

Highway Hypnosis Just Explained

By Sunil Prakash

When the drive is familiar or monotonous, 'procedural memory' can take the wheel.

Navigating from one location to another is usually straightforward. But have you ever suddenly realised during a drive that you've covered more distance than you imagined? Or have you ever arrived at your destination and been unable to recollect the journey or events that occurred en route? Experiencing this sense of time displacement or sudden unfamiliarity with your surroundings during a drive is known as "HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS," and it typically occurs when you've traversed the same route repeatedly or undertaken long drives on deserted highways. Hypnotherapist Dr Sunil Prakash elucidates why even the most proficient drivers may succumb to highway hypnosis, how sleep deprivation exacerbates the issue, and how to prevent it from occurring.

Understanding Highway Hypnosis.

Highway hypnosis is a state of disconnection from time while driving. You might struggle to remember details such as your driving speed, the landmarks you passed, or even your driving quality. The drive often seems like a nebulous, shortened experience. You usually only become aware of experiencing highway hypnosis after you've broken out of it. "Common descriptions of highway hypnosis are when individuals reach their destination without recalling the journey or when they've covered more distance than they anticipated without understanding how," says Dr Prakash. "There's usually an accompanying sense of disorientation and worry about the forgotten period before reaching the destination." This phenomenon can occur to anyone, especially during routine drives or on mundane routes to frequently visited places like work, school, or the supermarket. It can also occur on long, monotonous journeys or extensive road trips. One study suggests that highway hypnosis is more common on highways than on residential roads due to fewer changes in direction and speed. Interestingly, despite initial definitions categorising highway hypnosis as a trance-like state similar to drowsy driving, it is now believed to be linked with heightened automatic attention without impacting reaction times. "Highway hypnosis is not synonymous with drowsy driving or distracted driving," clarifies Dr Prakash.

Causes of Highway Hypnosis

Highway hypnosis is comparable to "time blindness," which describes the feeling of time passing quickly when engrossed in enjoyable tasks. When your brain is engrossed in a favoured activity, it goes into autopilot mode and concentrates on the task, causing you to lose track of time and your surroundings. This behaviour is based on the principle of "procedural memory." When tasks like cycling, assembling a puzzle, playing an instrument, or driving a car become second nature, your brain's autopilot mode takes over, allowing you to perform these tasks effortlessly.

Highway hypnosis, then, results from a heightened state of automatic attention and the engagement of procedural memory. "When your eyes are focused on the road, and you're alert, your automatic brain processes dominate," says Dr Prakash. "Some argue that it could indicate confident driving due to repetition and familiarity." Repeating the same path can lead to "zoning out," where your brain guides you effortlessly. The sameness of long drives and straight highways can have the same effect. "When something becomes very familiar to us, a certain level of automatic processing is expected,"

Dr Prakash explains. "If you take the same route to work daily, you're more likely to experience highway hypnosis because it becomes an automatic process. You don't have to look for exits consciously; you know the way."

Why Sleep Deprivation, Fatigue, and Distraction Exacerbate the Issue

Although highway hypnosis and drowsy driving are distinct concepts, sleep deprivation or fatigue while driving is always perilous, while highway hypnosis is dangerous only when combined with tiredness. "The critical aspect is to remain alert with eyes on the road," advises Dr Prakash. "If your automatic processes are functioning while you're alert, it's not dangerous because you're still subconsciously vigilant. But when you're drowsy and experiencing highway hypnosis, it can pose a significant risk to your health and that of others on the road." A few strategies to stay alert include conversing with someone until you arrive, opening car windows, playing loud music, consuming caffeine, and avoiding long drives. Inattentiveness or distraction, unlike highway hypnosis, can hinder navigation, causing you to miss highway exits and slow your response to unexpected events such as sudden traffic or emergencies. "Before driving, I'd recommend a brief meditation for multitasking," suggests Dr Prakash. "Aim to align your mind and body to be alert before hitting the road."

Preventing Highway Hypnosis

"Maintaining a presence in the present can help counteract highway hypnosis," says Dr Prakash. This could mean being more deliberate about your actions while driving. If you rely heavily on GPS, consider turning it off and relying on your instincts, sense of direction, and road signs. Changing your regular routes can also help. "If we alter our routine, we can't rely on automatic processes because we need to be more attentive," Dr Prakash adds. For long drives, strategies like vocalising highway exit as you pass, adjusting your seat for an upright position, and taking breaks every 90 minutes can help. Setting an alarm can also aid those who lose track of time. No matter how frequently you experience highway hypnosis, ensure you're fully awake, alert, and prepared for unexpected situations while driving. "Nothing can replace sufficient sleep for maintaining reaction times," warns Dr Prakash. "At the first sign of nodding off or drifting into a trance-like state, ensure you pull over safely."

To summarise it:

Navigating from one location to another is usually straightforward: This means that the act of driving is generally simple and routine, especially when we are following a familiar route. We follow the traffic signs, observe the rules of the road, and use our knowledge of the route to get from point A to point B. However, this very routine driving nature can sometimes lead to highway hypnosis.

Highway hypnosis, or the sense of time displacement during a drive, is an interesting phenomenon due to the drive's mundane or monotonous nature. This can often occur when driving on long, straight, and familiar routes with minimal changes in the driving environment.

Highway hypnosis is a kind of dissociative state where you're not consciously aware of what you're doing, but your subconscious mind is still carrying out the task at hand - in this case, driving. It's as if your brain has switched to "autopilot mode", enabling you to reach your destination without consciously processing the journey.

According to Dr Prakash, highway hypnosis can be compared to time blindness, a phenomenon where people become so absorbed in a task that they lose track of time. This is because the brain has switched to autopilot mode and is focusing on the task at hand (driving), which leads to a loss of awareness of time and surroundings.

Sleep deprivation, fatigue, and distraction can exacerbate the effects of highway hypnosis. When a driver is tired or distracted, the effects of highway hypnosis can become more pronounced and the risk of a road accident increases. It's important to remain alert and attentive on the road, despite the repetitive or monotonous nature of the drive.

Dr Prakash recommends maintaining a presence in the present while driving to prevent highway hypnosis. This involves being conscious of your surroundings and actions and actively engaging with the task of driving rather than letting it become an automatic process. This could involve changing your usual routes, turning off the GPS and relying on road signs, or even vocalising your actions while driving.

Highway hypnosis is an interesting phenomenon for any driver, especially during long, monotonous drives or on familiar routes. It's important to remain alert and attentive while driving and to take steps to prevent highway hypnosis from occurring, especially if you're feeling tired or distracted.