

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320108534>

Hypnosis and sport performance

Chapter · September 2011

DOI: 10.4135/9781412961165.n258

CITATIONS

0

READS

708

2 authors, including:



Richard D. Gordin

Utah State University

51 PUBLICATIONS 107 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Non-linear variability [View project](#)



Consulting in applied sport psychology [View project](#)

Hypnosis and Sport Performance

Hypnosis is a suggestive technique that has been used to help a person change thoughts, perceptions, sensations, or behaviors. The use of hypnosis for enhancing sport performance has enjoyed a steady increase over the past three decades. As athletes have recognized the importance of mental training techniques in their quest for excellence, effective interventions such as hypnosis have come increasingly into use. Although hypnosis has value if used properly in sports performances, it also has the potential for harm if applied inappropriately in sporting situations. This entry focuses on the characteristics of sports performers who can successfully be hypnotized, the ways hypnosis can be used effectively to empower sports performers, and the type of hypnosis thought to be most effective with the athlete population.

Characteristics of Hypnotic Subjects in Sports

Hypnosis is a psychological intervention that is often misunderstood by the general population, including athletes. Hypnosis consists of three distinct stages: (1) induction stage, (2) utilization stage, and (3) dehypnotization stage. Most sports performers are prone to trying any technique that is purported to enhance their performance, even if it can also be dangerous. Athletes are specially gifted physical specimens, but that attribute is far from the most essential characteristic that makes for an ideal hypnotic subject. The trait that influences a person to be an ideal candidate for hypnosis is suggestibility. Many authorities believe that approximately 95% of the general population can be successfully hypnotized. Strangely enough, most athletes are not easily hypnotized because, through experience and training, they learn to be guarded and untrusting instead of being open and receptive. Even though many sports performers express a willingness and desire to be hypnotized (because it is deemed to be a quick and effective process), initially athletes are not ideal subjects until they become educated concerning this technique and become more trusting. To facilitate learning the skill of being hypnotized, it is important for the hypnotist to debunk any myths surrounding hypnosis. Unfortunately, the "stage hypnosis" movement has served to reinforce these myths with all potential subjects, including athletes. Stage hypnotists usually do not have formal training in hypnosis and serve to perpetuate these myths. They are often very talented in the induction and dehypnotization stages but are lacking in ethical considerations during utilization. For instance, no person who uses hypnosis in clinical practice would use the stage for entertainment purposes. Sports hypnotists use this technique for the suggested aids in performance mentioned later in this article.

Empowering Sports Performers Through Hypnosis

Hypnosis has been used by sports performers in a number of different ways: (a) to receive more benefits from relaxation, (b) for controlling anxiety, (c) pain management, (d) for enhancing imagery, (e) to improve concentration, (f) for erasing a performance block, (g) injury rehabilitation, and (h) for ego strengthening.

Hypnosis and Relaxation

Many, if not most, hypnotists use fairly deep relaxation as an induction technique for entering a hypnotic trance. Naturally then, subjects surmise that hypnosis and relaxation are the same phenomenon, but this is inaccurate. Actually, the quelling of the active mind (relaxation) is a skill in itself and is a beneficial side effect that hypnosis seems to enhance. There are various forms of "active hypnosis" as well as passive hypnotic trances. It is even possible for an athlete to actively move in a hypnotic trance while performing. Also, there are various induction techniques that use active hypnosis as the most effective way to get the athlete to experience this state. For instance, an athlete could enter a trance and then actually perform or move to the rhythm of his or her event while in a trance state. This is a very powerful and effective way to mentally as well as physically practice a sport.

Controlling Anxiety and Arousal

Two of the most powerful factors that limit sport performances are the emotions of anxiety and arousal. As anxiety increases, the ability to focus effectively is greatly diminished. On the other hand, as arousal increases, the ability to focus narrows. These situations are crucial because most athletes experience anxiety

and also need to reach an individual level of arousal to perform well. Hypnosis is beneficial in sports performance because it can contribute to creating a state of relaxation that mitigates anxiety. Also, hypnosis can be used as a technique to reach an optimal level of arousal prior and during competition. In other words, hypnosis can effectively train a performer "to be intense but not tense." This emotional balance is crucial for attaining great performances in sports situations. Suggestions can be made in the trance state for powerful emotional transitions. Suggestions made in the trance state are not questioned by the athlete and often last for long periods of time if the sports hypnotist uses posthypnotic suggestions.

Pain Management

The human mind has the unique ability to either recognize and feel pain or ignore it. While in a hypnotic trance, it is indeed possible to reach an altered state where pain is not felt at the conscious level. Since pain in sports situations is a common occurrence because of extensive physical exertion, athletes readily seek ways to eliminate or reduce the feeling of pain. Hypnosis trains the mind to ignore the feeling of pain. Hypnosis is so powerful that under this technique some athletes have been able to withstand surgery without anesthesia and remain fully conscious during the entire operation. The whole concept of "glove anesthesia" is a demonstration of pain management in a hypnotic state. The sports hypnotist must be very careful to always leave some pain awareness in the athletes so as not to induce complete anesthesia, which would be very dangerous and would increase the possibility of overreaching and injury.

Enhancing Imagery

For sports performers, the skill of imagery normally has two perspectives: (1) seeing (visualization) or (2) feeling (kinesthetics). Both of these perspectives of imagery are extremely important for high-level performers. One of the benefits of hypnosis is to experience "heightened awareness" in all the human senses. Sports performers use their senses in a variety of different ways so that simple posthypnotic suggestions can be employed to enhance or at least focus on the various imagery perspectives. Learning to ignore distractions, feeling more intensity, and reliving past events (regression) are examples of the use of hypnosis and its effecting competition with imagery. In fact, even an increased learning effect can be induced with hypnosis as athletes can remember more information and practice cues when in a trance state. This is a very effective way to do additional practice while away from the athletic area.

Improving Concentration

Being able to concentrate while in the appropriate attentional style and at the right moment is the secret to committing fewer performance errors. Sports performances require the athlete to be able to change attentional styles almost instantaneously and automatically. If an athlete has to stop and think about what to attend to, it is most likely too late to perform effectively. Again, heightened awareness is a benefit of hypnosis and allows a performer to focus more quickly and clearly. Through hypnosis training, athletes can learn to change attentional styles with minimal effort and precision effectiveness. The ability to focus is a crucial skill in athletic performances. Hypnosis has been proven to increase an athlete's ability to concentrate for longer durations and on the more appropriate cues.

Erasing a Performance Block

Performance blocks are frequently the result of overanalyzing or overthinking about a motor movement that has previously been made automatic. As soon as an athlete interferes with an automatic response, the rhythm of the response is disrupted, and this creates negative emotionality, which is very strong and contributes to the increased probability that the negative response will occur again. Hypnosis can be used to keep the mind focused on the correct response instead of worrying about the wrong one. Hypnosis can aid in putting the mind on "automatic pilot" instead of focusing on the particulars of an incorrect technique. The athlete's mind in a hypnotic state is unquestionably more susceptible to suggestion and, therefore, will move immediately to the subconscious suggestion for improved self-image and performance possibilities that may be blocked by the conscious mind.

Injury Rehabilitation

In addition to mitigating the pain associated with injury, hypnosis is useful in recruiting the mind's powers to aid in the rehabilitation process. An example would be having the mind (under hypnosis) focus on sending more blood volume to an injured area to aid in removing infected tissues or reducing swelling; then, the injured area will heal more quickly. Employing hypnosis techniques to attain long periods of relaxed states also helps the process of rehabilitation of an injury. Much research has supported the ability of a hypnotic trance to facilitate and accelerate the healing process for athletic injury as well as to reduce the fear of reinjury in the

athletic population.

Ego Strengthening

Negative beliefs (fears) that interfere with ideal performances are often buried deep in the unconscious mind of the athlete. Under hypnosis, these fears can be reached and subsequently reduced. Once the fears are addressed and overcome, the ego is strengthened, which is a lasting benefit for future performances. The self-image is constantly being fed information in a conscious and unconscious manner. Self-talk or internal dialogue is an ongoing phenomenon. Hypnosis is a very valuable tool to aid in programming the mind in a positive way.

Building Confidence

After ego strengthening, athletes can again use hypnosis to help increase inner strength (self-confidence). By eliminating some of the detractors to being confident and then providing uplifting scenarios to work on, hypnosis helps sports performers to be more positive about themselves and their abilities instead of focusing on the negative.

Types of Hypnosis and Their Effectiveness

The two general types of hypnosis that are commonly used with sports performers are *hetero-hypnosis* and *self-hypnosis*. Hetero-hypnosis is facilitated by a hypnotizer, while self-hypnosis occurs when a person enters a trance without the help of another person. People respond to hypnosis in many different ways, and athletes are no different. With these thoughts in mind, most professionals who have used hypnosis with sports performers begin with hetero-hypnosis (to determine how suggestible a subject will be) and then eventually train the athlete to use self-hypnosis. This is ideal because self-hypnosis allows the use of hypnosis by the individual instead of waiting for the hypnotist to be available. It should be clear that hypnosis may not be the answer for all psychological issues in sports performers. It is also of great importance that hypnosis be used by properly trained and credentialed professionals only.

—Keith Henschen and Richard Gordin

Further Readings

Entry Citation:

Henschen, Keith, and Richard Gordin. "Hypnosis and Sport Performance." *Encyclopedia of Sports Medicine*. 2010. SAGE Publications. 15 Mar. 2011. <http://www.sage-ereference.com/sportsmedicine/Article_n258.html>.



© SAGE Publications, Inc.