*Detail from The Hunter (Catalan Landscape), by Juan Miró*

# How I Use Hypnosis in Counseling

There are two conversations, the intellectual one is verbal, the emotional one is visual.

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*"Trance is a focusing on one thing …*
*dropping all the peripheral foci and narrowing it down to one focus."*
—**Milton H. Erickson** (1979, p.369)

## Great Expectations

Most of the people to whom I provide counseling don't know what to expect. I tell them I provide another perspective, and I use hypnosis to explore their feelings.

I advertise myself as an explorer, not an expert or healer. I avoid diagnoses. Most of my clients are bothered, anxious, or tense, but they're not lost or despairing. There are exceptions.

Everyone has their story and they need to tell it. Personalities exist to navigate situations, and there is nothing that a person is invested in more than their personality. I encourage my clients to tell me their stories, and I'm particularly interested in the stories of what's good and going well versus what's not working out.

I draw out the conflict between my client's intellectual and emotional parts. I don't state that directly, but try to lead them into a state in which there is some equality between their intellectual and emotional attitudes.

The intellect usually presents the good side because that's where we've put our plan into words. Reservations and conflicts are stored on the emotional side because emotions are where we put things that have nowhere else to go.

I look for contradictions, assumptions, needs, and fears. Once I feel I have some understanding of those motivations, I use guided visualization to explore the underlying feelings.

## The Stories of Our Lives

We create rational dialog in order to provide a framework for our justifications. Using rational dialog, we substantiate our virtue and reiterate our control. Outside this spotlight lies the gray area of our doubts. Beyond that is "the dark side" of our fears. Most of us get increasingly uncomfortable as we move away from being reasonable, but that's where the roots of our conflicts lie. That's where we find new ideas.

Moving my clients from their preferred rational dialog to my target of emotional exploration feels like wresting control away from a driver and careening over the side of a bridge. People don't slowly become more reflective, they suddenly get emotional. They start to cry.

This break between reason and emotion doesn't have to be sudden. When I see it, I take it to be a measure of a person's resistance. I try to make this transition sound natural, but it usually requires some deception to get someone to relinquish control from one part of themselves to another.

There are different ways to characterize the shift between reason and feeling. It's commonly experienced as a loss of control. I don't think this has to be. It is possible to rationally explore one's emotional landscape, you just can't expect things to be reasonable.

This is what we do in dreams: we rationally explore emotional situations and arrive at irrational conclusions. In the dream world, where reason has little power or benefit, things rarely make sense. The recounting of every dream should be preceded by the admission that "this is hard to put into words."

Hypnosis is the perfect tool to move from the small world of what's reasonable to the much larger world of what's possible. You might be tempted to say that the unreasonable world offers infinite possibilities, but, in practice, our imaginations are limited. We often work from our reasonable ideas one extension at a time. To jump into a completely new world leaves us with nothing to return to.

# Let the Chaos In

I use hypnosis as a lock pick, or sometimes a crowbar, to open the box of safety and sensibility. Once I've elicited my client's reasonable expectations and unreasonable fears, I have a rough map of their mental territory. I know the two extremes, and I can use hypnosis to explore paths between them.

My hypnosis induction is a journey that starts in the body. Progressive relaxation is more than a release of muscle tension, it's a psychological release of rigidity stored in one's posture and personal boundaries.

If a person holds their personality in their face, then I'll work with facial muscles and emotions. If they store tension in their shoulders, neck, or back, then I'll work on relaxing their joints and muscles. If they carry vigilance in their metabolism, I'll bring their attention to their breath, pulse, and digestion. I'm looking for physical release of tension, but a mental disconnection from anxiety and fixation is the greater goal.

My visualization moves to create my client's pleasant landscape, which is a place, time, or feeling that they have described to me. For those clients who are already in touch with their emotions, I might also include a significant dream. I bring my relaxed and rationally minded client to a familiar place, a place from memory. For less rationally inclined clients, this is a dreamscape with a range of more colored possibilities.

In that place, I separate the organized from the disorganized. This might involve a shoreline, a forest's edge, a deserted road, or an empty city. I'm guided by my intuition and what I've been told. The triggers could be positive or negative. I'm never entirely sure and I don't entirely care. I build a landscape for the drama they suggest is their own. I make it up with ceremony.

I'm building a transition zone where things are uncertain. I bring in what's less familiar and my client's sense of ambivalence. I call on their needs and fears to express themselves in some form. This could be reminiscent situations or suggestive people. I pick from what I've been told, the emotions expressed, and the sense I can make of it.

*Women and Bird in the Night, by Joan Miró*

## Parts and Wholes

The visualization becomes a parts therapy, similar to what's known as family constellation therapy, but with less structure. I invite recognition, expression, and conflict. I look for collaboration and a willingness to cooperate. The voices that enter often turn out to be familiar and familial: parents, teachers, partners, siblings, or animals.

This open narrative flows from one's subconscious. Jung called it active imagination, and all psychotherapeutic techniques tap into it. Most try to direct it toward reason and, in so doing, destroy the alliance. A fully open narrative directs itself, even when you think you're making it up. And you do make it up; you make up everything, whether it be true or false.

Once you sink into your subconscious, you become an observer, and the flow finds its own direction. It's in that context that you can reintroduce yourself as a passenger and well-intentioned force. I craft it as a neutral territory where even your nightmares can set their costumes down.

There's a lot here. Your whole life, in fact, and it's bigger than your personality. My role is to navigate this forest to some clearing of stability. I'm not looking for resolution. I'm looking for powerful presences containing elements of opposition. As in a dream, the goal is not conclusion, it's inclusion.

Once we find a powerful place, I work to make it clear. I want my client to remember the path we took and the forces we encountered. We may have reached the source of their conflict, or the quiet eye of the storm. It is a workshop, a laboratory, an incubator; a place where they can meet themselves and, maybe, work together.

# We Are Like Mold

Human personalities are like the mold in a petri dish. Our separate parts explore our environment looking for rewards. The mold extends itself toward what nourishes it, and allocates its resources to grow in that direction. We lean into those attitudes that reward us.

When each activity's resources are separate, we can pursue activities independently. But when resources are shared, we need some way to decide which activity is best. For a mold, this might be simple, but for a person, it's complex.

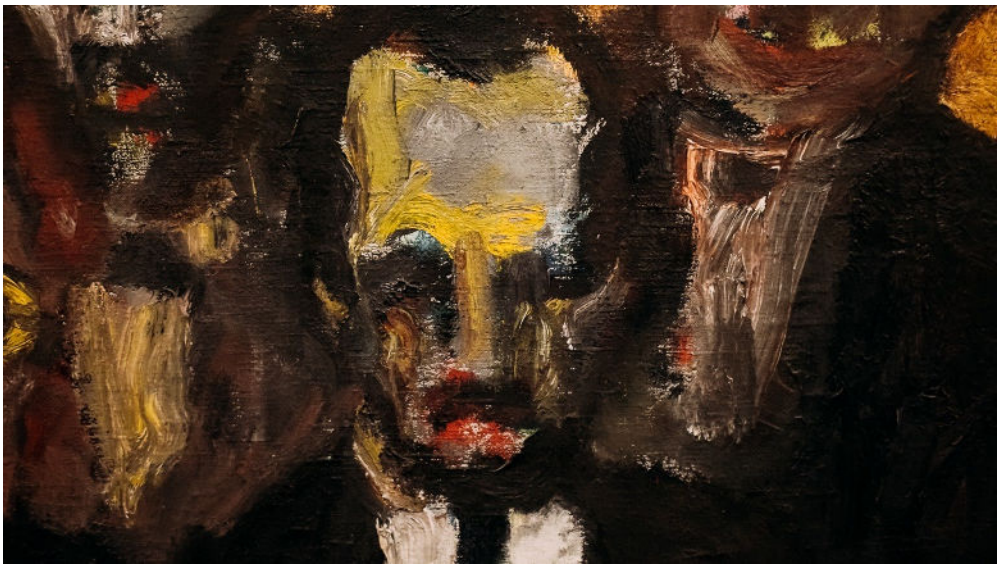
The best strategy is collaboration, a comparison of costs and benefits, and a decision or decisions to compromise or collaborate. To work together or to agree to work apart. Communication is key, and the more complicated the problem, the more communication you need.

Our personalities are not as integrated as we think. We don't know what communication we don't have, and we assume we have more than we do, because our personalities don't compare notes. Dissociated people—especially extremely dissociated people—have no idea how broken they are. Rarely does anyone else know either.

Dissociation is both common and difficult to measure, and it's not easier to measure in those cases where it's more severe. The person with full-blown Dissociative Identity Disorder often escapes notice because they learn to keep their selves hidden.

I assume dissociation in everyone, and I assume it's hampering their internal collaboration and performance. A mold is better at finding its food than most of us are at optimizing ourselves to fit our circumstances.

My efforts to bring my client's parts forward is both a strategy for new ideas, and an opportunity for better communication. What we consider conflict might be our failure to integrate ourselves. Clarifying the conflicts we project on the world also makes real the lack of communication between our dissociated parts.



*Detail from Six Gentlemen, by Emil Nolde*

## States of Comfort

People like comfort. Comfort avoids conflict, but conflict is our motivation. I want to change conflict into a journey. I reframe fear and risk as the hesitancy to explore, and exploration is what we need. Our goals are embedded in our problems, and distress is an invitation. I assert this during hypnosis.

I conclude sessions by creating an anchor for the emotional landscape and a resolve for alliance. I reverse our journey through the landscape, and come back to the waking world.

The challenge is bringing clients to a suitable entry point. I'll often spend most or even all of a session "softening up" their belligerent intellects to a point of emotional acceptance. I'm less interested in my client trusting me than I am in their recognizing themselves in me. I'm not a judge, I'm a mirror.

A successful session results in some new resolution, idea, or focus. I suggest homework to apply these. Solution is never my goal, only exploration and discovery. They will recognize something solution-like long before they can put it into words, and they should not feel compelled to tell me. Sadly, I may never know, but in subsequent sessions, I try to sense it.

The solution that I see is my client's change of state, from disturbed to content, from stuck to moving forward. Their original problem was often an aspect of their stuckness, not a reason for it. Becoming unstuck is less a disengagement and more a state of mind.

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Are your choices separate opportunities in the world, or separate perspectives in yourself? Perhaps the problems you're working to solve are in yourself.

To consider this further, **schedule a free call** on my calendar:

**https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15**

## References

Erickson, M. H., & Rossi, E. (1979). *Hypnotherapy, an Exploratory Casebook*, Irvington Publishers.