**HYPNOSIS**

The term ‘hypnosis’ is often shrouded in misconception, myth, and apprehension because most views about hypnosis are influenced by entertainment stage shows. These shows often highlight participants’ engaging in strange and often embarrassing behaviors. However, hypnosis is consistently reported to be an effective and reliable technique in many domains (including medicine, dentistry, and psychology) for the treatment of a number of physical and psychological issues including pain management and addictive behaviors. Hypnosis is a cognitive-behavioral process using the influence of suggestion(s) to bring about changes in thoughts, perceptions, feelings, memory, and behavior(s). Successful hypnosis is associated with situation(s) in which (hypnotic) suggestions are more readily accepted and acted upon by the participant(s). Indeed, hypnosis is a psychological technique available to athletes and exercisers to facilitate the mindset for peak performance and regular exercise. The nature of hypnosis, theories of hypnosis, hypnotic procedures, and the applications of hypnosis to sport and exercise are outlined as follows.

**Nature of Hypnosis**

Hypnosis is a process that involves an interaction between the hypnotherapist and participant and typically combines the procedures of visualization, relaxation, and the presentation of hypnotic suggestions. Hypnosis is usually characterized by extreme relaxation, intense concentration, and an increased responsiveness to hypnotic suggestion(s). Suggestion is an important facet of hypnosis and refers to the issuing of verbal statements (i.e., words and metaphors of how a person would like to think feel or behave) by the hypnotherapist to a participant. Suggestions are provided during hypnosis to alter perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behavior. Further, post-hypnotic suggestions may be presented to participants during hypnosis that are intended to trigger responses affecting behavior during a normal waking state. For example, post-hypnotic suggestions may be presented to help a soccer player feel more calm, composed and confident during training and competition situations.

Fundamental to hypnosis is determining the degree to which individuals are susceptible to hypnosis. Therefore, many measures of hypnotic capacity and susceptibility have been developed and evidence demonstrates that from 10% to 15% of all individuals are highly responsive, 10% to 15% are almost completely unresponsive, and the remaining majority of individuals are able to respond to some but not all hypnotic procedures.

Hypnotic suggestions are considered effective when they are presented to participants when they are in or entering a ‘trance’. Participants in a trance may look as though they are asleep, but a hypnotic trance is different from sleep. Indeed a person in a trance is aware of their environment, is relaxed, will respond to suggestions, and can usually remember later what transpired in the trance. Trance allows access, via suggestions, to the ‘unconscious mind’ that holds memories, and feelings that are below the level of conscious awareness but exert an influence on behavior, thoughts and emotions. The properties of trance typically include intense relaxation, time distortion, and an increased tolerance of discomfort and pain.

**Hypnotic Procedures**

Hypnosis usually includes four phases. Phase one is based around preparing the participant for hypnosis by educating them about hypnotic procedures. In phase two, a process of induction and deepening occurs that typically involves relaxation procedures to enhance participants’ susceptibility to hypnotic suggestions. Phase three is where the therapy or change will happen. When a participant reaches a deep level of hypnosis, suggestions and also post-hypnotic suggestions are presented about the way they think and behave when they are alert. Phase four of hypnosis is about bringing the participant out of hypnosis and alerting them to their surroundings. In addition, participants may use self-hypnosis to further increase the acceptance and the effects of suggestions. To illustrate, athletes’ can use self-hypnosis procedures as part of a pre-performance routine, further enabling them to acquire an optimal performance state.

**Theories of Hypnosis**

Generally, theories of hypnosis fall into one of two camps: state and non-state. A state perspective, presents the effects of hypnosis as a result of trance states, altered or divided consciousness, and or dissociation. For example, a trance state is posited to be responsible for increasing a participant’s acceptance of hypnotic suggestions. In contrast, a non-state perspective views the effects of hypnosis as a consequence of positive attitudes, motivations, and expectations held by both the hypnotherapist and participant. To illustrate, a hypnotherapist may create expectancy in participants that hypnosis will be effective for them and that they will have certain experiences and responses.

**Applications of Hypnosis**

The amount and breadth of sport and exercise psychology literature demonstrating the efficacy of hypnosis is currently somewhat scant. However, the research to date has revealed positive effects for hypnosis in increasing optimal performance states (e.g., flow and peak performance), augmenting the use of mental imagery, reducing pre-competition anxiety, influencing perceptions of effort and physiological responses (at rest and during treadmill running exercise, and enhancing athletes’ self-confidence. For example, in a recent study using a controlled group design, data revealed the immediate and long-term effects of hypnosis interventions on soccer players’ self-confidence and shooting performance. Future researchers should consider evaluating the efficacy of hypnosis on other important psychological factors necessary for optimal sport performance (e.g., concentration, anxiety, and motivation) using controlled group designs.

In sum, hypnosis is a potentially viable and effective strategy available to coaches, athletes, and exercisers for bringing about meaningful psychological and performance gains. To illustrate, during preparation for a important competition hypnosis could be used to increase relaxation and concentration, therefore reducing muscle tension, and distraction. Further, the presentation of positive suggestions prior to and during competition about the feelings and emotions that relate to performing successfully may increase the likelihood of an athlete experiencing increased motivation and feelings of confidence as well as reducing anxiety.

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**Cross-References**

See also Imagery; Intervention; Mindfulness; Psychological Skills; Relaxation; Self-Regulation

**Further Readings**

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