

# WHAT IS HYPNOSIS?

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## Definitions by the "Recognized" Experts

From "physiological relaxation" to "monoideized attention"

The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.

*William James*

Actually, the hypnotic state, like the conscious state and the sleeping state, is extremely complex and involves so many physiological, psychological, and interpersonal factors that no one theory has yet been able to account for all the intricate operations that take place within its range. This does not at all hinder our practical employment of this interesting method. In medicine we utilize many remedies and procedures because they work, even though we may not know exactly why and how they work. Every year, research adds more data to our fund of knowledge, providing an empirical foundation for our pragmatic superstructure.

*Lewis R. Wolberg*

Hypnosis is the term applied to a unique, complex form of unusual but normal behavior which can probably be induced in all normal persons under suitable conditions and also in many persons suffering from various types of abnormality. It is primarily a special psychological state with certain physiological attributes, resembling sleep only superficially and marked by a functioning of the individual at a level of awareness other than the ordinary conscious state... when hypnotized, or in the hypnotic trance, the subject can think, act and behave in relationship to either ideas or reality objects as adequately as, and usually better than, he can in the ordinary state of awareness. In all probability this ability derives from

intensity and restriction of attention to the task in hand, and the consequent freedom from the ordinary conscious tendency to orient constantly to distracting, even irrelevant, reality considerations.

*Encyclopedia Britannica*

Hypnotism is simply exaggerated suggestibility.

*George H. Estabrooks*

All of the various mesmeric, hypnotic, and verbal suggestive induction procedures have only one objective: To help promote this state of single-mindedness, of exclusively concentrated attention, letting other ideas pass into torpid oblivion. Because the monoideized attention has heightened the intensity of the one focal or dominant idea, the power of the imagination on mind and body is considerably greater than in the ordinary waking state, and thus suggestions are likely to initiate correspondingly greater influence.

*Ronald E. Shor*

...A state of intensified attention and receptiveness, and an increased responsiveness to an idea or to a set of ideas.

*Milton H. Erickson*

...Temporary condition of altered attention in the subject which may be induced by another person and in which a variety of phenomena may appear spontaneously or in response to verbal or other stimuli. These phenomena include alterations in consciousness and memory, increased suggestibility, and the production in the subject of responses and ideas unfamiliar to him in his usual state of mind.

Further, phenomena such as anesthesia, paralysis, muscle rigidity and vasomotor changes can be produced and removed in the hypnotic state.

*American Medical Association*

The essence [of hypnosis] lies in the experimental fact of a quantitative shift in the upward direction which may result from the hypnotic procedure. So far as the writer can see, this quantitative phenomenon alone remains of the once imposing aggregate known by the name of hypnosis. But this undoubted fact is quite sufficient to give significance and value to the term.

*Clark L. Hull*

...Nothing but an aspect of conditioning.

*Andrew Salter*

Hypnosis is largely a question of your willingness to be receptive and responsive to ideas, and to allow these ideas to act upon you without interference. These ideas we call suggestions.

*Andre M. Weitzenhoffer  
and Ernest R. Hilgard*

Hypnosis is not sleep. Whatever sleep is, hypnosis is not. In an operational sense, hypnosis is a response to a signal from another or to an inner signal, which activates a capacity for a shift of awareness in the subject and permits a more intensive concentration upon a designated goal direction... to put it succinctly, hypnosis is an altered state of attention which approaches peak concentration capacity.

*Herbert Spiegel*

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## More "Definitions of Hypnosis"

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Hypnosis is a consent state of physiological relaxation where the subject allows the critical censor of the mind to be bypassed to a greater, or lesser, degree... we could even go so far as to say that hypnosis is "preventive psychological medicine."

Peter Blythe

...An altered state of the organism originally produced by a repetition of stimuli in which suggestion (no matter how defined) is more effective than usual. Such a definition as this is admittedly ringed with ifs and buts and questions of how, what and why, and is more descriptive than explanatory.

F. L. Marcuse

There is nothing mysterious about hypnosis. Its application is based solely on the known psychological relationship between the conscious and the subconscious minds. The subconscious, having no power to reason, accepts and acts upon any fact or suggestions given to it by the conscious mind.

Frank S. Caprio and Joseph R. Berger

A complete theory of hypnosis would doubtless have much to say about the relationship of the hypnotic state to known processes going on within the brain and nervous system, the various parameters influencing hypnotic performances, the subordinate processes of induction and trance deepening: However, such a complete theory is not available.

Josephine R. Hilgard

It is recognized that there is no generally accepted definition of hypnosis, though considerable consensus exists at a descriptive level.

Martin T. Orme

...An altered state within which suggestions have a peculiarly potent effect.

K. S. Bowers

It is a somewhat altered state of consciousness and altered awareness, although the conscious mind is still present. We might compare it to a teeter-totter. In the waking state the conscious mind is at the high end of the teeter-totter and the subconscious mind at the low end. Under hypnosis they reverse and the subconscious is at the high end and the conscious part at the low end, but it is still present. Thoughts rise from the inner mind into consciousness.

Leslie M. LeCron

Hypnosis is a natural state of mind with special identifying characteristics:

1. An extraordinary quality of relaxation.
2. An emotionalized desire to satisfy the suggested behavior: The person feels like doing what the hypnotist suggests, provided that what is suggested does not generate conflict with his belief system.
3. The organism becomes self-regulating. It produces normalization of the nervous system (voluntary and involuntary systems).
4. Heightened and selective sensitivity to stimuli being received by the five senses and four basic perceptions.
5. Immediate softening of psychic defenses.

Gil Boyne □

## Mind's Eye

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plot device and have given it an exaggerated image. The typical TV story of a person being hypnotized to rob a bank or murder a person is impossible, according to Fishburn.

"Although an individual may suspend certain critical judgment, one does not respond in an immoral or criminal fashion purely as a result of being under hypnosis," he said. "Hypnosis cannot make a person do something against his moral values. The criminal tendency would have to be characteristic of the person. The individual retains control."

Some states forbid the testimony of defendants who were hypnotized to get information, but the Supreme Court overruled several of them in June 1987. The court said states may not automatically prohibit testimony given by defendants whose memories have been helped by hypnosis. Instead, testimony must be checked for reliability, and the states must set guidelines to evaluate it.

So, hypnosis isn't a remote phenomenon, but one that is growing in respectability and public awareness. At its simplest, it is a form of relaxation that many people experience daily. But it also has other important uses in habit control and stress management, and it's used to initiate hypnotic phenomena among highly receptive individuals. When treated with respect and understanding, hypnosis can be an effective way to control pain, to reduce the need for medication and anesthesia, to help overcome habits and phobias, and to assist in psychotherapy. □