

Perusing a Clinician's Perspective on Leveraging Hypnosis to Elucidate Mindfulness

Book Review – Yapko, M. D., (2011). *Mindfulness and Hypnosis: The Power of Suggestion to Transform Experience*. New York, NY: Norton.

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July 2012

In his latest book, *Mindfulness and Hypnosis: The Power of Suggestion to Transform Experience*, clinical psychologist Michael Yapko addresses an important lacuna by bringing his hypnosis sensibilities to bear on the domain of mindfulness. Scholars and clinicians working with hypnosis have long appreciated the power of suggestion to shape perception, emotion, thought, and action. Although hypnosis per se has yet to achieve popularity in mainstream clinical practice, interventions drawing on suggestion are on the rise. Proponents of such approaches, however, rarely appreciate the hypnosis-like components inherent in their work. In particular, contemplative treatments such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy have gained immense popularity over the past decade as vehicles for promoting health and wellness. Few scientific reports and even fewer clinical accounts, however, have sought to unravel the elements of suggestion that suffuse such meditative interventions. *Mindfulness and Hypnosis* fills this gap by skilfully braiding together disparate strands of empirical research and clinical practice to shed light on the role of suggestion in mindfulness practice.

Whereas popular associations typically construe mindfulness as goal-less, undirected, and free of beliefs, Yapko explains that contemplative approaches in fact draw substantially on psychosocial factors including goal orientations, response expectancies, and interpersonal contexts—parameters that have long permeated the scholarly literature on hypnosis. When chronic stress patients enrol in a mindfulness course, for example, they surely do so with a head full of goals and expectations. Therapists, moreover, inevitably reinforce these initial outlooks with implicit or explicit cues fostering beliefs that mindfulness will help patients relieve anxiety, gain insight, and achieve a measure of peace. Throughout his exploration of mindfulness-based approaches, Yapko examines the paradox of how practices that emphasise non-reactive acceptance of present-moment experience can simultaneously promote development and change. His account shows that setting explicit goals hardly conflicts with cultivating non-judgmental receptivity, but rather constitutes an essential step toward therapeutic growth even in a mindfulness context.

As Yapko eloquently explains, the eight weeks of a standard mindfulness program are far from goalless and expectation-free. While some scholars may view contextual factors including therapeutic rapport and response-sets as obvious and unspecific, a large body of scientific evidence demonstrates that such parameters wield substantial influence over cognition and behaviour (Michael, Garry, & Kirsch, 2012). Synthesizing such empirical findings with personal anecdotes and clinical intuitions, Yapko provides a thorough and accessible introduction to the range of styles and structures of hypnotic suggestions and elucidates how they may operate in a mindfulness context. In one particularly valuable chapter, he provides a detailed line-by-line analysis teasing out suggestive elements in three guided mindfulness

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scripts written by prominent meditation teachers. These real-world examples illustrate that, whether knowingly or unwittingly, practitioners of mindfulness regularly employ the power of suggestion to facilitate their desired outcomes.

Whereas Yapko is careful to restrict his conclusions to the realm of guided mindfulness meditation in a clinical context, many of his insights regarding the role of suggestion likely generalize to other milieus of contemplative practice, including meditative paths geared at promoting spiritual growth or existential clarity. Similar to patients walking into a stress clinic, practitioners crossing the threshold of a retreat hut likely enter with a host of aims and anticipations. Even in the later stages of practice—after countless hours of meditation have ostensibly quenched coarse manifestations of hope and projection—goals and beliefs likely persist in more subtle forms and may continue to shape the outcomes of meditative training (Trungpa, 1973). Furthermore, contextual signals including the visible actions of a teacher, the instructions of a practice text, the sound of a meditation bell, or the sight of other practitioners all may serve as potential suggestive cues for practitioners of meditation. Acknowledging and striving to understand the influence of such psychosocial and ritualistic variables can only help to optimize contemplative practice both within and beyond the clinic.

Traditional and scientific descriptions of contemplative practice put forth key cognitive, emotional, and neurophysiological processes that appear specific to mindfulness and likely extend beyond the general influence of suggestion and expectation (Hölzel et al., 2011). As you can see throughout this special issue, hypnosis and meditation do overlap but nevertheless remain distinct. In his comparative account, however, Yapko treads a vanishingly fine line between helpfully bridging the autonomous domains of hypnosis and meditation and unfairly reducing meditation to a form of hypnosis. Whereas the book's discussions of suggestive factors display conceptual and empirical sophistication, its explanations of more traditional and well-documented active ingredients of mindfulness (e.g., attentional and cognitive mechanisms) feel comparatively superficial. To be sure, this book introduces an important missing piece of the puzzle of contemplative experience; however, it seems at times to oversell its point by undervaluing the unique qualities of meditative practices.

Insofar as practitioners of mindfulness already seem to tacitly utilize contextual factors such as suggestion and expectation, *Mindfulness and Hypnosis* illustrates how both researchers and clinicians would benefit from bringing these variables out into the open. Yapko's accessible and carefully crafted book represents an important contribution toward acknowledging the suggestive elements inherent in mindfulness practice—an avenue that, if pursued, would likely help us better understand and harness these interventions. *Mindfulness and Hypnosis* provides an important synthesis for both scientists interested in elucidating meditative practices from an empirical vantage and clinicians striving to hone their skills as agents of health and wellbeing. Anyone interested in contemplative practices stands to benefit from engaging with this highly readable and compelling integrative account as an introduction to the rich treasury of hypnosis and suggestion.

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