

Milton H Erickson



During his lifetime, Milton Erickson became famous for his amazing 'miracle cures'. Since his death he has become a legend.

Unorthodox psychiatrist, congenial family doctor, ingenious strategic psychotherapist and master hypnotherapist, Milton Erickson's influence has revolutionised Western [psychotherapy](#). Thanks largely to Erickson the subject of hypnosis has shed its shackles of superstition and is now widely recognised as one of the most powerful tools for change.

Milton Erickson's life and background

Within his own life, Milton Erickson had many personal disabilities to contend with, which he often stressed helped him become proficient at practical problem solving for his clients.

His 'problems' began early. Born into a poor farming community in Nevada, Erickson didn't speak until he was four. Later, he was found to have severe dyslexia, to be profoundly tone deaf and colour blind. At the age of seventeen, he was paralysed for a year by a bout of polio so bad that his doctor was convinced he would die.

Despite his handicaps (or perhaps because of), Milton Erickson went on to qualify as a medical doctor and psychiatrist. In the following years he became the World's greatest practitioner of therapeutic hypnosis and one of the most effective psychotherapists ever.

It was perhaps Erickson's farming background which caused him to approach psychotherapy in such a practical way. Anyone who is

interested in relieving human misery and developing human potential will benefit greatly from reading about and learning from this remarkable man.

Milton Erickson was a great researcher into the extent and limits of [hypnosis](#) as a tool for personal change. '[Hypnotherapy - An Exploratory Casebook](#)' by Milton H Erickson and Ernest L. Rossi is a comprehensive and fascinating compendium of Erickson's cases, transcripts and ideas.

He influenced major thinkers like Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, inspired the developers of NLP ([Neuro Linguistic Programming](#)) and laid the groundwork for innovators of brief therapy like Paul Watzlavitz, who wrote the influential book Change.

When Erickson was in his fifties he was struck by a second bout of polio that caused him a great deal of physical pain. Even this he was able to turn into a learning opportunity as he became highly effective at treating other people's pain with hypnosis. He details many of his approaches to sensory alteration and pain control in '[Hypnotic alteration of sensory, perceptual and psychological processes](#)' by Milton Erickson. (The collected papers of Milton H Erickson Volume 2).

Despite severe illness in his old age, Milton Erickson continued to teach, demonstrate and practice his remarkable skills as a therapist, even when eventually confined to a wheelchair. He died at the age of seventy nine.

Reading his many case studies in such books as '[Uncommon Therapy](#)' and the subtle metaphorical approaches of his storytelling in '[My voice will go with you](#)' is like entering another dimension. I have read these books many times and still find unexpected elements buried within the entertaining prose.

[Going beyond 'The Cult'](#)

Milton Erickson's case studies are legendary. As with many legends, cults have grown up around the man and his life. There are numerous 'Ericksonian' schools and practitioners all over the World and his reputation grows by the day.

However, I believe that if we study Erickson's life and work merely to increase our sense of wonderment and awe then we are missing much of the potential of such study. In short we have to look at what he was doing rather than what he was. When reading Milton

Erickson's words it is clear you are reading about people, not about 'psychology' or 'science'. Despite his sophisticated and advanced understanding, his life long fascination with teaching healthier personal attitudes shines through.

I believe that Milton Erickson had some very important things to say about human motivation and the every day nature of trance and hypnosis. In addition to its therapeutic value, he showed its central role in emotional problems.

It may seem irreverent, but it is possible that present-day therapists or those in the future may be more skilled than Erickson was. Would we term such people 'Ericksonians?' To be as effective as Milton Erickson doesn't mean just aping him, but working from similar principles and learning to see and observe in ways comparable with his (legendary) human observation.

The '[Ericksonian handshake](#)'

The legendary 'Ericksonian handshake' whereby Erickson would send someone into deep trance works along a basic human principle. It taps into the natural human 'reorientation response', triggered by shock or surprise. This occurs with 'the handshake' as a familiar social pattern is interrupted. It is described in 'Haley on Erickson', another fantastic book.

Erickson's true legacy

Although Milton Erickson has been dead for over twenty years, when we really absorb the best books written about his working methods we can extrapolate ways of working which go way beyond mere technique or dry theory.

Brief therapy, solution focussed therapy, systemic family therapy, child psychology even sports performance training have all been influenced by Milton Erickson's work and ideas.

Now that Milton Erickson is becoming so well known it is sometimes forgotten that when he started out as a young psychiatrist back in the 1920's he was really a maverick. Because so many elements of his work contradicted standard psychological dogma it took him a while for him to become recognised as a leading clinician. It was only because his results were so consistently good that he rose to prominence.

Erickson wasn't interested in constructing an edifice of psychological theory and trying to get people to fit the theory. He looked to see what people were like first, then he worked with them as unique individuals.

Hypnosis

When Milton Erickson started working as a psychiatrist the field was limited by certain accepted rigid tenants. Hypnosis was widely seen as 'the dark art'. Psychiatrists could be struck off for using it leading to Erickson having to teach it to other psychiatrists in secret.

The role of the subconscious

In the early part of the last century the subconscious/unconscious was seen as a 'seething hotbed' of suppressed conflicts and complexes. The idea was that it had to be vanquished by the rational conscious part. Erickson stressed the wisdom and intelligence of the unconscious mind and did not view it as primarily a negative force. He would talk of trusting the unconscious with many of life's activities. He didn't see 'insight' into the cause of a problem as necessarily the main focus of therapy.

The use of brief therapy

At the beginning of Milton Erickson's career, therapy was often interminable. Change was expected to happen very slowly and painfully. Erickson would often see a client only once but still make lasting change happen for these individuals. Now brief therapy is 'all the rage'. Solution focused therapy

Until relatively recently, therapy was mainly focused on pathology rather than on the individual's inherent resources. Therapy was usually past focused whereas Erickson would focus on future solutions and seek to help develop the skills that people might need in order to move on. See 'The Seminars, Workshops and Lectures' of Milton H Erickson volumes I through IV for amazing insights into how he worked.

Lifting the symptom

It used to be assumed that psychological problem behaviours were always symptoms of something much deeper. The idea was that the

mind worked exactly like the body. It was seen as superficial to just treat the symptom and indeed many practitioners had no idea how to lift a phobia or relieve the experience of depressions.

Milton Erickson maintained that a therapist's duty was to first ease or remove the unpleasant psychological complaint. He said that if you could 'lift the handle a lot could be done with the pot'. A small change has 'knock on' effects which lead into other areas. For example, the lifting of a [phobia](#) can lead to increased confidence in other areas. Erickson was directive and strategic in his therapy in a time where the therapist was supposed to be passive.

Family therapy

Another revolutionary approach that now seems like common sense was Erickson's consideration of the effect of other family members on therapy. He would view a person as part of a wider system, not just as an isolated individual.

If he thought it necessary he would get other family members involved in the therapy. This was blasphemy for many of his contemporaries. 'Uncommon Therapy' by Jay Haley illustrates Erickson's unusual approaches with many unusual and fascinating case studies.

Many areas of modern psychotherapy have much for which to thank Milton Erickson. Solution focused brief therapy, family therapy, indirect hypnosis and rapport building plus many other aspects of different therapeutic approaches, owe him much more than just a nod!

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