

5 Ericksonian hypnosis techniques you can use right now to enhance your work with clients

by David Botsford

One of the challenges which many hypnotists face when they first encounter hypnosis done in the style of Dr Milton Erickson is the impression that it is complicated. This can certainly be the case when reading Dr Erickson's own writings, and those of many who have written about him.

Here, then, are five Ericksonian methods which you can put into practice with your clients immediately. The goal is to make it simple.

Technique 1: Reframe your client's experience into a positive.

Every problem was once a solution. Whatever the client's presenting "problem" may be, there was a context in which it achieved something positive for them. It was the most useful behavior available to the client at that particular time in that particular situation.

For example, a client may have become overweight as a result of eating too much food in order to relieve stress. Insofar as the client did actually relieve stress, then at least the overeating did achieve something positive, along with the negative result of becoming overweight. If a client has developed a fear of being in a confined space, such as an elevator, as a result of an incident earlier in life, you can congratulate the client's unconscious mind on its readiness to protect the client. If a client has difficulty in sleeping because of continuous thoughts about problems, then you can congratulate the client on the fact that he is aware of areas in life which need to be dealt with, and it is now time to redirect the "energy" applied to the worrying into constructive action to achieve a solution. For clients who have fear of public speaking, recognize that they attach a great deal of importance to what they say and how they come across to the audience, and that it is now time to find a more useful way of fulfilling that sense of importance. The issue will remain equally important to those clients, but they will develop more useful ways of manifesting that importance.

Your task now as the hypnotist is to take that client to a place where he or she can find a more useful way of achieving that same positive intent than through the problem behavior. So once the client has explained his or her situation, congratulate them on what the "problem" achieved for them. There are three positive results of doing this. First, the realization of the positive function of the behavior tends to surprise clients and shake them out of their negative attitude towards it. Second, it tends to give clients a sense of empowerment: they realize that since they had the power to develop the problem, they must also be able to develop new and more useful behavior. Third, it helps clients understand that life is a series of changes, that what "worked" yesterday will be replaced by something that works better today, and helps orient clients towards directing the process of change towards the positive goals they want to achieve.

Technique 2: Elicit the positive result the client *does* want (rather than the presenting problem)

We get more of what we focus on. A large part of our culture – including so much of medicine and therapy – focuses on the negative, on problems. Our clients – like most people – tend to focus a great deal of attention and energy on the problem instead of the solution. Recognition of this fact is in no way intended to criticize anyone. It is not surprising, for instance, that a person suffering from chronic pain is likely to think about it much of the time.

A crucial step early in the hypnosis session is to identify the positive outcome the client *does* want – using the client’s own definition, not the hypnotist’s. For example, ask your clients who want to lose weight to specify the exact weight they would like to become, as well as how they would describe themselves at that ideal weight (they might use words such as “slim”, “trim”, “lithe”, “light”, “attractive”). Ask a person who experiences fear of flying how he or she would *like* to feel when boarding a plane – listen for words such as “calm”, “relaxed”, “confident”, or whatever the client says. With a nail-biter, ask how long they would like their nails to be, ask for description of the nails once they have grown back to their full length, and where they want to direct the energy that has until now been trapped in the nail-biting habit. For clients who feel emotionally low or upset, ask what they would like to experience – perhaps it is “happy”, “enthusiastic”, or “joyful”, but again it must be the client’s words rather than yours.

Once you and the client have a concept – however rudimentary – of the positive outcome you are both working towards, you have already changed the client’s orientation away from the problem towards the solution. Now the task is to strengthen that representation of success so that it becomes a powerful means of achieving the desired goal. You can ask the client whether the image of the desired outcome is a picture, a sound, a feeling, or some combination of those. The client can then enhance that representation using sub-modalities. This means that the picture can be made bigger, brighter, in sharp focus and rich color. Feelings can be made larger and more intense. Sounds can be made louder and put in stereo. Also, if the client says he or she wants some outcome such as “confidence”, “well-being”, “comfort”, or “control”, you can ask the client to remember some occasion when he or she experienced that quality, perhaps in relation to some other aspect of life. For instance, if a singer lacks confidence while singing in front of an audience, but felt confident while completing a marathon run, then get the client to remember that marathon run, and ask the client’s unconscious mind to transfer that memory of confidence to a representation of a future experience of a singing performance.

As soon as the client has developed a strong representation of the solution to which we are headed, there is no need to mention the presenting problem again. If the client mentions that problem again, it is advisable to steer the session back to the solution, where possible.

Technique 3 - Find a metaphor

Metaphors are probably the most powerful form of communication available to the hypnotist. A metaphor equates one thing with another. Metaphor is fundamental to all

communication, and to human development. As very young children, we learn to associate one thing with another, and therefore build up our model of the world. As new words enter the language, metaphor is used to connect them with existing words. For thousands of years, stories, myths, fables and parables have been proven ways of transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. At an unconscious level, we connect with characters in those stories and learn lessons from their experiences.

If you use metaphors to enable your client to move forward to the solution he or she is seeking, you will be able to by-pass the critical faculty and avoid the impression that you are “telling the client what to do”. The client will pick up – certainly at an unconscious and possibly also at a conscious level – the lessons which need to be absorbed in order to achieve change. A metaphor might be a true story or an imaginary fairy story.

Metaphors are everywhere, and the challenge for the hypnotist is to find the one which is most appropriate to this particular client. The best source of metaphors is the client’s own conversation. The client will give you figures of speech, memories and influences which you can expand on in your approach. For example, a lady whom I was treating to become a non-smoker mentioned that she had been inspired by the sequence in the film *Rocky* (starring Sylvester Stallone) in which the title character is in training, running up steps in Philadelphia while a background song blasts out, “Getting stronger now...Not so long now.” Needless to say, when she was in trance I asked her to recall that scene and even sang the words in order to inspire her unconscious mind to quit smoking.

Another example is an elderly lady who suffered from a physical condition in which her hands and feet were cold because blood was not properly circulating to them. When she was in trance, I told a story about a house in a cold region which had a new central heating system installed so that every part of it – including the attic, basement and garage – became warm and cosy as heat circulated through it. Her unconscious mind connected this representation to her body, and her circulation dramatically improved as a result.

Technique 4 - Induce trance in a way which matches your client’s experience.

The effective hypnotist benefits from knowing a selection of proven trance inductions. Whatever induction you use, closely observe your client to ensure that it is having the desired effect. If one induction simply doesn’t connect with your client’s experience, then simply say, “That’s all right” in a reassuring tone, and switch to one that does.

Ericksonian inductions do not depend on merely reciting a script. They are based on feeding back the client’s actual experiences – whether present sense impressions or memories of the past. They are “permissive”, in that what the hypnotist says cannot be contradicted by the client. They may include vague language, multiple alternatives, double binds and self-fulfilling prophecies. They aim to encourage the client to “turn inward” towards unconscious resources in a naturalistic way which makes the most sense for that particular client.

The conscious mind is aware of five to nine items of information at any one time. The purpose of a hypnotic induction is to “overload” the conscious mind so that the hypnotist can present ideas to the unconscious mind without conscious interference.

Most clients have accessible memories of an experience of being relaxed, content or intensely involved with some pleasant activity. If you can bring back the client's memory of such an experience, and make it vivid, then the client's conscious mind will be "overwhelmed" and absorbed by it. If the client has a hobby, then you can ask him or her to remember a particularly satisfying experience – a day of gardening, golf, or whatever – that will both absorb the conscious mind with sensory representations and elicit a positive state characterized by optimism and a sense of capability and achievement which is the pathway to successful change. So if your client has such a memory, you can "feed back" both aspects of his or her description of it and things that must have been there.

The key here is to listen to the client's conversation for descriptions of anything he or she may do which is enjoyable and relaxing. It may be that the client plays a musical instrument. You might ask, "Can you remember a particularly enjoyable session playing the guitar (or piano, flute, or whatever)?" If the client plays a particular sport, you could ask, "What was the best game of golf (or football, baseball, etc) you ever played, when you were really in the zone?" Simply in order to answer your question, the client must elicit memories of those absorbing experiences, and so starts going into trance. You can then deepen the trance by asking for more details and feeding back experiences that would necessarily have been there. For instance, for a memory of playing the guitar, you might say, "You can feel the movement of your fingers on the strings", even if the client does not mention that feeling, because that feeling is necessarily a part of playing the guitar.

Even if the client simply enjoys other people's musical or sports performances, this approach can be effective. How often have you seen young guys play an "air guitar" while listening to the music of their favorite band - even if they are simply imagining that music? They are already in a form of trance. Consider also how sports enthusiasts get excited about major sports events. Have you ever seen anyone watching a game while displaying body movements as if they were playing that game? These are all positive trance experiences which you can utilize – and with Ericksonian hypnosis, utilization is the name of the game.

Some clients already engage in some form of relaxation practice, such as yoga, t'ai chi or transcendental meditation (TM). Working hypnotists should have a general idea of what these and other practices are, although it is not necessary to know *much* about them. If your client has already developed the habit of creating relaxation through some meditative practice or other, then simply ask him or her to recall what that is like. The client will develop a satisfactory trance state while remaining in his or her comfort zone. If the client mentions a meditative practice that you have not previously heard of, then take a few moments after the session to go on-line and find out what it is and the essential ideas behind it. Wikipedia makes this kind of research very fast and easy.

Otherwise, ask the client simply to recall a time when he or she felt relaxed. This could be on vacation (but bear in mind that vacations can sometimes be the most stressful time of the year!), chilling out with friends after a pleasant dinner, or just slumped half-asleep at home on a Sunday evening. Even with someone who spends a lot of time watching television, and has few interests beyond that, you can ask that client to describe a television show which he or she found particularly involving.

The key is simply to find what fascinates the client and shape your therapeutic approach around that. One of Erickson's patients was a young boy who was just starting school, and who was unable to urinate in public bathrooms. Erickson learned from talking with the boy that he was very interested in spaceships. So Erickson drew a design for a spaceship that could take astronauts on the long journey to Mars. This spaceship had only one room for the astronauts to live together in. Erickson drew cans of food and bottles of water on the shelves around the walls of that room, and explained that they would all eat and drink together on the route to Mars and back. As a result of this one session, the boy was totally cured. What Erickson did was to capture the boy's imagination by drawing that spaceship. Although Erickson never mentioned going to the bathroom, it was obvious that - because the spaceship had only one room - each astronaut would have to urinate in the presence of the others after eating the food and drinking the water. But the value of getting to Mars and back was so immense that it was simple to forget the problem of urinating by comparison. The boy's unconscious mind responded to the metaphor by finding a solution.

Technique 5: Use content-free language to encourage your client's unconscious processes

Erickson believed that the client's unconscious mind had all the resources it needed to achieve the client's goals. He took the view that the therapist's task was to lead the client to the creative "place" where the innate healing potential of the client's unconscious could do its work without interference. He said that the therapist simply creates the "climate" or "weather" in which this inner transformation takes place. He rejected the idea that the hypnotist should "tell the client what to do". Hypnosis was merely a question of introducing ideas which the creative part of the client's unconscious mind could explore in its own way.

Indeed, with many clients, Erickson's "prescription" was for the client do something seemingly unrelated to the therapeutic situation. For example, he would send some clients to visit the Phoenix Botanical Gardens, where they would examine such remarkable flora as the bizarre-looking Boojum tree, and the Creeping Devil, a form of horizontal cactus which seems to "crawl" across the ground in search of food as cells die at one end and are replaced by new ones at the other. The experience of studying this vegetation developed a sense of fascination in the client, which would be a doorway to new unconscious learnings. The client would study how these remarkable plants successfully adapted to the harsh climate of the southwestern desert. This would lead the client's unconscious to creatively examine how the client, too, could successfully adapt and make changes in life. This is perhaps the ultimate content-free induction.

More frequently, however, Erickson would use vague language to encourage the process of transformation. In inducing trance, he might say something like the following:

"You may be curious about what precisely I'm going to say that will take you to the place where you can access your unconscious resources."

This would have the effect of turning the client's attention inwards. The client would recognize that he or she was indeed curious about what words the therapist would use to

induce trance. Note also the presupposition that the client *has* unconscious resources and will soon be going to the place where they can be accessed.

This use of vague language became known as “the Milton model”. The classic formulation of Milton model language is as follows:

Therapist’s words	Comments
“I know that you are wondering...”	Turning the client’s attention inward.
“...and it is a good thing to wonder...”	Approving of the state of “wondering”.
“...because...that means...”	Suggesting causality.
“...you are learning many things. And all the things, all the things that you can learn...”	Suggesting learning without specifying what exactly is to be learned.
“...can give you new insights and new understandings.”	Again, the new insights and understandings are not specified.
“And you can, can you not?”	The words “you can” strengthen the client’s confidence but do not specify what can be done. The words “can you not?” displace resistance.

This formulation of the Milton model, or something close to it, can be used with almost every one-to-one client, as well as at group hypnosis sessions, usually towards the end of the time when the subjects are in trance. Every client has his or her unique response to these vague, content-free suggestions.

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