

AUTOHYPNOTIC AMNESIA

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Analytical Psychology; Depth Psychology

1. Core Definition

Autohypnotic Amnesia is a conceptual term primarily utilized within **Analytical Psychology**, the school of thought established by Carl Gustav Jung. Functionally, it serves as a highly specific descriptive analog for the widely recognized psychological defense mechanism of repression. The core premise posits that the mechanism by which threatening, painful, or incompatible psychic material is excluded from conscious awareness operates similarly to amnesia induced under the influence of hypnotic suggestion, but importantly, this influence is self-generated or "auto."

The significance of the term lies in its emphasis on the self-imposed nature of the cognitive barrier. When an individual represses a memory, an emotion, or an instinctual urge, the ego unconsciously acts as its own hypnotist, establishing a psychological firewall against access to that content. This mechanism differentiates the resulting memory lapse from organic or neurological amnesia, framing it instead as a dynamic, active, and autonomously maintained defensive maneuver of the psyche designed to preserve the integrity and stability of the conscious personality structure.

Jung used this terminology to illustrate that repression is not merely passive forgetting but an energized process requiring the sustained deployment of psychic resources to maintain the amnesic state. The initial clinical observation that informed this term was the recognition that amnesia could be induced externally in a hypnotic setting, leading to the logical conclusion that the psyche possesses an innate capacity to self-induce similar states to manage internal conflict. Thus, the statement that "A person who represses may get a form of autohypnotic amnesia" describes the functional outcome of profound psychological denial.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The coinage of **Autohypnotic Amnesia** is directly traceable to the late 19th-century fascination with the clinical power of hypnosis and its ability to manipulate memory and consciousness. Pioneers like Jean-Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet demonstrated that post-hypnotic suggestion could create specific, temporary amnesias, thereby proving that memory loss could occur without physical damage, driven solely by psychological influence. This revelation profoundly impacted early psychodynamic thinkers, including Jung and Freud.

Jung appropriated the model of hypnotic amnesia, which involves the partial suspension of critical judgment and the acceptance of a suggestion, and applied it internally. He saw the psychological necessity of repression--excluding painful material--as triggering a self-contained, unconscious process that mimics the external induction of amnesia. The term thus reflects the historical bridge

between the study of altered states of consciousness (hypnosis) and the burgeoning field of depth psychology.

By integrating the concept of "auto" into the term, Jung emphasized the inherent, structural autonomy of the unconscious psyche. While Freud focused on repression primarily as a defense against unacceptable instinctual drives (id), Jung's terminology aligned with his developing focus on the self-regulating nature of the psyche and the formation of autonomous **complexes**. For Jung, the amnesia was the necessary protective barrier surrounding a complex that had been walled off from the conscious ego, ensuring that the complex could operate independently without conscious interference.

3. Mechanism: Repression as a Trance State

The mechanism of autohypnotic amnesia suggests that the act of repression involves the psyche entering a localized, self-induced trance state regarding specific content. In this defensive state, the ego's usual vigilance and critical capacity concerning the threatening material are lowered, allowing the "suggestion"--the mandate to forget or exclude--to take hold. This mechanism is primarily selective; it only targets the incompatible elements that trigger internal conflict, leaving other cognitive functions and memory systems intact.

This self-induced suspension of awareness requires a continuous expenditure of psychic energy. Maintaining the amnesic barrier is an active process that prevents the repressed contents, which often retain their emotional charge and energy (known as psychic intensity), from surfacing into consciousness. If this energetic barrier were to fail, the repressed material, frequently organized into a **complex**, would flood the conscious mind, leading to anxiety, panic, or a psychological crisis.

The utility of this conceptualization is its ability to explain phenomena where memory appears to be intact but inaccessible under normal conditions. Just as memories can sometimes be retrieved during hypnosis when the critical faculties are bypassed, Jung implied that the material subject to autohypnotic amnesia remains potentially accessible, but only when the defensive structure--the self-imposed barrier--is temporarily circumvented or dissolved through therapeutic intervention, such as dream analysis or active imagination, which engage the unconscious directly.

4. Key Characteristics and Outcomes

Autohypnotic amnesia exhibits several defining characteristics that distinguish it in a psychodynamic context. Firstly, it is always a motivated defense; the memory loss serves the unconscious goal of protecting the ego from emotional or moral distress. This differentiates it sharply from simple retrieval failure or organic forgetting, which lack defensive motivation. Secondly, the amnesia is highly specific, often revolving around a core traumatic event, a

suppressed feeling, or an unacceptable behavioral impulse.

A crucial outcome of this amnesia is the creation of dissociated psychic contents. The repressed material, barred from conscious integration, coagulates into autonomous units--the Jungian complexes (e.g., the power complex, the mother complex). These complexes continue to influence behavior, affect, and cognitive patterns from the unconscious, often manifesting as neurotic symptoms, repetitive patterns of behavior, or intense emotional reactions disproportionate to current stimuli. The amnesia ensures that the ego cannot recognize the unconscious source of these behaviors.

Finally, the term highlights the circular nature of the defense mechanism. The amnesia leads to a lack of conscious insight, which in turn necessitates the continued maintenance of the autohypnotic barrier. The individual remains unaware not only of the content that was repressed but often of the very act of repression itself. The therapeutic task, therefore, is not simply to restore memory, but to help the individual recognize and dismantle the self-hypnotic process that is sustaining the psychological isolation.

5. Clinical and Psychological Significance

In the realm of Analytical Psychology, identifying a patient's resistance or memory gaps as a form of autohypnotic amnesia offers significant insight into the structure of their psyche. It shifts the therapeutic focus from simply treating symptoms to addressing the underlying psychic mechanism of self-exclusion. Understanding the amnesia as a self-induced, functional barrier informs the analyst's approach to interpretation and intervention, emphasizing the need to respect the defensive function while gently facilitating conscious integration.

The concept is particularly valuable in framing certain dissociative disorders. Clinical manifestations such as psychogenic fugue states, depersonalization, or certain forms of conversion disorder can be understood as extensive forms of autohypnotic processes, where the psyche has profoundly walled off significant portions of identity or reality awareness. These dramatic forms demonstrate the immense, sometimes overwhelming, power of the psyche to compartmentalize threatening contents via self-suggestion.

Furthermore, autohypnotic amnesia serves as a profound metaphorical tool for understanding everyday repression. It provides a dynamic, energetic image of the psychic labor involved in maintaining psychological ignorance. In Jungian therapy, resolving this amnesia leads to the process of integration, where the previously excluded contents of the personal unconscious are brought into dialogue with the conscious ego, leading toward individuation--the lifelong process of achieving psychological wholeness.

6. Debates and Criticisms

The term **Autohypnotic Amnesia**, being highly specialized and rooted deeply in early 20th-century psychodynamic models, faces criticism regarding its contemporary relevance and empirical testability. Modern psychological disciplines, including cognitive and affective neuroscience, often find the term redundant, preferring the more empirically grounded concepts of motivated forgetting, psychological dissociation, or the standard clinical designation of repression. Critics argue that the hypnotic analogy, while poetically powerful, lacks the necessary precision for scientific measurement.

A key point of contention revolves around the implicit suggestion of intentionality. Although Jung views the process as unconscious, the term "autohypnotic" implies a structured, almost volitional act of self-induction, which may misrepresent the immediate, involuntary, and primal nature of traumatic repression. For many contemporary researchers, the defensive exclusion of traumatic memory is seen less as a structured "hypnotic suggestion" and more as an automatic, evolutionarily adaptive response to overwhelming threat, mediated by physiological and neurological mechanisms.

Moreover, like many specialized Jungian terms, autohypnotic amnesia often requires a specific analytical framework for its comprehension, limiting its universality across psychological schools. While it remains a potent descriptive device within Analytical Psychology, its integration into interdisciplinary discussions concerning memory and consciousness is challenging due to the lack of consensus on the nature and mechanism of autohypnosis as a psychological defense.

Further Reading

[Repression \(psychology\)](#) - Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

[Hypnosis](#) - Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

[Dissociation \(psychology\)](#) - Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

[Analytical Psychology](#) - Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.