Science of suggestion: Why are some people more susceptible to hypnosis than others?

Today hypnotherapy is used to provide therapeutic remedy for depression, pain, substance use disorders, and certain traumas, uses that are supported to a certain extent by research evidence. But many still consider hypnosis more of a cheap magician’s trick than legitimate clinical medicine.

Perhaps this is because very few of us are easily hypnotized: Only about 10 percent of the population seems to respond well to it. Researchers and clinicians tend to use one of two scales to measure an individual's susceptibility: the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale, typically used on individuals, and the Harvard Group Scale, which is used on groups primarily to identify potential subjects for research.

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How hypnotizable a person is may have a genetic component, according to twin studies. And yet, concrete insights into what separates the hypnotizable from the rest of us are scarce. Research from the 1980s suggests a facility for becoming “absorbed” in a task, such as reading or a theater performance, might make a person more susceptible to hypnosis. Others have found a correlation between hypnotizability and one’s tendency toward dissociation, a mental process of disconnecting from one’s thoughts, feelings, and memories that can develop as a defense mechanism to trauma.

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