

The Mindful Life

By Michael Wiederman, Ph.D.
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MINDing theMIND

How Powerful is Hypnosis?

Again the other day I saw a two-page advertisement for a traveling hypnosis treatment program. It was advertised as being in town for a single evening, and one price entitled the attendee to be hypnotized to quit smoking or lose weight, or both. Does hypnosis work for these purposes? Just what is hypnosis anyway?

In cartoons and movies hypnosis is frequently portrayed as a kind of trance involving mind control. The hypnotist seems to “program” the individual to do some sinister deed. Then there are stage hypnotists who get people to do all kinds of crazy and embarrassing things, implying that the hypnotist is indeed controlling the behavior of the hypnotized person. If hypnotists can control peoples’ behavior, then it makes sense that the hypnotist can make the person quit smoking, or eat less, or exercise more.

In reality people will not do anything “under hypnosis” that they don’t want to do. Hypnosis is simply a state of relaxation and intense focus that results in the person being suggestible to the hypnotist. The notion behind hypnosis is that if a person relaxes and intensely imagines something, that person will react as though the imagined situation is real. So, the hypnotized person has to get into that state themselves; by definition no one can force a state of relaxation and focused attention onto another person. This also explains why some people are easily hypnotized, whereas others remain too skeptical or tense or grounded in the reality of the situation to be hypnotized.

Closer inspection of the ad for the hypnosis seminar reveals that the first hour involves stage demonstrations of the power of hypnosis. This introductory period is followed by a half-hour group hypnosis session to quit smoking, followed by a half-hour session to lose weight. Also, the ad itself contains lots of hype about the power of hypnosis and the supposed success of seminar attendees. Why all the hype, and why does the first half of the seminar consist of demonstrations? Because hypnosis relies on being open to suggestion, it’s important that people who are about to be hypnotized believe that the process is a powerful one, and that the hypnotist controls what happens.

Does all of this mean that hypnotism doesn’t work? It depends on what we mean by “work”? The process can indeed aid in relaxation. As for quitting smoking or losing weight, perhaps the most important factor is how much the individual believes hypnosis will work, and is invested in changing behavior afterwards. One point to think about: If hypnosis was a powerful method of instantly changing behavior or ridding the individual of cravings, wouldn’t we would have heard much more about it by now?

MIND Morsels

Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to doesn't mean it's useless.
– Thomas Edison

Most medications are first studied under the assumption that they should treat particular ailments. Research may show that they're ineffective, yet sometimes the "side-effects" of these ineffective medicines point to a benefit that ultimately ends up being what the drug is used for. How often in our own lives, however, are we so focused on the intended result of our actions that we may lose sight of positive "side-effects" that end up being more important than the intended outcome? Many times the process involved in a project that fails in the end turns out to have yielded many benefits itself. Perhaps on our way to "failure" we learned certain skills, sharpened others, and proved to ourselves that the process wasn't as intimidating as it first seemed. These benefits, accrued over time, may make "failure" an increasingly less frequent result.

You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.
– Dale Carnegie

We live in a culture that emphasizes being impressive. So, it's easy to forget that most people would rather be around those who take interest in them, than vice-versa. Showing interest in a person typically leads that person to make positive assumptions about us. Since people generally hold a high opinion of themselves, if we're taking an interest in a person, that person will tend to see us as smart (since we recognized that this other person is worth noticing). We must also be humble, generous, and nonthreatening—all likeable qualities. Ironically, it's easier to take interest in others than to impress them. Anyone can show interest in other people, whereas no matter how impressive your credentials, there is always someone who is ultimately more impressive. Trying to impress others often elicits resentment and envy, so even though people might be polite to "impressive" individuals, they're probably not going to consider them friends.

*There is so little difference between husbands
you might as well keep the first.*
– Adela Rogers St. Johns

Whether we're talking about spouses, houses, or jobs, it's easy to get caught up in the "grass is always greener" game. The difficult realization is that the ability to be satisfied lies within us, and not in finding the "perfect" spouse, house, or job. This realization flies in the face of the messages we receive from our culture, and from our gut, which seems to say that the problem lies "out there," rather than "in" us. At what point do we quit spending our energy looking for the perfect match, and start the more difficult but more promising task of working on ourselves?