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Using hypnosis in coaching psychology practice to enhance performance, reduce anxiety and increase self-efficacy

By Stephen Palmer

Abstract

Traditionally, hypnosis techniques have been applied within hypnotherapy and psychotherapy as a therapeutic intervention. This paper focuses on using hypnosis as a technique to enhance performance, reduce anxiety and increase self-efficacy in coaching and coaching psychology settings. A hypnosis script is included that can be adapted by practitioners to tackle presenting performance-related problems.

Keywords: Hypnosis, coaching, coaching psychology, sport psychology, special state theory, non-state theory, self-efficacy, performance

Imagery and relaxation techniques are often used within business, executive, health, life, performance, personal and sport coaching in assisting coachees to enhance performance, increase confidence and self-efficacy, reduce stress and anxiety, anger reduction and to decrease physiological arousal (Anshel, 1991; McMorris & Hale, 2006; Palmer, 2008a,b; Palmer & Szymanska, 2019; Williams & Thomas, 2005). In addition, there has been an increase of the use of mindfulness based techniques used within coaching (Irons, Palmer & Hall, 2019; Passmore & Marianetti, 2007; Spence, 2019).

Traditionally, hypnosis has been a form of psychotherapy i.e. hypnotherapy or applied as a therapeutic intervention, technique or adjunct to therapy (Chapman, 2006; Curwen, Palmer & Ruddell, 2018; Palmer, & Dryden, 1995). However, it has been

noted that in contrast to relaxation techniques, hypnosis is mentioned far less in the coaching and coaching psychology theory, research and practice literature (see Palmer, 2008; Armatas, 2009). A decade later, this situation has not changed. Perhaps this is due to the concerns about the potential boundary issues relating to the application of hypnosis within a facilitative professional coaching framework (Berger, 2002) and/or a lack of interest by academics to undertake relevant research.

O'Broin and Palmer (2006) highlight that there is learning from parallels and differences between coaching psychology and sport psychology. In sport and exercise coaching, coachees are more familiar with instructional interventions to enhance performance and confidence. The application of hypnosis within sport coaching has highlighted

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the potential for enhanced self-efficacy and this is likely to lead to an increase in its use within the field (see Barker & Jones, 2005, 2006, 2008; Barker, Jones & Greenless, 2010, 2013). In sport psychology, self-efficacy is considered an important psychological variable as it is associated with optimal levels of performance (Bandura, 1997; Barker, Jones & Greenless, 2013). Increases in performance and self-efficacy can also be expected in hypnosis applied within professional and personal coaching although more research is necessary.

What is hypnosis: special state, non-state and integration?

There are a number of contradictory explanations of what exactly is hypnosis. The two main theories that explain the nature of hypnosis are special-state and non-state. 'Special-state' theorists assert that the participant's appearance and self-reports strongly suggest that they are experiencing a trance-like state or disassociation (eg. Hilgard, 1977; Kirsch & Lynn, 1995; 1998). This is in contrast to 'non-state' theorists who associate hypnosis behaviour with the participant's expectancy, motivation and the interface between the practitioner and participant (see Chapman, 2006; Heap & Aravind 2002). Heap and Aravind describe the non-state theory as (2002:55):

The term 'hypnosis' is used to denote an interaction between two people (or one person and a group) in which one of them, the hypnotist, by means of verbal communication, encourages the other, the subject or subjects, to focus their attention away from their immediate realities and concerns and on inner experiences such as thoughts, feelings and imagery. The hypnotist further attempts to create alterations in the subjects' sensations, perceptions, feelings, thoughts and behaviour by directing them to imagine various events or situations that, were they to occur in reality, would evoke the intended changes. (p. 55)

Lazarus (1973) found that client expectancy played a key role in whether or not participants found hypnosis or relaxation helpful. When the participants who wanted hypnosis believed they were receiving relaxation and not hypnosis, the outcome was not

so effective, even though the interventions were identical. This finding would support the non-state theory. Cognitive behavioural therapy and coaching practice would normally be informed by non-state theory (Palmer, 2008c).

An alternative explanation which describes the nature of hypnosis could be a theory that integrates both state and non-state theories. Barker, Jones and Greenless (2013) have provided a definition combining dissociation and non-state theories. This definition may be a useful explanation to use with coachees (2013: 237):

Hypnosis is an induced temporary condition of being, a state of dissociation (divided consciousness) differing mentally and physiologically from a person's normal state of being. This state can be influenced by attitudes, motivations, beliefs, and expectancies, by participants and hypnotherapist, and procedures in which a person in a usually relaxed state responds to suggestions for making alterations in perceptions, feelings, thoughts, actions, behavior, and or emotions. (p. 237)

Stages of the hypnosis technique

In this paper, a six-stage hypnosis script will be described. The British Psychological Society (2001) highlighted three key areas where hypnosis involving mental and physical relaxation induction and deepening methods are used in addition to one or more of the following (2001:9):

- (i) Suggestions to encourage desired changes in perception, feelings, thinking and behaviour;
- (ii) Suggestions and guided imagery techniques to explore possible problems and conflicts that underlie the presenting complaints;
- (iii) The use of self-hypnosis by the client or patient to rehearse relaxation and other self-control methods.

The above can be used for to performance related issues, stress and increasing confidence and self-efficacy. There are a number of different stages of hypnosis, which vary depending upon which method is being used. The example provided in this paper has six stages:

1. Preparation (explanation)
2. Preliminary induction
3. Deepening
4. Cognitive restructuring (sometimes known as ego-strengthening)
5. Termination
6. Debrief

Stages 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 are briefly described in the hypnosis script below and elsewhere (e.g. Curwen, Palmer & Ruddell, 2018; Dowd, 2000; Hartland, 1971; Heap & Aravind, 2002; Palmer, 1993, 1997).

Stage 4 is the cognitive restructuring and modification phase. In coaching or more specifically, rational emotive and cognitive behavioural coaching (Palmer, 1997), the coach will have previously elicited during the coaching session, relevant Stress Inducing Thoughts (SITs) and/or Performance Interfering Thoughts (PITs) and then helped the coachee to develop Stress Alleviating Thoughts (SATs) and/or Performance Enhancing Thoughts (PETs) (Neenan & Palmer, 2001; Palmer & Cooper, 2013). The SATs and/or PITs are then incorporated into the hypnosis script at stage 4. The standard script below should be revised to take account of

the situation the coachee wants to tackle. Reiterating the positive effects of hypnosis outside the coaching session can be beneficial and can have a useful post-hypnotic effect (Palmer, 1993). Imagery techniques such as Coping Imagery (see Lazarus, 1984; Palmer 2008d; Palmer & Cooper, 2013) can be included in the cognitive restructuring stage to help the coachee rehearse strategies to tackle stress and/or performance related situations they wish to address such as job interviews or giving presentations or dealing with difficult situations such as chairing meetings.

Introduction to hypnosis script

The 'pauses' in the hypnosis script assist in underscoring the cognitive restructuring in order to enhance their effect (Palmer, 1993). A pause may be 2 to 3 seconds, and a long pause from 5 to 15 seconds. The practitioner varies the pause depending upon how relaxed the coachee appears to be. A longer pause can assist relaxation. Coachee feedback during the debrief stage can help to revise the script for the following meeting.

The script below is focuses on both general stress reduction and performance anxiety. Depending upon the presenting issue, sections can be left out.

A COMBINED HYPNOSIS SCRIPT FOR PERFORMANCE ANXIETY AND STRESS

Preparation explanation stage: *Important to explain to the coachee about hypnosis and answer any questions. Providing a definition combining dissociation special state and non-state theories is recommended. In order to prepare the coachee, each stage of hypnosis and the prepared script can be explained and shared with the coachee.*

Preliminary induction (adapted Palmer, 1993:33-6)

(NB. Preliminary induction acclimatises the coachee to their environment and prepares them for the Deepening Stage)

Can you make yourself as comfortable as possible in your chair

Pause

And if you would just like to close your eyes

Pause

If you would like to listen to the noises outside the room

Pause

And now listen to the noises inside the room

Pause

These noises will come and go probably throughout this session and you can choose to let them just drift over your mind and choose to ignore them if you so wish

Pause

You will probably notice how these noises and the sound of my voice will become softer and louder and softer again during this session. This is quite normal and will indicate that you are in a state of hypnosis

Pause

Let your whole body go limp and slack

Pause

Now keeping your eyelids closed and without moving your head, I would like you to look upwards, keep your eyes closed, just look upwards

Pause

Notice the feeling of tiredness, sleepiness

Pause

And relaxation

Pause

In your eye muscles

Pause

And when your eyes feel so tired, so very, very, tired, just let your eyes drop back DOWN

Pause

Notice the feeling of tiredness, sleepiness and relaxation in your eyes

Pause

Let this travel DOWN your face to your jaw

Pause

Now just relax your jaw

Pause

If your teeth are clenched, then unclench them

Pause

Now relax your tongue. If it's touching the roof of your mouth then just let it fall down

Pause

Let the feeling of relaxation slowly travel up over your face to your forehead

Pause

To the top of your head

Pause

To the back of your head

Long pause

Then slowly DOWN through the neck muscles

Pause

and DOWN to your shoulders

Long pause

Now concentrate on relaxing your shoulders, just let them drop DOWN

Pause

Now let that feeling of relaxation in your shoulders slowly travel DOWN your right arm, DOWN through the muscles, DOWN through your elbow, DOWN through your wrist, DOWN to your hand, right DOWN to your finger tips

Long pause

Now let that feeling of relaxation in your shoulders slowly travel DOWN your left arm, DOWN through the muscles, DOWN through your elbow, DOWN through your wrist, DOWN to your hand, right DOWN to your finger tips

Long pause

And let that feeling of relaxation in your shoulders slowly travel DOWN your chest right DOWN to your stomach

Pause

Notice that every time you breathe out, you feel more and more relaxed.

Pause

Let that feeling of relaxation and tiredness travel DOWN from your shoulders DOWN your back, right DOWN through your back muscles

Long pause

Right DOWN your right leg, DOWN through the muscles, DOWN through your knee, DOWN through your ankle

Pause

To your foot, right DOWN to your toes

Long pause

Let the feeling of relaxation and tiredness now travel DOWN your left leg

Pause

DOWN through the muscles, DOWN through your knee, DOWN through your ankle

Pause

To your foot, right DOWN to your toes

Long pause

I'll give you a few moments now

Pause

To allow you to concentrate on any part of your body that you would like to relax even further

15 second pause or longer if necessary

Deepening (adapted Palmer, 1993:36-8)

(NB. Deepening assists the coachee in becoming more relaxed and prepared for the cognitive restructuring stage)

I want you now to concentrate on your breathing

Pause

Notice how every time you breathe out, you feel more, and more, relaxed

Pause

With each breath you take you feel so relaxed, so very, very relaxed

Pause

Breathe in slowly through your nose and slowly out through your mouth

Pause

With each breath you take

Pause

Every time you take a new breath of air

Pause

You are becoming more and more relaxed

Pause

Gradually you are drifting away as you become more,

Pause

On every out-breath you are becoming more, and more, sleepy

Pause

More and more deeply relaxed

Pause

Notice how, as you relax, you are breathing more, and more, slowly

Pause

And more, and more, steadily, as you become more, and more, deeply,
very deeply, relaxed

Pause

You are drifting DOWN into a deep state of relaxation

Pause

Your whole body is becoming more, and more, relaxed, every time, you breathe out

Pause

I'm slowly going to count to five, and as I do, you will feel even more relaxed
than you do now

Pause

One

Pause

NOW you are feeling more and more relaxed than you did a few minutes ago.
More and more relaxed than you did a few seconds ago

Pause

Two

Pause

Notice how you are feeling so relaxed, that you are finding it so difficult to
concentrate on my voice all the time

Pause

Three

Pause

NOW every time I say a number, every time you breathe out, you feel more and more deeply, very, very deeply relaxed. An overwhelming feeling of tiredness and relaxation is descending upon you as you listen to my voice

Pause

Four

You are feeling even more relaxed NOW than you did a few minutes, a few seconds ago. In a moment when I say the number five, but not quite yet, you are going to feel so very deeply relaxed...

Pause

Five

Pause

NOW you feel even more relaxed than you did a moment ago, more relaxed than a few seconds ago, much more relaxed than you did a few minutes ago, and very much more relaxed than you did a few hours ago.

Pause

Cognitive restructuring (adapted Palmer, 1993: 38-41)

(NB. Cognitive restructuring to assist the coachee in strengthening performance enhancing and/or stress reducing cognitions.)

You are now so relaxed, so very relaxed, that you are becoming very aware of what I am saying to you

Pause

You are so aware that your mind is open to any positive and helpful suggestions I may make for your benefit

Pause

You are feeling so relaxed that when I make positive suggestions about your wellbeing and performance, you will accept these suggestions, and gradually over a period of time you will feel better and better, even though you will not be here with me

Pause

My suggestions will just drift over your mind and you will be able to remember all the relevant ones that will influence your feelings

Pause

Your thoughts

Pause

And your behaviour

Pause

As you feel more and more deeply relaxed during this session, you will find new energy to help you cope with any issues you may have had recently

Pause

New energy to tackle future challenges

Pause

New energy to lessen any fatigue

Pause

New energy to help you concentrate on your goals

Pause

A new strength of mind and body to deal with internal and external pressures

Pause

And as every day goes by, you will become more relaxed, and much calmer than you have been for some time

Pause

And each day, you will feel far less tense, and far less concerned with unimportant matters

Pause

And as this happens, your confidence will grow as your old concerns become a distant memory

Pause

Week by week, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, second by second, your independence will grow

Pause

Any stress or anxiety will fade away as you learn to cope with life
(NB Target relevant emotion according to the coachee's presenting problem.)

Pause

You will be able to stand difficult situations much more easily

Pause

You will no longer hear yourself saying 'I can't stand it', but instead you will realistically say to yourself, 'It's unpleasant but I CAN STAND IT'

Pause

As you learn that you can stand challenging situations, you will procrastinate less often and you will be able to start and continue your tasks more easily

Pause

You can now see yourself coping with difficult situations
(NB Target the presenting problem such as attending a job interview, giving a presentation at work, or being assertive with work colleague and describe how the coachee will tackle possible challenges as they arise. This strategy is discussed and developed prior to the hypnosis session. Coping imagery or other appropriate imagery techniques to enhance self-efficacy and mastery could be inserted in this section.)

Pause

You will question whether things are really awful. They may be bad but are they really awful?

Pause

As you realise that you can stand situations, and that things are seldom awful, you will be able to face challenges much more easily

Pause

If you fail at a task, you will not condemn yourself as a total failure

Pause

All it means is that you did not achieve your target

Pause

No more, no less

Pause

You will learn to accept yourself more for the person you are and not just for your achievements

Pause

Your internal demands, many of those unnecessary, inflexible musts and shoulds

Pause

Will change to preferences and coulds and subsequently your stress and anxieties will lessen
(Target relevant emotion according to the coachee's presenting problem e.g. anxiety.)

Pause

Gradually, as time goes by, you will feel better and better and your life will improve

Pause

And your recent concerns will be a thing of the past

Pause

And you will be able to put them behind you

Pause

Termination (adapted Palmer, 1993: 43-4)

(NB. Termination stage re-enforces post-hypnotic suggestions and increases the level of consciousness so the coachee can 'wake up' and feel in control.)

In a few moments' time, but not quite yet, I am going to count to three, and when I do, you will open your eyes and wake up, and feel relaxed and refreshed

Pause

You will be able to remember or forget whatever you want to of this hypnosis session
And you will be in full control of your body and mind

Pause

And wake up today on (insert here: day, time, location)

Pause

As I count to three, you will wake up
(NB Practitioner starts to speak louder with each subsequent number)

Pause

One

Pause

TWO

Pause

THREE

Pause

Open your eyes in your own time

Debrief

Obtain feedback from the coachee about their experience of hypnosis. Were the pauses too long, short or just right? Deal with any concerns that may be raised. Ask for suggestions how the script could be improved for their particular presenting problem(s).

© Stephen Palmer, 1993

Discussion

Hypnosis has been used for a wide range of presenting problems and clinical disorders. However, in the field of coaching and coaching psychology its use has been rather limited. Similar to sport psychology, it could be used to enhance performance, reduce performance anxiety and increase self-efficacy. However, when considering the possibility of using hypnosis, the coach-coachee relationship needs to be carefully considered. Practice, ethical and boundary issues will need to be taken into account (Bachkirova & Baker, 2019; Berger, 2002; Law, 2005; O'Broin, & Palmer, 2019). Self-hypnosis is a possible alternative. For example, the coachee could use self-help material to record their own self-hypnosis session (see Palmer & Puri, 2006).

There are a number of guidelines for the use of hypnosis (eg Walker, W-L., 2016). The Nature of Hypnosis (BPS, 2001) publication provided some guidelines. Barker and associates (2013) developed short Guidance for Hypnosis Education in Sport Guidelines for the use of hypnosis. However, developing guidelines for the application of hypnosis to the field of coaching psychology practice is necessary.

Appropriate training in hypnosis is important and regular on-going supervision of coaching/coaching psychology practice is always recommended, and sometimes mandatory, depending upon the professional body that the practitioner belongs to. It is worth noting that in some countries using any psychological technique or intervention may require national or state licensing.

Conclusion

Palmer (2008: 261) recommends that hypnosis is used judiciously as an adjunct to coaching and coaching psychology practice to enhance performance, reduce stress and increase relaxation. This current paper has been informed by sport psychology coaching research relating to enhancing self-efficacy. However, the field of coaching and coaching psychology needs further research into the application of hypnosis.

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