

HYPNOSIS AS A PROCESS LEADING TO CHANGE

Hypnosis is not some kind of complementary medicine. It's been a familiar experience for mankind since the dawn of time. When I asked who had ever experienced a hypnotic state, only ten people in this room raised their hands. And yet all children can put themselves into a shallow hypnotic trance. Their eyesight then becomes blurred and they no longer react when a parent passes a hand in front of their eyes. Trance is a perfectly natural and normal state, which consists of returning to the depths of your being or to your unconscious, so as to make contact with your own inner resources. You reconnect with your real self before setting off on new ventures, a bit like when you put a disk into the computer to wipe out viruses.

Conquering the fear of change

Hypnosis has numerous applications, but I'll speak about it here above all as a method of making the process of change possible in a reassuring way. In our society, we learn to distrust what is unknown. We fear doubts and the void. We seek reassurance by relying on the scientific knowledge that we have mastered. We cling to this so firmly that those things we are quite certain about end up becoming prejudices. We then find ourselves rowing upstream against the normal flow of life, because this isn't constant but evolves in cycles. Suffering can perhaps be explained in this way - by our preference for clinging to what we know best, rather opening ourselves up to new experiences and change.

When someone decides to seek medical help, they have often already trodden a long, hard road and been driven there by this inner suffering.

And yet, caricaturing only a bit, we often find that after dozens of conventional therapy sessions, all the therapist will have done is to make the patient regurgitate everything that has gone wrong - but without bringing about much change.

I have had people interested in hypnosis come to see me who confessed: «I've been under analysis for several years, and now I know exactly what's wrong with me, but I don't really feel better.»

With hypnosis, the patient immediately enters into a mechanism of change. This creates the confidence needed to induce him to accept what, until then, had remained unacceptable. A patient who has been depressed for several years and who, for a quarter of an hour or so, experiences a sensation of happiness and inner peace, is not cured. But he has seen proof that something within him is capable of changing.

When a person who is suffering from chronic pain has the benefit of a general analgesia for a few minutes, he discovers that his pain is not necessarily a permanent fixture. If he can disconnect from the pain for a few moments, it means that relief could be made to last longer. Once, when I saw one of my patients who had come over especially from Italy, he confided in me that for as long as he could remember, he had always been tense and anxious and had never experienced a single moment at peace. I suggested to him that we try hypnosis before

doing an anamnesis or getting to know him better. He emerged periodically from his trance laughing and told me: «It's the first time that I've felt good» or «But this is quite amazing, what's happening!». And after the consultation, he exclaimed again: «That means I won't always be the way I've been up to now.» He had at last been able to enter the unknown, this process of change that's absolutely vital for hope, as well as for individual and collective evolution.

Most of my patients come to see me because of depression, fears, phobias, anxiety or post traumatic stress disorders. Often, at some earlier date, they have experienced some traumatic event, emotion or relationship which they have suppressed. Refusing to accept what happened, they turned in on themselves, and this is now still preventing them from opening themselves up to the flow of life. They are too frightened of finding there what they have been trying to flee from for years. The process of hypnosis allows the patient to go back to this previous situation, in a state of total inner safety, and consequently to accept it.

That's when the work starts. Hypnosis is perhaps the branch of psychiatry that most resembles surgery. You often have to open something up in order to repair it. But there's an important difference. I do not act alone, but in collaboration with my patient. He does the work - I just lend him company.

When the patient returns to the normal state of consciousness, new opportunities may have been opened up. I remember one woman patient who suffered from agoraphobia (fear of crowds). The first time that she had been subject to this was when she was with a member of her family she had to supervise, but of whom she was jealous. As the crowd got thicker, she realized that this person was at risk of being trampled to death. And at this moment she thought , «That's appalling, I'm responsible for her», but at the same time the thought entered her head :«If she pegs out, I'll have a bit of peace».

Since she rediscovered this memory, she has no longer been afraid of crowds, because she has understood that it was not the crowd that she had been afraid of, but the ambivalence of her own feelings. So after that we worked on this ambivalence.

When under hypnosis, the patient expresses himself, digests past emotions, and then resurfaces, often having brought about a change in his view of life.

He will have reintegrated within himself something unknown which had previously been unacceptable, but had now become an ally, a path leading towards an improvement in his condition. Freudian psychiatry long considered the unconscious to be a garbage can into which you throw anything unacceptable, vile or perverse. Hypnosis on the other hand starts from the principle that the unconscious contains the forces necessary to support life and progress, as well as the answers to the questions one asks oneself. So you do not interrogate it in order to resolve a repression problem or to understand why you don't feel well, but rather to draw from it the inner strengths needed to progress.

We must, however, make clear that a patient who experiences an hypnotic trance does not lose consciousness. He remains fully aware of his conscious mind whilst adding to it

communication with his unconscious mind. But some patients do arrive expecting magic to be performed, and say to me: «I'd like you to put me to sleep. I will rediscover all the memories I have forgotten and will wake up cured.» It's just not realistic. You do not go to sleep when you lose consciousness and the therapist can do nothing against the patient's will. What happens is a therapeutic exchange and the discovery of a part of yourself to which you previously perhaps never had access, because of lack of inner peace, but which you can henceforth continue to use.

Consensual, developmental hypnosis

There are several types of hypnosis. We talk of consensual hypnosis, directive hypnosis and hypnotic manipulation (or stage hypnosis). For a long time, hypnosis was something that was very directive and mysterious. At the end of the 18th Century, Mesmer introduced into his experiments notions of magic, magnetism and the circulation of energy by authoritarian means. By the time of Charcot and Freud, the methods had evolved, but power remained in the hands of the doctor, who would say: « Go to sleep, I command you » and then «We will cure you». It was in the middle of the 20th Century in the USA that Milton Erikson introduced the notion of consensual, developmental hypnosis. This approach is centered on the patient, who is allowed to feel what he must feel, experience what he must experience. Returning to one's real self plays an important part here, as do metaphors, allegories and stories from real life. The practitioners of this form of therapy sometimes use experiences from their own lives when telling a story to their patients. In ordinary psychiatry, we would never do that. One day when he was a child, Erikson saw a horse arriving at his parents' farm. Everybody wondered where this animal had come from, because the nearest dwelling was several miles away. The child offered to take the horse back home. When he came back a few hours later, everybody asked him how he had known where to go. He answered: «But I didn't know. All I had to do was to keep the horse on the road. He knew very well which way to go.» The person who comes seeking medical help holds within himself the keys to his improvement and eventual cure. I therefore respect him deeply and construct with him a partnership of equals. It sometimes happens that I don't have the remotest idea what is going on during a trance. Silence reigns and the patient emerges, marveling and saying: «It was a unique experience. So many things happened.»

But it is also true that hypnosis can be used to manipulate people. During the Second World War for example, a specialist named Göbel taught a Nazi head of state how to hypnotize his partisans to conquer Europe. However, you should not believe that the people who followed Hitler had been completely manipulated. Let's not forget that they had to take the bus or train to go and listen to him speak, so they were predisposed to agree with what they were about to hear.

Negative hypnosis

There is another hypnotic phenomenon which must absolutely be mentioned: the negative trance, to be found in all types of addiction. People can be dependent not only on drugs, alcohol and tobacco, but also on money, speed, sex, violence or the need for an intense relationship. In all these states, the afflicted person leaves his normal state of consciousness for a dislocated and parasitical form of consciousness. The forces that drive dependence are extremely violent and invariably take over a person's awareness of himself and the world around him.

When you smoke a cigarette, it's not necessarily to give yourself a bit of pleasure. Very often, the smoker automatically puts his hand in his pocket – always the same one - takes a cigarette out, always in the same way, puts it between his fingers in a well-practiced gesture, and lights it in a ritual fashion, putting it into his mouth. And it's only at that point that he realizes he is smoking. The person was in a dissociative state, because he lit the cigarette without realizing what he was doing. In the USA, addictive behaviours are being studied more and more, and treated through techniques of hypnosis rather than with long analytical or behavioural approaches.

Conclusion

Hypnosis is therefore less of a technique and more of a return to your real self, so as to mobilize your life forces and go through processes of change in a condition of inner safety. It becomes a form of personal development, whether one practices it subsequently by doing meditation or by self-hypnosis - the terms used are of little importance. We all have ways of rediscovering a state in which we feel safe, sometimes simply by returning to the beauty of nature or of an old memory, a remembered piece of music, a picture or an encounter with someone we loved.

Connecting up to our inner self is a way of escaping from dependence on the outside world and on our own outdated patterns of thought in order to create a space in which we can move in the direction of our choice. In the end, we don't have to be so afraid for ourselves. There's more confidence in us to mobilize than anxieties, and by attaching ourselves to this confidence we can pursue our psychological and spiritual development.

Dr Bertrand Piccard, psychiatrist

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