
Utilising Hypnosis with Children

A girl returns from a dog phobia

Robert McNeilly



AN ENHANCED EBOOK

Dedication

*This book is offered as a humble gesture of appreciation of the continuation of
Milton Erickson's heritage into the future.*

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Introduction

Many clinicians say that they are wary of working with children. I have found that they are generally easier than adults.

Children, especially younger children, have a much more flexible relationship with “reality” than us sensible, logical, certain, adults. As we “mature” we find ourselves learning to narrow our experience so we can navigate the social environment, know how the world “really” is, and expect it to be consistent. Children can have a different name from one moment or game to the next. They can be Superman, Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, or a kitten, a lion, an airplane! If we, as adults, attempt such transformations, there is a predictable reluctance, or at least a required caveat that we know that we are “only” pretending. We know what our name “really” is.

Hypnosis has been associated with weird company through the ages: with magic and its assumption of power over a helpless victim, with sorcery and its assumption that the words of the spell have power over the helpless victim, with anaesthetics with its association with sleep, unconsciousness and the powerlessness of the anaesthetised patient.

I have been strongly influenced by Milton Erickson’s assumption of hypnosis as an extension of what he called “the common everyday trance”, where anyone can focus and become absorbed in reading a book, watching a movie, looking out the window daydreaming. If we observe anyone, including ourselves, in such a situation, we can notice a constellation of physiological changes. This is a predictable slowing and deepening of breathing, a smoothing out of facial muscles, a relative stillness in the body, a slowing of blinking, to name a few.

When we invite a client to approach hypnosis as an extension of a normal human experience, much of the fear about weirdness is avoided, and a more natural exploration of options, real and imagined, can begin.

Erickson also emphasized the relational aspect of hypnosis, as a special communication between the patient and the therapist. This relational aspect is only now being recognised as an essential component of effective healing, more influential than whatever technique the therapist is using - whatever theory might be informing the session.

From this perspective we can observe that when we say that hypnosis is happening, we can notice an experience where there is focus, absorption leading to predictable physiological changes. By starting from this way of observing, we can describe a phenomenon and avoid the arguments about what hypnosis “really” is, and put our attention on how we can assist someone to focus on a useful experience, encourage them to find their own way of becoming as absorbed as they need to be, and enhance physiological changes by ratifying those we can observe, as with those changes we see in the common everyday trance.

From this starting place, we can also avoid any perceived need to test a client’s hypnotisability since anyone can focus on something, can become absorbed in their own way. Instead of testing them, we can adapt our approach to respect each individual client’s unique experience.

Hypnosis can then be experienced as being natural, avoiding all the control fears, and predictably encourages a restoring of self trust, self respect, and a reconnecting with the client’s own innate resourcefulness.

Because we are respectfully joining with the individual client’s experience and not imposing our own agenda, a solidly respectful therapeutic alliance is generated.

I like to begin a session with a child by exploring what they like to do. This helps to create a more natural relationship than the formal expert therapist with the seemingly “de-

fective” client. Children are then more likely to feel at home with us, and thus more willing to play and explore with us.

Also, finding what a child likes to do such as play a computer game, watch a favorite TV programme or play with their toys, opens a world where resources are abundant.

Exploring what resource or experience might be missing for each individual child in their problem gives a clearer direction to the conversation, so they can then create their own solution by connecting with this missing resource or experience. If we both know what we are looking for, it is much more likely that we will find it.

I find that asking about what might be wrong leads to a search for problems to be fixed by an expert in a mood of pathologising which can diminish the expectancy and autonomy of the client. Exploring what might be missing or overlooked by the client, in contrast, leads to a search with the client as expert in their own experience in a mood of normalising which can enhance their sense of expectancy and autonomy.

Because children have an active imagination, they can easily become focused and absorbed, which are the cornerstones of any hypnotic experience. A highly textured experience of being immersed in what each individual child likes to do can then be created hypnotically, so they can connect strongly and easily with whatever resource is missing in their problem, and allow their own solution to emerge naturally.

Sometimes we can join a child in an experience they are already immersed in such as a TV show, a book, a game or anything where they show an ability to focus and become absorbed.

In the session which is the core of this book, an eleven year old girl's experience of reading a book "Pigs Might Fly" allowed a starting place for focus and absorption and by imagining that we could become part of the story, we could explore, together, ways out of her problem with dogs, and allow a natural emergence of a solution within the session, and one that persisted as permanent.

Part of the plot of the book was about a girl who had become lost in the "wrong land" and was going to find her way home. I offered the idea that the client could imagine that the girl in the book could have had a problem with dogs in this "wrong land" but when she returned home, the problem could be left back in that "wrong land".

As the conversation evolved, she was able to imagine that the girl in the story had the same name as she did, and so gradually she was able to connect the imagined experience with her personal experience.

We explored what she liked to do; maths, particularly fractions and running at her own pace. This established a connection with her own unique abilities which could then be utilised in the session.

I asked her to imagine she was running and to let me know when she was half way, three quarters of the way, etc., and to find her own way back home at her own pace. Since both of these ideas were familiar to her, she could easily translate them into her imagined experience, and then to her own solution as it emerged naturally.

About a month after this session of thirty minutes or so, she met two dogs down the street. She liked one, but not the other and had no fear of either of them. Several months later she had a "beautiful" dog of her own, and continues to enjoy him after more than a decade.

The hypnosis session



A transcript

R: How old are you?

H: 11.

R 11, oh right. OK What grade are you in school?

H 5.

R. Oh right. What do you like about it?

H. Mm - everything.

R. Everything! Really. Wow. Is there anything that you like specially? Anything that you like even more than everything?

H. Maths and sport.

R. Maths and sport. That's an interesting combination. What sport do you like?

H. Umm ... Running and games.

R. Oh yeh. Are you a fast runner?

H. Mmm ... sort of.

R. Sort of. Do you like running short distances or long distances?

H. Long.

R. Ah ha. What sort of long distances do you like?

H 800 metres.

R. Oh really? My goodness. When I was your age I could run 100 meters, but 800 meters? Don't you get tired towards the end of it?

H. Yes.

R. How do you keep going?

H. Mmm. I just do

R. You just do.

H. Start off slowly at the start.

R. Start of slowly and then ...

H. Keep going slowly.

R. You keep going slowly ... and how do you go running with other people? Do you ever win races or do you ...?

H. We usually time each other.

R. Oh yeh. So you're really trying to run against your time.
Not trying to compete with someone else.

H. [nods]

R. Isn't that fantastic? Great, and your mum said that you'd
like to be less frightened of dogs than you are, yeh?

H. [nods]

R. How come? How come it's a problem to you?

H. I don't know, they're just scary.

R. They scare you? Cats OK?

H. Yep.

R. You don't mind cats?

H. Uh huh.

R. Kangaroos?

H I like them.

R. Wallabies?

H. Yep.

R. Wombats?

H. Yep?

R. Emus?

H. Yep.

R. You like emus? I'm scared of emus. After we've helped you
with dogs, maybe you can help me with emus. I'm very scared
of them. Have you ever been near an emu and they kind of
look at you like that?

H Mm [smiles]

R. They give you such a funny look. So - how long have you
been scared of dogs?

H. For ever.

R. For ever. All right, so you don't have a dog?

H [shakes her head]

R. Any neighbors have dogs?

H. Mm yes.

R. Yes, so you keep away from them, I guess. So what do you
think would be different if you weren't so scared of dogs?
What would be different for you?

H I don't know, I'd just be able to pat them, but I don't like
them.

R. Don't like what?

H. Patting them, being near them.

R. No. There's something you do't like about that. What is it?

H I don't know, I just feel like they are going to hurt me.

R. Oh ... so it would be nice to be able to pat them like you pat a cat or ... have you ever patted a wallaby or a kangaroo?

H. Don't think so.

R. They're very soft to pat. They've got softer fur even than a cat. They are fun to pat if you get a chance to, that would be really nice, and um ... what do you know about hypnosis, because you probably know that your mum is learning about hypnosis?

H I don't know much.

R. Well, a lot of people say a lot of silly things about hypnosis, but it's a bit like, you know when you were reading your book out there, you can ... er ... get really interested in reading, and you could even imagine that the things you are reading about are actually happening. You kind of get into the story, and there may be some other things that can go on around you, like there may be some cars outside, some kids next door, or the wind might blow or something, and you don't pay attention to that because you're enjoying the book; you're reading the book; you're concentrating on it. Do you know what I mean?

H [nods]

R. Well hypnosis is a bit like that. It's a bit like just finding a way of concentrating on something ... and then when you concentrate on that, after a while you ... start to ... not need to

think about other things, you don't need to be concerned about other noises or other people around. Probably when you were reading, you knew that she was over in the other part of the room, but some of the time you didn't pay attention to that ... because you were so busy reading, and often when someone starts to go into hypnosis, they begin to feel ... rather pleasantly comfortable ... be kind of relaxed ... and ... do you know what it's like when you pat a cat, and sometimes you pat the cat and it kind of settles and it looks like it ... looks really cozy?

H. Mmm.

R. Well for some people going into hypnosis, it feels a bit like that. They can settle into something and feel safe and cozy. Do you know what I mean?

H. Mmm.

R. And I wonder if you can begin to feel anything like that beginning to happening to you now.

H. Yes

R. Good. So ... you could just let that continue. There's nothing you need to do really. You don't need to really listen to me; you don't need to give any particular attention to what I'm saying; if you wanted to, you could even close your eyes.

H [closes eyes]

R. And just let your mind think about something pleasant, something you could enjoy. Maybe remembering what it was like reading that book ... and you're reading "Pigs could Fly"?

H [nods]

R. What was happening when you were reading that book? When you ... can you just leave your eyes closed for a while and tell me ... what you are reading about; what's going on in that book.

H. She's in the wrong land.

R. She's in the wrong land. Oh dear ... and is that funny, or is that scary, or what is that ... what is that?

H. She wants to get back home and is looking for a way back home.

R. Ah, right, and do you think she's going to find a way back home?

H. Yes.

R. Uh huh, and now that she's in the wrong land, what's her name?

H. Rachael

R. Rachael. Now that Rachel is in the wrong land how is she feeling? Is she feeling sad or scared, or ...

H scared.

R. Scared. Oh right. OK. So, how do you think she is going to get back into the right land, get back home?

H. Somebody else has been there. They call them outsiders.

R. Oh yes.

H. And she's trying to go back into how that boy got back into his time.

R. All right, so she's going to follow that somehow?

H. Yes.

R. Like a path through time?

H. Yes.

R. And you haven't read how she's going to do that yet, but you can enjoy knowing that she's going to find a way back and she'll find a path and she'll get back home and she'll feel ... How do you think she'll feel when she's got back home?

H. Happy.

R. Happy. Yes, now I wonder if we could, if you could imagine ... that we could have another story ... and this story won't be about Rachael. This story is going to be about someone called Helen. Could you go along with me and pretend that we're going to have a story about someone called Helen? ... and Helen lives normally in a place where there are cats and kangaroos and wallabies and ... er ... wombats, and all kinds of lovely furry things that she'd love to pat ... and she's got into um the

wrong land. She's got into the wrong place ... and she's scared where she is ... because she doesn't want to be there. She wants to come back home ... and when she gets back home, she's going to feel really happy to be back home ... and something interesting is going to be there when she gets back home. Something that she didn't know that she was going to like, because when she was in the land she was in that was the wrong land ... she was scared ... but when she gets back home, she's going to feel happy. Now she hasn't got back to that happy place that she knows is home yet. She's got to find her way there ... and what's going to be really interesting for this girl called Helen is that when she gets back there, there's going to be a dog there ... and that dog is going to be very friendly ... and it will seem strange to Helen in the wrong land because she's scared there, but when she gets back home, that dog is going to be ... friendly, and it's going to have fur like a cat. It's going to have fur like a kangaroo; like a wallaby, and it's going to be very friendly and she's going to be happy to see it. Now she hasn't got back there yet. What do you think about that idea?

H. Exciting.

R. Huh? Exciting. Yes, ... so she's in the wrong land, and when she gets back to that place, she's going to be happy, she going to be excited. Now it's not going to be a 100 metres to get back. It's going to be something more like 800 metres ... and she might want to run back home, but she doesn't have to be in a hurry, does she? She can start off slowly. Can you imagine that Helen is starting to head back home and when she gets

home she's going to be happy and excited and that dog is going to be there? I wonder what it's going to look like. What do you think that dog is going to look like? We can tell this story because we are writing it as we go along, making it up as we go along. What do you think that dog is going to look like?

H. Brown and shaggy.

R. Brown and shaggy. Yes, ... is it going to be a big dog or a little dog?

H. A big one.

R. A big one. OK ... and do you know what that dog's name is going to be?

H. No.

R. No. Do you want me to tell you?

H. Yep.

R. I don't know. How about we make up a name together ... because we want it to be a name that when Helen sees it she's going to think ... "Oh! What a lovely dog!"; that she's going to really like this dog; she's going to really know that it's friendly. I wonder whether we could call the dog Brown shaggy friendly or we could call it Friendly shaggy brown, or we could call it Shaggy friendly brown. I don't know. Something like that. What do you think? Will we call it friendly, or will we call it all those names?

H. All of them.

R. OK. So we've got all of those names ... and we're going to have Shaggy friendly brown, and Brown friendly shaggy, and Friendly shaggy brown, all of those different names. It's going to be the same dog, and it's going to be large and brown and friendly ... and Helen's going to get back there and be excited and be happy to be back there. So can you watch her as she starts along that 800 metres ... as she starts on that ...?

H. Nods

R. OK ... and just let her start slowly. There's no hurry is there? She doesn't have to rush. How is she doing?

H. Good.

R. Yeh, good. Pretty soon she'll start to leave that scary feeling behind her back in the wrong land and as she gets closer and closer to home, she can feel that happiness and that excitement. I don't know when she'll start to feel the happiness and the excitement and when she'll stop feeling the fear and the scary feeling. [Pause] How far along the 800 meters has she gone so far?

H. Almost half way.

R. Almost half way. Right. She's really a fast runner, isn't she? Make sure she doesn't go too quickly because we want her to really look forward to getting home and seeing that friendly shaggy brown ... that big beautiful lovely dog that's going to be there ... and as she's continuing, is she starting to feel a bit of

that excitement yet? Mm hum. Is she starting to feel some of that happiness yet? OK. So how far along the 800 metres is she now?

H. She's half way.

R. She's half way. Wow! That's fantastic. So she can just take her time, she doesn't have to hurry ... and I wonder what she's feeling thinking that she's left that scary feeling back in that wrong land. What's it feel for Helen to think "Oh, that scary feeling is back there"? ... What's it like for her?

H. Um ... good.

R. Mmm. It is good, isn't it? OK. So let her continue running and let me know when she's got to the $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way home. Must be coming up to $\frac{3}{4}$. Mmm? Is she getting close to that?

H [nods]

R. Uh huh ... and what's she doing now?

H. She's still there.

R. Yeh. Still there. Yeh ... and I wonder if when she gets back home, if you could imagine, just imagine, that you are Helen and pretend that you are Helen. Could you do that? ... and pretend that when Helen gets home that you are going to be able to feel what it's like for her to feel so happy and so excited about that big brown shaggy dog, and it might even be that when you get back, when she gets back, you could open your

eyes and imagine that there's a dog there. Would that be fun to do?

H [nods]

R. OK. So is she nearly, nearly back home yet?

H [nods]

R. How close to home is she?

H $\frac{3}{4}$

R $\frac{3}{4}$ already. Wow. She's really moving along, isn't she? Only 200 metres to go. Do you know what $\frac{7}{8}$ of that will be? I know that you like maths. Have you done ...

H. Fractions.

R. Fractions?

H. Mmm

R. What would $\frac{7}{8}$ be?

H [pause] 100

R. Yeh. 100 to go. Exactly. So let me know when she gets to $\frac{7}{8}$... when she's only got 100 to go.

H [pause] She's there.

R. She's there. Wow ... and as she looks to that last 100 metres, maybe she can see a little dog ... and that little dog ... it's

actually not a little dog but from 100 meters it looks small. Is she starting to feel happy about that and excited about that? OK ... and let me know when she's got to 50 metres to go ... because as she's traveling that last little while, the dog looks bigger and she's feeling even happier and even more excited. Has she got just 50 meters to go yet? Let me know when she's got 25 meters to go. She's getting pretty close to the finish, isn't she? How's she feeling? Pretty excited about getting back home out of that wrong land and back, back home with all the lovely furry creatures and that dog. OK so let me know when she gets to the end of the 800 meters. [pause] Is she nearly there?

H. She's there.

R. Mmm?

H. She's there.

R. She's there ... and just imagine that you are now Helen, and just imagine that you're going to open your eyes and that you can imagine that there's a dog there. You can pat it. How's that going to feel?

H. Good.

R. Yeh ... and what happens when you do that? Is that dog excited to see you?

H. Yes.

R. Is the dog happy to see you?

H. Yes

R. Yes ... and you're happy to see the dog? ... and you're happy to feel happy?

H. Yes.

R. Isn't that beautiful? [pause] Mmm ... and what is it like for you to know that that is what happened to Helen? What would it be like for you to know that that could also happen to you? Would that be fun?

H. Yes.

R. Yes. Do you know that sometimes dogs get very excited? Some dogs get so excited that they jump on you and they knock you over and ... they're a nuisance sometimes, dogs. Do your friends ever do that kind of thing? Do you have friends that get so excited that they jump on you and knock you over?

H. No.

R. You don't? I've got friends that do that to me sometimes. They get very playful, and my kids do that to me sometimes too. They jump on me, knock me over ... but it's important to know that some dogs get a bit excited and they want to lick you on the face. You just need to know that some dogs will lick you on the face and lick you on the toes or something ... dogs do that kind of thing. You don't have to let them lick you if you don't want to ... but they get excited and want to do that sort of thing sometimes. Is that OK for them to want to do that? So, what do think's happened since we've been talking?

H. Changes.

R. Changes. Yeh ... and are those changes OK? ... and how do you know that the changes that we've been imagining are actually going to really happen to you?

H. I feel different

R. You feel different. Can you tell me something about that feeling? How you feel different?

H. Feels like there's a thing, a blanket waved over the top of me.

R. Oh, right. That sounds very nice ... and it might even be that that blanket can be just like a magic carpet and all of the worries and the fears and the scary things can just get; jump back onto the magic carpet and go back to the wrong land because you don't need those scary things now, do you? So when you see a dog, I hope you're not going to be too happy and too excited. You're not going to go rushing up to every dog you see, are you? You're not going to be difficult, your mother is not going to have to bring you back here and say "I need some help with Helen, because every time she sees a dog she rushes up to it and pats it and wants to take it home. We've got 17 dogs at home and she's got another 50 god that she want to bring and she love dogs so much that she's driving me crazy. Please give her that scary feeling back." You don't think it's going to be like that?

H [shakes her head no]

R. You're going to be able to manage that? Well, ... I want to thank you for being willing to play along with me like that. It's nice to have a conversation with you, come back from the wrong land and see you looking forward to having a good time with dogs, and to know that sometimes they get a bit jumpy and you might need to push them. Do you know what I mean? ... but you don't need to be scared of them do you? They might need to be scared of you. Do you think? You might push them. You're not going to lick dogs on the face, though are you?

H [shakes her head no]

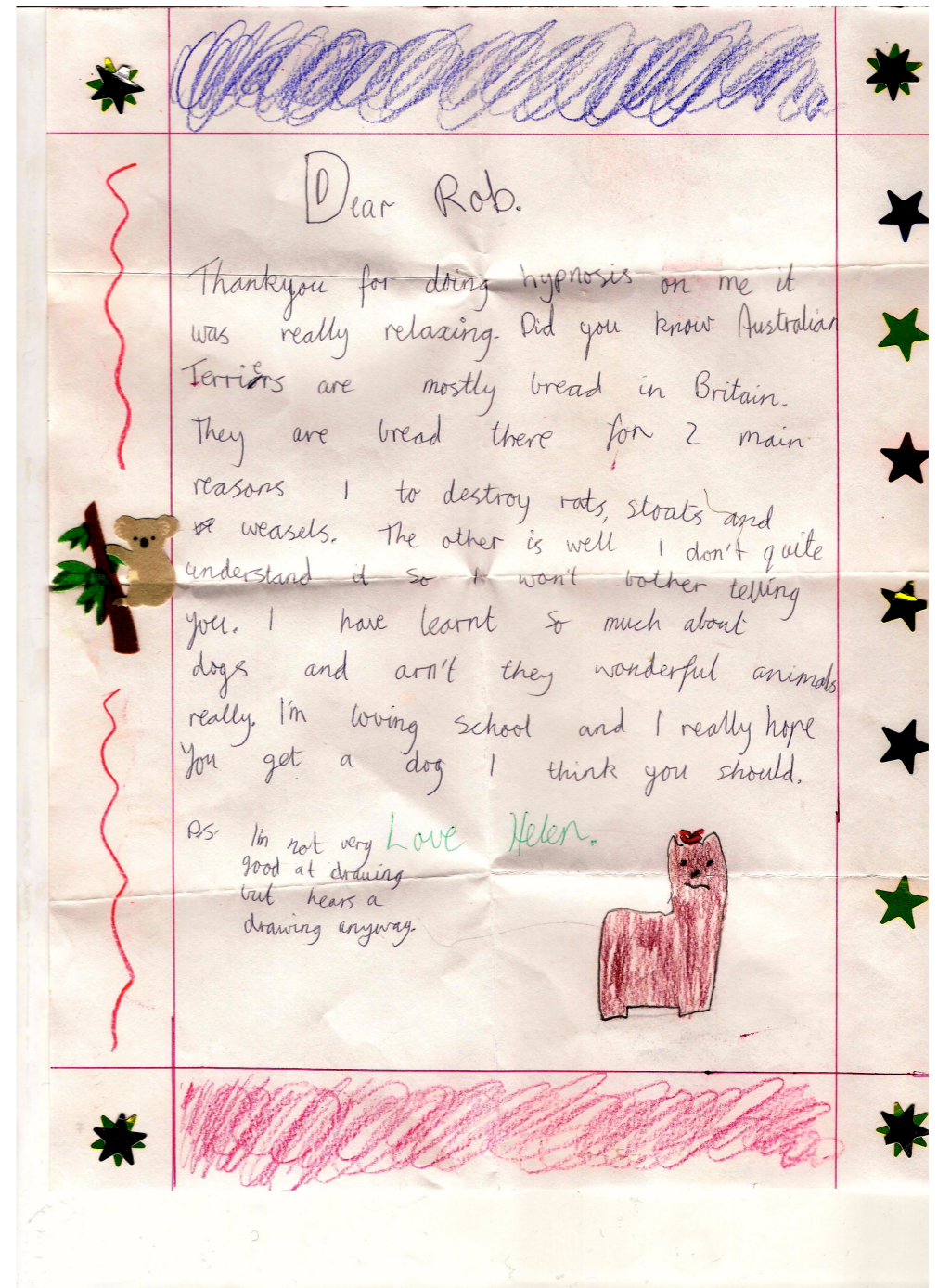
R. Good. If they want to lick you on the face, you just push them down ... Is there anything else that you want to, that you might want me to say before you open your eyes and ... [sighs] ... Are you ready to let your eyes open?

H. [opens eyes]

R. Do you know that's what we call hypnosis? It's a silly thing to call it, isn't it. I mean you're just using your imagination, having a good time. You've got a very good imagination. Mmm ... and it's good to know that you can use your imagination in ways that are helpful for you. I know that sometimes we get scared and we imagine that things are there and are going to scare us, but we can also use our imagination in a way that's helpful. It's great to know that you can have that choice. All right.

Follow up

This is a letter she sent to me several weeks after our session. I had asked her opinion about getting a dog myself as a way of increasing her authority and self trust.



Ten year follow up

Ten years later, this little girl, now a young woman still loves her dog.

Invitation

As you watch this demonstration and read the transcript, I invite you to notice your experience and speculate what you may have done differently.

In your own practice, would you be interested to:

Explore in detail what each individual child likes to do,

Comment on any useful physiological changes,

Wonder with them, what might be missing that if they had that, all would be well,

Invite them onto imagining that they are doing that activity, whatever it may be,

Look around within their experience for the missing experience,

Connect this experience with the problem area,

Invite them out of hypnosis,

Ask about what's different,

Thank them for trusting you to be part of their solution.

Thanks

I'm grateful to this little girl, now a young woman for her generosity in letting us see how she could use her creative imagination which had generated her fear of dogs and transform this fear into lasting appreciation and enjoyment.

Resources

Websites

www.cet.net.au

<http://globalmultiversity.com>

<http://robmcneilly.com>

Email

rob@cet.net.au



Other enhanced ebooks by Robert McNeilly

Utilisation in hypnosis - building on an Ericksonian approach

Hypnosis in psychosomatics - utilisation after Erickson

Listening for Solutions in Hypnosis - utilisation after Erickson

The Poetry of Therapy - Creating effectiveness after Erickson

Coaching for Solutions

Testimonials

There are all too few examples of experts demonstrating hypnotherapy with children. In this session Rob McNeilly MBBS artfully applies Ericksonian methods of utilization and metaphor to effect cure of a ... phobia. This video is highly recommended to practitioners of all persuasions who want to improve their clinical effectiveness.

Jeffrey K. Zeig, Ph.D.

Director

The Milton H. Erickson Foundation

3606 N 24th Street

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USA

"Dr. McNeilly nicely demonstrates the skilled use of hypnosis with a girl presenting the problem of a dog phobia. He illustrates well the art of utilization, first eliciting then incorporating the interests and the language of his client. Dr. McNeilly employs a simple but skilled intervention involving metaphor and multiple level communication for the benefit of his patient. This is a good video from which to learn important aspects of hypnotic approaches to treatment."

Dr. Michael D. Yapko, Author of Essentials of Hypnosis and Trancework

This is therapy at its simple, beautiful best. McNeilly quickly accesses client resources and utilises them empoweringly. To view this video is to see the essence of effective therapy.

George W Burns

Clinical Psychologist

Director MHEIWA

Author, Nature-Guided Therapy

This is a masterful demonstration of Ericksonian therapy. McNeilly's therapeutic interventions flow so smoothly that they may be seen by those unfamiliar with this approach as no more than a pleasant conversation. In spite of that, it's difficult for me to imagine squeezing more elements of the Ericksonian approach into a 25 minute session. I would recommend this video to anyone interested in studying Ericksonian hypnosis. In fact, I would recommend it to anyone interested in learning to do effective therapy.

Gary Schultheis, author "Brief Therapy Homework Planner"

Two themes kept coming to mind as I watched this video of Rob McNeilly at work on a young girl's dog fears. I was again impressed and inspired by the artistry and the elegance of McNeilly's masterful use of trance and metaphor. And I again pondered over what I call the "accountability questions" of the seemingly magical style of Ericksonian interventions.

On the artistry and elegance theme, this session shows the use of utilisation in the Ericksonian style with an 11 year old girl. McNeilly's matter of fact, naturalistic, conversational induction style is classically Ericksonian and truly irresistible. His ability to quickly engage and involve his subject in the joint work of the trance induction is exem-

plary. The small talk at the start is deceptively simple and yet everything is utilised. From his very first words McNeilly is laying the foundation for his later interventions. No interaction is wasted.

The level of focus, concentration, and care for the client, all demonstrate the exceptional quality of listening that McNeilly brings to his work. A light irreverent mood begins in the first few minutes and continues throughout the induction. The little girl is quickly entranced by McNeilly's playful delivery. The skillful use of metaphor, the way McNeilly links to existing skills and resources, and his repeated indirect suggestions are a joy to watch. Right from the start he is at work establishing new associations - cats, kangaroos, wallabies are the lovely furry things that can connect a safer feeling with the feared stimulus. From "orienting to trance" to his multilayered "post hypnotic suggestions" McNeilly is masterful. The latter are particularly note worthy. McNeilly does a kind of relapse prevention, and in this way at least partially addresses the notorious generalisation problem of moving from imaginal success to actual.

In summary this session is a beautiful illustration of the collaborative nature of Ericksonian hypnosis, by one of Australia's foremost exponents of the approach.

*Ivan Milton (December 1999)
Senior Psychologist
Maroondah Hospital*