



Not a fan of the gym? With this new workout, getting fit is all in your head, says **Helen Croydon**

ARE you sitting comfortably? Well, you can stay that way because I have the best news yet about exercise. You don't necessarily need to do it to get the benefits. You can just *imagine* doing it.

So cancel that gym membership, close your eyes and imagine doing your sit-ups and burpees. Don't believe me? Just ask Tessa Guy, a personal trainer who has devised a series of workouts based on the phenomenon known as Active Imagery.

The concept of rehabilitative imagery (visualising actions) is thought to be one of the most ancient



Mind over matter: Tessa Guy devised the visualised workout after being diagnosed with cancer

forms of healing – activities such as imagining you're on a beach to aid relaxation or being surrounded by colours to enhance your mood. Sports champions such as golfer Luke Donald and athlete Sally Gunnell both used the technique ahead of competition.

Now Tessa has taken the concept a step further with Active Imagery audio workouts.

'I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2010,' she says. 'I was aware of the benefits of exercise for recovery but there were many days when I was just too exhausted to exercise.'

'I started to read science books about the impact of thought imagery, so I decided to apply it to my own workouts.'

It may sound bonkers but studies do support it. One, by The Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Ohio, found that people who visualised doing biceps curls five times a week for two weeks increased their strength by 13.5 per cent. Another, on elite skiers, found that those who mentally rehearsed going down a slope fired off

the same electrical impulses in their brain as those who actually skied down the mountain.

Researchers believe that the visualisation process stimulates the muscle fibres and strengthens the mind-body map to allow muscles to perform optimally later.

So, is it as easy as it sounds?

I downloaded one of Tessa's audio workouts from her website, In Mind In Body. She has an 'activate and regenerate' range, which features gentle movements designed to activate muscles after injury (the sort a physio might prescribe).

The 'accelerate' range is for able-bodied people who want to get down to a full-on imaginary gym workout. That's me.

I opt for a legs and abs session. It's only ten minutes of eight sets of eight reps. I lie down and am told to take three deep breaths to oxygenate my body. Then

a calm voice talks me through barbell squats. It's important to imagine it in real time. I 'stand' with feet shoulder-width apart (even though I'm lying down) and imagine lowering my bum and powering up, activating my glutes. I 'do' this eight times before moving on to imaginary dumbbell lunges. Exhausted? Not yet. Aches the next day? Um, no. So, is this just a lazy person's workout?

Tessa admits it's not a substitute if you can't make the gym (or are too hungover) – it's something to do as a supplement.

'We still need our cells oxygenated and the respiratory system needs activating,' she says. 'But there are times when we are prohibited from exercise. This is a good way of keeping the neural pathways for activating muscles alive. We know elite athletes use imagery to peak performance, so there's no reason we can't follow suit.'



Winner: Gold-medal Sally Gunnell used visualisation ahead of races

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