

HYPNOTISM FOR MEDICAL AND DENTAL PRACTITIONERS

by A. A. MASON
M.B., B.S.

WITH CHAPTERS ON
HYPNOSIS IN DENTAL SURGERY
AND OBSTETRICS

by K. DAWSON WATTS
F.D.S.R.C.S.(ED.)

and S. D. PERCHARD
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INTRODUCTION BY PROFESSOR
ALEXANDER KENNEDY

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PREFACE

BY

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ALTHOUGH ITS HISTORY EXTENDS BACK ALMOST TO THE EARLIEST written records hypnotism remains one of the outstanding unsolved problems of Science. A great deal of descriptive knowledge is now available on its phenomena and on its application to the treatment of functional nervous disorders. Yet in spite of an enormous theoretical literature, no unifying hypothesis has yet emerged which satisfactorily explains how it works in terms of brain and mind. There is abundant proof that it is not dependent for its induction on abnormalities of brain structure, for it is seen at its best for purposes of study in physically and mentally healthy subjects at the prime of life. It can be presumed to be a by-product of useful nervous and mental activity for it has characteristics in common with both healthy and abnormal adaptive mechanisms. Except that for practical purposes the human mind exists only in the presence of a living brain, hypnosis is a phenomenon of mind alone—of the way the healthy brain is used. Thus, since it offers a method of influencing mental activity with some degree of uniformity, it is an obvious starting-point, one of many, for the study of both normal and abnormal psychology.

The absence of detailed knowledge of how hypnotism works in terms of nervous transmission is no obstacle to its empirical use in the hands of medical psychologists in the treatment of illness. Its place would indeed be regarded now as secure in the treatment of a limited number of conditions had it not become discredited by excessive claims and the introduction by some of its more flamboyant advocates of the concept of the power of one individual over another, even at a distance, and of other occult

explanations which have given more personal satisfaction to their inventors than to those in search of a scientific explanation. Hypnosis is of particular relevance to man's fight against disease in that it allows a direct influence by means of the spoken word over bodily functions such as the mechanisms and secretions of the alimentary canal. Under hypnosis, the mechanisms of attention can be altered in such a way that the perception of pain or appreciation of the individual's surroundings may, while they reach the nervous system, be held from reaching consciousness. If chemical anaesthesia had not been invented hypnosis would still be the most effective analgesic and it is still useful in childbirth, for instance, where the selective absence of pain with preservation of other sensations is desirable. In that a physical response can occur to a purely sensory experience, the phenomena of hypnotism resemble those of the conditioned reflex. The importance of this is that hypnosis may prove to be a valuable tool in research on the influence of mind on the detailed behaviour of the body. It is already a weapon of some importance in combating the psychosomatic diseases so frequent in highly civilised populations.

The practical use of combustion long preceded the discovery of oxygen and even during the use of the fallacious phlogiston theory the control of the process of combustion made practical advances. Cosmic measurements and predictions were made before relativity arrived to question the basis of measurement. That the study of hypnosis, like much of our present-day psychology, is still in the stage of limited, tentative and even wild theorisation which precedes scientific clarification, does not mean that we must wait upon this to accept its benefits. Psychological treatment as we know it today had its origin with the arrival in Paris of Anton Mesmer and the impact of his methods upon a group of enquiring minds who were shaping the course of many fields of science. The first commission of enquiry, that of 1784, into animal magnetism, the hypothetical background of Mesmer's treatment, included Lavoisier, Benjamin Franklin, Bailly and the ingenious Dr. Guillotin.

Few Medical men fail to become interested in hypnosis if they have the opportunity of seeing it in use. It is now almost a

PREFACE

recognisable stage in the development of a medical student and his impressions of it, illogically, often influence his attitude to Psychological Medicine as a whole. It is to be hoped that, as recommended by the Sub-Committee of the British Medical Association of 1955, some knowledge and experience of hypnosis will be generally accepted as a part of the medical curriculum. Individual tuition in hypnosis for all medical men who wish it is not yet fully available, although courses at which the subject is presented in a scientific and practical way are regularly organised at some centres. In spite of the profusion of books on hypnosis, however, few succeed in conveying with success the best ways to adapt its techniques to each individual patient according to his personality and attitudes toward it.

Dr. Mason's approach has been to eliminate a great deal of the oft-repeated historical and theoretical material in favour of a consideration of the immediate needs of the patient. That he has been able to do this is due to his very full experience of the method. Dr. Mason was himself responsible for an important break-through in our knowledge of the uses of hypnosis with his work in the rare disease, congenital ichthyosis. It had not until then been thought that a constitutionally determined abnormality of the skin with strong evidence of inheritance would respond to hypnotic suggestion. Since the publication of this work and of his later experience with other skin diseases, interest in hypnosis at dermatological clinics has not only increased, but appears to have justified itself in that in a proportion of cases results are quite dramatic. The combination of a sound technique in hypnosis with an enquiring mind is perhaps made less likely by the didactic approach which is often necessary if the technique is to succeed, but Dr. Mason has been able to reconcile these qualities in his own approach to the subject. For this reason this book, based on his personal work, may prove especially useful to those who wish to gain a practical acquaintance with hypnosis and at the same time to think of it both as a striking method of treatment and a challenging scientific problem of brain and mind.

ALEXANDER KENNEDY

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