

Milton H. Erickson: The Handshake Induction



Dynamics Of The Handshake Induction

The handshake induction is one of the most fascinating and effective procedures developed by Erickson for initiating trance. It is essentially a surprise that interrupts a subject's habitual framework to initiate a momentary confusion. A receptivity for clarifying suggestions is thus initiated with an expectancy for further stimuli and direction. In a letter in Weitzenhoffer in 1961 Erickson described his approach to the handshake induction as a means of initiating catalepsy. When he released the subject's hand, it would remain fixed in a cataleptic position or would keep moving in any direction he initiated. He used this approach as a test to assess hypnotic susceptibility and as an induction procedure. The prerequisites for a successful handshake induction are a willingness on the part of the subject to be approached, an appropriate situation, and the suitability of the situation for a continuation of the experience. An edited version of his outline of the whole process and some variations is as follows:

The Handshake Induction

Initiation: When I begin by shaking hands, I do so normally. The "hypnotic touch" then begins when I let loose. The letting loose becomes transformed from a firm grip into a gentle touch by the thumb, a lingering drawing away of the little finger, a faint brushing of the subject's hand with the middle finger - just enough vague sensation to attract the attention. As the subject gives attention to the touch of your thumb, you shift to a touch with your little finger. As your subject's attention follows that, you shift to a touch with your middle finger and then again to the thumb.

This arousal of attention is merely an arousal without constituting a stimulus for a response.

The subject's withdrawal from the handshake is arrested by this attention arousal, which establishes a waiting set, and expectancy.

Then almost, but not quite simultaneously (to ensure separate neural recognition), you touch the undersurface of the hand (wrist) so gently that it barely suggests an upward push. This is followed by a similar utterly slight downward touch, and then I sever contact so gently that the subject does not know exactly when - and the subject's hand is left going neither up nor down, but cataleptic.

Termination: If you don't want your subject to know what you are doing, you simply distract their attention, usually by some appropriate remark, and casually terminate. Sometimes they remark, "What did you say? I got absentminded there for moment and wasn't paying attention to anything." This is slightly distressing to the subjects and indicative of the fact that their attention was so focused and fixated on the peculiar hand stimuli that they were momentarily entranced so they did not hear what was said.

Utilisation: Any utilisation leads to increasing trance depth. All utilisation should proceed as a continuation of extension of the initial procedure. Much can be done nonverbally; for example, if any subjects are just looking blankly at me, I may slowly shift my gaze downward, causing them to look at their hand, which I touch and say "look at this spot." This intensifies the trance state. Then, whether the subjects are looking at you or at their hand or just staring blankly, you can use your left hand to touch their elevated right hand from above or the side - so long as you merely give the suggestion of downward movement. Occasionally a downward nudge or push is required. If a strong push or nudge is required,

movement. Occasionally a downward nudge or push is required. If a strong push or nudge is required, check for anaesthesia.

There are several colleagues who won't shake hands with me unless I reassure them first, because they developed a profound glove anaesthesia when I used this procedure on them. I shook hands with them, looked them in the eyes, slowly yet rapidly immobilised my facial expression, and then focused my eyes on a spot far behind them. I then slowly and imperceptibly removed my hand from theirs and slowly moved to one side out of their direct line of vision. I have had it described variously, but the following is one of the most graphic. "I had heard about you and I wanted to meet you and you looked so interested and you shook hands so warmly. All of a sudden my arm was gone and your face changed and got so far away. Then the left side of your face, until that slowly vanished also.". At that moment the subject's eyes were fixed straight ahead, so that when I moved to the left out to his line of vision, the left side of my face "disappeared" first and then the right side also. "Your face slowly came back, you came close and smiled and said you would like to use me Saturday afternoon. Then I noticed my hand and asked you about it because I couldn't feel my whole arm... you just said to keep it that way just a little while for the experience."

You give the elevated right hand (now cataleptic in the handshake position) the suggestion of a downward movement with a light touch. At the same time, with your other hand, you give a gentle touch indicating an upward movement for the subject's left hand. Then you have his left hand lifting, right hand lowering. When right hand reaches the lap, it will stop. The upward course of the left hand may stop or it may continue. I am likely to give it another touch and direct it toward the face so that some part will touch one eye. That effects eye closure and is very effective in inducing a deep trance without a single word having been spoken.

There are other nonverbal suggestions. for example, what if my subject make no response to my efforts with his right hand and the situation looks hopeless? If he is not looking at my face, my slow, gentle out-of-keeping-with-the-situation movements (remember: out-of-keeping) compel him to look at my face. I freeze my expression, refocus my gaze, and by slow head movements direct his gaze to his left hand, toward which my right hand is slowly, apparently purposelessly moving. As my right hand touches his left with a slight, gentle, upward movement, my left hand with very gentle firmness, just barely enough, presses down on his right hand for a moment until it moves. Thus, I confirm and reaffirm the downward movement of his right hand, a suggestion he accepts along with the tactile suggestion of left hand levitation. This upward movement is augmented by the fact that he has been breathing in time with me and that my right hand gives his left hand that upward touch at the moment when he is beginning an inspiration. This is further reinforced by whatever peripheral vision he has that notes the upward movement of my body as I inhale and as I slowly lift my body and head up and backward, when I give his left hand that upward touch."

Erickson's description of his handshake induction is a bit breathtaking to the beginner. How does one keep all of that in mind? How does one develop such a gentle touch and such skill? Above all, how does one learn to utilise whatever happens in the situation as a means of further focusing the subject's attention and inner involvement so that trance develops? Obviously a certain amount of dedication and patience are required to develop such skill. It is much more than a matter of simply shaking hands in a certain way. Shaking hands is simply a context in which Erickson makes contact with a person. He then utilises this context to fix attention inward and so set the situation for that possible development of trance.

As he shakes hands, Erickson is himself fully focused on where the subject's attention is. Initially the subjects' attention is on a conventional social encounter, then, with the unexpected touches as their hand is released, there is a momentary confusion and their attention is rapidly focused on his hand. At this point "resistant" subjects might rapidly withdraw their hand and end the situation. Subjects who are ready to experience trance will be curious about what is happening. Their attention is fixed and they remain open and ready for further directing stimuli. The directing touches are so gentle and unusual that subjects' cognition has no way of evaluating them; the subjects have been given a rapid series of nonverbal cues to keep their hand fixed in one position (see last paragraph of the initiation), but they are not aware of it. Their hand responds to the directing touches for immobility, but they do not know why. It is simply a case

Their hand responds to the directing touches for immobility, but they do not know why. It is simply a case of an automatic response on the kinesthetic level that initially defies conscious analysis because the subjects have had no previous experience with it. The directing touches for movement are responded to on the same level, with a similar gap in awareness and understanding.

The subjects find themselves responding in an unusual way without knowing why. Their attention is now directed inward in an intense search for an answer or for some orientation. This inner direction and search is the basic nature of "trance". Subjects may become so preoccupied in their inner search that the usual sensory-perceptual processes of our normal reality orientation are momentarily suspended. The subjects may then experience an anaesthesia, a lacuna in vision or audition, a time distortion, a *deja vu*, a sense of disorientation or vertigo, and so on. At this moment the subjects are open for further verbal or nonverbal suggestions that can intensify the inner search (trance) in one direction or another.

[From **Erickson M.H., Rossi E. & Rossi S** . *Hypnotic Realities*. New York: Irvington, 1976.]