

Peter NAISH (Psychologist) - UK
ESH Board Member

Hypnosis, Psychosis and the Consciousness Conundrum

Hypnosis is often referred to as “an altered state of consciousness”, but does that tell us anything? Ignoring for a moment that the description fails to tell us in what way consciousness is altered, we are still left with two significant problems. First, we are a long way from understanding what makes us conscious, and second, it is far from easy to decide what constitutes consciousness. For example, it is clearly more than simply the ability to respond to stimuli, because even simple organisms can do that.

People using hypnosis clinically might respond, “Well, hypnosis works, and that is all I need to know.” However, we should never stop looking for answers; for one thing, if we knew more about it we may be able to make hypnosis work even better. One of the ways of increasing our understanding of mental processes has been to examine cases where the processes have ceased to function correctly. In the case of consciousness we can easily find an example: the psychoses. If a patient is conscious of a voice when there is no physical sound present, then consciousness mechanisms are malfunctioning. The same can be said of a patient with posttraumatic stress disorder, when they have the compelling experience of being back in their trauma. It must even apply to a hypnotised person who “sees” someone sitting in an empty chair. Is a “hypnotic high” really like a schizophrenic or PTSD patient? Apart from the fact that hypnosis can be terminated at will, it turns out that these three examples have a great deal in common. Consequently, each might tell us something about the other, and all three may help us to understand consciousness itself a little better.