

Spellbinding Situations— Why and How Hypnosis Works

by Dan Harvey

Relax.

This Is Easy to Understand.

Just Relax.

Concentrate on the Words in This Story.

That's It.

Yes, you too might be hypnotized without even realizing it.

That sounds like sideshow ballyhoo, but the idea comes closer to reality than what you may think. Indeed, hypnosis is something we often do to ourselves. Want to get a basic sense of what it's like? Rent a riveting DVD—perhaps a spellbinding thriller like *The Manchurian Candidate*.

The original 1962 version is appropriate and not because it involves hypnotism. In fact, the plot premise—an army officer is hypnotized to assassinate a popular politician—is scientifically invalid. “In reality, no subject can be transformed into an automaton who responds to suggestions in robot-like fashion,” says Steven Jay Lynn, PhD, professor of psychology and director of the Psychological Clinic at Binghamton University in New York.

Rather, the film makes a good choice because it invokes what D. Corydon

Hammond, PhD, refers to as the “everyday trance.”

“Everyone has these when they become totally wrapped up in an activity, like watching a good movie,” explains Hammond, a psychologist and professor at the University of Utah School of Medicine. “It’s an experience of total concentration, where they block everything else out.”

As such, an absorbed viewer experiences something much closer to a true hypnotic state than the film’s tragic character. “Everyone has this ability to focus (their) concentration as powerfully as a magnifying glass that concentrates sunlight into a burning pinpoint, but they just don’t think of it in hypnotic terms,” Hammond says.

A Suggestive Situation

During formalized hypnosis, a hypnotist harnesses that inherent ability, facilitating an individual’s power to con-

centrate. As such, hypnotism really represents collaboration and not one person exercising power over another. “Subjects are actively engaged in the process, thinking and imagining along with what the hypnotist suggests,” Lynn explains.

“Basically, all hypnosis is really a form of self-hypnosis,” adds Hammond, a past president of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis.

Lynn agrees: “Subjects are really the ones generating the experience.”

Lynn defines hypnosis as a situation in which a subject receives suggestions for changes in behaviors, thoughts, sensations and perceptions consistent with therapeutic goals.

Clinical Value

In clinical applications, hypnosis serves as an adjunct to different therapeutic approaches and can enhance effects of particular treatments. Common hypnotherapeutic applications include smoking cessation, weight loss, stress and anxiety reduction, irritable bowel syndrome, and headache and migraine relief. Research also demonstrates its effectiveness in acute and chronic pain management. “In highly responsive subjects, hypnosis provides more analgesic relief than morphine,” Hammond points out, adding that hypnosis is used in painful medical procedures such as bone-marrow aspirations, breast biopsies and childbirth.

Hypnosis is also useful with surgery. Clinical studies show that it speeds up recovery, and reduces bleeding and pain. “I’ve used it in arthroscopic knee surgery and plastic surgery, and it benefits patients who are sensitive to anesthesia,” Hammond says. “I’ve taken a patient through a four-hour surgery with hypnosis as the sole anesthesia.”

However, the impact of hypnosis across the board varies, as some people are simply more responsive than others. “About 15 to



20 percent of the population is highly suggestible, while an equal percentage is not very suggestible," Lynn says. "The rest are moderately suggestible. But success often depends on a subject's motivation."

Still, success is sometimes more than a matter of will. "Some people are just naturally hypnotically talented and studies have suggested a genetic component related to brain function," Hammond says. "But research has been limited and more needs to be done."

Fact vs. Fancy

Along with motivation, attitude and possible genetic factors, a person's hypnotic experience can be influenced by misperceptions. Here are some common myths:

People lose total consciousness. Research reveals that a subject isn't asleep or unconscious. Rather, hypnosis fosters a hyperattentive and responsive state, Lynn says.

Left-brain people can't be hypnotized. "Left brain versus right brain notions represent gross overgeneralizations, as the two hemispheres are always working together," Hammond says.

Subjects always forget what happens. Actually, spontaneous amnesia is very rare and typically only occurs in people


who anticipate suffering memory loss.

Hypnosis is dangerous. It's no more dangerous than normal sleep, and no evidence exists that indicates it causes physical, emotional or psychological damage.

Subjects can be compelled to perform acts they normally wouldn't. "Even a very suggestible subject can resist and oppose a suggestion at will," Lynn says. "A mild-mannered person can't be turned into a cold-blooded killer."

Myths and misperceptions are fostered by movies as well as the stage routines, says Lynn, who has devoted much of his career to establishing a clear, scientific understanding of hypnotic suggestion.

During performances, the stage hypnotist, using a fun and clever screening process, only selects people from the audience who appear highly suggestible. Once they're on stage, the selected subjects—often fueled by a drink or two as well as their own extroverted nature—essentially respond to social pressure and performance demands to help put on a good show. "As such, they'll do strange and unusual things such as clucking like a chicken or playing an air guitar," Lynn says.

He concludes: "You need to keep all of that separate from serious scientific and clinical application." 



One of the biggest myths about hypnotism is that a hypnotist can compel an unwitting subject to perform an act against his or her will. Motion pictures have promulgated this notion, often in lurid fashion, in low-budget horror films, where hypnotic suggestions involved far more than clucking like a chicken. Here are a few of the most ridiculous examples:

- In *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957), a mad scientist uses a sequence of hypnosis sessions to transform Michael Landon into the title character.
- *Horrors of the Black Museum* (1959) is about a best-selling author who hypnotizes his assistant to commit lurid murders that he could later write about.
- In *The Hypnotic Eye* (1960), an evil mesmerist hypnotizes beautiful women to disfigure themselves. One of them accomplishes the posthypnotic directive with an acid facial.
- *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (1964) relates how a gypsy fortuneteller hypnotizes a young man to grab a knife, don a hoodie and go on a murder spree.

A Hypnotic History

The word hypnosis derives from the name of the Greek god of sleep, "Ypnos." As such, the term is a bit of a misnomer, as hypnosis isn't a sleep state or even an unconscious one. However, the derivation does help indicate its long history. People of ancient Greece employed hypnosis for therapeutic purposes around the 4th century BC. Also, Hindus in ancient Egypt used hypnosis in so-called sleep temples for curative purposes.

However, the term hypnosis wasn't used until the 18th century when research and application had spread to Western societies. Scottish physician James Braid is credited with creating the term in 1842, around the time when he developed the hypnotic procedure as we know it today. Later, Braid realized the term "hypnosis" was an inaccurate description. He wanted to change it to "monoideism" (for single idea-ism), but the other name had already caught on.

Braid, who is referred to "the father of modern hypnotism," employed the practice to try and treat both physical and psychological disorders. But it would take a century before researchers and physicians in the United States accepted hypnotism as a beneficial therapeutic practice.