

LINE ON LIFE

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The Mystery of Hypnosis

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Most of us have heard about hypnosis, but it seems to be a strange and sometimes frightening phenomenon. Most people do not understand hypnosis. In fact, psychologists don't know exactly what it is...yet. Because hypnosis has long been used as a form of entertainment, many psychologists have looked down on anything related to hypnosis.

In recent years, some psychologists have made strong efforts to understand this mysterious process. What is hypnosis? How does someone hypnotize another person? What are the qualities of a good hypnotic subject?

Before we start talking about hypnosis, I want to give a word of caution. Hypnosis can be *dangerous*, especially when tried by an inexperienced person. Do not try experimenting on your own with hypnosis. If you are interested in hypnosis, contact a qualified expert to learn more about it.

Most psychologists would agree that **hypnosis** is a *trance-like, altered state of consciousness, characterized by narrowed attention and increased openness to suggestion*.

Interest in hypnosis began in the eighteenth century with Franz Anton Mesmer, an Austrian physician. (This is why another term for hypnosis is "*mesmerism*.") Mesmer believed that he could cure diseases by passing magnets over the body. For a while, Mesmer's theory of "*animal magnetism*" enjoyed quite a following. However, under closer investigation, Mesmer's theories were rejected by the medical profession, and he was branded as a quack and a fraud. Even so, one member of the investigating committee, Benjamin Franklin, concluded that suggestion might have been a causative factor, even though "*animal magnetism*" was not.

Later, a respected English surgeon, James Braid, used mesmerism to anesthetize patients for operations. Since his patients appeared to be asleep, he coined the term, "*hypnosis*" to describe his method. The Greek word, "*hypnos*," means "*sleep*." Although the subject may seem to be asleep, the hypnotic trance is very different from sleep. For example EEG (brain wave) recordings made during hypnosis are like those obtained from a person who is wide awake.

How can you induce a hypnotic trance? The hypnotist may ask subjects to fix their gaze on a swinging pendulum, a second hand of a watch or a point of light. (However, there are about as many different hypnotic routines as there are hypnotists.) If the subject does not want to be hypnotized, *no hypnotist can force the subject into a trance*. The subject must *trust* the hypnotist, who invites the subject to enter the trance. Speaking in a

soft, even tone, the hypnotist encourages the subject to relax, become calm and drowsy, and listen only to the hypnotist's voice. The subject is encouraged to give up control and not worry about anything. On the other hand, the subject must be willing to give up control, to be receptive to the hypnotist's suggestions and to tolerate distortions in time, space and causality.

Continued repetition of the softly murmured invitation will eventually lead to the hypnotic trance. (If the subject has never been hypnotized before, the process will take longer.) Subjects describe the trance as a state of calmness, mental relaxation and detachment. Hypnotic subjects are content to be passive. They don't feel like making plans or doing things. Often they describe their minds as being "*blank*."

The hypnotized subject is extremely receptive to the suggestions of the hypnotist. If the hypnotist asks the subject to do something, the subject usually seems happy to oblige. As an example, stage hypnotists often tell subjects that they are at a picnic, eating a sandwich. The subjects will go through the motions of eating an invisible sandwich. If asked how it tastes, the subject will describe it in detail. If the hypnotist says that the sandwich is "*full of ants*," the subject will immediately start to spit out invisible ants.

Who can be hypnotized? Not everyone can be hypnotized. About 10% of us will not respond at all, and only 5-10% of us can enter into the deepest levels of a hypnotic trance. Most of us will respond to some aspects of hypnotic suggestions, but less than half will be "good" hypnotic subjects. Contrary to what some people think, the best subjects are not stupid. Subjects have to be intelligent enough to concentrate and understand what the hypnotist is saying. With the added requirement of trust, this makes the typical seven-year-old child the best hypnotic subject.

Many different types of personalities are susceptible. In 1970, psychological researcher Ernest Hilgard reported that susceptible individuals are those who are confident, outgoing, interested in subjective experiences, and capable of becoming wrapped up in imaginative experiences. Other work has shown that sensation seekers tend to make good subjects. On the other hand, Hilgard also found that persons subjected to strict childhood punishment may be more responsive to following orders and more prone to escaping into fantasy — making them good hypnotic subjects. Thus evidence suggests that very different kinds of people may be susceptible. In other words, there is no one personality that is easily hypnotized.

What can be done under hypnosis? Hypnotic suggestions are most effective **perception** and **sensation**. Given proper instructions, a subject can be made to smell a bottle of ammonia and respond to it as if it were a wonderful perfume. It is also possible to alter color vision, hearing sensitivity, time sense, perception of illusions and many other perceptual responses. If hypnotized deeply enough, subjects can be made to report visual and auditory hallucinations — seeing and hearing things that are not there. At deepest levels, subjects report *negative hallucinations* — they act as if they do not perceive objects or people, which are actually present. (Have you ever seen a stage hypnotist suggestion to his subjects that the audience has no clothes on?)

The greatest value of hypnosis in the perceptual area is the ability to **control pain**, especially in situations where chemical painkillers cannot be used. Hypnosis has been used to control pain in dentistry, childbirth and phantom limb pain. (Phantom limb pains are recurring pains that amputees feel coming from the missing limb.)

There is some evidence that hypnosis can enhance **memory**. However, it frequently increases the number of *false* memories as well. (This is why there is so much controversy about hypnotizing witnesses in criminal cases.) False memories also cause controversy with **age regression** — subjects are told they are "*going back*" in their life and becoming younger and younger. Although long-buried childhood memories can be brought out, some may be distortions. The subjects may be "*remembering*" events as they were described to them at some later date. Other subjects may merely "*role play*" — acting "*as if*" they were a younger age. Some research evidence suggests that hypnotically regressed subjects had no more accurate memories than nonhypnotized subjects. To say the least, the effect of hypnosis on memory is still controversial.

Subjects can be instructed to forget what they have learned in a trance. In other words, they have **amnesia** for the trance period. Although it is not certain whether subjects really forget or just won't say that they remember, the pattern of memory errors suggests real amnesia. *Specific* material can also be forgotten. If told they will forget the number "3," subjects cannot count properly. Although they know that they have five fingers, when asked to count them, it always comes out to six ("*1, 2, 4, 5, 6*"). You can imagine how frustrating it is for the subjects. Just as amnesia can be caused by suggestion, most memories can be quickly brought back by an opposite suggestion.

Can a person be made to do illegal or immoral acts? It depends. If subjects are asked directly to do something against their moral or ethic code, they will almost immediately come out of the trance and refuse to do the behavior. However — if they secretly want to do the forbidden behavior but are afraid of the consequences under normal conditions — they might comply with the request. So if a woman — whose secret desire was to be a stripper — was asked to take off her clothes, she might do it. One possible explanation is that she sees the hypnotist, not herself, as being responsible for her behavior.

Another possibility is that the subject could be "*tricked*" into doing the forbidden behavior. If the woman was staunchly against public nudity, she could be asked to model a nonexistent wardrobe. After changing into her "*clothes*" in another room, the woman could come out stark naked, but thinking that she is modeling an acceptable outfit. Potentially, situations could be setup so people could feel justified in lying, stealing or even killing. (However, the same is also true with people who have not been hypnotized.)

Can people be hypnotized to have superhuman strength? In contrast to what many people think, hypnosis has no more effect on physical abilities than merely encouraging subjects to make their best effort. Some people may have tried *self-hypnosis* and greatly improved their physical performances. However, another term for self-hypnosis could be *will power*.

Why hasn't *your* will power worked? That is easily explained. When trying to excel, we say to ourselves, "*I can do it! I can do it!*" However, many of us cancel out this suggestion by adding, "*Who am I kidding? I can't do that!*" Then — sure enough — we can't!

The power of hypnosis lies within the subject not with the hypnotist.

Some of the "*superhuman*" feats of strength demonstrated by stage hypnotists are merely **tricks**. Such a trick involves having a person lie down on three chairs — one under his head, one under his buttocks, and one under his feet. The hypnotist gives a suggestion of rigidity and removes the center chair. Miraculously, the person remains there supported only by the two end chairs! It isn't such a miracle. An average person can do the same thing. Even you can — unless you tell yourself that you can't.

To sum it up, the power of hypnosis — what there is of it — lies *within the subject*, not with the hypnotist. Most of what you can do with hypnosis — you can also do without hypnosis. Essentially the hypnotist becomes a trusted coach, whose suggestions you follow without question. You can be your own coach. *You can do it!*

* Adapted from Houston, Bee & Rimm's *Essentials of Psychology*, Academic Press, 1985, pages 104-106 and Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West, 1986, pages 137-140.