

The FAST Pathways® Academy - Mental Rehearsal



This technique is used by top performing Sports people. A while ago, I attended a conference where the speaker was Sir Chris Hoy. As a six times Olympic Gold medal winning cyclist, he knows a fair bit about getting ready for big challenges. He spoke about his Olympic preparations:

In his last few weeks of training, alongside his gruelling physical schedule he took every opportunity to practise his sprint in his imagination – immersing in every last detail as if it was really happening.... The sounds of the crowd, the lights in the arena, the feeling of his bike beneath him.... When it came to the day, he was absolutely focused, ready to get out on the track and do exactly what he'd been rehearsing.

He attributes his Gold medal to this preparation – it enabled him to stay completely focused, despite the pressure. There are few things in life which require as much preparation as Olympic competition, but the same thinking skills will help you prepare for success, whatever it is that you want to achieve. They're incredibly versatile – here are a few examples of how people I've worked with have found them most useful:

- Getting ready for a performance or competition
- Preparing for a test or assessment, such as a driving test or college exam
- Overcoming the fear of flying, to be able to relax and enjoy travelling, remaining unconcerned even when there's turbulence
- Becoming comfortable to speak up in meetings and group situations
- Becoming a confident, engaging presenter or public speaker
- Overcoming social anxiety, to be able to go out and enjoy time with friends
- Overcoming food aversions, to be able to enjoy an interesting and healthy variety of foods
- Adopting a new behaviour, such as resolutely saying "No" to something you used to give in to

Mostly, when people think about what they want, they focus all their thoughts on the outcome, imagining what it'll be like when they have it. This is daydreaming, and although it may be very pleasant, it's not giving your mind the specific instructions of how to get there. Mental rehearsal is very different, in that you focus your attention on the process of achieving the outcome, rather than on the outcome itself – as Sir Chris did by immersing in imagining the details of his race, rather than just crossing the finish line and celebrating.



Although you might not have realised it, when you've been worrying or making yourself feel bad about the event, you've already been mentally rehearsing it; with all the outcomes that you don't want. And your outside-awareness thinking doesn't hear 'don't'.

Many of the people who I've worked with worried that their voice will crack when they speak out, worried that they'll blush or get tongue-tied, worried that they'll panic and make a fool of themselves..... and a whole range of unpleasant outcomes. Your neurology is really obedient, and when that's what you've been thinking, guess what happens.....

You already know how to de-code that unpleasant thinking; and now you're going to learn how to use that same obedient neurology, to have things happen the way you want them instead. To programme in confidence, resilience, and anything else you'd like.

Sir Chris was preparing for something with which he's very familiar – he'd been competing at the top level for a long time, and had already enjoyed a great deal of success. So for him, imagining the thing as if it was actually happening, was natural and comfortable.

Sometimes, it can be too big a step to imagine doing the thing straight away – either because it's something that you've never personally experienced, or because discomfort gets in the way as you start to imagine. In this exercise, you're going to design your chosen event going exactly as you want it to - firstly fine tuning all the details as an outside observer, before you then step in and experience it, as if it's happening.

You're going to be the Director of a Block Buster production, entitled "My Event" (whatever, you'd like to call that event). As the Director, you have the very responsible role of making sure that this scene turns out exactly right – so the audience will experience it just as you want them to. You can choose the location, and your cast. It doesn't matter if you don't know exactly where the thing will happen in real life, or who'll be there. Imagining the environment simply enables you to programme in the experience of the event going as you want it, so it doesn't matter what's different on the outside when it happens for real.

Whoever you choose as your cast, your leading character bears a striking resemblance to you. In fact, they look exactly like you; but they're a very experienced actor or actress, who responds exceedingly well to direction – and that's your job. You don't have to believe that the way you imagine it is how it will go, you're allowing yourself to experience 'What If?' – which is one of the most powerful questions you can ask your imagination.

If you're preparing for a single event, then it may be enough to run through this technique a couple of times in depth, then return to top it up as needed. If you're preparing for something more diverse, like overcoming social anxiety or dealing with challenging workplace relationships, then you can use it to imagine a range of different situations where you'll be relaxed, confident and comfortable. The more detail you put into the imagining, the more easily your mind will be able to make it happen in real life; even when your on-purpose thinking doesn't know how.