

In the new year, you may be one of the many who take stock of their life and wonder how to make changes for the better. But good intentions alone aren't enough: without a clear focus and a positive strategy for making these changes, you may well revert to your old bad habits before the tinsel is off the tree.

However, there are some simple ways that you can use your mind to help you fulfil the aspirations that could make 2009 the best year ever. These seven tips will help you to tune your mind, clear it of clutter and make it work for, not against you.

1 Open the door to your future

Neuroscience suggests that our ability to visualise the future largely depends upon our past. Researchers found people with memory loss and Alzheimer's who lost memories of their personal history also lost their ability to imagine a personal future. So, if our past is instrumental in creating our future, then we need to make peace with our history. This way, the brain has the best bits to play with when imagining what the future holds. An exercise that can help with this is "one door opens". Negative events from our past are often used to give meaning to new things that happen to us, so over time we get more of what we don't want. For example, people who fear rejection in relationships begin to anticipate it, and hence create it. 'One door opens' broadens the perspective of these past events by getting you to focus on their positive consequences, and linking them into the narrative of your life.

Here's how you do it:

- (i) Write down 3-5 of the most negative things that have happened to you: breakups, redundancies, illness etc.
- (ii) With each one ask the following questions: As that particular door shut on your future, what other doors did it open? How did that negative event lead to good things in your life afterwards; especially things that you wouldn't have experienced without it? Spend some time considering your answers; you might begin to see how each new door opening in some way led to the next one; that our lives are made up of a series of disasters, or a series of opportunities and we can choose which perspective to take.

2 Everything has a purpose

I try to live my life using two conflicting beliefs: that life has a purpose, and that it's chaos. When something happens, I decide which belief will keep me moving forward in my life. Think about your life up to now: if everything has led up to this moment, and had to happen that way for you to learn something, that by learning it would mean the rest of your life can be what you want it to be, what would that learning be? That's a big sentence, deliberately constructed for you to meditate on. Give it some thought and you might be surprised at the answers you find. How can you use that learning to propel you into the next phase of your life?

3 Give and receive

We all have people to whom we owe gratitude, but often life is so busy that we forget to remember them. Experiments have shown that the act of gratitude boosts the immune system of both parties involved. There are several ways that you can use this to boost your energy: Look for opportunities to express your gratitude for the small things – those who do the basics that improve our quality of life are often quite invisible to us as we rush past them; pause in your day to thank the people who serve you – make eye contact and share a moment.

This has been some of the most powerful learning of my life: it takes very little to make someone feel valued, but will vastly improve the way you feel about yourself.

4 Three gifts to yourself

We spend so much time focusing on the negative but this exercise has been proven by positive psychologists to have more effect on people suffering from depression than Prozac.

At the end of each day, take a few minutes to write down three good things that you experienced in the past 24 hours: something small such as noticing birdsong or sharing a smile with a stranger; as well as the bigger victories in your life. Each represents a gift to you. By doing this for just seven days, you will feel more positive about life. As a cognitive hypnotherapist, I believe that this works because of a principle called priming i.e. if you have something on your mind, like getting pregnant, suddenly everyone around you

seems to be having a baby. Basically, what's on our mind comes to mind. Focusing on the positive subtly primes your brain to notice the good things around you, leaving less space for the bad stuff, moving you towards optimism and away from pessimism.

5 Go public with your goals

Setting goals works. Research demonstrates that people who set goals and stick to them are more successful in life. However, the process of setting a goal is relatively easy; it's sticking to them that is the tricky part. Professor Cialdini, a leading researcher in the science of persuasion, discovered that we tend to live up to the statements we make that other people know about. So, write your goal down (another thing that makes it stickier), and display it where people can see it: your fridge, your desk, your forehead. Make it big and bold so you and others are reminded about what you want to achieve on a regular basis.

6 Know what you want

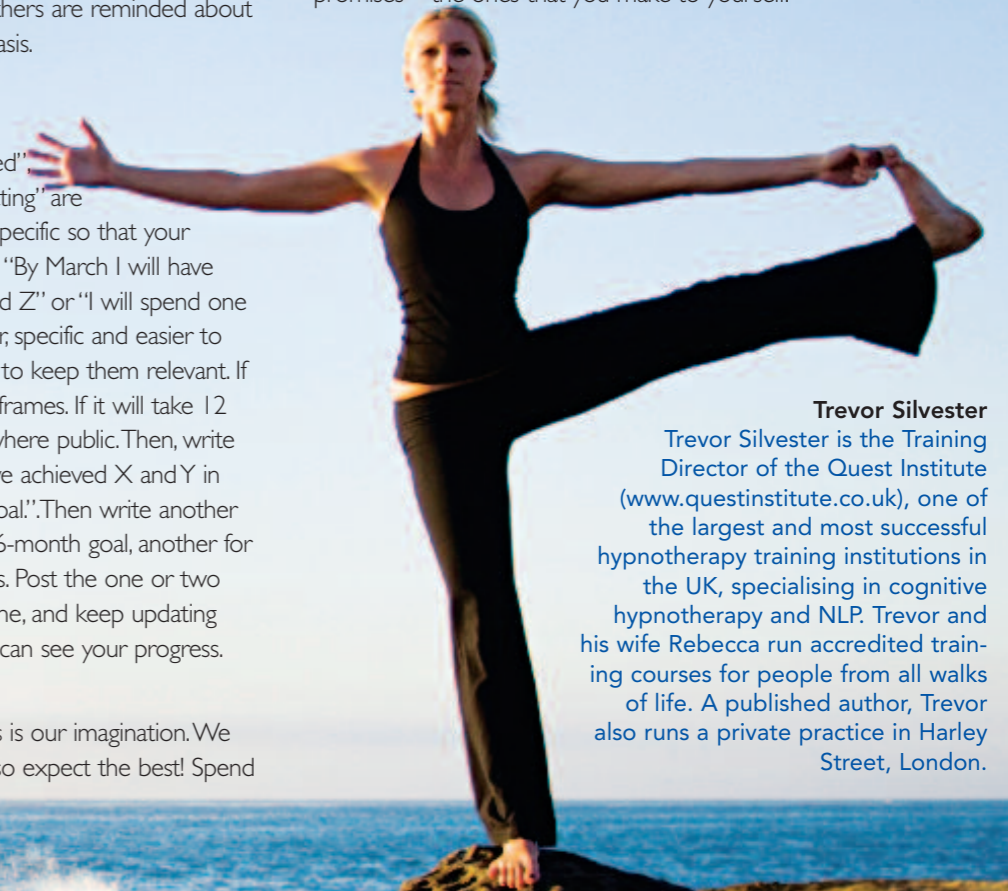
Vague and undefined goals such as "this year I'm going to get promoted" or "I'm going to spend more time meditating" are unlikely to bring you what you want. Be specific so that your unconscious can't wriggle out of the deal. "By March I will have applied for 4 jobs which offer me X, Y and Z" or "I will spend one hour meditating 3 times a week" are clear, specific and easier to measure. Goals also need to be revisited to keep them relevant. If it is long-term, break it into shorter time-frames. If it will take 12 months, write it down and post it somewhere public. Then, write one that says "In 6 months' time I will have achieved X and Y in order to be on track for my 12-month goal". Then write another for three months to be on track for the 6-month goal, another for one month and another for 1 or 2 weeks. Post the one or two week goals publicly with the 12-month one, and keep updating them so that you – and everyone else – can see your progress.

7 If you want it, see it

One of our most potent resources is our imagination. We tend to get the future we expect; so expect the best! Spend

some time regularly visualising your goal. Make it exciting, interesting, and compelling. Linger over the things you want most from your goal, and go into as much detail as you can: see it, hear it, feel it, taste it, smell it. Every time you think of the future, make sure this is the future you see. This primes the brain to bring to your attention anything that might help you achieve it; things which might otherwise pass unnoticed.

Taken together and put into practice, these seven tips could get your year off to an amazing start. But if you are serious about making long term improvements to the way you live your life, make them a part of your everyday life – this way the amazing never stops! So, now you have the techniques at your fingertips, go for it – and make 2009 the year that you keep all the most important promises – the ones that you make to yourself.



Trevor Silvester

Trevor Silvester is the Training Director of the Quest Institute (www.questinstitute.co.uk), one of the largest and most successful hypnotherapy training institutions in the UK, specialising in cognitive hypnotherapy and NLP. Trevor and his wife Rebecca run accredited training courses for people from all walks of life. A published author, Trevor also runs a private practice in Harley Street, London.

7 Ways For A Positive Start to 2009

Some practical advice for those who are determined to make the most of the year ahead