

POSTHYPNOTIC AMNESIA

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Definition and Historical Context of Posthypnotic Amnesia

Posthypnotic amnesia (PHA) is a highly specialized cognitive phenomenon characterized by a subject's temporary or sustained inability to consciously retrieve memories of events, actions, or suggestions that occurred while they were immersed in a state of hypnotic trance. Fundamentally, this condition involves a disruption in the normal process of explicit memory retrieval, specifically targeting the episodic memories formed during the hypnotic session itself. While often perceived by the subject as true forgetting, PHA is generally understood by cognitive psychologists not as the erasure of stored information, but rather as a profound and temporary inhibition of access to those stored memories. Historically, the observation of this phenomenon was instrumental in establishing hypnosis as a unique area of psychological inquiry, dating back to the pioneering work of figures like Jean-Martin Charcot and Hippolyte Bernheim in the late nineteenth century, who noted that subjects frequently reported a complete lack of recollection immediately following profound trance states, even after executing complex instructions while hypnotized.

The study of PHA necessitates a crucial distinction between amnesia that is intentionally induced by hypnotic suggestion and amnesia that occurs spontaneously. In most clinical and experimental settings, PHA is a direct consequence of a command issued by the hypnotist while the subject is in the trance state. The subject is explicitly directed to forget everything that transpired until a highly specific retrieval cue is administered, such as a code word, a specific gesture, or a verbal phrase. This induced form of forgetting is remarkably reliable among individuals classified as highly hypnotizable, underscoring the deep influence of focused suggestion on conscious recall mechanisms. Conversely, spontaneous posthypnotic amnesia occurs without any prior instruction to forget; it is typically observed in individuals exhibiting extremely high levels of hypnotic responsiveness or those who naturally enter very deep somnambulistic trances. Analyzing these two forms--induced versus spontaneous--is essential for dissecting the underlying cognitive and neural pathways involved in memory blocking.

The significance of PHA extends far beyond simple anecdotal evidence; it serves as a powerful, controlled experimental tool for researchers investigating the nature of memory systems, dissociation, and the structure of consciousness. When a subject successfully executes a complex posthypnotic suggestion--an action commanded during hypnosis to be performed after the subject returns to normal wakefulness--yet maintains complete amnesia for the origin of that command, it demonstrates a compelling separation between the conscious awareness of the action and the memory of its instructional source. This profound dissociation between behavioral performance and explicit recall is central to many theoretical conceptualizations of hypnosis. Moreover, the characteristic ability of the subject to rapidly and fully restore memory access upon receiving the predetermined cue provides definitive evidence that the information was retained in memory storage all along, challenging notions of permanent loss and strongly supporting models focused on temporary retrieval blockade or functional impairment of access routes to specific episodic

content.

The Mechanism of Suggested Amnesia and Retrieval Cues

Suggested posthypnotic amnesia operates through a carefully constructed command structure designed to inhibit the conscious recall process upon waking. The hypnotist typically delivers a command such as, "When you wake up, you will have absolutely no memory of anything that happened in this room until I say the word 'recall'." This instruction acts as a powerful cognitive filter that remains active in the subject's mind even after the trance state has ended. The efficacy of this suggestion highlights the unique capacity of the hypnotic state to bypass normal critical faculties and establish deeply rooted psychological constraints on conscious behavior. The success rate of suggested amnesia is highly correlated with the depth of the hypnotic trance achieved and, more importantly, the subject's baseline level of hypnotic suggestibility, suggesting that it relies on a pre-existing neurological or psychological propensity for responsiveness to focused direction.

The function of the retrieval cue is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of suggested PHA. The cue, which can be auditory, visual, or kinesthetic, acts as a cognitive trigger that instantly dismantles the inhibitory barrier established by the initial suggestion. When the cue is administered, subjects frequently report an immediate flood of previously inaccessible memories, often experiencing a rapid shift from complete blankness to full, vivid recollection of the hypnotic events. This dramatic return of memory strongly supports the hypothesis that the memories were merely sequestered or inaccessible, rather than destroyed or repressed in the classical psychoanalytic sense. The speed and completeness of this retrieval mechanism provide critical support for theories positing that PHA is an executive control function failure, where the conscious mind is temporarily prevented from executing the necessary search and retrieval operations, rather than a storage failure.

Research into the specific phrasing and structure of the suggestion reveals that the quality of the command significantly impacts the resulting amnesia. Suggestions that are clear, direct, and framed in terms of temporary blocking are generally more effective than vague instructions. Furthermore, the implementation of multiple, distinct retrieval cues can sometimes reveal nuances in the amnesia, suggesting that the memory blockade might not be monolithic. For instance, a subject might be given two separate cues: one to recall the actions performed, and another to recall the specific verbal instructions. Experiments utilizing differential cueing demonstrate that posthypnotic amnesia can be highly selective, targeting specific subsets of episodic memories while leaving others intact, lending credence to models that view memory as distributed and retrieval as highly dependent on contextual and instructional constraints established during the hypnotic induction phase.

Spontaneous Posthypnotic Amnesia and Vulnerability

While induced amnesia is the norm in experimental settings, the occurrence of spontaneous posthypnotic amnesia (SPHA) provides important insight into the intrinsic mechanisms of the hypnotic state, independent of explicit suggestion. SPHA is defined by the subject's inability to recall the events of the trance immediately upon waking, despite receiving no prior instruction from the hypnotist to forget. This spontaneous forgetting is primarily observed in individuals deemed highly hypnotizable, often those who reliably achieve the deepest levels of trance, sometimes referred to as the somnambulistic state. The presence of SPHA suggests that for certain vulnerable individuals, the deep hypnotic state itself inherently triggers dissociative processes that isolate the memories of the trance from normal, waking consciousness.

The psychological profile of individuals prone to SPHA often overlaps significantly with those who exhibit high levels of natural dissociation in everyday life. Dissociation, in this context, refers to a temporary disruption in the integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception. For these individuals, the hypnotic induction may simply enhance a pre-existing tendency to compartmentalize experience. When the trance is deep, the cognitive system responsible for processing and storing the hypnotic experience operates in a functionally segregated manner. Upon waking, the normal executive system fails to integrate these segregated memories into the continuous stream of conscious recall. This inherent vulnerability suggests that SPHA is less about suggestion compliance and more about the structural or functional organization of memory retrieval in highly suggestible brains.

Research attempting to differentiate SPHA from induced PHA often focuses on the stability and completeness of the amnesia. While induced amnesia is typically lifted reliably and completely by the cue, SPHA can sometimes be more transient or partial. Subjects experiencing spontaneous amnesia may begin to recall fragments of the experience over time or through simple effortful retrieval attempts, indicating that the barrier is less robust than the one actively established by a direct posthypnotic command. The existence of SPHA strongly supports state theories of hypnosis, which argue that hypnosis represents a genuine altered state of consciousness characterized by unique psychological properties, including an enhanced propensity for memory compartmentalization and dissociative experiences, which naturally lead to a temporary failure of autobiographical memory retrieval.

Theoretical Models Explaining Posthypnotic Amnesia

The mechanism of PHA has sparked significant theoretical debate, generally falling into two main camps: state theories and non-state (or socio-cognitive) theories. State theories posit that hypnosis is a genuinely altered, unique state of consciousness that functionally changes how the brain processes information and memory. According to the state view, PHA results from a temporary,

hypnosis-induced dissociation or functional separation within the cognitive architecture, which prevents the conscious mind from accessing the memories stored during the trance. The memory is physically present but rendered inaccessible because the normal pathways of retrieval are temporarily rerouted or shut down by the hypnotic state itself, or by the executive suggestion given within that state.

In contrast, non-state theories, particularly the socio-cognitive or response expectancy models, argue that PHA is primarily a strategic enactment or role-playing guided by the subject's expectations of what a hypnotized person should do. From this perspective, the subject is not truly unable to recall the events; rather, they are motivated, often unconsciously, to comply with the suggestion to forget. PHA, therefore, is viewed as a form of motivated retrieval inhibition--the subject actively suppresses or avoids recalling the memories until the socially sanctioned cue (the retrieval word) allows them to legitimately stop complying with the forgetting role. This model emphasizes the importance of social context, expectancies, and the subject's interpretation of the hypnotic instructions in generating the amnesic effect.

A third, highly influential model is the dissociation theory championed by Ernest Hilgard. Hilgard proposed the concept of a "hidden observer," suggesting that while the conscious, reporting self experiences amnesia, another part of the mind--the hidden observer--retains full awareness and memory of the hypnotic events. In experiments, subjects suffering from PHA, when asked to communicate through an alternative pathway (e.g., automatic writing or speaking while pressing a button), often demonstrate complete and accurate recall. This dual-processing model suggests that PHA is a split in conscious awareness, where the memories are fully available to a segregated part of the mind but deliberately walled off from the subject's normal, reporting consciousness. This view effectively bridges the gap, acknowledging both the genuine cognitive mechanism (dissociation) and the influence of instruction (the suggestion to forget).

Research Methodology and Measurement of PHA

Measuring the efficacy and nature of posthypnotic amnesia requires rigorous methodological controls to distinguish genuine retrieval failure from simple malingering or intentional non-compliance. Standard experimental protocols involve several key stages. First, subjects are carefully screened for hypnotic suggestibility using standardized scales, such as the Stanford Hypnotic Susceptibility Scale or the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility. Only highly suggestible individuals typically proceed to the PHA induction phase. During the trance, subjects are given a series of tasks or exposed to specific stimuli, followed by the explicit suggestion for amnesia until a defined cue is given.

Upon returning to the waking state, the primary test for PHA is recall performance. The subject is asked to list or describe everything they remember from the hypnotic session. Genuine PHA is

quantified by the number of items or events they fail to recall. Crucially, researchers then administer the retrieval cue and immediately retest recall. The difference between the pre-cue recall score (low) and the post-cue recall score (high) provides the measure of reversible amnesia. If the subject recalls significantly more information after the cue, the amnesia is considered genuine and reversible, consistent with a retrieval blockade rather than encoding failure.

Furthermore, researchers employ implicit memory tests to probe whether the amnesic memories are truly lost or merely inaccessible to conscious recall. Tasks such as word-stem completion, priming exercises, or physiological measures (e.g., skin conductance) are used. If a subject shows evidence of having retained the information implicitly--for example, by completing a word stem with a word presented during hypnosis, even though they consciously deny remembering the word--it provides compelling evidence that the memory traces are intact but separated from explicit awareness. This combination of explicit recall testing, cue administration, and implicit performance measurement is essential for generating reliable data on the cognitive mechanisms underlying posthypnotic amnesia.

Clinical and Experimental Applications of PHA

While often studied purely for its theoretical implications regarding memory and consciousness, posthypnotic amnesia holds limited but specific utility in clinical settings. Clinically, PHA may be used to enhance the efficacy of therapy by blocking the recollection of painful or traumatic events experienced during a therapeutic regression or emotional abreaction while under hypnosis. By suggesting amnesia for the intense emotional content, the therapist may help the patient integrate the cognitive understanding gained during the session without being overwhelmed by the raw emotional memory immediately after waking. This is a delicate procedure, however, and is generally used cautiously, as modern psychological practice often emphasizes the importance of conscious integration of memory for long-term therapeutic success.

In experimental psychology, PHA is a critical tool for isolating cognitive processes. Researchers utilize amnesia to create controlled conditions where subjects perform tasks but lack conscious memory of the instructional set. For instance, PHA can be used to study the automaticity of behavior, where subjects execute complex posthypnotic actions (like performing a specific routine when a certain stimulus appears) while being unable to recall why they are performing the action. This allows scientists to investigate the cognitive systems that guide behavior implicitly, separated from conscious intent or episodic memory recall. The ability to switch memory access on and off through the retrieval cue provides an unparalleled level of control over the subject's conscious experience.

A further experimental application involves the study of pain and perception. If a subject is instructed under hypnosis to forget a painful stimulus or a specific perceptual experience, the

resulting PHA can be used to explore how cognitive barriers affect sensory input processing. If the subject reports reduced pain or altered perception after waking, the amnesia for the suggestion helps maintain the efficacy of the hypnotic alteration without interference from conscious awareness that they were instructed to experience the change. These applications underscore the value of PHA not just as a phenomenon to be explained, but as a methodological instrument for probing the deepest connections between consciousness, memory, and behavior in a highly controlled laboratory environment.

Controversies and Criticisms Regarding the Reality of Forgetting

A significant controversy surrounding posthypnotic amnesia centers on the fundamental question: Is the subject truly unable to recall the memories, or are they merely unwilling to report them? Critics adhering to the non-state theories of hypnosis frequently argue that PHA is an artifact of compliance and social demand characteristics. They suggest that subjects, aware of the expectations inherent in the hypnotic setting, are simply engaging in inhibitory reporting--they know they are supposed to forget, so they report forgetting, only releasing the memories when the cue provides social permission to do so.

This criticism has driven extensive research using objective measures that are difficult to fake. The aforementioned studies involving the "hidden observer" and implicit memory testing have largely countered the simple compliance hypothesis. If amnesia were purely based on willingness to report, subjects should not demonstrate accurate implicit memory performance or be able to bypass the amnesia barrier via automated writing. The observation that PHA affects performance on objective tasks, such as source monitoring (knowing when and where a memory was acquired), strongly suggests a genuine, functional alteration in retrieval ability, rather than mere social compliance.

However, the debate persists regarding whether PHA constitutes a true mnemonic block or a highly effective, selective executive control failure. While most experts agree the memory is not destroyed, the question remains whether the subject genuinely experiences the inability to recall (mnemonic block) or if the subject is actively, though perhaps unconsciously, inhibiting the retrieval process (executive inhibition). Neurophysiological research utilizing fMRI and EEG aims to resolve this by observing brain activity during PHA. Studies have shown altered activity in prefrontal regions associated with executive control and retrieval effort during the amnesic period, lending support to the hypothesis that PHA involves the active suppression of retrieval mechanisms necessary for conscious access to episodic memory, rather than a failure of the stored memory trace itself.