

Introduction to Hypnotherapy

For those of you new to hypnotherapy there you may be wondering what is involved. It is simply the combination of hypnosis with psychotherapy and is a very profound and empowering intervention.

What is hypnosis?

There are many views on this currently in the field but my definition is; “a state of inward focus with heightened attention to suggestion”. There is nothing mystical or magical about it in my opinion – it is similar to the state you are in when you drive home without any recollection how you got there. It may not be magic but the results are amazingly powerful.

It is important that you understand a little about the process before you first experience hypnosis and we start using it to make the desired changes in your life so I have written some information here for you to answer a few questions you may have and also to dispel a few myths and misconceptions about hypnosis.

Common misconceptions include;

- You lose control – you will be made to do things you do not want to do

This one unfortunately comes from watching stage hypnotists who use various techniques to maintain an illusion of power. In reality you are always in control and can choose whether to respond or not to the suggestions of the hypnotherapist at all times. Those that are deemed ‘unacceptable’ to the subconscious will not be responded to.

- It is something the hypnotist does to you

It has been said that all hypnosis is self-hypnosis and this would seem to be the case. You can only enter hypnosis when you decide to do so. If the hypnotist were truly in control then all treatment results would be uniformly successful, something which is clearly not the case. Every person is unique and every session will be uniquely tailored to you as your needs and circumstances dictate. Ultimately it is your commitment and the rapport we build together which will determine success.

- You fall asleep or go unconscious

Unfortunately this one also has a long history with hypnotism as people have been told to go into “a deep sleep” and for a while hypnosis was believed to be some form of sleep state. In fact you are in a state of heightened awareness – quite the opposite. Although people do differ in how deeply they go most hypnotherapy is done in the lighter states of hypnosis where you are very much conscious and awake. Although relaxed you are still able to respond to the therapist. Being unconscious would be pointless – we need you to be fully responsive.

- You can’t hear or sense anything going on around you

This is completely erroneous - you can hear everything and respond to everything. Indeed that is vital to the process. The process is one of relaxation and focussed attention on inward sensation but you are required to listen to the suggestions being made by the therapist and respond to them should you wish to.

- You suffer memory loss afterwards

There are some instances where stage hypnotists have insisted that amnesia be present for certain events that occurred during hypnosis and the willing participants have obliged but this is not part of standard hypnotherapy procedure and would be unethical as well as unhelpful

- It is only the weak minded that can be hypnotised

This is completely untrue – it in fact requires a heightened imagination and intelligence to be hypnotised. Anyone can be hypnotised – though some will find it easier than others there are very few people who cannot – even those suffering from extreme anxiety find that once they let go of worrying about what ‘should’ be happening that they can find deep relaxation possible.

It is really important that you understand this and have an open mind about what 'should' or shouldn't be happening during the treatment. There is nothing that you have to do – just 'go with the flow' and try not to judge yourself or the process. Sometimes it may seem that you are being asked to do a variety of things and you are not sure why but trust that I always have your best interests at heart and that I always have a good reason. So it is important to have correct expectations about the hypnotic experience that you are going to have, and are able to ask any questions if you have any doubts or queries should you wish to enter treatment with me.

Two Different Levels of Mind: the conscious and sub/unconscious mind?

The Conscious Mind

In order to understand what hypnosis is and how it works, it is important to understand the concept of the two levels of mind; the conscious and subconscious minds. This is a *working model* (in other words it has no basis in the structure of the brain) based on an idea first developed by Freud who hypothesised two levels of mind each of which has different functions; the conscious mind is where we do most of our conscious processing, thinking, problem solving, etc and the unconscious mind is the one which works behind the scenes and is by far the largest part.

The conscious mind is the **problem solver**, responsible for analysing our day to day experience; it looks at problems and tries to create solutions to those problems. The second part of our conscious mind is our **rationale**, the part of us that wants to know why things happen and why we behave in particular ways. Over working this part of our brain can cause us to over focus on our problems as we try to figure them out – thus creating more problems for ourselves *as the more we focus on what we don't want the more of it we get!* By giving certain thoughts more credence they continue to hold power over us. More traditional methods of counselling or psychotherapy often look at why we do the things we do but may not necessarily give us the skills required to changing unwanted habits and behaviours. This is where hypnotherapy comes in.

The third part of our conscious mind is **will power**, that determination to succeed or change in some way. But unfortunately we know that sometimes it is not enough. How many times have we used our will power alone to make changes and found that our will power weakens and that change is temporary or non-existent? What about that diet or gym membership you started last New Year?? In fact it is often acknowledged that the more we engage will power the more likely we are to fail unless we have looked out our incorrect thinking around the situation – our so called 'cognition' first. This is the basis of all coaching and NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming) techniques which aim to look at beliefs first before expecting to change behaviour.

The final part of your conscious mind is your **short-term memory**. These are the things you need to remember in order to function. To know what year it is, how to use the phone etc. This is often the part that can disappear with strokes or severe depression.

In a working model of the mind the conscious mind is like a beam of light that focuses on what it needs to any particular time. Have you ever noticed that you can cut yourself but not feel the pain until you see it and suddenly it hurts! Similarly you can block out the things you don't need to focus on like other people's conversations, etc – until you hear your name that is. You were taking in the information subconsciously beneath the awareness of the conscious mind as the 'light beam' was focussed elsewhere.

Your Deeper Inner Self: Your Unconscious Mind

Below this level of awareness and controlling 95% of what we do is our unconscious/subconscious mind (they can be considered the same thing for our purposes). To use an analogy, think of it like an iceberg where the largest part is below the water, the unconscious lies 'beneath' the surface. It controls all of our **automatic functions** – our breathing, heart rate, etc which we don't have to consciously think about. It is therefore responsible for controlling basic essential functions without our awareness. This has probably given us an evolutionary advantage as, if all our brain power were taken up with thinking about breathing and the beating of our heart, there would have been very little left to know when to run from the sabre-toothed tiger now approaching us! Clearly there is an advantage to having the most basic functions running 'behind the scenes' without us having to think about it. Milton Erickson, the famous hypnotherapist, considered the unconscious the basis of our 'gut-feelings' or hunches about things. Indeed he believed that the unconscious mind is always listening and whether we are in hypnosis or not suggestions are always being acted upon.

Your unconscious mind is therefore tremendously powerful and controls a huge amount of our behaviour. Do you remember the first time you learned to ride a bike or drive a car – how difficult it was? Everything had to be learnt for the first time – after that it became easier because the unconscious was able to monitor and automate the individual actions so you didn't have to think about it. It does this every day, monitoring our blood pressure, heart rate and so on but, importantly, it also controls your behaviours and personality. This was learnt when we were young, by observing our parents, siblings and peers. We literally downloaded these responses to certain stimuli and then, as adults we repeat them even if they no longer serve the people we have become.

Your **long-term memory** is stored here too. Every experience you have had in your life is recorded here even though we may not remember those experiences. This is because it would simply overload the brain to have everything in conscious awareness all of the time when it is not needed. These memories continue to affect our behaviour even though we are not consciously aware of them. There is a view that the body (which is one with the mind anyway – we are a bodymind) also stores everything – so trauma can also be stored in the bodyⁱ

So, it is your unconscious mind where you get your **instincts or intuition**. You may have a 'gut feeling' that something isn't right – this is your unconscious communicating with you. With hypnosis we find a way of accessing that part of your brain and *updating the programming* that you downloaded about the world and your response to it so the automatic behaviour becomes one that *helps rather than hinders you*. It will enable you to **make powerful and profound changes**. The unconscious mind is a hugely powerful and unrecognised part of ourselves which we can use to our advantage by the suggestions we make during hypnosis; this is the essence of hypnotherapy.

ⁱ Levine, Peter. Healing the Tiger