1: Getting Started

About This Book

What you're holding now is a guidebook to getting the most out of your own mind.

I wish I'd known enough to write this book when the first of my four children was starting high school. A lot of suffering, theirs and mine, could have been avoided. The upside for you is that you get to benefit from all that suffering and the experience that came of it. How cool is that?

This book was written for you, the student. Whether you're in high school, college, grad school, trade school, or any other environment where you're being taught, tested, and graded, there are tips and techniques in here that can help you fine-tune your habits, your methods, and your mind itself.

Some of the material you're about to read is simply common sense. Unless this is the first time you've explored ways to get better results in school, chances are you'll have heard some of this already. That's okay, though. Even if you are already doing some or all of those things and enjoying the benefits, it may surprise you to find how a little fine-tuning of your mind can dovetail with those tried-and-true behaviors and make the whole process of learning smooth, pleasant, and natural for you.

Where this book departs from other manuals on study habits is in the method you'll use to adopt and complement those habits. The first several chapters are devoted to the concepts and practice of self hypnosis.

First we'll discuss how your mind works, placing emphasis in particular on

how it learns. You'll learn to recognize the way your mind prefers to store and retrieve information, which is vital to figuring out how to study effectively. We'll explore how stress can affect your learning ability because self hypnosis is a powerful tool for combating stress. A brief discussion of some of the most common myths and misconceptions about hypnosis will finish the process of getting you ready to start hypnotizing yourself.

Once you understand those fundamentals about your mind, learning, and what hypnosis is, you'll learn how to put yourself into trance and give yourself suggestions. Entire books have been written on self hypnosis – I have several myself – but you can get fine results with the simple self inductions and suggestion advice in this section. I'll teach you how to construct your suggestions so that they are effective and easy to use, and provide some good tips on when, where, and how to practice your self hypnosis.

The rest of the book focuses on the habits, beliefs, and behaviors that will help you become a better student. You'll read about studying, test anxiety, classroom activities, homework and assignments – that common-sense stuff I mentioned earlier. But this time, every tip, trick, and recommendation you'll read will include advice on how you can use self hypnosis to absorb that concept and make it part of the way you naturally think, act, and work. That is the combination that will teach you to fine tune your mind so that learning becomes a natural thing.

By reading this book and practicing your self hypnosis, you'll be mastering your mind at the same time that you master your studies. Which do you think will ultimately be the greater benefit?

<MR>

Facts About Hypnosis and Self Hypnosis

A number of people are apprehensive about hypnosis, even self hypnosis. Usually that fear comes from misinformation. If your knowledge about hypnosis comes from movies and television, certain fundamentalist preachers, or the dark corners of the Internet, chances are you "know" a lot about hypnosis that isn't so. Let's start by clearing that stuff out of the way.

Hypnosis is not sleep. To a casual observer, someone in hypnosis may appear to be asleep. They are usually relaxed, they breathe slowly, and they often ignore noises around them (like said observer asking, "Hey, are you asleep?"). The resemblance to sleep was enough to prompt Dr. James Braid to coin the word *hypnosis* based on the name of Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep.

The truth, however, is that a person in hypnosis is fully conscious. A hypnotized person is using their mind in a very powerful and natural way. They are aware of everything going on around them and are quite able to respond to that annoying observer if they feel like it. Being in hypnosis is a very pleasant sensation, though, so people often choose to ignore distractions instead of responding to them.

Hypnosis is not an abnormal state of mind. People go in and out of trance states every day. At an absolute minimum, you spent time in hypnosis this morning when your mind was making the transition from sleep to wakefulness. You'll do it again tonight when you go back to sleep.

Normal people often slip into hypnotic states during the day as well. Have you ever gotten so absorbed in a movie or TV show that two hours went by in a flash? Arrived at a familiar destination, shut off the car, and realized you don't consciously remember the trip? Caught yourself daydreaming to the point where your friend was talking to you and you completely ignored them? Congratulations – those are all forms of the trance state. You may be in trance right now, so engrossed in reading this book that your mind has been ignoring those subtle noises in the room around you. You notice them now because I'm drawing your attention to them, but a moment ago you were oblivious. That's okay; it's natural. Self hypnosis is about learning to induce that state deliberately and then using it for your own benefit.

Hypnosis is not mind control. It's been said over and over, even in those infamous bad movies and TV shows: a hypnotized person can not be made to do anything against their will. That's the truth and, ultimately, the limiting factor to anyone can do with hypnosis.

In my professional hypnosis practice I often run into clients who want me to "make" them stop smoking, lose weight, or what have you. One of the first things I do with these clients is determine whether they really want to make that change or not. If it turns out that the client has come to me to stop smoking, for example, because her spouse is nagging her about it, I end the session then and there and send the client home. Why? Because unless the clients wants that change for herself, her subconscious will resist my suggestions and the results, if we get any at all, will be short-lived.

If hypnosis really worked the way it does in the movies, I'd have the easiest job in the world. My clients would always succeed in whatever they asked me to help them do and they'd pay me top dollar for compelling them to do it. My kids would keep their rooms clean, my local politicians would keep their campaign promises, and I'd get outstanding service every time I go out for dinner. Alas, reality is a lot less tidy. Even the best hypnotist can't force anyone to do something they aren't willing to do.

Hypnosis does not open your mind to Satan. Even in this modern, enlightened age, there are those who cling to the belief that when you allow yourself to be hypnotized your mind becomes empty and pliable, and Satan will use that opportunity to enter your mind and compel you to evil. It's easy to mock that belief but a frightening number of people have it.

Debating religion is futile, so rather than address what Satan is or does let me focus on the idea that hypnosis makes your mind empty and pliable. It doesn't. Hypnosis brings a specific part of your mind, the subconscious, to the forefront and allows you more easily to alter your habits, behaviors, and beliefs. When in hypnosis you are mentally very active – you are focused, aware, and concentrating.

The purpose of that state is to make it easier for your mind to accept beneficial suggestions, yes. No matter how deeply into hypnosis you go, though, there is always a part of your mind that evaluates each suggestion against your personal morals and beliefs. Ernest and Josephine Hilgard, a team of well-known hypnosis researchers, named this part the *hidden observer*. That hidden observer blocks any suggestion that your mind considers dangerous, immoral, or impossible, which leads back to the fact that hypnosis is not mind control. If I can't control your mind with hypnosis, then neither can Satan.

Hypnosis does not make you a zombie. A staple of sketch comedy and

sitcoms is the “accidental” suggestion – someone goes into hypnosis, hears someone nearby say something that sounds like a suggestion, so they obey it.

Just as Satan doesn't enter your mind when you're hypnotized, neither are you going to indiscriminately obey anyone else who happens to walk by while you're in trance. You know, no matter how deeply into hypnosis you go, what is going on around you. You know whose voice you intend to take suggestions from – in this case, your own – and you can and will disregard any random stranger or mischievous friend suggesting that you cluck like a chicken. This, too, is a function of the hidden observer.

Hypnosis is not fake. Like the Satan thing, I shouldn't have to tell you this. However, there are still an astonishing number of people – some of them very learned people – who maintain that there is no such thing as hypnosis. These individuals claim that the behavior of people in hypnosis is just *social compliance*, meaning that people view the hypnotist as an authority figure and are unconsciously just trying to please.

Thanks to new technologies like FMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging), though, studies in the last decade or so have proven that hypnosis is a distinct state of consciousness that is different from normal waking or sleep. There are specific physical changes in the brain during hypnosis, such as an increase in activity in the anterior cingulate gyrus. Study subjects hypnotized and instructed to visualize a specific color show brain activity in the visual cortex, where control subjects given the same instruction without being hypnotized do not. This is all recent work and more will be forthcoming, so with any luck in another decade or so I'll be able to take this section out of the book.

Having now devoted so much space to what hypnosis is not, fairness dictates that I tell you what hypnosis actually is.

The problem is, I can't.

We know a lot about hypnosis these days. We know how to get someone into hypnosis reliably; how to use that state to change behaviors, create physical phenomena such as anesthesia and catalepsy; unlock hidden memories and (accidentally or otherwise) implant false ones; give suggestions that will affect behavior after the trance is over; emerge someone from trance safely. We can even point to FMRI images showing distinct parts of the brain affected by trance and by the suggestions we give. When it comes to defining exactly what hypnosis is, though, we come up short.

Experts do concur on a few parameters. Hypnosis is generally agreed to be a state of focused concentration in which the mind is usually more receptive to suggestion than when in the normal waking state. It is generally understood to be a cooperative process, requiring consent at some level in order to achieve any result.

Exactly how it feels to go into hypnosis varies with the individual, the circumstances, and often additional random factors. Some people feel a sense of detachment, of becoming distant and disconnected from their bodies. Others seem to retreat into themselves, feeling intensely connected to their bodies but deliberately passive. One client of mine described the feeling as “moving to the passenger seat” in her body. What you feel when you go into trance is going to be unique to you. Don't be surprised if the sensation changes as you get more practice and start using self hypnosis in different environments.

You'll notice throughout this book that I use *hypnosis* and *self hypnosis* interchangeably. There's a very good reason for that: as many an authority on the subject has noted, all hypnosis is self hypnosis.

Think of trance as a place you would like to drive to but have never visited before on purpose. There are basically two ways you can get there: you can get good directions, perhaps a map, and follow them to find the spot; or you can have someone who's been there before ride with you and guide you as you drive. Both ways will work. Whichever you choose, it's still your car.

When you visit a hypnotist and have that person guide you into trance and give you suggestions, we call that *hetero hypnosis*. It's analogous to having someone ride with you and give you turn-by-turn instructions. A lot of people first learn about hypnosis this way, and there's a lot to be said for using a trained, professional hypnotist.

For purposes of this book, however, the focus is on *self hypnosis*. You will shortly be learning how you, without a hypnotist present, can guide yourself into the hypnotic state and use that state for your own purposes. Like using the map, the first couple of times you go into trance by yourself you may get a little lost. With practice, though, you'll find it easier and quicker each time to get where you want to be.