

## SELF-HYPNOSIS AND MENTAL IMAGERY

With a little practice, most people can be hypnotized and can use self-hypnosis. Hypnosis allows us to experience thoughts, fantasies and images as almost real (Soskis, 1986). The hypnotized person knows the experience is not real, however, because he/she doesn't act like it is real. Under hypnosis we may vividly imagine being at the beach but we don't take off our clothes and try to jump into the water. Yet, by experiencing a situation differently, e.g. seeing public speaking as a way of influencing minds, we may act and feel differently (more positive, less scared).

The mental scenes can seem very real to us but we know it is all just in our head. It is the same experience as watching a film and feeling we are there, we really get "into it" and become afraid, inspired, sexually aroused, very sad and so on. This imagery is something we do, not something done to us. It used to be thought that the hypnotist gained power over the subject through "animal magnetism." Actually, there can be no hypnotic experience without the subject's agreement and participation. Thus, all hypnosis is in a sense self-hypnosis. Could anyone force you against your will to get deeply emotionally involved in a good book or movie? No. But you can do it by yourself...and feel wonderful.

No one knows who discovered hypnosis. No doubt a storyteller thousands of years ago. We do know that hypnosis was used to treat illness long before Christ. During the Middle Ages, priests used self-hypnosis to make God more real to them and to intensify their relationship with God. Hypnosis has been used by physicians and faith healing by preachers to cure people. In the early part of this century, a Frenchman, Emile Coue (1922), popularized the idea of auto-suggestion. His most famous self-instruction was, "Every day in every way I'm getting better and better."

At first, you are likely to believe that an experienced hypnotist could perform impressive feats but you couldn't possibly do much. That is a reflection of the stories you have read and movies you have seen. Research has shown (Fromm, 1975) that some people reach deeper trance states in self-hypnosis than with a hypnotist. They have more vivid, richer imagery. Self-hypnosis costs nothing, is easy to produce, and allows the person to make changes in the procedures so that they work best for him/her. So, again, an old therapy technique may become even more effective in the hands of an informed self-helper (Fisher, 1991). Alman & Lambrou (1991) also provide a self-hypnosis induction method and specific self-instructions for several specific problems, like self-confidence, pain relief, weight loss, phobia reduction, etc.

It is not necessary to be hypnotized in order to have vivid imaginary experiences. Daydreams are vivid. The basic idea of hypnosis and mental imagery is this: if you want to do something, imagine yourself doing it over and over. This is also called goal rehearsal. The idea is father to the act. Books by Lazarus (1977) and Fanning (1988) are filled with examples of visualization (without hypnosis) serving many purposes.

## *Purposes*

By using hypnosis or mental imagery (without hypnosis) a person can sometimes produce impressive results. Perhaps the most astonishing is the control of pain. Many people (not everybody can) have had dental work, surgery, and babies without pain. One of the easiest experiences to have is relaxation which can counteract fears and stress. If your behaviour or someone else's is hard to understand, the key is likely to be uncovering the thoughts and images occurring between perceiving the situation and responding. Example: One paraplegic sees only misery, another plans on going to graduate school. Developing new intervening images and self-suggestions can change certain behaviours, such as studying and concentration, help control anger and sadness, build self-esteem, reduce bad habits, and so on.

## *Steps*

### **STEP ONE: Become familiar with self-hypnosis and/or mental imagery.**

There are several things to learn. First, you need to get a "feel" for what is involved--some basic understanding. Second, you learn a simple procedure for inducing self-hypnosis or using visualization. Third, you practice these procedures several times. Fourth, you make plans of exactly how to use hypnosis or visualization to change the things that concern you. Only after this preparation do you start actually trying to use hypnosis or visualization as a self-help method.

Almost all of us daydream. Our daydreams tend to be helpful re-living of the past or rehearsing for the future, i.e. useful stuff. Very few of our daydreams are self-aggrandizing or erotic fantasies. Sometimes they relieve the boredom, but most of the time they involve some emotion--an important event, a threat, a frustration, a hope, etc. Daydreaming is like brainstorming, a chance to mentally test out and practice different solutions. There is evidence that daydreamers concentrate better, are more empathic, less fearful, more lively and alert, may enjoy sex more, and generally are more fun to be around (Klinger, 1987). Of course, obsessions with harming others, using drugs or eating, past or possible future catastrophes and so on are a serious problem. In most cases, however, a good fantasy life should be of great value, nothing to be ashamed of.

Most of us know how to daydream, it comes naturally. Perhaps you can encourage more daydreams and guide your fantasies into more constructive, fruitful, creative areas, rather than leaving it entirely up to the "whim of the moment." You might refer to chapter 15 where guided fantasies are used for insight. Perhaps your re-occurring daydreams reveal some frustrated needs that deserve more conscious attention. Otherwise, I'm going to assume you know all you need to know about daydreams and go on to hypnosis.

Most hypnotists start by giving the subject some introductory experience, often a demonstration of "suggestion effects" or an illustration of how ideas influence behaviour, called ideomotor action. For example, they will ask you to clasp your hands together and imagine that your palms are tightly stuck--glued--together. Then they ask you to try to take your hands apart. Many

people find it is somewhat difficult to separate their hands after the suggestion is given. Other hypnotists will have you stand with your eyes closed, heels together, and imagine swaying backwards. Most people actually sway backwards (the hypnotist must be prepared to catch the subject). In other words, thinking of some action tends to produce that action if your imagination is vivid enough.

You can have similar experiences by yourself (Soskis, 1986). For example, make yourself a pendulum out of a small, round object that has some weight to it. A spherical button or glass ornament is ideal, but a medallion or set of keys or heavy ring will do. Make the string about 10" long. Then draw a circle on a piece of typing paper and draw two lines intersecting in the middle of the circle. Put the paper on a table in front of you. Put your elbow comfortably on the table and grasp the string at the point where the pendulum is just resting on the centre of the circle where the lines cross. Now, lift the object off the paper slightly (1/8 inch) and think of the object moving back and forth along one of the lines. Don't consciously move your hand or fingers; just think of movement back and forth in a certain direction. Guess what? The pendulum will start to move (an inch or so) in the directions you are thinking about. Wow! Then think of the object moving in the other directions, then in a circle, and so on. Play with it for a while. Of course, your thoughts aren't moving the object, very tiny imperceptible movements in your hand are. Most people are impressed.

Another hypnotic experience is extending your arms in front of you and carefully noting that the palms are facing each other at the same height and about two inches apart. Then close your eyes and imagine your right arm is getting heavy while your left arm is getting lighter and lighter. Tell yourself over and over that the left arm is feeling very light...the right arm and hand is getting heavier and heavier all the time. Dwell on those images...then add to the images...a helium balloon might be attached to the left arm by a soft ribbon and it is gently lifting that arm higher and higher into the air. On the right arm there is a bookstrap and several heavy books are pulling it down...further and further down. After imagining this for a minute or so, open your eyes and see how far your hands have actually moved. Six inches or more is not unusual but an inch or two makes the point that thoughts influence behaviour.

Consider some other factors about hypnosis. It should be an interesting experience and it may be helpful. However, if you have had a bad experience with hypnosis, you should not use this method by yourself. If you expect magical, instant, major changes, like a cure for cancer or a new personality, forget it. Yet, pain can be lessened and new attitudes learned. Also, you can get started on a diet or quitting smoking, but one hypnotic session isn't all you need.

You may wonder if you will be able to respond, e.g. to a telephone or the door, while hypnotized or if you will remember what happened. The answers to both are yes. You can come out of it at any time. Is hypnosis like sleep? No, you know what is going on (although it is easy to fall asleep while so relaxed). If you fall asleep, don't be concerned, just take a nap. You won't do anything weird, like with a stage hypnotist, because you are in control. You won't hurt yourself. Much of the effects of self-hypnosis are due to expectations or placebo or suggestion.

Decide if you want to use self-hypnosis and what you want to use it for.

Before trying self-hypnosis, you may want to do some reading or talk to a friend or a professional. But in the kind of experiences I will suggest you try, there are no more dangers than in using other self-help methods. As suggested under purposes above, hypnosis is best used with (a) problems that primarily concern only you, not your spouse or boss or family, (b) recent problems, (c) problems that involve your feelings (e.g. anxiety), not your performance (take a speech class if you want to be a more skilful speaker), and (d) problems that can be helped by new cognitions--thoughts, attitudes or images--not problems requiring insight or new knowledge.

Do not use self-hypnosis with (a) serious, long-term mental illness, (b) problems involving a troubled relationship with someone else or if you are a loner with "spacey" or peculiar ideas, (c) problems that have not responded to professional help in the past, or (d) problems which you are not willing to devote 15 minutes each day for a month or so. Also, do not try to uncover suspected traumatic early childhood experiences, e.g. abuse or incest, or to explore past lives. In fact, don't try to use hypnosis to "discover the truth" about anything because many of the vivid "memories" one might have under hypnosis may be radically different from reality. Yet, mental imagery is used (with caution) to gain insight and new awareness (see Chapter 15).

## **STEP TWO: Prepare a specific method for inducing self-hypnosis.**

You may want to be hypnotized by a trained person first; he/she can then teach you how to do self-hypnosis (Soskis, 1986). Or, you can memorize the general induction process and give self-instructions. Or, you can put the entire induction procedure on an audiotape. I'll show you how to do the latter two:

Find a quiet place, sit in a comfortable chair.

Close your eyes and relax your whole body. Use something like one of the relaxation methods given in Chapter 12. Repeatedly tell yourself throughout the relaxation procedure to become more and more deeply relaxed. At the same time, tell yourself you will remain totally awake and alert, carefully attending to your own self-instructions. When deeply relaxed all over, tell yourself that you are ready for a pleasant, effective hypnotic state which will help you help yourself.

When very relaxed, say to yourself or listen to the self-hypnosis instructions you have prepared. Usually, relaxation instructions are all that are needed.

When hypnotized and feeling very comfortable and relaxed, imagine being in a very safe, peaceful, and comfortable place. Enjoy that as long as you like.

Give yourself instructions for improving (written in the next step).

Wake yourself up by counting from 5 to 1, become more awake at each step.

If you wanted to simply record the whole thing, you might use a script like this: (read in a clear but slow drawn-out voice, a hypnotic voice)

"You should be relaxing in a comfortable chair with the phone and other distractions turned off. If you are interrupted, you will at any time be able to open your eyes and take care of whatever needs to be done.

Close your eyes and concentrate on relaxing all over. Take a deep breath and slowly exhale...notice the calming effect of deep breathing. Take some more deep breaths.... Feel the muscles in your body losing their tightness and tension. As this happens, you will feel better and better.

To increase the relaxation, I will count from one to ten and get more and more relaxed as I count towards 10. At the count of 10, I will be in a very relaxed, very pleasant, worry free, completely alert and aware, but comfortable hypnotic state. One, I will relax my hands and forearms. Think of the right hand, fingers and forearm, tell those parts to get rid of all their stress and tension. Relax more and more. Think of the left hand, fingers and forearm. Relaxing deeper and deeper. Two, I let the calmness spread into my upper arms...into the biceps and triceps. Very relaxed. Feeling good. Three, my shoulders and neck are relaxing...deeper and deeper. Four, the top of my head, scalp and forehead are calming...relaxing...feeling smooth and soft. Five, I notice the wonderful feeling moving down into my eyes, cheeks, lips, tongue and jaws. I tell the entire head and face to relax more and more. Six, my chest, lungs and upper back are slowing and calming down...very comfortable. Seven, I am letting the stomach relax and settle down...also the lower back and spine...the tension is going away...replaced with pure comfort. Eight, the muscles in my upper legs relax deeper and deeper. Nine, the wave of relaxation moves down into my lower legs, feet and toes. Ten, I am extremely relaxed all over. The last remaining tension anywhere in my body is melting away...my whole body is calm...very comfortable...feeling wonderful.

I am now probably in a pleasant, enjoyable, effective hypnotic state, even though I may not feel certain of that. In any case, I will be able to think clearly and control my own thoughts. My imagery will be very detailed, very clear and realistic. I will be able to use this imagery to my advantage. I will remember everything that happens while I am hypnotized.

I will first use hypnosis to imagine being in a pleasant, comfortable place, a place where I feel perfectly safe, perhaps on a beach or in my own private place. I will see all the details... hear the sounds...feel and smell the air...really get into it. I will talk to myself about all aspects of the scene...and enjoy myself thoroughly for a minute or so."

Be quiet for a minute, then continue recording:

"At this point I will give myself the instructions I have prepared for self-improvement. I can open my eyes if I need to look at notes (but it is better to keep your eyes closed, so the visualization is more intense). If the self-instructions do not use all of the three

minute break that follows, I will just return to my pleasant scene and enjoy it until the tape takes me out of the hypnosis or I decide to come out of it."

Note: At this point either record the 3-minute self-instructions developed in the next step OR be quiet for 3 minutes, during which you can, over a period of time, give yourself a variety of self-instructions. Then continue recording.

"Now, I am ready to end the session. I will count from five to one and become more and more alert as I count. Five, I am starting to come out of the hypnosis. Four, feeling a little more like moving. Three, feeling good with more energy. Two, my eyes are gradually opening...now, completely open. One, I am completely alert, feeling good and refreshed. I am done. Stretch a little and get up."

Turn off the recorder.

### **STEP THREE: Develop self-improvement instructions to give yourself during hypnosis or while using mental imagery.**

The self-instructions may reflect a new attitude towards others or yourself, a different way of thinking, a post-hypnotic suggestion for a change in behaviour and so on. Hadley and Staudacher (1985) say that hypnotic suggestions should (a) be worded simply (focus on one change at a time) but repeated several times, (b) be believable, obtainable (gradual steps may be needed) and desirable, (c) be stated positively ("I am relaxed" rather than "I won't get uptight") and for a specific time (I will study effectively from 6:30 to 10:00 tonight), (d) use cue words or a key phrase to trigger the suggested reaction (saying "relax" while approaching an attractive person or "good memory" while studying), and (e) provide detailed images of the suggested outcome ("I am taking a test...relaxed and doing well...").

Here are some specific suggestions (mostly from Le Cron, 1964, and Hadley & Staudacher, 1985), modify them to fit your situation:

1. *Studying and concentrating*: "I will start studying tonight at 6:30, right after the news. I will remain alert and concentrate fully on my reading, except for taking a 5-minute break every half hour. If other thoughts intrude, I will quickly re-focus on the studying. If friends try to get me to do something else, I will tell them that I definitely intend to study for three hours. Nothing can change my mind. I will quickly understand what I read and will have a 'good memory,' remembering the material well for the exam.

I will start on time and stay on schedule, including 5-minute rest periods every half hour. My mind will attend only to the text; it will absorb the big and important points; it will take the time every two or three paragraphs to repeat (recite from memory) what the author

has just said. As I do this, I will feel really good about studying so effectively and learning so much. I will remember the material well for the exam on Friday."

2. *Weight loss*: "I can feel very relaxed and I can change my eating habits. I see myself as becoming thinner and thinner, in better and better shape. I will allow myself to lose weight. I will change my poor eating habits into good ones. Imagine a table filled with the high-fat food and the junk and sweets that make me overweight. These foods harm me and interfere with my life; they might even kill me. I won't eat them any more. I'll shove this food off the table. Now, I'll place good, healthy, low-fat, high fibre food on the table.

Imagine slowly eating--only when I'm hungry, not when I'm upset--small amounts of the good food. Delicious. My hunger is satisfied and I am really pleased with my self-control. I see myself as thin, in good shape, healthy, beautiful, and coping. When I'm bored, I'll call a friend. If I'm tense, I'll meditate. Instead of eating lunch with friends, I'll play handball with Joe. If I ever get 2 pounds over my limit, I'll immediately cut my calorie intake and increase my exercise for several days. I feel wonderful, full of energy, proud, attractive, in charge... I eat nutritious food but only as much as I need. Keeping in shape by eating right and exercising is a source of great pride for me."

3. *Stress reduction*: "I am very relaxed...very relaxed. I can see that pressure comes from the outside world but feelings come from inside me. I can control my feelings. The feelings I want, I can keep. The feelings I don't want, I can discard or discharge them...get rid of them. I am a whole person with many feelings. I am aware of all my many feelings, but I can chose which feelings I want to keep and which to get rid of. I choose to be peaceful and rid of stress. I feel good... at ease... calm... composed.

Furthermore, I can build a shield against the outside pressure. External stress will just bounce off me. In this way my shield will prevent the pressure from producing upsetting emotions inside. I will be protected all day from tension and stress. No matter how many demands there are outside, I will be calm inside... protected by the shield and by my decision to get rid of unwanted emotions. When people expect too much of me or when they are critical, I will stay calm... protected and in control of the inside feelings. When I need the shield, it will automatically be there or I can call on it by simply saying, 'the shield' or 'relax.' I am very relaxed, strong, and in control of my feelings. The shield will shelter me for the next four hours. I am safe."

4. *Fear reduction*: People have overcome fears by watching others conquer the same fear. They even imitate others seen in a film mastering a fear. Just having vivid imagery of someone handling the fear we face may be enough to provide a new model of behaviour for us to imitate. Also, hypnosis or imagery can be used to create a very relaxed feeling and then to imagine confronting the frightening situation (see confronting the fear and desensitization in Chapter 12).

Other fantasies may also help reduce fears: imagine you are a powerful, important person and the other person (who scares you) is your subordinate; imagine the woman/man you

want to approach will say "no, I have a jealous boy/girlfriend" (making rejection less upsetting); imagine a pleasant scene to calm yourself when scared in any situation.

5. *Pain reduction*: one procedure involves numbing your hand (or making it cold or changing it into wood or stone) and then transferring the numbness to the part of your body that hurts. Thus, reducing the pain. Another procedure involves first experiencing the pain as movable, say from the back of the head to the back of the neck, then continue moving the pain until it is finally out of your body. An example: "Even though I'm very relaxed, I can feel the pain I have been having. Focus on the pain (describe it). Now, notice that the pain is fluid...it can move within my body. As this fluid moves, it carries the pain with it. (Very gradually move the pain from its source towards the right shoulder, down the right arm and into the right hand).

As the pain enters my right hand, the fingers tighten into a tighter and tighter fist... When the fist is very tense, I can simply open the fist and throw the pain and tension away. Now, throw the pain away...completely gone. (Repeat if needed) Appreciate the relief...notice the peaceful calm that remains. I still have feelings where the pain was, so I will know if anything is going wrong... I will move, feel, and react normally. The pain is gone... drained... and I will be able to use this technique over and over again if the pain returns." Read Hilgard and Hilgard (1983) and/or Wall and Melzack (1984). Obviously, a continuing or repetitive pain must be examined by a physician immediately.

6. *Building self-esteem*: "While remaining very relaxed, think of the labels that have in the past made you feel down or slowed you down. Imagine those labels on a blackboard. They are negative words and criticism from others and from you. Now wipe them off the board...wash them away...they are gone. Go to the blackboard, and in place of the negative labels, write positive labels...strengths that describe you... Capable... Caring... Sensitive... Good... Willing to help... Able to learn... (Add other major strengths you have and/or want to develop more).

Now, stand back from the board and think of these positive traits. (pause) I am a good person... I'm fine. I am proud of myself. I am able, I have some talents. People see me as a good person. I feel comfortable interacting with people; I am as good as they are. I share my ideas and experiences with others. They are interested in me. I am positive and pleasant to be around, tactfully asserting myself, self-assured, and looking for ways to help others. I say to myself, 'I can handle this,' 'I look nice,' 'I have lots of energy,' 'I am unique, like a snowflake,' 'I'm in charge'...

I fill my mind with these positive ideas, I look for my good points, I pursue my goals, and I see my life as a wonderful adventure."

Write your own instructions for any desired change, e.g. if you are not motivated at work or at school, write self-suggestions about being able to change, becoming a successful person, deciding on your major goal and putting minor goals aside, seeing the importance of the goal and the wonderful possible outcomes, having the drive and determination to

succeed, imagining yourself resolutely plodding on day after day, dream of the eventual success and the fantastic consequences for you and others around you.

Lazarus (1977) reports using unpleasant fantasies to reduce unwanted feelings and behaviours (much like covert sensitization in Chapter 11). He asks the compulsive person or cigarette smoker to imagine the awful consequences and stress of continuing the behaviour. Similarly, he had a physician, who often gave women unnecessary vaginal exams, imagine getting arrested, losing his practice, and people in the community thinking he was a "sick pervert" or "dangerous man." The doctor quickly gained more self-control or will power. Note, however, that it is not a good idea to tell yourself that chocolate will taste awful if you are a chocolate addict, because you won't believe it. Hypnotic suggestions must be believable, e.g. chocolate will make you fat.

#### **STEP FOUR: Get prepared and have the experience daily.**

Find a quiet, private place. Don't schedule anything for 20 minutes. If you are interrupted, you can answer the phone or the door, but it may be better to turn off the phone and ignore a knock. Have your self-instructions prepared. Go through the entire routine, just as you planned it, even though you don't believe you are truly hypnotized or deeply into the visualization. Try to develop a routine so you will have the experience at the same time each day. Be patient, it takes time to learn any new skill. Measure your progress.

##### *Time involved*

A couple of hours will be needed to plan and prepare the procedure you want to use. Since the effects of hypnosis and visualization are frequently short-lived, you need to schedule a 20-minute session every day. To give self-hypnosis a fair trial, expect to use it daily for at least a month.

##### *Common problems*

As with meditation, some people expect too much too fast from hypnosis or mental imagery. So, guard against premature disappointment or excessive expectations. Likewise, some people wanting instant "magic" resist having to write a script and make a tape. Such people should seek a hypnotist.

Occasionally, you may become so relaxed that you fall asleep. No problem. In fact, if you feel you have lost control for any reason in self-hypnosis, simply relax and wake up using the counting procedure or just go to sleep and wake up naturally.

##### *Effectiveness, advantages and dangers*

The evidence for the effectiveness of hypnosis is mostly in clinical reports. Clinical cases make it clear that some people are helped, but it is hard to know what percentage of the general

population would respond satisfactorily to hypnosis. Soskis (1986) estimates that only about 10% of us are able to use hypnosis to avoid intense pain, as in surgery or childbirth. The fact is that the effectiveness of self-hypnosis suggestions, such as those given above, has not been objectively evaluated and compared to other methods. You will just have to try it and find out how well it works for you. Be objective.

An additional problem is that scientists have not yet separated the effects of hypnosis from the accompanying suggestion or placebo effects. If we think a method will work, it probably will. For example, Theodore Barber (1969) has found that a simple request without any hypnosis can produce remarkable changes, e.g. making one hand warmer and the other colder or changing heart rate. It isn't clear how the body does these things but it can be done without hypnosis. Perhaps it doesn't matter what the real cause is; we just shouldn't be in awe of hypnosis or a hypnotist.

My main criticism of one person hypnotizing another person is that the hypnotist tends to become a superior-feeling, controlling "master" while the subject becomes a helpless, unthinking, submissive "slave." That doesn't seem healthy. Many people are intrigued with hypnosis; they want to use it with friends and at parties. I suspect they want to be seen as a comedian, a great healer, or a powerful controller. If you are not a trained professional (and qualified to treat the problem with other methods), you should not be using hypnotism for helping another person. You shouldn't remove a symptom that still serves a psychological purpose. And, you should certainly avoid using age-regression and probing for traumatic experiences; that could possibly cause panic and lead to a serious situation (MacHovec, 1988). Likewise, hypnosis should never be used as a form of party entertainment. You are dealing with a human life; don't demean a person by making him/her look foolish or by arrogantly playing publicly with his/her private, intimate concerns.

Self-hypnosis is easy to learn, it lets you be your own master, and it can be used whenever you need it with many self-improvement projects. It is interesting to most people; that helps us maintain our motivation to make difficult changes. Most experienced practitioners say self-hypnosis is not dangerous as long as it is used for these simple purposes and with the cautions mentioned above.