

Fundamentals of
Hypnotic
Language and
Suggestion

CLINICAL WORKSHOP

LEVEL 1

**January 31, February 1, February
28, and March 1, 2026**

Learning objectives

- Explain at least two ways hypnotic communication creates positive expectancy.
- Discuss Erickson's Principles of Individualization and Utilization as it pertains to language and suggestion.
- Identify at least four commonly used words/phrases to reinforce the person's hypnotic experience.
- Differentiate between direct and indirect suggestion.

Topics

- Informal hypnotic language as part of “being hypnotic”
 - Can be used by **anyone** in the medical setting
- Different styles of suggestions, for both informal and formal use
- Utilization: what it is and why it’s so great
- Principles of forming suggestions

Rapport/Attunement

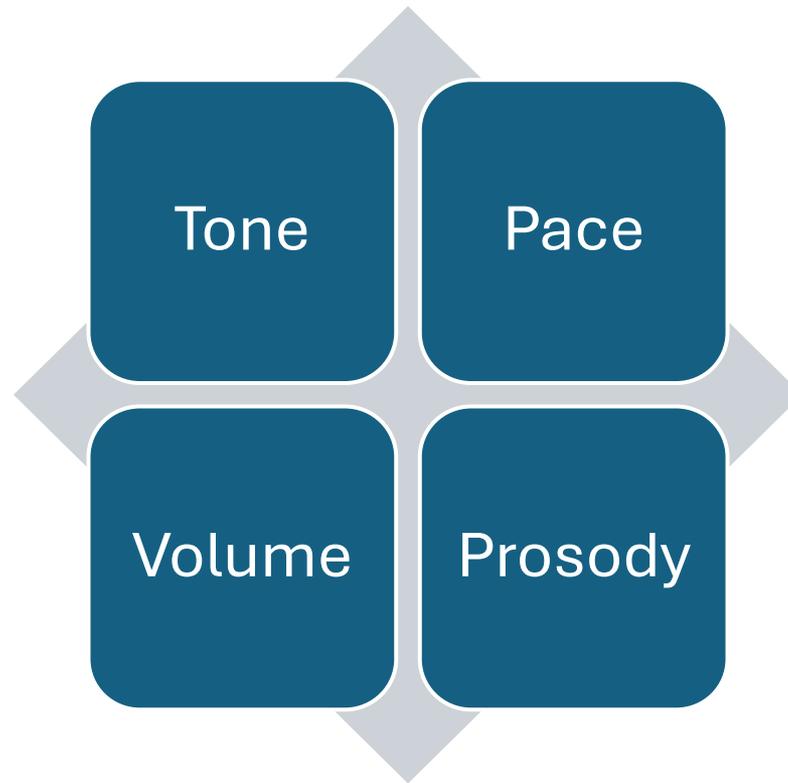


- The foundation for the effectiveness of whatever language/suggestions you use
- Show your warmth, respect, and caring
- Creates a climate of trust
- Demonstrate that the process is cooperative
 - doing things WITH, not TO, the patient
- Patients will be more forgiving of missteps when you have good rapport

Communication

- Begins when the encounter does – if not earlier
- Three primary modes
 - **Verbal**
 - **Nonverbal**
 - **Paraverbal**
- Informal hypnosis/ “being hypnotic”

Paraverbal communication: HOW you speak



Being Hypnotic vs. Doing Hypnosis

Being hypnotic means being able to **fully engage** the person, being so **attuned** and **connected** to the client that you are **difficult to ignore or take lightly** because **what you are doing and what you are offering is *so relevant and absorbing.***

- Yapko, 2012

Being Hypnotic

- Observe (as well as listen) and then tailor what you say to what you see
- Add emphasis, pauses, silence
- Slow down and speed up to help guide the experience
- Create hypnotic patten – this comes with practice!

A few definitions

- **Implicative language:** assumes that something has happened, is happening, or will happen

Example: “When you finish that process of relaxation...”

- **Conjunctive language:** creates momentum or coherence with words like “and,” “because,” or “so”

Example: “You can take a slow breath, and then feel a pleasant wave of relaxation spreading through your body, because this is just the right time to become more comfortable.”

- **Dissociative language:** implies a separation between the patient and an unwanted/unpleasant sensation or situation

Example: “You can let any discomfort in that arm become fainter and more remote.”

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Being hypnotic: creating positive expectancy

- Create an assumption that suggestions can be (will be?) effective
- Goal of inspiring confidence in patients
- Meant to be empowering
- Not authoritarian!

- **Example:** “You can feel better, and this is one way to get there.”
- **Example:** “You might be surprised by how effective this approach is for you.”
- **Example:** “Let’s see how quickly you begin to notice changes.”
- **Not an example:** “When I snap my fingers, you will feel complete relief.”

Useful
words for
creating
positive
expectancy

May/might

Can

How much

Until

When

Change

Improve

Learn

Less
useful
words

If

Whether

Try

Fail



**DO OR
DO NOT.
THERE IS
NO TRY.**

Hot button words (“negative affective priming”)



The Influence of Negative Words on Pain During Venous Blood Sampling

Ott et al, Clin J Pain 2012; 28:324-328

- 98 healthy adults having blood draws
- Randomized to “Stich” (sting) or “Vorsicht” (beware) groups
- Pain measured on the Numeric Rating Scale (NRS)



The Influence of Negative Words on Pain During Venous Blood Sampling

Ott et al, *Clin J Pain* 2012; 28:324-328

Findings:

Group	NRS score
Sting	2.7 ± 1.2
Beware	1.6 ± 1.1

P = 0.001



A negative times a
negative does not make
a positive.

The hot button word trumps all.

Most patients experience medical settings as a **serious and critical situation** and, to some extent, as an **existential threat**.

In such situations, individuals... tend to enter a **trance-like altered state of consciousness**.

-Zech et al, 2019



Nocebo Effects on Muscular Performance - An Experimental Study About Clinical Situations

Zech N et al. Front Pharmacol. 2019 Mar 11;10:219. doi: 10.3389/fphar.2019.00219. PMID: 30914952; PMCID: PMC6421283

- 46 healthy adults without medical training
- Deltoid strength testing as an objective physiological measurement
- Baseline and after paired negative (A) and positive (B) verbal suggestions or video clips
- Negative suggestions caused greater reduction of muscle strength.

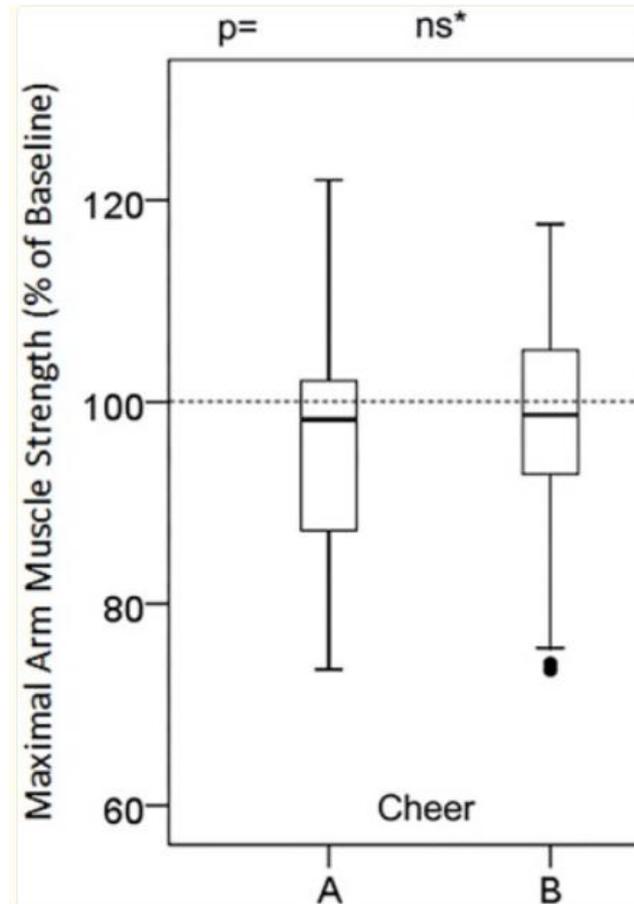


Sample paired suggestions

A) You don't need to be afraid. Don't worry.

B) We are right by your side until you have successfully finished your procedure.

Negative (A) vs positive (B) statement

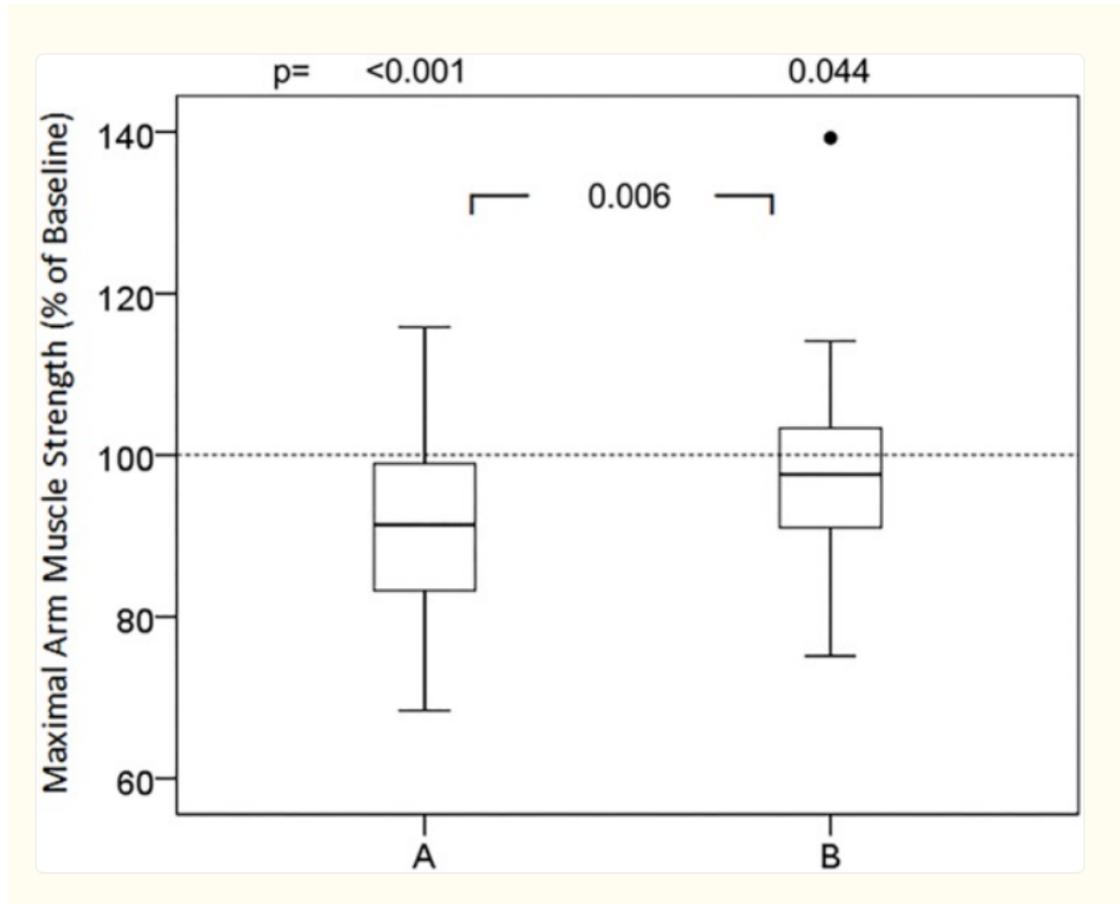


Sample paired suggestions

A) Let us know when you feel pain. Do you feel nauseous?

B) Let us know if there is anything to make you feel better. We always can do something good for you. Do you feel okay?

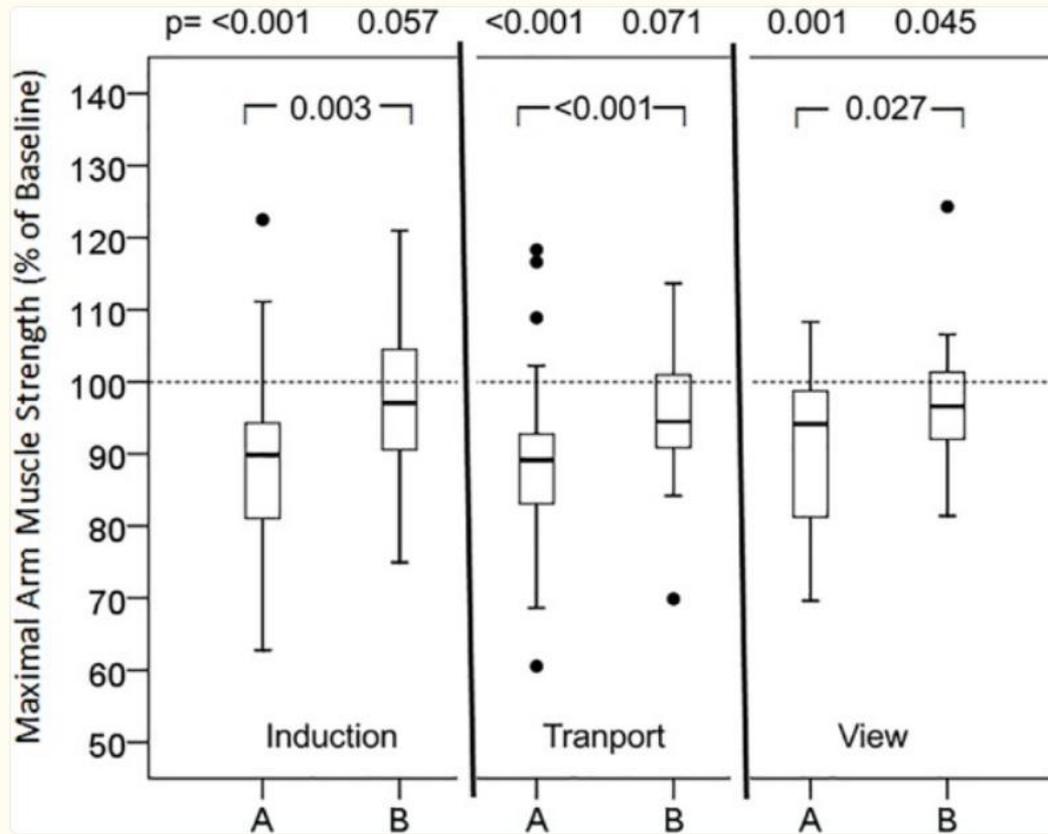
Negative (A) vs positive (B) phrasing of symptom evaluation



Sample paired suggestions



Negative (A) vs positive (B) images



Word choice in medical situations

Avoid if possible	Preferred option
Pain/hurt	Discomfort/ache (or use patient's own language – “that [fill in the blank] feeling”)
Shot	Injection/treatment
Sting/burn	Spicy, warmth
Go to sleep	Sedation/anesthesia

Word choice in medical situations

Avoid if possible	Preferred option
Pain/hurt: not negated by “not/won’t”	Discomfort/ache (or use patient’s own language – “that [fill in the blank] feeling”)
Shot	Injection/treatment
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Implications for informed consent

To avoid generation of the nocebo effect when describing a treatment or procedure:

- Maintain neutral language
- Emphasize the likelihood of good outcomes:
“95% of patients use this medication without any problems. A (small?) minority may experience...”
- Visual aides may be helpful.

“OK?”

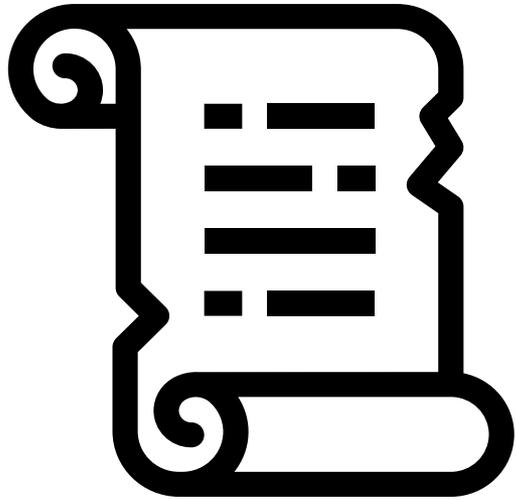
Do you understand me OK?

Let me reassure you that it will be OK.

This is a statement/command/demand but to be polite, I would like it to sound more like a request.

Is that OK with you?

To script, or not to script?



- Reading scripts **in advance** of a session for certain conditions/problems can shape your ideas of where to go and what to do...
- BUT they are not tailored to the person in front of you.
- Tailoring language and suggestions to the individual is essential.
- Leaning too heavily on scripts early on may slow the development of your own style and creativity.

Rapport

Rapport

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Validation of Experience in Hypnosis

During a trance state, patients respond well to frequent reassurance that all is going as it should, and that **they are doing it right.**

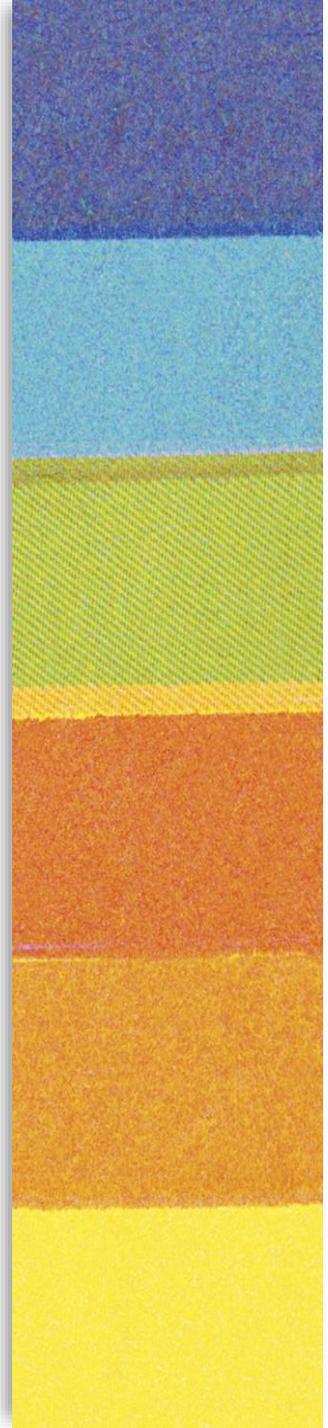
- That's right
- Mmm hmmm
- Just like that
- Good
- Isn't that amazing?
- Take all the time you need to

Suggestions

Spectrums of suggestion

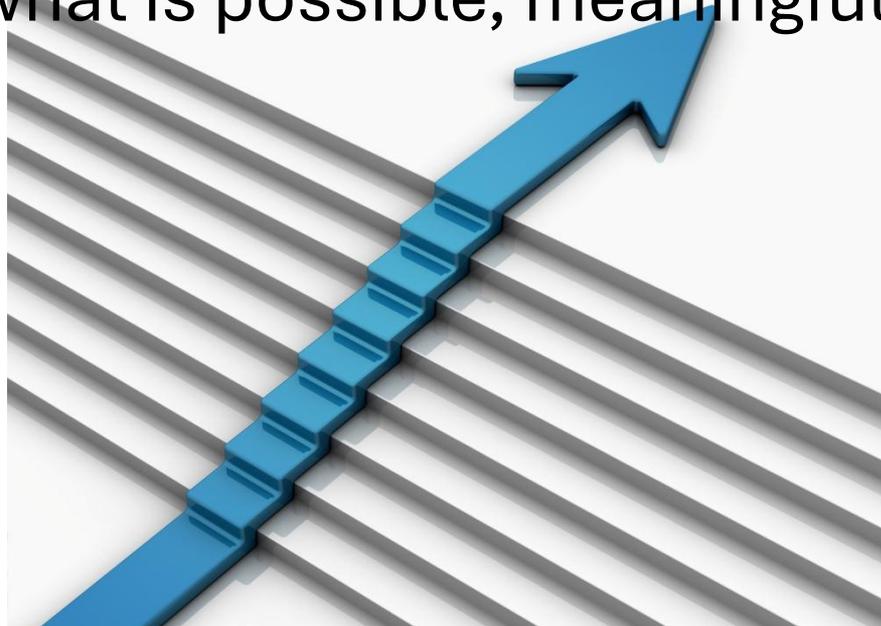
Positive ----- Negative

Direct ----- Indirect



Positive Suggestions

- Most common, simplest, often most useful
- Phrased to convey encouragement in experiencing a positive outcome or accomplishing a goal
- Amplify what is possible, meaningful and helpful



Positive Suggestions-Examples

- Generic structure is “You can do X”
- Examples:
 - You can feel more comfortable with each breath (deepening)
 - You can remember a time when you felt very proud of yourself (age regression)
 - You are able to discover inner strengths you didn’t realize you had (resource building)
 - You may notice a soothing feeling of warmth in your hands (sensory alteration)

Negative Suggestions

- Similar to “reverse psychology”
- Obtain a response by suggesting someone NOT respond in the desired way
- Used to bypass resistance -- but use them carefully!!
- Examples
 - Do not allow yourself to wonder what time it is
 - I would suggest that you not notice any sensations in your left leg



Direct Suggestions

- The desired response is clear and overtly related to the issue
- Advantages: direct relevance, orientation to goal, model for resolution of problems
- Disadvantages: reliance on conscious willingness to follow the suggestion, increased likelihood of resistance, may cast the patient into a role of compliance rather than active participation

Example:

- Let your eyes close.



Indirect Suggestions

Examples:

- Can you allow your eyes to close?
- Responsive patients usually begin the hypnotic experience by closing their eyes
- Isn't it nice to not have to listen with your eyes open?
- I wonder what you might think of that will allow you to comfortably close your eyes...

Indirect Suggestions

- Less obvious, may be subtle
 - Refers to another person or situation (“I know someone who...”)
 - Invites patient to find the relevance or meaning
 - Increases engagement/unconscious response
 - The patient has to do more of the “work”
- Includes story telling, implied analogies, jokes, puns, role modeling, disguised and embedded suggestions
- This is the foundation of Milton Erickson’s approach.



- Emphasizes flexibility in treatment and as a goal of treatment
- Practitioners are encouraged to exercise creativity (e.g. storytelling) and work collaboratively with patients
- Progress is measured subjectively, based on patient's goals/needs
- Patients participate in experiential and open-ended learning
- Assumption that change will develop naturally

Creating a “Yes Set”

- Ask questions or make statements that one has to agree with
- Sets the stage for further affirmative responses or agreement
- Build a momentum toward responsiveness to suggestions
- Offer at least 3-4 consecutive statements that will end in agreement



- Sometimes it's cold in the winter. (Yes.)
- And a person's ears or fingers can really get chilled. (Yes.)
- They might even become sort of numb. (Yes.)
- So your body has already experienced numbness. (Yes.)
- And your brain knows what it feels like. (Yes.)
- So... it knows how to create that same feeling in your body again.

**YES,
YES
AND
YES**

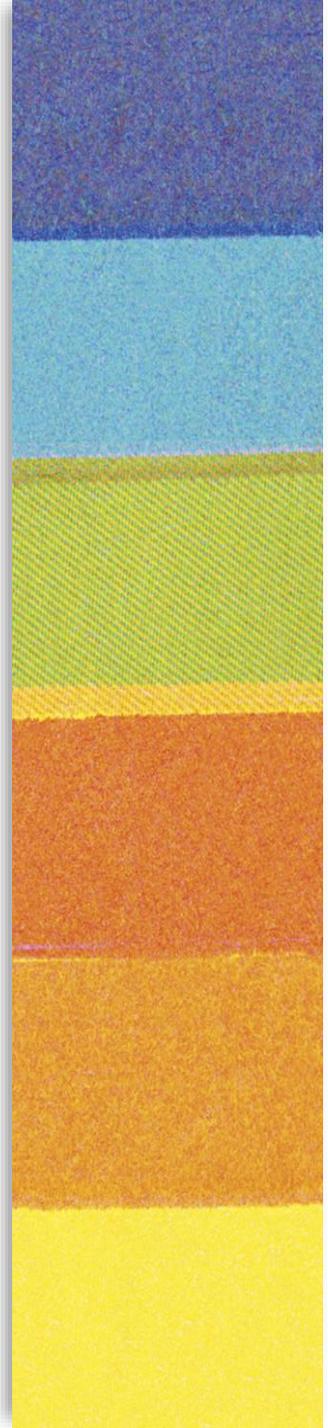
Core Concepts

- Individualization: a readiness to individualize treatment to the patient, possibly with modification from what might be expected based on theory. Requires a respectful but flexible view of specific treatment approaches.
- Utilization: a readiness to utilize any client attributes, including resistance, in creating therapeutic strategies and suggestions. Requires a state of heightened observation and validation.

In practical terms: create metaphors and suggestions based on the patient's interests and experiences.

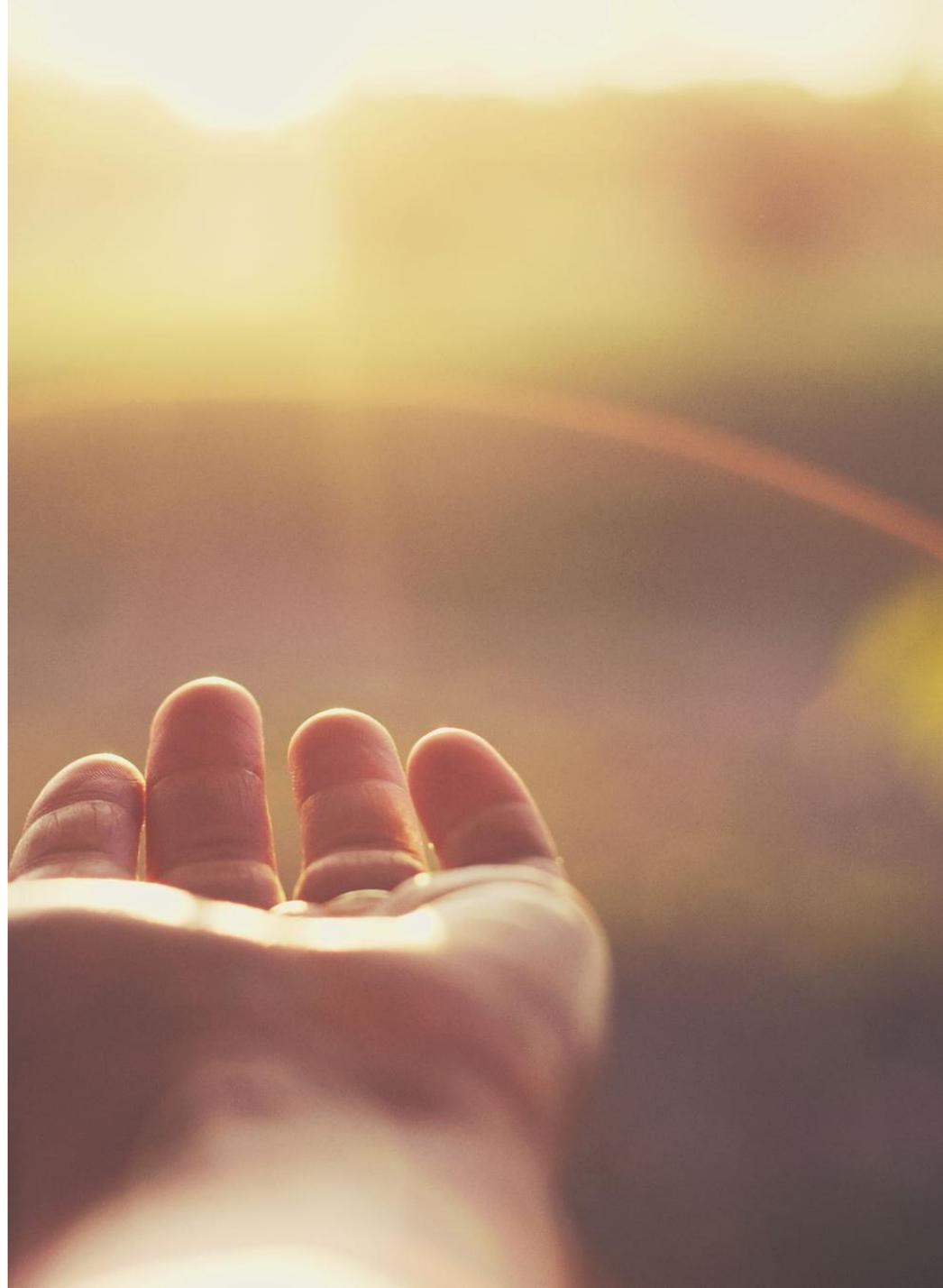
Another spectrum of suggestion

Permissive-----Authoritative



Permissive Suggestions

- Emphasize what a patient can or might do... if they so choose
- Demonstrates respect for autonomy
- Allows for a wider range of responses



- Examples:
 - It's possible to experience your body differently
 - Perhaps you can remember a time when you felt more comfortable
 - You can allow your eyes to close or leave them open, whatever is best for you
 - You may choose to uncross your legs or get more comfortable in ways that are right for you
 - You might be willing to relax more deeply



Authoritative Suggestions

- “Old school” approach
- Examples
 - Close your eyes when I count to three
 - When I touch your shoulder, you will go into deep hypnosis or trance
 - You will find it impossible to bend your arm
 - You will not remember anything from this experience

Permissive vs authoritative suggestions

- Clinical settings will often dictate which are more effective but both styles have their place and usefulness
- A permissive style is appropriate for most situations
 - To avoid setting up a power struggle
 - To avoid the perception of a failed guarantee
 - In recognition of/respect for patient autonomy
- An authoritarian style may sometimes be preferred
 - Some patients prefer to be told what to do in a step-by-step fashion, especially when first learning how to use hypnosis
 - May be helpful during realerting/reorienting

Fundamental Principles in Formulating Suggestions

From Hammond's Handbook of Hypnotic
Suggestions and Metaphors

“The Law of Concentrated Attention”

Repetition of suggestions

Concentrating attention on a goal or idea helps get it realized

Repeating suggestions several times in similar ways

Repeating them in several different ways-direct vs indirect or seeding



“The Carrot Principle”

- The “pull” of achieving a goal tends to be more motivating than the “push” of avoiding a symptom.
- Link suggestions to a goal set by the patient.



“Law of Reversed Effect”

- Can't “will” ourselves to change physiology (e.g. sleep, yawning, sensations)
- But **can** use imagination to bypass conscious will



Use of imagery or metaphor can bypass the conscious will and allow physiologic change (i.e., reduce resistance)

“Principle of Successive Approximations”

- Cannot expect instant results
- Give patient time to develop desired response
- Break task into smaller pieces
- Set timelines with permissive language

Examples:

- Take all the time you need over the next few moments.
- Soon you will begin to notice, in your own time, in its own way, X becoming gradually heavier/lighter.
- And over the next minutes, or hours, or maybe even days...

“Law of Dominant Effect”

- Stronger emotions tend to take precedence over weaker ones
- Connect suggestions to the dominant emotion to maximize effectiveness

“Principle of Positive Reinforcement”

- Reinforce and compliment both in trance and out of trance
- “Good, you are doing so well, That’s right, enjoy the feeling of...”
- Goal to enhance rapport and improve uptake of suggestions

“Principle of Trance Ratification”

- Let people know they are really in trance, ratifying the experience
- Helps patients believe more strongly in their own ability to utilize the unconscious

Types:

- Glove anesthesia
- Time Distortion
- Limb Catalepsy
- Arm Levitation
- Limb heaviness
- Amnesia
- Ideomotor signaling
- Recall of forgotten or insignificant memories
- Olfactory hallucination

“Principle of Interspersing and Embedding Suggestions”

- Concept of seeding or interspersing suggestions inside of stories, deepening, etc
- Repeating suggestions in different ways
- “Sitting in chair, feet on floor, breathing in and out, beginning to feel a **sense of quiet**, breathing in and out and **noticing more relaxation** with each breath out, feet on floor, breathing in and out, and **even more relaxed...**”
- “Like when [your pet] rests **so comfortably** on the couch next to you, with such a sense of **security and ease...**”

“Principle of Positive Suggestion”

- Frame the suggestions in positive rather than negative terms

Examples:

- You will be so absorbed in what you are doing that time will pass and you will find with surprise it is time for another meal.
- You may notice a comfortable feeling of fullness.

Not an example:

- You will not be hungry.

“Law of Parsimony”

- Use the simplest strategy to accomplish the therapeutic task
- Fancy is not required when simple will do the trick.
- “Allow the muscles in your neck to relax” rather than involved metaphor of knots or rivers



Summary

- Start with good rapport – that is more important than any hypnotic technique.
- You can “be hypnotic” even without “doing hypnosis.”
- Verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal communication all contribute to being hypnotic.
- You can increase positive expectancy with techniques including implicative language and indirect suggestion.
- The principles of Utilization and Individualization will guide your choice of words, metaphors, and suggestions.
- Choose neutral language over “hot button” or “trigger” words.
- Let patients know that they are doing it right!

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