

REFINING SKILLS: HYPNOTIC LANGUAGE AND SUGGESTION

Mary J. Wells, PhD

Assistant Professor, Department of Physical Medicine and
Rehabilitation

Virginia Commonwealth University Health System
Richmond, VA

Contact Information

- Mary J. Wells, PhD
- Mary.wells@vcuhealth.org
- 8730 Stony Point Parkway, Suite 290
- Richmond, VA 23235
- 804-327-1183

Disclaimer

- I do not have any financial conflicts of interest to claim
- I will not discuss off label or investigational uses of medications.

Learning Objectives

- At the conclusion of this session the participant will be able to:
 - Explain at least two ways hypnotic communication creates positive expectancy.
 - Discuss Erickson's Principle 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.

Establishing Rapport-Review

- Warm, understanding, respectful, caring
- Reduce defensiveness and create climate of trust
- Cooperative: doing with, not to a patient

Positive Psychology

- Basically an orientation toward life
- Introduced by Martin Seligman in 1999
- Focusing on strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive
- A shift in focus from what is wrong to what is right
- Positive suggestions are the most common, simplest and most useful type of suggestion structure-Yapko

Creating Positive Expectancy

- Confident that suggestions will be effective
- Inspires confidence in patients.
- Some authoritative style is helpful, not authoritarian however
- “This is going to help and you can feel better”
- Meant to be empowering and create positive possibility

Using Language in Hypnosis

- Your voice is the director of the experience
- Your observational skills allow you to tailor what you say to what you see
- Changing the flow of your words to work for you
- Emphasis, pauses, silence can change the entire experience for your patient
- Creating hypnotic patter
- Slowing down and speeding up help guide the experience

To script or not to script

- Problem with scripts is they are not tailored to the person in front of you
- Reading scripts in advance of a session for certain conditions/problems can shape your ideas of where to go and what to do but rarely offer you everything
- Tailoring scripts to the individual is KEY
- Leaning too heavily into scripts early on can leave you without the creativity to make it the best possible experience

Validation of Experience in Hypnosis

- During a trance state, patient will respond best to frequent confirmation statements that all is going as it should
 - That's right
 - Just like that
 - Good
 - Isn't that amazing?
 - Take all the time you need to

Ericksonian Therapy Approach

- A perspective of learning, healing and growth that fosters flexibility in an ongoing and adaptive way
- Practitioners are encouraged to exercise creativity and work collaboratively with a client/patient
- Progress is measured subjectively, based on client's personal goals and needs
- Other concepts include destabilization to foster growth, experiential and open-ended learning, and a naturalistic approach that assumes change will occur automatically and naturally

Core Concepts

- Utilization: a readiness to utilize client attributes, interpersonal dynamics and situations factors. Requires a state of heightened observation and validation that helps the therapist reduce conflict.
- Individuation: the readiness to individualize treatment to the person in front of you, tailoring treatment without too much reliance on theoretical knowledge derived from a diagnosis or treatment method

Basics of Suggestions

(From Yapko's *Trancework*,
2003;2012)

- Goal is to make suggestions both acceptable and usable
- Any suggestion can be accepted or rejected
- Suggestions are dynamic, not static
- Ability to accept or incorporate suggestions are influenced by a number of different factors, some under the control of the facilitator and some not
- Personal, interpersonal and situational factors interact to create a synergistic response to suggestions

Basics continued

- Multiple categories of suggestions based on continuums that can be moved up or down
 - Positive to negative
 - Direct to indirect
 - Process to content
 - Permissive to authoritative (more related to style of suggestion)

Positive Suggestions

- Positive suggestions most common, simplest, often most useful
- Supportive, encouraging and phrased to give subject idea that they can experience or accomplish something desirable
- Amplifying what is possible, meaningful and helpful is basic foundation of positive suggestions

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 concept of 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

- Direct suggestions deal with problem at hand or specific response desired clearly and overtly
- The desired response is clearly asked for
- Advantages include direct relevance to issue, keeps goals clearly in sight, model of resolution of problems
- Disadvantages include overreliance on conscious willingness to follow suggestions, increase likelihood of resistance, defining subject role as one of compliance rather than active participation

Indirect Suggestions

- Less obvious and unobtrusive, often quite subtle, talking about someone else or some other situation, with invitation to subject to find own meaning/response. Increases unconscious response
- Includes story telling, analogies, jokes, puns, homework, role modeling, disguised and embedded suggestions

Indirect Suggestions

- This is the foundation of Milton Erickson's approach, called the utilization approach to hypnosis
- Examples for eye closure:
 - Can you allow your eyes to close?
 - Responsive clients 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...

Content Suggestions

- Suggestions containing highly specific details describing feelings, memories, thoughts or fantasies subjects are asked to experience during hypnosis
- Includes a lot of detail about the exact situation or dimensions of the desired experience to assist subject to more fully experience the desired event
- This is best used when you have good rapport and know a lot about the subject. More challenging when you have less information

Content Suggestions

- Examples:
 - Allow yourself to go back in time to the event when happened, remembering all the details of that day
 - Allow yourself to remember the last time you felt (angry, overwhelmed, sad, anxious) and bring up all the specific sensations you had in your body, your mind, your experience
 - Let your mind replay that specific event that was so distressing as if you were observing it from a passing train window, or on a screen....

Process Suggestions

- Provides minimal detail and encourages subject to fill in their own content
- Allows subjects the opportunity to use their own experience and details in the process to make what appears to be very general suggestion into a very personalized experience
- Use of qualifiers that can be employed to have subject sift all experiences down to one in particular

Process Suggestions

- Examples:
 - You can have a particular memory from childhood, one that you haven't thought of for a long, long time.
 - You will notice a certain pleasant sensation in your body as you sit there comfortably
 - You can become aware of a specific sound in the room
 - Can you remember that special time when you felt so good about yourself?

Styles of Suggestion

- Some subjects prefer to be told what to do or expect in a step-by step fashion and others will refuse to follow anyone's lead no matter what.
- Authoritative styles tend to work best with those willing to follow directives without question but most situations require more permissive style to avoid setting up a power struggle
- Clinical settings will often dictate which are more effective but both styles have their place and usefulness

Authoritative Suggestions

- 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 Suggestions

- Suggestions that emphasize what a subject can or might do if they so choose
- Recognizes you can't MAKE someone respond, can only suggest possibilities of response which the subject can choose to accept or reject
- Saying to subject that they can have an experience if they permit it and response is a choice, increasing respect for autonomy

Permissive Suggestions

- 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

Helpful Hypnotic Communication Patterns

- Keep your suggestions simple and easy to follow
- Use client's language as much as possible
- Have clients define terms experientially
- Use present tense and a positive structure
- Encourage and reinforce clients' positive responses
- Give clients the time they need to respond
- Use anticipation signals to announce your intentions

Fundamental Principles in Formulating Suggestions

From Hammond's Handbook of Hypnotic Suggestions
and Metaphors

Law of Reversed Effect

- Can't “will” ourselves to change physiology but can use imagination to bypass conscious will
- Use of imagery or metaphor can bypass the conscious will and allow physiology to change
- Trying makes it worse, but allowing can facilitate change
- Examples: sleep, yawning, thinking about things

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

Principle of Successive Approximations

- Cannot expect instant results-magical thinking
- Give patient time to develop desired response
- Break task into smaller pieces
- Set time lines with permissive language
- “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, the body becoming gradually heavier/lighter



Law of Dominant Effect

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

The Carrot Principle

- Pushing a mule toward a goal is less effective than leading one
- Seek to motivate from in front, toward a goal set by the patient
- Similar to Law of Dominant Effect-link suggestions to patient motivators and goals

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 compliance with suggestions

Principle of Trance Ratification

- VITALLY IMPORTANT!!!
- How to 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**”

Principle of Positive Suggestion

- Frame the suggestions in positive rather than negative terms
- Not” you will NOT be hungry” rather “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” or “you notice a comfortable feeling of fullness”

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

Creating a “Yes Set”

- Similar to sales process or Socratic method
- Ask questions or make statements that one has to agree with, an armful of yeses.
- Use truisms, example of cold winter’s day, cold against skin, creates numbness, your body remembers and knows what this feels like and can create it spontaneously

Yapko on Response Sets

- Goal is to set the stage for an affirmative or agreement response
- Build a momentum toward responsiveness to suggestions
- Offer 3-4 consecutive statements that will end in agreement
 - Each person is unique and independent (yes)
 - Human experience is often complex (yes)
 - People often have more resources than they realize (yes)
 - Sometimes it feels good to sit and relax (yes)

Continued

- Identify a patient goal and have an idea of what order to address the problems
- What resources are needed and what are already available within the client/patient?
- Identifying risk factors
- Differentiating the content (the what) and the process (the how) of the identified problem

Generic Structure of Hypnosis Session

- Orient client to hypnosis
- Perform induction (trance elicitation)
- Build a response set
- Introduce therapeutic theme (#1)
- Provide suggestions addressing theme
- Ask about derived meaning
- Introduce therapeutic theme (#2, #3 etc)
- Provide suggestions addressing theme
- Ask about derived meaning
- Provide post hypnotic suggestion (contextualization)
- Provide closure
- Suggest disengagement

Doing Hypnosis vs. Being Hypnotic

- Being hypnotic includes the following
 - engaging fully and purposefully,
 - being responsible for being an agent of change,
 - using capacity for influence intelligently and sensitively
- “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