

Hypnosis

by James K. Walker

Founder: The father of modern hypnosis is Franz Anton Mesmer.

Founding date: A practice of unknown ancient origin, modern hypnosis can be traced to Mesmer's therapeutic use of Animal Magnetism in 1773.

Other Names and Related Terms: Mesmerism, Trance, Altered States of Consciousness, Induction, Hypnotherapy, Post Hypnotic Suggestion, Past Life Therapy.

HISTORY

Hypnosis has long been linked to ancient religious practices and eastern mystical experiences involving similar trance states or altered states of consciousness. Such altered states are essential to such practices as out-of-body experiences, astral projection, and Yoga. William Kroger, M.D. and William Fezler Ph.D. maintain that, "hypnosis has been practiced in one form or another in the civilized and uncivilized world under many different labels since the dawn of history." They further note that historically elements of hypnosis have been an integral part of pagan religious practices and world religions including Assyro-Babylonian exorcism, Egyptian soothsaying, Jewish mysticism, Byzantine Catholicism, Chinese Taoism, Sufism, Hinduism, Shintoism, forms of Buddhism (Tibetan and Zen), and Yoga.¹

The modern practice of hypnosis in Europe and America, however, can be traced to the controversial practice of German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) who developed a technique known as Mesmerism. His practice was based on a theory called "Animal Magnetism" which held that the human body contains an invisible "fluid" that is affected by the planets and stars or by magnets. Blockage of the fluid was thought to be the cause of much disease and Mesmer believed that he could release the blockage through a crisis event that consisted of a trance state utilizing iron rods and "magnetic fluid." As part of his treatment, Mesmer "walked around, touched the patients; they fell into convulsions, sweated, vomited, cried — and were healed."²

The medical establishment largely rejected Mesmer's theories attributing the alleged healings to vivid imaginations. Others rejected the animal magnetism explanation but focused on the accompanying trance noting that mesmerized patients appeared to be "subject to the least suggestion, whether by word, look, gesture or thought." Eventually, occult practitioners such as clairvoyants and spiritualists incorporated variations of Mesmer's techniques further alienating Mesmerism from traditional medicine.³

In Britain efforts to harmonize Mesmerism were made by divorcing the induced trance from Mesmer's theories of Animal Magnetism. The Scottish physician, James Braid (1795–1860) coined the word "hypnosis" after discovering that all of the effects of mesmeric trances — including hallucination — could be achieved without the presence of magnets. By 1893 a committee of the British Medical Association concluded that the mesmeric state was different than the hypnotic state and that the latter was beneficial in relieving certain pain and disorders.⁴

Experimentation with hypnosis played an important part in the early development of Psychiatry and Psychology. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) used hypnotic suggestion as an integral part of his therapy until it was gradually replaced by his "free association" psychoanalytic technique. Freud never rejected hypnosis. Indeed, he claimed that it was the future of analysis, seeing his "free association" as a natural outgrowth of hypnosis.⁵

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Hypnosis was eventually incorporated into Psychology and seen as an adjunct therapy. The term “Hypnotherapy” was later adapted to describe “the use of hypnosis as a technique to be employed in conjunction with other skills by a trained psychotherapist, physician, or dentist.” One popular technique is Indirect Hypnotherapy, developed by Milton Erickson, in which elements of hypnosis are subtly introduced or “embedded” into counseling sessions without the client’s knowledge. This form of hypnosis was influential in the development of Neurolinguistic Programming by Richard Bandler and Dr. John Grinder.⁶

Another form of Hypnotherapy involves the discovery of forgotten or repressed memories. Just as a hypnotist can effectively suggest that the subject “forget” events that take place during the trance, he can also elicit memories or details of events long forgotten by the conscious mind. Critics warn that these “recovered memories” may not correspond with reality. The phenomenon is too similar to the testimonies of those who are able to “remember” through hypnosis being abducted by aliens on a UFO or to those who recount vivid memories of reincarnation after being regressed back to some alleged previous lifetime.⁷

Many of the early myths of hypnosis have been disproved and the medical and mental healthcare communities have generally accepted the practice. Many Christians, however, remain troubled by its occult history, the lack of a scientific consensus on how or why hypnosis works, the potential of unethical influence, and its possible link to biblical prohibitions against “charming” or “enchanting.”⁸

THEORY

One of the troubling aspects of Hypnosis is that there is no generally accepted theory to explain either physiologically or psychologically exactly what is taking place in the human mind under hypnosis. “Psychologically, hypnosis has been explained as a role-playing response, a primitive phylogenetic response, a conditioned response, a special form of transference, or a regressive phenomenon. Research continues on all these theories, and currently none can be eliminated.”⁹

While no one can fully explain how or why it works, there is a generally accepted theory regarding the effect of hypnosis—a substantially reduced ability to think rationally and a remarkable susceptibility to suggestion. When a subject is hypnotized, the result is a

...shift in concentration, executed in a passive manner (such as occurs in daydreaming or sleeping), resulting in a state of consciousness distinguishably different from alertness or ordinary sleep. It is characterized by narrowing of attention, reduced rational criticalness, and increased response to suggestion.¹⁰

This phenomenon is demonstrated by stage hypnotists who can convince their subjects to believe preposterous claims or perform ridiculous and embarrassing acts. The hypnotized subject has evidently lost much of his or her ability to think critically and seems perfectly willing to believe as fact whatever the hypnotist suggests. Apparently, the subconscious mind, under the influence of hypnosis has difficulty with epistemological and ethical discernment. The hypnotized subject has a sharp decline in his or her ability to tell fact from fantasy or to decide between what is right or wrong. The loss of ethical or moral decision-making skills is discussed by Ankerberg and Weldon who cite Dr. J. Meerloo, a psychiatric consultant in the geriatric department of the Municipal Health Service of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Meerloo warns,

Several textbooks on hypnosis inform us that the patients’ superego is strong enough to protect him against immoral suggestions given in a trance. Experimental hypnosis has shown that this is not the case. The art of moral seduction is based on repeated fragmentized suggestions that gradually permit the other party to give in to what he or she would never have done without those repeated suggestions.... The act of suicide,

especially, can be suggested.... I called this criminal suggestive strategy *psychic homicide*...¹¹

Concerning the potential dangers and/or misuse of hypnosis, Ankerberg and Weldon cite seven published studies from *The International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* and the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*.¹²

INDUCTION TECHNIQUES

Stereotyped by cinema and television is the classic induction technique of a swinging pendulum or a pocket watch waved back and forth in front of the eyes of the subject. While professionals may be able to induce hypnosis using a variation of this technique, the practice of swinging a pendulum seems to be somewhat rare.

Leslie M. LeCron writes, “Gadgets of one kind or another are sometimes used in inductions, although they are quite unnecessary.” He recommends induction techniques involving combinations of the following: guided imagery, visualization, counting backwards, eye fixation, breath control and slightly swaying the subject’s upper body in a slight clockwise circle.¹³

Guided Imagery, considered one of the most powerful induction techniques, consists of talking the subject through an imaginary journey where with a soft voice the hypnotist takes them on a walk through the forest or a trip to the beach. “Good, now I want you to picture yourself strolling in the park on a lovely summer day.... Go to the hammock, let your body sink into it....” Throughout the exercise the subject is given suggestions to reinforce or deepen the trance. “As you walk along feeling so peaceful, so relaxed...”¹⁴

Exercises like this are sometimes used in the workplace and are often used in schools (kindergarten through college). The practice may be called directed fantasy, guided meditation, a day at the beach, mini-vacation, etc. Because of its popularity, it is disturbing to know that this practice is recognized by much of the popular literature as one of the standard induction techniques for hypnosis.

Many styles of induction exist, all incorporating a gradual shift in attention with a reduction in external awareness.... Frequently the induction encourages the subject to focus his attention, either through focusing his eyes on something external (eye fixation technique) or through focusing internally on breathing or any other sensation (e.g., muscle tension). Further suggestions of comfort, relaxation, or rest are then clearly and calmly given along with compatible visual, auditory, or physical images such as a beach, stairs, or floating on clouds.¹⁵

A common misconception concerning induction is that one can never be hypnotized against the will. *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology* notes that this is only a half-truth.

A hypnotic induction does require the cooperation of the individual, and a trance can be resisted. Nevertheless, the individual’s participation may not be a conscious response, and people can enter into hypnosis without knowing that they do so. Erickson is famous in this regard, due to his skill... to induce a trance without preparation or awareness by the subject. The ethics of this may be debated...¹⁶

Hypnotic induction can take place without the subject’s knowledge or permission. In theory, once induced suggestions and commands given can have long-lasting effects through a phenomenon known as post hypnotic suggestion.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

The Bible warns against the practice of “charming” (*chabar* or *lachash*) and “enchanted” (*nachash*) (Deuteronomy 18:10-11, Isaiah 19:3). The exact meanings of the underlying Hebrew words are debatable. Brown, Driver, and Briggs note that the Hebrew root *chabar* primarily means to unite, bind together, or make occult spells but it is

sometimes used in reference to charming a snake — a practice ostensibly similar to human hypnosis.¹⁷ Consistent with the voice of the hypnotist during induction, the Hebrew root word *lachash* translated *charmer* can be defined “to speak in a soft and gentle manner; applied to the charming of serpents, probably by soft and gentle sounds.”¹⁸

It is difficult to know if “charming” is a direct reference to hypnosis as the evidence is somewhat circumstantial. The Bible, however, is replete with clear admonitions against involvement with the occult (Leviticus 19:26, 31; 2 Kings 21:6; Isaiah 47:9-13; Acts 8:9-11). This would prohibit any Christian association in those aspects of hypnosis that directly relate to the occult (spiritualism, channeling, past-life regression, divination, etc.) But what about non-religious use of hypnosis such as medical or psychological? Josh McDowell and John Stewart see a possible medical use (e.g., anesthesia) for hypnosis but warn: “A therapist may use hypnosis for crime investigation, UFO abduction recall, Satanic ritual abuse recall, multiple personality investigation, or some form of therapy. These are all spiritually dangerous because they release the mind to fantasize uncontrolled by reason.”¹⁹

There is general agreement that hypnotized individuals are somewhat vulnerable to uncritically accepting as true any suggestion given by the hypnotist. This factor alone creates the potential for misuse and deception. Some Christian researchers go a step further warning that it is possible for hypnotized subjects to be influenced by voices other than that of the hypnotist. They believe that in a trance state one is more susceptible to demonic oppression or even possession — especially if the subject has a history of occult experimentation.²⁰

Hypnosis can be indirectly linked to biblical admonitions against “charming.” It is historically linked to pagan and occult practices. Even proponents warn of the potential for misuse or unethical application. These factors coupled with the absence of a provable neutral, non-religious theory of hypnosis make hypnosis a potentially dangerous practice not recommended for Christians.

RECOMMENDED READING

Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs, John Ankerberg and John Weldon. This very thorough and user-friendly book contains a 39 page chapter on Hypnosis and Hypnotic regression that raises evangelical Christian concerns in a balanced and well-documented critique. Bibliography, index, 670 page paperback.

Hypnosis and the Christian, Martin and Deidre Bobgan. The authors discuss from a Christian perspective the possible dangers of deep hypnosis, the similarity to occult trance states, and a biblical evaluation. 61 page paperback.

Notes

¹ William S. Kroger & William D. Fezler, *Hypnosis and Behavior Modification: Imagery Conditioning* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1976) 6–8.

² Leslie A. Shepard, “Mesmerism,” *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, Vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1978) 598.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 599.

⁵ *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, David Benner ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985) 430, 543.

⁶ Ibid, 547, 548, 754.

⁷ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1996) 334–335.

⁸ Ibid, 309–310.

⁹ Benner, 545.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ankerberg & Weldon, 318.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Leslie M. LeCron, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 63–71.

¹⁴ Rachel Copelan, *How to Hypnotize Yourself and Others* (Hollywood: Lifetime Books, 1997) 94–95.

¹⁵ Benner, 546.

¹⁶ Ibid, 544.

¹⁷ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 288.

¹⁸ William Wilson, *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*, 74).

¹⁹ Josh McDowell and John Stewart, *The Occult*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1993) 113.

²⁰ Ankerberg & Weldon, 327-31.



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