

Use of the forensic hypnosis techniques as a memory retrieval method

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A number of methods can be used in hypnotic memory retrieval. Since a positive relationship is a prerequisite for success, it is important to develop rapport with the subject at the onset. A helping and supportive attitude is, generally, appreciated by a forensic hypnotist. However, when working with certain personality types, a different approach may be more effective. For instance, a passive-dependent man may only be able to recall details of an event when he is strongly directed to so by the hypnotist.

Contextual positioning refers to aiding the subject to perceive externally the peripheral circumstances of time, place, person, and other conditions as they existed at the time the situation to be retrieved had originally occurred.

Recalling the context variables surrounding an event enhances memory.

These involve the time of day, temperature, physical characteristics of the surroundings, how the subject felt, preceding events, and so on. Additionally, Bower (1981) has found that restoration of the original mood that accompanied an event helps in the subsequent recall of the event. These set the stage for the original experience and assist greater recollection of information.

When beginning a forensic hypnosis interview, it is best to follow a non-directive free-recall approach while also inquiring for more specific information introduced as the interview progresses. Thus, the hypnotist starts with a broad outline and then narrows down to greater detail. The encouragement of imagery not only assists in contextual positioning but also proves to be of great use in helping the subject to retrieve details of the particular circumstances that are being sought. Instructions to the

hypnotized subject, such as, look around and describe what you see and hear, can be facilitative.

Another important technique is time regression, sometimes called age regression. In this process, the subject re-experiences an event by mentally returning to it. Nonetheless, it doesn't guarantee accuracy, as a reconstructed memory can result in confabulation and fantasy. Moreover, since hypnosis is reserved as the last resort, after several traditional techniques have been tried, it is not unusual for an interview to be conducted many months after an original event occurred. Revivification is the phenomenon of re-experiencing or re-living of the effect attached to a traumatic incident. It is related to regression but is fundamentally different. Memory regression may occur without revivification and vice versa; it is best if both can be facilitated simultaneously. Furthermore, since the retrieval of repressed emotions can cause disruption to an individual's emotional equilibrium, the forensic hypnotist should be prepared to confront them and help the subject cope with any undue psychological expressions that may arise if he experiences any trauma. Therefore, it is really essential that hypnotists be qualified mental health professionals with experience in the assessment and treatment of emotional problems. Police officers, attorneys, and other laymen do not possess these qualifications.

The affect bridge is another technique that is helpful in helping the subject trace current feelings back to their origins (Watkins, 1971). There is nothing surprising in the fact that an individual has certain emotions that are not consciously in the present attached to their past origins, and the affect

bridge helps in establishing such connections. When affect is attached to memory, more vivid, veridical, and greater amounts of information can be elicited. Verbal encouragement and support are related useful methods. Saying things like you're safe now, and it's all right to tell me what happened is always a good idea. Another technique that can be employed on the subject is ideomotor signals and automatic writing. They circumvent the defences against traumatic pain that an individual tends to go through (Gravitz, 1985a).

Free association under hypnosis can also be efficacious in leading the subject from one detail to another, from relatively superficial and less important to deeper and more important information. Various other techniques can also be applied. Many of them are metaphorically modelled after the functions of a camera lens. A subject can be asked to zoom onto a portion of a scene, such as face or vehicle, or to widen the angle of the image. Action can be slowed down or rolled back accordingly. Volume of sound, such as spoken words, can be turned up and made more audible, while the lighting of a scene can be made brighter. This, in turn, can reduce the distracting peripheral noise. The use of metaphors such as stopping the tape and rolling back the action does not imply that this is the manner in which memory is organized. Since all memory is inherently reconstructed, it is distorted and inaccurate. Yet, certain subjects tend to feel more secure and consequently do better in their recall if there is a distance between themselves and the recollection of a traumatic event. For such people, asking them to visualize

the incident unfolding on a television or cinema screen can help them do better.

Recollection can also be enhanced without hypnosis; encouragement, personal needs, free association, conscious effort, and prolonged concentration can all help in retrieving forgotten experiences (Pettinati, 1988).

Therapeutic serendipidity

Although forensic hypnosis is not intended to be a therapeutic method, the professionals using such techniques must be capable of intervening and managing the unexpected and undue emotional rest that may occur because hypnosis can serve as a powerful tool for accessing the repressed recollections and feelings of a victim or witness (Putnam, 1992). Requiring that the hypnotist be a qualified mental health professional reduces the risk and brings those emotions to the surface that had been psychologically controlled prior to the interview with possibly detrimental effects on the subject's well-being. An example follows:

A 38-year-old state trooper was attending a seminar with a group of law enforcement officers, designed to acquaint them with the applications of hypnosis in their work within the context of the model used by federal agencies (Gravitz, Ault, Gelles, & Hibler, 1992). The participants, however, were not learning how to administer hypnosis but instead how to work with the psychological professional who did. While seeking to demonstrate the induction process, the course leader who was a clinical psychologist asked

for a volunteer from the audience, and the trooper stepped up. The trooper proved to be a good subject, and induction proceeded calmly. The psychologist then sought only to rekindle the memory of a prior experience and asked the hypnotized trooper to go back to an earlier time that was important to you. After a brief hiatus, the subject began to show overt signs of distress, including tears, sobbing, clenching of both fists, and overall bodily tension. When he received a radio message directing him to assist with the management of an automobile accident, he was on routine patrol in his vehicle on a state highway. Upon arriving at the scene, he found a passenger car on fire and was informed by onlookers that the driver of the vehicle was unconscious and unable to exit. When the officer hurried to the car to remove the driver, he discovered that the doors were either jammed or locked and could not be opened.

Therefore, he had to watch helplessly and in horror as the vehicle was consumed by the fire and the passenger burned to death. As per evidence, the subject repressed the memory and effect of that situation, for over the following years he had no conscious recollection of it. But it was only when he was hypnotized in the relative security of a classroom and in the presence of a psychologist that he was able to express the extreme frustration, fear, and guilt feelings that he had had at the time of the original experience. Once the demonstration was terminated, the subject was provided with the private opportunity to discuss his reactions at the scene of the fatal accident. He was also referred to the Employee Assistance Program of his unit for further counselling.