**The Difference Between Meditation and Hypnosis**

**What’s the Difference Between Meditation and Hypnosis?**

**Learn how meditation differs from hypnosis**



"What's the difference between meditation and hypnosis?" I have been asked this question a thousand times.

But it's a fair question. Both meditation and hypnosis require a certain kind of focus of mind - often (but not always) purposefully directed. I have a great deal of experience using hypnosis, but less so with meditation, so the differences I cite here are my personal opinions. I welcome and encourage any meditative types to please comment if you feel I've missed anything.

First, let's get some kind of definition of hypnosis.

**A secret of hypnosis**

People will often 'sell' hypnosis as just a 'state of deep relaxation'. This doesn't really make much sense, though. Hypnosis *can* be relaxed (and this is often how we use it therapeutically), but really it's any state of mind that makes us:

* More disassociated.
* More focussed.
* More suggestible.

When people are experiencing a horribly traumatic experience, they become infinitely more suggestible. I've worked with people who were so traumatized that, even years later, they still respond to environmental 'post-hypnotic suggestions' (just from a 30-second traumatic experience) which take them right back to the original trauma. For instance, a war-weary veteran whose heart pounds every time he hears a car backfiring, or a driver who feels anxious whenever she passes the corner where she had that accident. This is a pure hypnotic phenomenon, but not relaxation at all.

And what's more, all emotions are, to a greater or lesser extent, hypnotic.

**Emotional hypnosis**

That's right - emotion is hypnotic. Ever been in lust? Love? A rage? Think about how focussed and suggestible (and disassociated) you become in these states.

Anger is very hypnotic - it focuses our attention right down and makes us suggestible. And, of course, depression is a trance-like focus. All these states are hypnotic, which is why they are so amenable to hypnotic treatment.

Anyone who can make you more emotional will also be making you more suggestible. When cults (or politicians) want to influence people's belief systems, they will try to raise the emotional pitch. And such charismatic people are naturally more hypnotic.

Really, all therapists use hypnosis to some degree (even if they are ignorant of this). If a counsellor asks you to direct your attention to a recent break-up or the pain of your childhood, they are encouraging disassociation from the here and now (which can be a feature of hypnotic trance). And the state of flow, or being 'in the zone', is also very focussing and therefore shares similarities with relaxed therapeutic hypnosis.

So my point is, hypnosis isn't 'just a state of relaxation' as you might read on a million hypnotherapists' advertising blurbs. It's actually much more interesting than that.

So what about meditation?

**Meditation *v.* hypnosis; alcohol and wine**

Just like hypnosis, meditation may have great benefits (1), but (I would suspect) it can also have drawbacks if used unwisely. I'm thinking here of the woman who meditated up to 12 hours a day and began to find she could no longer cope with some of life's practicalities. It's not always a question of 'more is better'; sometimes more is just more and may even be harmful. Taking a hundred painkillers is most certainly not better than taking one.

Hypnosis, used purposefully, will generally have a very specific psychological (and therefore behavioural) aim. We hypnotize people to help them engage in the kinds of thoughts, feelings, and actions that will stop them being depressed or drinking heavily or being traumatized or phobic. We use hypnosis to help them switch off pain or maximize their motivation in sports. Meditation may have, as a 'by-product', the effect of making us calmer day-to-day, but it's not usually used to stop someone smoking or to treat a specific phobia.

Likewise, clinical hypnosis, whilst wonderful for 'just relaxing', isn't generally used with the sole intention of helping someone achieve an 'empty' mind or objective 'mindfulness' - although we can certainly use hypnosis for this effect very well.

So one difference between hypnosis and meditation is for what purpose they are used.

Ultimately, asking what the difference is between hypnosis and meditation is a little like asking what the difference is between alcohol and wine. Meditation may be a very specific, specialized use of a type of hypnotic state, often as part of a wider 'spiritual system'. The most famous 'meditater' in history was, of course, Siddhārtha Gautama - otherwise known as the 'awakened one' or the Buddha. His followers believed he had attained enlightenment through meditation. However, the words 'meditation' and 'hypnosis' are much more recent inventions.

One aspect of the Buddha's 'awakening' was a perception of the connectedness of all things beneath deceptive appearances. 'Meditation' and 'hypnosis' are just words and could sometimes mean exactly the same thing. Some hypnotic states could be more like quiet meditative states, and I'm sure some people who meditate experience profoundly hypnotic imagery sometimes.

**Hypnosis and meditation can both make you happier**

I have seen the judicious use of hypnosis change lives by helping people rid themselves of unwanted patterns of thought and emotional chaos. And there is also some research that regular meditation or self-hypnosis can make us happier (1).

We use hypnosis to help people detach from destructive emotions and calmly begin to see wider and happier possibilities (such as feeling calmer around spiders!). One meditation technique, that of 'mindfulness', seeks the same result as the person meditating seeks to name his or her feelings whilst not disentangling themselves from them. In this way, meditation can help people.

Hypnosis used therapeutically will often focus on helping someone relax around memories of the past or prepare to feel better and act differently in the future. Meditation, as I understand it, is often an attempt to be absolutely in the present. But again, people in hypnosis will often report feeling totally focussed in the now.

So the question, "What is the difference between hypnosis and meditation?" is simple, but the answer is a little more in-depth.