

**Using Hypnosis to Invite Relaxation**  
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As you've no doubt discovered during anxious or stressful times, purposefully trying to relax is like trying to fall asleep or trying to have fun—the expended effort undermines the intended goal. Any time your clients pit their conscious will against their racing thoughts or uptight bodies, trying to compel themselves to unwind or let go, they initiate a battle they can only lose. Their thoughts refuse to slow down and their bodies stay tense, leaving them feeling frustrated and defeated.

Relaxation can't be dictated; it must be invited to develop, which is where hypnosis comes in. Bridging the chasm between mind and body, hypnosis offers your clients a wonderfully effective means to relax their efforts at relaxing, opening the possibility for non-volitional change. In this chapter, I'll provide some guidelines and illustrations for how to incorporate hypnosis into your practice, but for that discussion to make sense, I first need to talk a bit about the differences between conscious awareness and hypnotic experience.

**Understanding Hypnosis**

In the everyday process of consciously perceiving stuff, you typically distinguish yourself as an observer, separate from what you observe. When the object of your perception lies outside of you, and particularly when it is somehow unpleasant—that annoying song blasting from the radio; the threatening clouds forming on the horizon; the odor emanating from the locker at the gym—you tend to experience a self-other split between you and it. But this same division between observer and observed also gets evoked when you're perceiving yourself, especially

when you don't like what you're noticing—the damn itch on your legs; the cold nausea that's been gripping you as tonight's speech looms ever closer; the troubling memory that keeps popping up at inopportune times.

In everyday awareness, you often stay one step (or more) removed from your surroundings and your experience, as if there were an invisible wall erected between your “Observing-I” and the rest of the world, including the rest of *you*—your body, your thoughts, your emotions. This is the experiential source not only of alienation but also of the Cartesian mind-body split.

During hypnosis and related activities of engagement—meditation, prayer, reading, making love, playing sports, watching movies, and playing or listening to music—the invisible wall disperses, allowing the insular separateness of your Observing-I to dissolve. This accounts for the non-volitional character of hypnotic experience (Flemons, 2002). As your sense of self moves from outside to inside your experience, facilitating the emergence and merging of an embodied mind and mindful body, no insular Observing-I remains to claim ownership of, or responsibility for, the arm that's levitating, the numbness that's spreading, or the warm heaviness that's increasing. As a result, these and other hypnotic phenomena seem to “just happen.” Such an environment is ideal for your clients to learn how to relax without trying, without expending any conscious effort.

### **Inviting Hypnosis, Inviting Relaxation**

Over the years, clients have told me stories of other hypnotherapists they've had who, when it came time to do hypnosis, put on their glasses and read a scripted induction, read a few scripted therapeutic stories, and read some scripted directives. Good hypnotic technique requires something quite different. Rather than focusing on a bunch of words on a page, you must be

focused on your clients—attuned to, and in sync with, their experience. Of course, if you're going to work this way, you have to know what to do with your clients' responses to what you say and how you say it. Following are suggestions for how to put into practice a client-focused approach to hypnotically invited relaxation.

*1. Communicate your empathic understanding.* The best way to begin helping your clients change their relationship with themselves, facilitating a shift in their internal boundaries and the development of relaxation, is to help them change their relationship with you and their surroundings. Hypnosis doesn't begin when you start delivering an "induction"; it begins when your clients start trusting that you have a good handle on the intricacies of their experience. You help them relax into this trust by proving that you deserve it—by empathically communicating your understanding of the details and emotional nuances of their experience.

CLIENT: . . . and by then I'm so stressed out that when it comes time to go to sleep, all I can do is lay there and replay what happened during the day, over and over.

THERAPIST: It's bad enough that you have to go through it the first time during the day, but then to have to live through it again and again, instead of drifting off to sleep—I bet you just want to scream.

CLIENT: Exactly. I do.

You know that you're connecting well with your clients when they're agreeing with your empathic statements. This is the rapport you need to move forward.

*2. Use permissive words, inviting possibilities.* Imagine walking into a bank and having the manager say, in a commanding tone, "You will open an account right now and deposit your money into it. I will count backwards from 10 to 1, and as I do, you will find yourself signing your name on these forms, and you will give me all your money: 10, 9, 8, . . ." You'd head

straight for the door, right? Well, your clients are no different. What many therapists regard as resistance, I view as clients' healthy reluctance to go along with a course of action that, for whatever reason, doesn't fit for them (Flemons, 2002). My reluctance would certainly be heightened if a therapist were to start ordering me around:

THERAPIST: Now I want you to just relax as you look at me and listen to my voice. As I count backwards from 10 to 1, you will find yourself unable to look away from me, as if I were at the end of a dark tunnel and you could see nothing else. Soon that darkness will envelop you and your eyes will close all the way as you completely relax.

Yuk! Forget looking through a tunnel—I'd be looking at the therapist through the office window, shaking my head as I headed back to my car. Rather than issuing directives, you'll be much better off offering suggestions and possibilities, phrasing them with permissive words (O'Hanlon & Martin, 1992):

THERAPIST: I *don't know* if you'll be more comfortable closing your eyes or keeping them open. If they stay open for awhile, they *might* want to rest somewhere as I talk. You *can* listen to what I'm saying or you *can* let your mind wander—either is fine. Certainly there's *no need* to pay attention, or to try to make something happen or to try to help me out.

**3. Utilize what the surroundings and your clients offer up.** Is your office too bright or warm or cold for you to do hypnosis? Are the seats too uncomfortable? Are the walls too thin to block out the sounds of traffic, voices, phones, and plumbing? Are your clients too uptight to let go? Are they too intent on maintaining control to experience hypnosis? It makes sense that you'd entertain such concerns, but if you approach hypnosis as an opportunity for utilization (Erickson, 1980), you can see each of these apparent roadblocks as possibilities for furthering hypnosis and relaxation.

THERAPIST: You can allow the sunshine streaming in through the window to shed light [utilizing the amount of light in the room to make a metaphorical statement about gaining understanding] on how you can feel so uptight, the temperature in the room helping you, perhaps, to warm you to the realization that warm light is light, that the lightness of warm air, the warmth of light air, takes it up, up, up [utilizing the too-warm room as part of a metaphorical expression (“to warm up to something”) that suggests positive feelings, and to indirectly explore possibilities of developing sensations of lightness]. And I wonder just how high up, just how light, that feeling of being uptight can take you [utilizing being “uptight” as helpful in creating this movement up], like an updraft, perhaps accompanied by a developing sense, somewhere, probably not yet in your shoulders, maybe somewhere else already warming up to the possibility [again utilizing the temperature in the room] of sinking comfortably down, like water, aided by gravity, moving down through pipes [utilizing the sound of a toilet flushing], effortlessly moving along with nothing getting in the way.

No need to bother trying to help me out, as the cars and trucks out there, also rushing in their own way, speed by, and you can effortlessly follow the sound of their movement, rushing ahead of rush hour [utilizing the sound of traffic]. And what a rush it can be for it to slowly dawn on you, like the light of dawn (utilizing puns to change meanings), that the pace outside can be nicely complemented by the pace inside, that their zooming out can remind you how to more easily float in, like floating in the silence between each of the rings of the telephone. Such a relief that brief silence is [utilizing the incessant ringing of a telephone], more appreciated because of the lovely way in contrasts with the rings on either side of it, before and after it, and that voice out there answering, giving you the freedom to question [utilizing a voice answering the phone to move to the idea of questioning], going round and

round, wondering what to make of hypnosis, knowing that you can question both before and after you experience it, wondering how your body is able to perfectly monitor and control your experience, just as it does when you're sleeping or otherwise occupied in some absorbing activity.

4. *Offer both-and suggestions.* If you think of contrasts—relaxed/tense; slow/fast; up/down—as exclusive opposites, you will assume that securing the desirable side of any distinction requires the elimination of the other. But if you treat contrasts as compatible and mutually important, as I did in the example above, then one side of a contrast can coexist with, or be the conduit to, the other. Rather than lecturing my clients about this, I tell stories or vignettes that allow them to vicariously experience the ideas. For example, if a client's thoughts are racing, I might offer a vignette or story that acknowledges the restless speed of their thinking as an ideal means for potentiating its complement:

THERAPIST: Wolves protect themselves by continually patrolling the perimeter of their territory, but if all of the wolves in a pack were to patrol all the time, none of them would get any rest. So they take turns. Part of the pack keeps moving, always moving, along the edge of their territory, making sure everything is safe and secure, while the rest are able, in the center, to rest deeply, relaxing and sleeping. Why not allow part of you to continue patrolling the perimeter of your awareness, ensuring that everything is safe and secure, while the rest of you rests deeply and comfortably?

A both-and approach to offering suggestions helps you not presume that quiet, calm thoughts are a necessary precursor for hypnosis, and it helps clients not to have to try to slow down their thinking or breathing. Hypnosis makes it unnecessary for them to be at odds with themselves. Here are some more both-and contrasts I sometimes offer, allowing clients to

experience something new without having to first not experience something else. Notice how the juxtaposition of stories creates a both-and relationship among my descriptions.

THERAPIST: Isn't it fascinating how you can be zipping along in a car at 80 mph and yet feel like you're going 20? How is it that something so fast can feel so slow? Your thoughts can race on ahead or along side or just behind me. I have a friend who, when we walk together, is always a half-step in front of me, and another, a former competitive ski racer, who always skis a half a breath in front of himself, staying on the leading edge of himself, effortlessly careening down the mountain, taking all the time he needs to ever . . . so slowly . . . carve . . . each screeching turn.

*5. Bring forth small shifts, rather than dramatic transformations.* I grew up in Canada, where I gained a lot of experience freeing cars from snow banks. When a vehicle is stranded, you rock it forward and back, while the driver alternates between hitting the gas and engaging the clutch. The goal isn't instantaneous liberation but a process of ever-increasing trajectories of change.

You'll enjoy greater success if you adopt the same attitude in helping clients. For example, instead of directly trying to get their shoulders to relax, help them discover that one of their fingers feels a little numb. A small change in sensation there can be the first step to an ever-so-slightly bigger change somewhere else, resulting, after awhile, in the shoulders letting go of their tension.

*6. Offer interactive relaxation (via weird body conversations).* Many hypnotherapists offer their clients some form of progressive (sometimes called Jacobson) relaxation, which involves purposefully contracting and then releasing different muscle groups for 10 or 15 seconds at a time. Other clinicians combine this with deep breathing techniques, timing

exhalations with the releasing of tension. Still others offer guided imagery, taking clients to a vividly described beach or alpine meadow, or some other potentially relaxing setting, offering suggestions for enjoying the surroundings and relaxing into the experience.

Although these can all prove helpful, I, for the reasons I outlined earlier, invariably take a less directive path. I ask clients to find a place in their body that feels especially tense, and I get them to describe the sensations there with as much detail as possible. I then have them then go in search of a relaxed place—some part of them that is comfortable or numb or so relaxed that they haven't even noticed it for a while—and ask what they're able to describe about it, too. I then provide a rationale for why it would make sense for the two areas to get into a kind of developing “conversation,” each one sharing some important information with the other. As we proceed, I frequently check in on what is changing and then fold that into what I say next.

THERAPIST: Okay, so you feel the tension most in your shoulders, like a sharp, radiating ache?

CLIENT: Yes.

THERAPIST: And your right thigh feels warm and comfortable—almost asleep.

CLIENT: Pretty much, yeah.

THERAPIST: Great. You know, just as your lungs and heart work together to deliver oxygen to the cells throughout your body, they also coordinate with each other in the extraction and transportation of carbon dioxide from your body into the atmosphere. At a smaller level, the various cells of your immune system communicate with each other about intruders and, based on this shared information, they coordinate an appropriate response. So your body knows a lot about how to communicate within and between organs and systems, and it does this without your having to consciously understand how it happens.

So as you sit there and listen to me, why shouldn't your shoulders get into a body conversation with your right thigh? You can listen to me or think about whatever comes to mind, confident that your shoulders and your thigh can communicate in a way that you and I could never understand. But as your thigh keys into the sharp radiating tension there in your shoulders, it might learn something about how to allow sensations to radiate outward. If pain can radiate, why not comfort? I don't know how the muscles there in your thigh have figured out so brilliantly how to become so easily warm and loose, but your shoulders might as well get in on the secret. Let's let them get into a body conversation of sorts while you tell me what you're noticing.

7. *Practice extemporaneous collaboration.* Just as it is useful to encourage different parts of your clients' bodies to get into conversation with each other, so too it is vitally important for you to stay in touch with your clients as you help them develop their hypnotic ability. Watching their nonverbal responses to your suggestions will keep you partially apprised of what they are currently experiencing, but if you can get them to tell you in words, do it. Then base your next suggestion on the information you've just received.

THERAPIST: What's happening now?

CLIENT: My right hand is warm and soft, but my shoulders are still tight.

THERAPIST: Great. Your right hand was first off the mark in adopting some important understanding from your thigh. And we didn't even know it was listening! So now I don't know if your thigh will continue to help your hand develop that sensation while it engages in contact with your shoulders or whether your hand will serve as an intermediary of some sort. Could be that your hand passes along the information to your shoulders, maybe directly, or

maybe by way of some other body part. . . . Let's let things continue, and let's see if your shoulders get in on the action at this point, or if some other part will first.

*8. Teach self-hypnosis and self-reliance.* The hypnosis sessions you offer in your office may be all your clients require to change how they've been orienting to the stresses in their lives. Nevertheless, by teaching them how to do self-hypnosis, you will give them the skill to invite relaxation on their own. I suggest to clients that since all hypnosis is, in a way, self-hypnosis, they, having already experienced it in my office, know almost everything they need to know in order to practice on their own.

THERAPIST: Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down at home, in your office, or wherever, and begin by noticing external and then more and more internal things or events that grab your attention—sounds and sights before and after you close your eyes; the sound and feel of your breathing; sensations on your skin; thoughts and feelings; smells or tastes; and so on. Devote one breath to each thing you notice, silently naming it in time with your exhalations: “The dog barking . . . birds chirping . . . jaw tense . . . the kids arguing downstairs . . . tight shoulders . . . the fan clicking . . . left hand heavy . . . waves of color . . .” The more you practice, the easier it will be for you to invite yourself into hypnosis, not needing to try to make anything happen, not needing to try to relax.

If clients attempt to give themselves suggestions in the midst of self-hypnosis, they will re-invoke the split between the Observing-I (a.k.a. the Bossing-Around-I) and the rest of the self, and the hypnotic experience will be interrupted. To help them avoid this problem, I suggest, passing along an idea of Milton Erickson's, that they begin each self-hypnosis time by posing a question to themselves—for example, “I wonder how my body will find its way into

relaxation?”—and then let that wondering hover around them as they proceed with noticing their experience.

**9. *Trust yourself.*** If you’re just getting started with hypnosis, you might feel inclined, despite my earlier cautions, to use some of my examples as scripts for use with your clients. I suggest instead that you study them closely for the logic informing them, explore diverse examples of other hypnotic work, and then work interactively and extemporaneously with your clients as you develop your own style.

**10. *Get training.*** Check with your state licensing board to find out whether you must obtain approved training in hypnosis prior to employing it in your practice. Even if there’s no regulation to this effect in place, I highly recommend getting hands-on experience and supervision so you can keep your hypnotic work within the boundaries of your clinical knowledge and competence. Workshops are regularly offered by several professional organizations, including the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, and the Milton H. Erickson Foundation (see below for website URLs), and some offer certification. Your state licensing board may also have a list of approved workshop providers in your area.

### **For More Information**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter outlines fundamental hypnotic principles and practices for inviting clients to relax. Clinicians are provided with concrete suggestions (and illustrative examples) for how to work interactively and extemporaneously with clients, utilizing potential distractions in the setting and the clients' unfolding experience to facilitate non-volitional shifts from tension to relaxation.

**Keywords:** hypnosis, relaxation, utilization, permissive, suggestions, resistance, self-hypnosis