

Hypnosis and Common Misconceptions

“You are very, very sleepy”, “I want you to fall asleep!”, “You shall do everything I say”, “When you wake up you will have forgotten everything”. Have you ever come across any of these phrases? I would guess that you have. In this article I shall break down what hypnosis is, and what it is *not*, as well as its scope of usage in the modern era, before finally dealing with the four main types of misconception; surrounding hypnosis itself, the hypnotic state, and the hypnotherapist and séances, before closing with the various other erroneous views on the subject.

Part 1: A Long Introduction

1) Definition

What is hypnosis? I could easily write a chapter or even an entire book in response to this question. I am therefore going to explain it quite simply here. According to the French Larousse dictionary, it is “a specific state of consciousness, between wakefulness and sleep, induced through suggestion”. It also denotes both a particular state of consciousness and all the techniques used to achieve this state of consciousness.

Hypnosis comes under the umbrella of “trance states”, which in turn form part of the various possible altered states of consciousness. A vast field... There are multiple ways of experiencing an “altered” state of consciousness. And there is no single, targeted, or particular technique either: you may enter a light trance at the cinema, or while reading a good book, and of course in a similar, if not deeper, trance when you are attending a religious ceremony or when you are focusing your mind for a séance... Meditation is a state that is close to hypnosis. This “light trance” needs to be built upon in order for it to become a genuine hypnotic trance.

2) The Four Types of Hypnosis

The professional who is due to hypnotise you has the choice between four different forms of hypnosis. There is no form that is better than the rest; otherwise it would have held predominance for a long time! They each have their advantages and disadvantages. They are each more or less well suited to the practitioner in question depending on his or character, approach, experience, etc... The different forms do not by any means exist exclusively of one another; the specialist may begin with one, switch, and then close with another.

2a) Classic Hypnosis

This form of hypnosis is the best-known to the general public, as well as being the most caricatured. "You are now going under..." Mainly used for entertainment, this in no way means that it has no real use beyond that. It is very direct and directive. Although any professional worth his salt knows it and can practice it should the need arise, it is generally "mixed" with other forms for greater effectiveness.

2b) Humanistic Hypnosis

This is the most recent branch of hypnosis, developed by Olivier Lockert on the cusp of the twenty-first century. It is "typically" French. Unlike the three other forms, it is not aimed at the subject's subconscious, but rather at his or her 'greater consciousness' or 'inner self'. The traditional techniques of hypnosis are inverted and the person experiences a heightened state of consciousness. It also incorporates a greater level of understanding, in that it touches the spiritual side (mourning, *raison d'être*, etc...). To be frank, humanistic hypnosis does cause a lot of controversy, for instance amongst our Anglo-Saxon neighbours, as well as in Spain, Greece, etc., at least when it is not simply ignored outright.

2c) New Hypnosis

This term was thought up by sexologist Daniel Araoz in the mid-1970s. Araoz's aim was to create a new kind of hypnosis that complemented Erickson's approach, making it less directive and more flexible.

2d) Ericksonian Hypnosis

This form of hypnosis takes its name from American psychiatrist Milton Erickson, who developed it during the 1930s. It is both the most popular form of hypnosis and the least well-known. Historically, it was a very interventionist approach and did not take into account the will of the patient. Today, few practitioners carry it out in the same way its founder did. Even though it bears his name, this form of hypnosis in the modern age is more refined, in the sense that the hypnotherapist is more tactful and "diplomatic" towards his patient.

3) Who is Milton Erickson (1901-1980)?

Milton Erickson was an American psychiatrist. During his rehabilitation from polio, which he contracted at the age of 17, he tested methods on himself that he later put in place under the banner of therapeutic hypnosis that nowadays (incorrectly) bears his name (see 2d above).

Part 2: Application

1) Clinical Hypnosis

As its name suggests, this is carried out by medical professionals who add this degree to their main qualification; whether they be doctors, psychologists, psychotherapists licensed by their local health agency (in France: *Agence régionale de santé*), etc... It should be noted that psychoanalysts themselves **are not** health professionals, contrary to common misconception. However, the latter being very much present in the medical sector (a phenomenon peculiar to France), hypnoanalysis training may be provided for medical professionals. Just as a doctor may also be

religious or believe in astrology, clinical hypnosis remains separate from their main occupation, even though it may have an influence on their response to certain aspects of their job.

Clinical hypnosis is largely orientated towards practical therapeutic techniques, like anaesthesia often is, whether that therapy is related to quitting smoking (under medical supervision), an eating disorder, alcohol addiction, dermatology, etc... My year of training at Staffordshire University, for instance, was largely based around clinical hypnosis, whereas in my career I only conduct past-life regressions/life-between-lives regressions, which fall into the category of 'well-being' hypnosis.

2) "Well-being" Hypnosis

Open to psychotherapists, coaches, and hypnotherapists in a non-clinical context, there are many training bodies for well-being hypnosis, the most well-known in France being: the French College of Hypnosis (*École française d'hypnose*), and the Institute of Ericksonian Hypnosis (*Institut français d'hypnose éricksonienne*), to name just the first two that come to mind.

The National Guild of Hypnotists (NGH) was founded in 1951, and is a reference point the world over. It is paradoxically little-known and under-represented in France. The NGH offers a few training courses that lead to a qualification, and these include over 100 hours of compulsory training split into different modules. As far as I am aware, there are only two such organisations based in the Paris region; Psynapse and Hypnose-Coaching. This is also one of the rare organisations that include examinations at the end of its courses, which you are sure to pass, with the success rate verging on 99% (a success rate worthy of a rigged vote for a dictator!), this being unheard of in other higher educational establishments.

The cost of one module, with the NGH or elsewhere, varies considerably, ranging from ~1200-2000€. In order to be operational and considered a master practitioner (and not simply a freshly-qualified hypnotist), the candidate will often part with more than 4000€ ! For these kinds of prices virtually everybody leaves at the end of their training course with a diploma in hand. Business is business. And let us be clear; after one week of training a student may claim to be a teacher or even a master of hypnosis, knowing that I personally, at the end of two years of training, would not dare make such claims! Later, those who do make such claims are committed only to themselves and their own consciousness, since French legislation, legally speaking, allows that.

3) How do you find a good hypnotherapist?

How do you choose your general practitioner, with all of them having graduated from medical school with flying colours? Do you go on word of mouth? Do you flick through the Yellow Pages? Do you consider the doctor's experience? Is price a factor? Choosing a professional hypnotherapist is no different. Whether you are drawn towards clinical hypnosis or well-being hypnosis, the number of available professionals will be invariably high, especially if you live in a city.

If you have a common cold, you main not require the help of France's top virology expert; everything depends on your reason for booking a consultation, and what you are expecting from the professional, etc... But academic training is already a good sign (although I am naturally against obtaining a diploma at a very high price, when students are effectively buying their degree). The human factor is also important, and there is certainly no clear-cut way of knowing if the professional you have chosen will fully satisfy your needs or not.

Part 3: Common Misconceptions Surrounding Hypnosis

1) Surrounding hypnosis itself

a) How does it differ from the hypnosis we see in show business?

Hypnosis carried out for theatrical purposes represents only a tiny part of what hypnosis is about. On stage, it is caricatured to entertain an audience, and most audience members undoubtedly leave thinking that all mediums conduct their séances wearing a headscarf and gazing into a crystal ball like Madame Irma.

b) Hypnosis is “supernatural”

This is not the case. It involves techniques for inducing the hypnotic state that are learnt and practiced. Just like the guitar, right? Nothing more, nothing less.

c) Hypnosis, a passing fashion like any other

It all depends on your point of view and your understanding of the word ‘fashion’. If you are talking about the public’s excitement for this discipline, due to its enticing aura of mystery and fun in an age of “well-being for everyone”, then yes, perhaps. If you understand it to mean a passing fad that will soon be cast aside, like phrenologyⁱ was, then the answer is most definitely no. From neurosciences to medicine to experimental psychology; people from all these fields are interested in hypnosis, and in all four corners of the globe.

d) Hypnosis is not scientifically proven

Yes it is! Amongst those who believe it not to be, some decry astrology but worship other even more ‘doubtful’ methods of psychotherapy. Need I inform you that if one rejects the former, it would be an intellectual contradiction to accept the latter. Hypnosis, on the other hand, is studied in a scientific manner under strict protocol, meaning it can be reproduced in a laboratory under the same conditions every time. The latest research into images produced by positron emission tomography (PET) shows a real difference between at least four zones of the brain, whose activity

corresponds to different states; the hypnotic state proving to be separate from usual wakefulness, daydreaming, and even from visualisation.

- e) Hypnosis only takes care of the symptoms and does not take into account the causes.

This statement, worthy of the dark ages, flies in the face of the latest scientific research. This concept makes no more sense than claiming that microbes do not exist just because we cannot see them. To quote Joëlle Proust, a researcher at the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (the National Scientific Research Center), states that **“the term “subconscious” does not refer to all “repressed” images, but rather to the vast majority of the images, emotional or not, pertaining language or not, that the brain produces at any given moment”**.

- f) Hypnosis carries out miracles.

It is also important that we do not frame hypnosis as a miraculous process. You do not simply arrive at the séance, sit down and listen to the medium telling you how your future is likely to pan out. With hypnosis, you do not succeed unless you work at succeeding! As for achieving your degree, a certain level of effort is required. The same “process” and psychological approach is in play if you come to see me for a (spiritual) life path consultation. In short, hypnosis will only help you to quit smoking if you yourself are really invested in quitting.

- g) Hypnosis allows the hypnotist to read your mind. What else can it entail?!

When you are in the hypnotic state, your sixth sense may become heightened. You may find yourself directly connected to your spirit guides, and that is as far as it goes. And that’s not too bad, right?

- h) During hypnosis you are asleep.

This is definitively incorrect. See the definition in Part 1, section 1.

i) Everyone is hypnotisable.

Yes and no! It all depends on how you understand the word “hypnotisable”. More or less everyone can be hypnotised one way or another (a captivating film at the cinema may “hypnotise”...), but a few rare people have a subconscious resistance to hypnosis that is somewhat stronger than the average...

j) Hypnosis works better on women than on men.

False! There is no difference between men and women, at least when it comes to being hypnotised.

2) Surrounding the Hypnotic State

a) Only suggestible people enter a trance.

Wrong! The exact opposite is true. It has been found that people with a strong character enter a trance more readily than people who are more fragile psychologically.

b) I'll have no idea what I'm doing when I'm in the trance.

This is certainly not the case. Get that idea out of your head pronto! You will never end up doing what you do not want to do under hypnosis. You are just as capable of lying as ever. During police enquiries (mostly in English-speaking countries), it is always the victim who is hypnotised, not the suspect (since the latter could easily lie and reinvent the whole story to his advantage)...

c) I came across an apparently very good hypnotist and didn't enter a trance.

Once again, you will not enter a trance if you do not want to. In the hypnosis of show business, the clients are expecting to enter a trance and are willing to be led into that state, even if they do not realise it.

d) I need a hypnotherapist in order to be hypnotised.

No. Watch the countryside flit by from a train window, watch a good film, read a captivating book, and there you go; you are hypnotised (albeit 'lightly').

e) I don't believe in it, it won't work.

I do not believe that the world is round because I cannot see it ! More seriously, all kinds of things come into play here; the personality of the client/patient, his or her relationship with the hypnotherapist, the circumstances, etc...

f) I won't wake up.

No, no, and no again ! See the definition of hypnosis above.

g) Is self-hypnosis dangerous?

Is cutting your nails dangerous ? Once again, it is not about hypnosis itself, but how you experience it, feel it, apprehend it.

h) You need to be very good at staying focussed in order to achieve it.

Not at all. All you need is some technique and a little bit of patience.

i) Can you simulate a trance?

Yes, but why would you want to ? What would be the interest ?

j) Can you experience a bad (negative) trance ?

It is not so much the trance as the feeling that one may get from it afterwards that could be considered "negative".

3) On hypnotherapists and séances

a) The hypnotist needs to be very charismatic; otherwise he will not make it.

No, he or she is simply an expert who knows has the right tools and uses them, just as a doctor puts into practice what he or she has learnt. The hypnotist's experience and personality do of course still hold importance, but charisma is not the defining trait of a good hypnotist.

b) Can you end up being dependant on your hypnotherapist ?

It is you who defines the professional relationship that you develop with your hypnotherapist. You will only be dependant if you want to be. This is the case in any human relationship, whether it be with your baker or your clairvoyant.

c) Can you undergo hypnotherapy in parallel with another kind of psychotherapy ?

You certainly can. After all, why would that be harmful or forbidden?

d) Can my hypnotherapist turn me into a professional hypnotherapist myself ?

The answer to this is a definitive no, unless of course he or she is a hypnosis instructor. See Part 2, section 2 “Well-being Hypnosis”.

e) Is it expensive ?

It is less expensive than certain particularly long courses of psychotherapy ! There are series of consultations on offer that are not reimbursable by social security, and as if by coincidence often payable by cash, that may last for years on end, or at least one year. Let us say you pay 50€ every fifteen days for a séance. That adds up to 1000€ a year, which is multiplied if you carry on for several years. With hypnosis, the séance (the price of which varies from ~50-150€/h) is short, just like the duration of the therapy, which in general consists of just 3-6 consultations. This means that you will spend less but that the money you *do* spend on consultations will leave you satisfied for much longer than other, more drawn-out courses of psychotherapy.

f) Are séances reimbursed by social security ?

It all depends on whether or not you are consulting a health professional. If the hypnotherapy is associated with well-being (self-confidence, reducing stress...), séances are non-reimbursable. It is the same in any other branch of psychotherapy.

g) Could the problem for which I am seeking help change ?

This concept has no meaning out of context. It is like applying French grammar to Russian. They are two separate entities. The problem for which you are seeking help

in hypnotherapy is separate from the hypnotherapy, even though the latter can intervene and help you to overcome it. During a séance your problem may fade into the background to give way to another, just as in any other area of psychotherapy.

h) Where does my general practitioner come in ?

I advise you to keep him or her informed, should you undertake a course of hypnotherapy, especially seeing as they are likely to be your family doctor.

i) All hypnotists are charlatans.

All police are Nazis, all teachers support the extreme left, all politicians are immoral, etc... These statements would be no more watertight ! A real hypnotherapist has been trained, and will not say or do anything improper. They will tell you their limits and let you know what work you have to put in yourself.

4) Everything else and much more (in no particular order...)

Hmm, no, there is in fact nothing more to say. Misleading heading, but I would like to extend my warm thanks to Pascale Haag, Nathalie Roudil-Paolucci, the National Guild of Hypnotists and Stylian Zanos, hypnotherapist and Doctor of Sciences at the Hypnose-Coaching office in Paris and instructor at the NGH, to Olivier Lockert for his observations, and most of all to my professors at the University of Staffordshire who trained me._

The study of the form of a criminal's skull in order to build up a psychological portrait of the subject.