

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

CAN TURBO-CHARGED BREATHING REALLY MAKE YOU TRIP OUT? **STEPHANIE THEOBALD** TRIES THE LATEST ALTERNATIVE THERAPY FAD AND IS HOOKED

I have seen two shrinks in my life. The first was in my early twenties, when I had a panic attack and thought I was going schizophrenic like my twin brother. After three months, my therapist told me I was fine and that I should get out more, then asked me if I had ever tried line dancing?

Then recently, I started getting stressed again, so I thought I'd better go to another therapist. This one wore horrible round-toed shoes and had a habit of looking appalled when I said something shocking. I spent a lot of the time wondering how much Lindt chocolate and rump steak I could be buying with my weekly £50 bill.

So imagine how pleased I was to hear about turbo therapy (TT). It's actually called transformational breathing (TB), but Britain's top practitioner, Alan Dolan, is calling it TT because a shrink recently told him it was the equivalent of two years' worth of therapy in two hours. TB was invented 30 years ago in California by the sparkly, smock-wearing Dr Judith Kravitz, and Goldie Hawn and Deepak Chopra are longtime fans. But it's now gathering momentum as increasing numbers of people are opting for alternative medicine: recent reports indicate that this market has grown by a whopping 18% in two years and is now worth £213m a year.

Part of the appeal of TB is that you can easily do it by yourself. As Dolan says: "TB is not about becoming dependent on a therapist to fix you. It's about taking responsibility for your own health."

Basically, you breathe in huge amounts of oxygen very quickly, which takes your mind to an ecstatic place and supposedly helps you deal with a range of emotional and health issues. I heard about it from my friend Yasmin, who has introduced me to a variety of alternative therapists over the years. She saw Darth Vader in her TB session, but this wasn't the only thing that worried me. Frankly, I'm not sure that I'm any good at the alternative lark. I've tried reiki, hypnotism, craniosacral therapy and weird massages with Himalayan snare drums in the background, but nothing ever seems to work, and I always leave feeling like a loser.

I decided to try it out, however. Here we go again, I thought, as I hoicked myself onto a couch strewn with ethnic cushions. Dolan told me to breathe through my mouth as if I had a balloon in my tummy. He said a few words over me and I was aware of a dry throat, and then suddenly, I was falling down into a velvety black volcano, slithering along like the old Doctor Who screen credits. Then a vast orgasm of emotion passed through my body like a wave, and I was crying and laughing at the same time. The physical stuff was also weird. My arms and legs felt as if a huge weight was on them, and my hands felt enormous, like Kenny Everett's huge polystyrene hands in his Brother Lee Love sketch.

At one point it crossed my mind that I might be paralysed. But then Dolan asked me to make a few long "Om" sounds, deeper and deeper, and then I was out again, back in the real world. Although not really. When I left the couch, part of me was still in the dark volcano.

And I felt fantastic, as if I had just stepped out of the healing pool at Lourdes. I felt stoned, but without the paranoia bit, and my skin had a glow that cognitive behavioural therapy never gives you.

HOW TO DO IT AT HOME

■ Prop yourself up on the bed at a semi-reclined angle. Make sure that you are warm and comfortable, and that your head and neck are properly supported.

■ Focus on your lower abdomen — below the navel.

■ Inhale twice in succession through your mouth and exhale once. (The drum intro on Queen's

We Will Rock You gives a sense of the rhythm needed). Watch the videos on breathguru.com if in doubt about the technique.

■ Focus on inhalation. Exhalation should be a quick sigh.

■ Keep concentrating on the breath. Relax. Go with any thoughts or physical sensations that appear.

My main worry was that I wouldn't be able to go back to that "place" again in my rickety one-bedroom flat. The next day, mid-afternoon, I went into my bedroom, closed the blinds, lay on the bed and started the balloon thing again, thinking, "God, this is stupid, just breathing..." But soon I realised my arms had that tingling thing and then there I was — Neverland. Nothing as big as the first time, mind. The first two sessions with a practitioner are the most turbo of all in terms of emotional avalanches.

Now, three months into the cult, as I jokingly refer to it to my friends, I'm finding that giving myself a 15-minute, slightly trippy experience in the morning is making my mind pin-sharp for the rest of the day. On a physical level, I have more energy, and I haven't been getting my monthly winter cold, due, I am told, to the fact that my cells are getting a full top-up of oxygen every day. It's helped my yoga, too — my mind used to wander all over the place during the chillout bit at the end of the class.

Encouraged by my London session, I went on one of the breathing holidays Dolan runs in Lanzarote. The cumulative effects of having an hour-and-a-half breathing session every day were stronger than I'd thought. Think legal opium den (although TB is often used to help people get off drugs). I've stopped telling friends about the fourth day in, when I found myself back sharing a womb with my twin brother, because that sort of stuff tends to weird people out. But it was a powerful experience that touched me more than months of talking to a line-dancing shrink with a taste for bad shoes. ●

breathguru.com

OTHER WAYS TO BRAIN TRAIN

TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION Choose a random word with no "attached energy" (so not Cheryl Cole or iPhone) and use it to block out the hurly-burly of life. meditationtrust.com

Pros You must never reveal to anyone what your mantra is, which is quite exciting in itself.

Cons The vibe is love beads and clapped-out hippies of the 1960s.

SILVA METHOD Jose Silva's kooky self-hypnosis technique involves imagining going down in a lift, walking along a corridor, turning into a room and chatting to whoever you need to sort out your issues with. It proved irresistible to New York denizens such as Andy Warhol and Calvin Klein and is now a multi-million-dollar business helping with addictions and anxiety. silvamethod.co.uk

Pros Retro cool and way more fun for the head than Pilates.

Cons A one-way ticket to becoming a serial fantasist.

LIGHTNING PROCESS A more prosaic version of the Silva Method, it involves exercising your mental love muscles as opposed to dwelling on misery. Esther Rantzen's daughter claimed it cured her of ME. lightningprocess.com

Pros Seeing life constantly through rose-tinted spectacles.

Cons Turns you into a bit of a Stepford Wife.

SOKA GAKKAI BUDDHISM Adherents of so-called celebrity Buddhism believe that by chanting "Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo" early every day, they gain mental cleansing and refreshment. Celebrities, including Tina Turner, Richard Gere and latterly Orlando Bloom, tend to join when they have love-life problems. No fee, although donations are welcome. sgi-uk.org

Pros It's okay to chant for a bigger car and a better job.

Cons Early rising, round-the-clock fresh fruit for your bedroom altar, and the framed photograph of a po-faced Japanese man you're supposed to hang on your wall.

EMO TRANCE Dr Silvia Hartmann teaches you to locate the emotional pain in your body, visualise it as smoke and watch it leave. feeling-good-therapies.com

Pros: Great for people who hate verbalising their problems.

Cons: You're stuffed if you're not a visual type.