

# **An introduction to the history of hypnotism and hypnotherapy**

In this article I have sought to put together a potted history of hypnotism and hypnotherapy through the ages. The key events and people who played the most important roles in the discoveries and developments of what has become today's hypnotherapy treatments are the main focus of this essay. I hope this may give interested people more of an insight and understanding into the world of Hypnotherapy

## **The early days**

Primitive societies used hypnotic phenomena throughout the ages for spiritual beliefs. Tribal drama and rituals, e.g. dances have been a part of many societies around the globe. This rhythmic pattern greatly assisted the participants to make the transition into a trance like state. Shamanistic rituals have played a very large part in tribal cultures around the world and there are still many cultures today where shamanism is actively practised. Shamanism is also practised in the west and has gained some credibility in most notably the new age movement. In ancient tribal cultures the shaman was the most respected member of the tribe because it was believed that not only could he commune with the spirit world and receive direct sacred knowledge that other members of the tribal community were unable to receive, but it was also believed he had special curative magical powers that could not only produce magical healings and changes in state, but he could also guide the rest of the tribe into a hypnotic state where they could also commune with the spirit world and experience a different reality. The point here is to understand that Shamanism was in some way the earliest form of hypnotism in its raw unharnessed state and that the shaman was acting as a facilitator when guiding individuals or members of the tribe into this trance like state. This demonstrates that the power of the human mind is really very remarkable in its ability to visualise and to reach altered states of consciousness.

Throughout many cultures all across the early days of mankind's history and into the Middle Ages there have appeared remarkable people who claimed to have special knowledge or understanding that was uncommon to the ordinary man or woman, who have appeared to have the ability to produce healings by simply the laying on of hands. In today's enlightened society it comes as no surprise that belief and faith played the most important part in these apparent miraculous cures.

Kings of middle age Europe would touch commoners with amazing results. Priests and ministers would use a laying on of hands to produce startling changes in their congregation members.

There are paintings and sculptures from ancient Greece and Egypt that depict a curing sleep induced in subjects by their leaders to effect healing and other changes in state. There are also records of hypnosis being used

by priests using the process on initiates in the Egyptian mystery schools.

## **The age of enlightenment and reason**

### **Franz Mesmer (1734-1815)**

Probably the most infamous hypnotist of all time was an Austrian gentleman called Franz Mesmer. In fact his last name has rung on down the centuries as the term 'to mesmerize' has sprung forth from the association with his surname and his hypnotic cures and early experiments into the subject of hypnotism.

In 1773, Franz Mesmer an Austrian, worked with a Jesuit priest, Maximillion Hell, who was the royal astronomer in Vienna, Austria. They treated a case of hysteria with Magnets. Hell thought the magnet cured with physical properties interrupting the sick person's magnetic field. Mesmer thought there was a fluid mineral that pulsed through the person's body. He called it animal magnetism. This magnetism fluid was thought to be affected by forces of astral bodies. There were four primary fluids of concern. They included blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Keeping all of these fluids in good harmony was the trick to good health. The theory was understood to be sound at the time because it coincided with Benjamin Franklin's discovery of electricity and recent advances in astronomy.

Mesmer moved to Paris in 1778 and invented backquets. These were large iron pots that would hold many adults. He would line the pots with iron filings and magnets. Patients would enter the bath, immersing themselves into the water and leave cured of their ailment. Mesmer had a very high percentage of cures. As Mesmer's cures increased and his reputation grew by word of mouth recommendation people came from far and wide. People came from as far away as Vienna. People came to Mesmer believing they would be cured and by and large they were. By now Mesmer had people believing he had a miraculous ability to cure the sick.

In 1784 the French Academy set up a commission to study Mesmer In an attempt to understand how his unique process worked. The Academy sent forth internationally famous scientists to find out what was really going on there. Benjamin Franklin from America and two other scientists were asked to study Mesmer and his techniques. Mesmer took two large iron rods and proceeded to attach them to trees in a forest in the belief that he was magnetizing them. His patients were asked to go into the forest and touch the magnetized trees. It was business as usual for Mesmer as many of Mesmer's patients came back cured of their afflictions. However, Patients were touching all the trees in the forest and not just the magnetized ones Benjamin Franklin and the two other scientists came to the conclusion that Mesmer was not healing his patients but his patients were healing themselves by their own willpower and belief structure, by the power of their own minds. The patient's power of imagination was stimulated in such a way that would enable the person to become completely healed.

Most of Mesmer's contemporaries frowned upon his unorthodox methods and within medical circles he began to be treated as an eccentric outsider and received a great deal of criticism for his beliefs. Nevertheless clients would still come from far and wide to see this wonderfully flamboyant individual and to experience his phenomenon and get a treatment or cure for their ailments. Mesmer published two books, 'memoirs about the Magnet' in 1775 and 'Memoirs about the discovery of Animal Magnetism' in 1779. Unfortunately these publications did not do Mesmer any favours at all and these built him a reputation as an occultist. In 1784 the French government after an investigation pronounced Mesmer a fraud. Mesmer died in 1815 at the age of 83 in Switzerland. With hindsight we can see that Mesmer's techniques reinforce modern belief that a large percentage of ailments may be dealt with by our attitude and approach to them, coupled with a physical mechanism, the intermediary of the hypnotherapist and the use of hypnosis; it is possible to negate many negative conditions and ailments.

### **The Marquis de Puysegir (1751-1825)**

This gentleman was one of Mesmer's own students. At the age of 33, the Marquis discovered how to lead a client into a deep relaxing trance state that is known today as **Somnambulism**, using relaxation and calming techniques. The term somnambulism is still widely used amongst hypnotherapists today and refers to a very deep hypnotic trance like state. For medical uses of hypnosis, the patient is usually taken to a much deeper level, sometimes even to what is called the comatose or somnambulistic state. In this state the subject appears to be sound asleep, yet can hear and respond to questions and suggestions. It is in this state that anaesthesia for surgery can take place. The Marquis de Puysegir was able to demonstrate three cardinal features of somnambulism. These were:--

- Concentration of the senses of the operator.
- Acceptance of a suggestion from the therapist.
- Amnesia for events in a trance.

Over two hundred years later, these three theories of the Marquis de Puysegir still stand.

### **James Braid (1775-1860)**

A Scottish physician and surgeon, specializing in eye and muscular conditions, Braid was an important and influential pioneer of hypnotism and hypnotherapy. During his research into hypnosis, Braid formed the following ideas, most of which still stand today:

- That hypnosis is a powerful tool which should be limited entirely to the medical and dental professions.
- Although hypnotism could be the cure for many diseases for which there had

been no cure formally, it was nevertheless not perfect and was only a medical tool which should only be used in combination with drug remedies in order to properly treat the patient.

- That in skilled hands there is no great danger associated with hypnotic treatment and neither is their pain or discomfort. That a good deal more study and research would be necessary to thoroughly understand a number of theoretical concepts regarding hypnosis. James Braid maintained a steady interest in hypnotism throughout his life and made major contributions to the therapy we use today. He coined the phrase Hypnotherapy after seeing a demonstration of mesmerism in which he forced a pin between the fingernail of a subject who gave no sign of even the slightest discomfort. Because he was so impressed by this he carried out further research and experiments and eventually gave the process its popular but erroneous name that has remained in use ever since. Hypnotism comes from the Greek word, Hypnos, which means to sleep. But Hypnosis is not a sleep state as clients are aware of what is happening. Once Braid realised his mistake he wanted to rename the Hypnosis as Mono-Idealism, which is total concentration on a single train of thought.

### **James Esdaile (1808-1859)**

James Esdaile was a surgeon who in 1830 was appointed as assistant Surgeon to the East India Company. It was in Calcutta in 1845 when operating on a Convict patient who was suffering such great pain that Esdaile decided to try Mesmerism for the second operation. He was successful in rendering the convict completely comatose. This became to be known as the Esdaile state and is still used today in some circumstances. (For e.g. in 2008 the BBC showed a three part series on alternative therapies where a Chinese team of heart surgeons performed open heart surgery on a patient in the Esdaile state.)

Esdaile at once began to experiment with mesmerism both as a means of producing analgesia in surgical cases, and as a method of treatment for medical ones. The patient was put into a trance like state in which they remained throughout the procedure. Esdaile assisted in over three hundred operations all of them major and over a thousand minor ones. Esdaile's mortality rate was 5%.

This was considered good at the time as most other physicians had over a 50% death rate whilst completing the same operations as Esdaile was performing. This form of anesthetic was soon put into second place due to the arrival of Chloroform. It was thought easier to inject someone than assist them into a trance like state. Using hypnosis in some areas is preferred as an alternative to conventional anesthetics, especially in the dental profession.

## **Sigmund Freud(1856-1939)**

Freud was born in Freiberg, Moravia in 1856. In the early part of his career he became involved in hypnosis; this was between 1883 and 1857. He practised for some time with some successful results; however he struggled with the technique and became bored.

Freud was probably one of the most famous people to use hypnosis. However he abandoned it saying that it was ineffective, which has been proven to be completely erroneous. Instead Freud decided to concentrate on developing psychoanalysis.

He is regarded by many even today as the founding father of psychoanalysis despite the fact that in some circles his methods and conclusions have led him to be reviled in some circles. The process that Freud developed he called 'Free Association'

Throughout his life Freud had many books and papers published that have continuously been used as the cornerstone and building blocks in the development and furtherance of the understanding of Psychoanalysis in the world of Psychology.

Sigmund Freud died on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 of cancer from which he had been suffering since 1923 after making his big impact on the world of psychology.

## **Milton H. Ericson (1901-1980)**

Milton Ericson is widely regarded by many professionals in the world of hypnotherapy as having made great achievements towards progressing the field of hypnotherapy. His results throughout his life were often spectacularly successful. Ericson certainly played his part in shaping hypnotherapy into what it is today. Ericson was a psychotherapist who used hypnosis throughout his career to aid his client's progression and recovery. He was excellent at intently observing people and rapidly building a rapport with them. Metaphors, confusing statements, surprise, imagery and humour were all part of his vast range of therapeutic tools. His methods of trance induction are nowadays referred to as Ericsonian hypnosis and without a shadow of a doubt; he added another very important chapter to the history of modern hypnotherapy. Without doubt, any student of hypnotherapy will have spent some considerable time studying and using Ericson's methods because he was so successful.

### **Today**

There are many leading figures and pioneers in the world of hypnotism today and the story of hypnotism and new evolving hypnotherapy techniques does not end here, quite the opposite in fact. With the demands and complexities of modern life today, greater numbers of people are turning to hypnotherapy to help solve their problems often with spectacularly successful results. New and exciting discoveries are being made all the time; with add on therapies that also complement hypnotherapy, many of which have their roots in hypnosis. These are

continually being developed and the list is endless of the psychological problems, phobias, fears, disorders, habits, that can be put in their place by these well-developed therapies.

Here are some examples:-

- Stopping Smoking
- Weight loss
- Improving self-esteem and motivation
- Enhanced learning and memory performance
- Dealing with anxiety and panic
- Increasing athletic performance
- Curing procrastination (especially out of habitual laziness)
- Curing phobias, e.g. of spiders, snakes, and other animals,
- Curing fears, e.g. of flying, thunder, heights, water, public speaking, enclosed spaces.

These are just a few of an endless list, but this is enough to give the reader an idea of the vast possibilities of the therapeutic uses of hypnosis today

In conclusion, the history of hypnosis starts way back before history was recorded. Along its way, it has received contributions from many colourful characters and cultures, but the true fact is that hypnosis is a naturally occurring state. It occurs to people all the time in everyday life and it has been harnessed in many ways over the years by many individuals who wish to progress the phenomenon and bring it up to date in their time. This is just a brief insight into the history of hypnotism and not complete.

However for the reader that would like to do further research, here are a few of the more important characters who should not be omitted from the history of hypnotism:-

- John Elliotson (1761-1868)
- Dr Ambroise -Auguste Liebeault (1823-1904)
- Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893)
- Josef Brever(1842-1925)
- Dr Étienne Eugene Azam (1822-1899)
- John Milne Bramwell (1852 - 1925)