



## Clear Thinking Issue 126

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### How to stop jinxing your future

*Hypnosis Master Series: How to stop jinxing your future – by **Mark Tyrrell***

Human beings, as far as anyone can tell, are the only creatures that can envisage the far future.

When humankind developed imagination, we entered a new kind of relationship with the future. One in which we could envisage *alternative* scenarios. This ability allowed us not only to picture different futures, but actually *plan* for them. Something that does not yet exist except in the mind's eye can influence today's actions so that tomorrow it is no longer imaginary but quite real and concrete. If we believe what our imaginations tell us, we can *avoid* what we imagine will lead to bad consequences and *pursue* what we imagine will lead to good consequences. This is how we learned to plan rather than just live in the moment without trying to influence the future.

Think of the amazing pyramids of ancient Egypt or the giant gothic cathedrals of medieval Europe. These astonishing structures can take more than a century to build, and were only possible because someone had the imagination to envisage them, and

was able to plan how to build them, and so eventually brought them from the realm of the mind into material reality.

How we think about the future strongly influences how fulfilled and successful we'll become and our ability to make good life choices for ourselves. It matters to think about the future in effective and productive ways. You would think that this ought to be relatively straightforward, but in fact there are a number of common mistakes that people tend to fall into when using their minds to create a future. If things don't turn out well for them, this can of course be due to unfortunate circumstances over which they have no control. But it can also – and surprisingly often – be because they fell into one or more of these 'future traps'. They 'jinxed' their own future.

### **Future traps**

For example, a basic mistake people make is to assume that the future will always resemble the past. It's somewhat surprising that we so commonly make this mistake, given that we have this amazing power of imagination that specifically enables us to see a future that is *different* from the past.

If we feel that the past was 'bad' then this trap leads us to assume the future will be uniformly bleak as well. This can stop us from putting any effort into improving our lives – because what is the point, if the future is going to be just like the past? And it may even stop us from seeing that, in fact, life *has* improved – because we view the present through negative filters constructed through past experience. Psychologists call this 'learned helplessness' – where we fail to act constructively even though we now have genuine opportunities that we didn't have before.

So one way to influence your future more positively is to *stay flexible* and to understand that circumstances always change and we have to adapt to the good as well as the bad.

Another mistake is to stop at the fantasy and never get to the action.

Imagine if the great pyramid builders had merely sat back on the banks of the Nile and imagined what wonderful structures pyramids would be and how fantastic it would be to have been the builders of such marvels, but never actually taken any practical steps to start building. They would have enjoyed their fantasies, perhaps, but there would have been nothing to show for it.

A third trap for the unwary is focusing too exclusively on certain aspects of your imagined future. If, for instance, you're concentrating exclusively on the importance of *avoiding* things that might have bad consequences, you can end up seeing everything – even positive opportunities – as a threat that you must fight off for your own protection. So you miss out because you worry too much.

Now one of the things we can conclude from the frequency with which we all fall into these traps – mistaking the past for the future, substituting fantasy for action, and worrying too much – is that, in spite of our wonderful imaginations, most people are not that good at making predictions about the future and planning for it! Of course, we all muddle through somehow, but what I am interested in here is what you can do at the *psychological* level to protect yourself from being caught in these errors and so give yourself more of an advantage when it comes to planning your future and working towards those plans.

Now let's consider in depth three common mistakes people make when thinking about how the future will pan out. Knowing these mistakes in *thinking* in advance can help you avoid mistakes in *action*.

### **Probability and possibility**

First off, we regularly confuse *probability* with *possibility*. What do I mean?

Okay, think about this. Around ten million people play the lottery each week. You might buy your ticket thinking: "Well, I have just as much chance of winning as the other 9,999,999 people." That seems like a reasonable bet. Now imagine that you bought one ticket while your neighbour John bought the other ten million tickets minus the one that you bought. Who now has the better chance of winning? You, with your one ticket? Or John, with his ten million tickets minus your one?

In this scenario, most people *feel* as if they have much *less* chance of winning, even though it makes no difference if *one* person or *millions* of people have all the other lottery tickets.

Excitement and drama easily knock out rationality when we're thinking about the future. You've probably heard how after the terrorist attacks in New York known as '9/11' more people died on the roads in the weeks that followed by choosing to drive instead of fly. They *over-estimated* the risk of terrorist attack while *under-estimating* the risk of dying on the roads.

The fact is, we all tend to *over-estimate* a threat if it is well publicised and dramatic. Lottery winners are often publicised and they seem so normal – regular people like you and me! We see winners on TV all the time.

But imagine if, instead of the winners, they interviewed everyone who'd bought a ticket and *didn't* win. How many hundreds of thousands of hours of TV would you need to watch just to see one week's worth of non-lottery winners being interviewed? This is why winning seems so much more probable than it really is – because we see the winners and we don't see the millions of losers. I'm not for or against lotteries, I'm just

making the point that we could all think about odds in a different way, and wake up to the fact that we get *primed* by our environment to *over-* or *under-*estimate the likelihood of stuff happening.

Why do I feel, for instance, that I am more likely to be attacked by a serial killer when putting the rubbish/garbage out late at night after having watched a TV horror film? Of course, me having watched that scary movie will not affect the odds of me being pounced on by a psycho one iota, but the film *primed* me with scary stuff and therefore it now *feels* more likely to me that something scary will happen. This is one way our expectations about the future can be moulded to make us less accurate in our predictions – and goodness knows, we’re not that accurate to start with!

Smokers sometimes make a similar mistake in that they *under* estimate the probable destructive consequences of their smoking. The cliché many smokers use is: “Well, I could get run over by a bus tomorrow – so I might as well smoke!” It’s a classic confusion of probability and possibility.

Sure, they could get run over by a bus. In the United Kingdom about one person in 14,000 gets run over by a vehicle, but one in *two* people who smoke 20 cigarettes a day are killed by their habit. (1) So this confusion can make something *seem* like a fair comparison when it isn’t at all.

Of course, improbable stuff *does* happen. It’s the very *improbability* of it that leads to it making the news. But when we see it on the news or in the media, it instantly feels much more probable to us, even though, by definition, it’s less likely to happen.

Most people are millions of times more likely to die of heart disease than from the gun of a terrorist. Yet we continue to eat what we know are heart attack-inducing foods quite unthinkingly, while filling our heads instead with fears of plane crashes or terrorist attacks. We imagine that serial killer coming in the door even as we stretch out lazily on the couch again – ignoring the incontestable fact that lack of exercise is vastly more likely to be the death of us.

It’s not that these things aren’t *possible* but rather that we overestimate their likelihood because they are so colourful and dramatic. “Man dies after serial killer attack” makes the headlines and you’ll hear about it. “Another man dies from heart disease” sadly does not, and you won’t.

So, statistics might be boring but they can tell us a whole load of stuff about *probability* and what you should really be paying more attention to. By paying attention to a few stats here and there, you can save yourself much mental effort and become potentially more productive and less wasteful of your time. Understanding probability better can

help you avoid worrying needlessly while encouraging you to focus on what you really *should* be worrying about.

Many young people watch reality TV shows which lead them to *over*-estimate their chances of becoming celebrities with apparently very little effort. But winning a TV talent contest is still the equivalent, statistically speaking, of winning the lottery. Far better to focus not on fame as such but on activities that you enjoy for their own sake, letting any success or fame that comes your way as a result be a *by product* of doing what you love.

### **What makes us happy?**

The second common mistake we make when imagining how the future will be is to *wrongly predict how we'll feel* after an expected event. People, it seems, are just terrible at predicting what will make us happy or unhappy.

For example, most of us assume that earning more money will make us happier, and it does... but only up to a very specific point. In the US researchers found that if people earning less than \$60,000 dollars a year started earning more, up to \$60,000 a year, this did make them correspondingly happier. But here's the thing. Earning *more* than \$60,000 a year, whether one dollar more or a million dollars more, *made no difference at all to happiness levels.* (2)

So some more money will likely make you happier, but there's a cut off point after which any further increase will not make you significantly, or even at all, happier. Most people don't predict that.

Other researchers found that lottery winners (I'm not really obsessed with the lottery – just that it's a great thing to talk about when discussing how people think about future outcomes), six months after their wins, had more or less the same level of happiness as they had *before* their win. They experienced a massive euphoria on winning, but pretty quickly returned to their pre-existing levels of happiness. (3)

The same researchers found that the same thing happens even with major negative events. Six months to a year after the event, people who had been paralyzed in an accident had mostly returned to normal levels of contentment. But both the lottery winners and the paraplegic patients *predicted* much bigger changes after these different life changing events. The lottery winners predicted that they would be *much* happier, the paraplegics that they would be *much more* miserable.

Yet more research found that people who expected to feel better after exacting revenge on someone who had wronged them actually felt *worse* after they'd had their revenge. So be careful what you wish for – it might just not make you as happy as you expect. (4)

It helps to keep in mind those things that *have* been shown to increase the levels of happiness in our lives – finding a sense of meaning, being closely connected with other people, having some autonomy and self-control and a sense that there are important serious things in life as well as stuff to enjoy and appreciate.

### **How far can you see?**

The last common mistake I want to focus on is *the way we visualize the distant future*.

Whenever we think about the future we engage in a kind of self hypnosis. The architects of ancient Egypt and medieval Europe would have also been masters of self hypnosis. They would have been able to ‘go inward’ and see the structure in their mind’s eye before it was even built. But it seems that most people are rather better at visualizing the near future than they are at visualizing the more distant future. In fact, when something feels too far off in the future, we almost feel as if it doesn’t really count at all. But, of course, one day, that distant future will be now.

Telling a 16-year-old smoker that if he is still smoking at forty he’ll very likely suffer impotence won’t work, because to him the age of forty feels impossibly distant and therefore wholly insignificant. It’s partly the same error as assuming that the future will be just like the past. If in the past, you have always been young, you somehow imagine that this will always be the case. Being forty is just inconceivable, and therefore not worth bothering about.

But by making a conscious effort, you can overcome the temptation to just dismiss the distant future as not important. Do it now. Take a moment here to imagine for a while, *really* imagine... *yourself*... in twenty years’ time... right now... what you are doing day to day with your time... where you are living... who you are living with... how you might look...

Interesting, isn’t it?

When I work with a smoker I get them to visualize the distant future in this manner, as bringing it into focus like this makes it *feel* more immediate and therefore relevant to them. I’ll hypnotically take them into the future and get them to feel as if they haven’t smoked for twenty years and that the habit now just feels like a dim and distant memory. Before doing that, I might get them to visualize seeing and hearing themselves in ten years’ time as they would be if they continued to smoke tens of thousands more cigarettes than they already have.

When we are forty years old the age of sixty-five might feel impossibly remote but, as we know, the far future always seems to come around quicker than expected. I worked with a man who was having trouble with managing his money and debts because he

always used to put bills and other official looking stuff aside 'to deal with later', and would then forget about them until it was too late. I got him to closely envisage his future twenty-five years from now. At that point he started taking responsibility for the health of his own finances.

So, to stop jinxing your future and improve your chances a better future, remember:

- worrying is a tool and should not be overused or we'll live timid lives and miss opportunities
- fantasy should mobilise positive action, not replace it
- vivid, dramatic things convince us that they are more likely and we need to remind ourselves to properly check out *probability* vs. *possibility*
- happiness levels change much less than we expect – we can cope better with adversity than we think and limitless funds do not increase our store of happiness
- and lastly – take time now and then to really visualize your longer term future in *detail* – this can alert you to stuff here and now that's storing up trouble for you and help you plan better to ensure the future is as good as it can be.

Because one thing's for sure... your future is getting nearer all the time.

## Notes

- (1) [Tobacco and cancer risks – statistics](#) (Cancer Research UK)
- (2) See Daniel Kahneman, Alan B. Krueger, David Schkade, Norbert Schwarz and Arthur A. Stone, '[Would You Be Happier If You Were Richer? A Focusing Illusion](#)', *Science* 30 June 2006: Vol. 312 no. 5782 pp. 1908-1910
- (3) See Brickman, Philip; Coates, Dan; Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. '[Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative?](#)' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 36(8), Aug 1978, 917-927.

See '[Revenge and the people who seek it](#)' by Michael Price in the *APA Monitor on Psychology*, June 2009.

## Rewind technique online training - LIVE for the last time

People who have the misfortune to suffer from post traumatic stress (PTSD), or who are gripped by the crippling limitations of a phobia, find themselves trapped in a very specific 'future thinking trap'. The one that equates the future with the past.

Even though they may perfectly well understand, cognitively, that there is no logical reason why their future should be the same as their past, they *feel* so dreadfully certain that it *will* that their lives can be completely blighted.

Reasoning is not much help to people in such a predicament. The only way to help them out is to work directly on the unconscious, *emotional*, underpinnings of their fears.

There is a very fast, very effective, very gentle way to do that.

And you can learn how to do it on our unique [Rewind technique online training course](#).

### **Online Live for the very LAST time!**

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The **last** live Rewind technique online training course starts on Thursday 8 September. The Early Bird discount of 25% is still available – but only until 18 August 2011.

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See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell

Co-Founder

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