-old who has just completed a maths degree at Edinburgh University. Proudly clutching her First Class Honours, she is starting out as a statistician with a top London firm – the world lies at her feet. Yet two years ago all this success, almost inevitable in its progression, was thrown into doubt when she awoke one morning to find she had completely lost the use of her muscles. She lay prone until discovered by a housemate. An entirely ordinary evening the night before led to this vast disability a few hours later.

Blood was taken, tests were run, doctors were mystified. Nothing physically adrift was found – Martha's body seemed to be in perfect shape, but was somehow sulking. And then the white-coated experts tried a remarkable experiment – they hypnotised Martha, and asked her to climb some stairs. Simple as it sounds, this task was on a par with scaling Everest for Martha in her state then. But under this benign hypnosis, her muscles leapt to do her bidding, and she made it up and down the steps without a murmur. The boffins had thoughtfully recorded this ghostly activity, and played the film back to Martha once she came round, to her total amazement. The all-in-the-mind nature of her ailment had been incontrovertibly revealed.

There is no compelling evidence that this exercise was vital to her eventual recovery, but the story is a poignant one. Hypnosis is a fascinating topic, and I'm not necessarily referring here to making people think they are elephants for some theatrical freak show. Any psychological trick that gets us to do someone's bidding without our fully realising why can count as hypnosis. A doctor knows that to ask a boy, 'Can I look into your ears?' is inviting trouble. He asks instead, 'Which ear should I look in first, your left or your right?' Introducing this tiny choice leads to a happy child, and to my mind counts as hypnosis. Our parents 'hypnotise' us as babies – to mature into adults is to learn to spot these family techniques (that may be completely subconscious) and to free ourselves from them. There

are such things as ‘damaging family myths’, that tell us that we cannot do things that in fact we can. And what for maths teachers is the most damaging family myth of all? ‘Oh, he’s never been able to do maths.’

So maybe part of our job as teachers is to take students whose mathematical muscles are really fine, but who are trapped into some negative view of themselves that leaves them prone in our classrooms, and gently hypnotise them. Safe in our professional hands, we can ask them to walk up and down mathematical stairs, and we can surprise them later when we show them what they have achieved. Maybe then they can go home and challenge preconceptions, putting their lives onto a more fruitful course. We can all be mathematical hypnotherapists.

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