Competition: How Hypnosis Can Help Women to Hold Their Own in the Workplace

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This paper takes the perspective that competitive strivings in self and others have been an area of difficulty for women and that gender socialization has played a significant role. The author discusses elements of competition that seem toxic for women and proposes descriptors of healthy competition. It is proposed that hypnosis provides a suitable method for neutralizing negative elements and promoting adaptive responses in competitive situations. Five applications of hypnotic methods are illustrated through two case examples.

Keywords: Competition, coping, gender, hypnosis, reframing, women, workplace

Anna, age 29, is a policy analyst for a prominent think tank. She is bright, intuitively diplomatic, and performs competently in her job by objective measures. She shares an office with her colleague, Betsy, whom Anna describes as beautiful, ambitious, and backstabbing. Betsy typically ignores Anna, requests the choice assignments, and makes a point of spending time with their director, Tom. Anna is very uncomfortable around Betsy. She attempts to be pleasant but generally feels “one-down” and insecure.

Emily, age 35, is a bright, energetic fourth-year associate in a law firm that specializes in mergers and acquisitions. She is married with a one-year-old child. Emily has come to therapy because she feels stressed and resentful about the way she is treated by Susan, the partner with whom she works most closely. Emily reports that Susan does not acknowledge Emily’s hard work and long hours, often claims credit for document errors that Emily discovers and resolves, and makes snide comments about “women lawyers trying to balance work and family life.” Emily is confused by the way that Susan relies heavily on her, yet criticizes her in front of others and seems annoyed when clients express appreciation to Emily.

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What is similar in the situations faced by Anna and Emily? Both are capable, bright women who hold responsible positions in prestigious companies. Yet both of them are reacting to displays of competition in the workplace. When the issue of competition was raised with them, Anna responded: “Yes, that’s what I’m picking up in Betsy’s behavior. But, I’m not competitive. If anything, I compete against myself.” Emily stated “Yes, I think Susan may feel competitive with me. I hate the competitiveness; otherwise this would be a great job.”

The comments of Anna and Emily are commonly heard from women in the workplace. How has competition come to be viewed so negatively? Acknowledging that competition is a commonly encountered dynamic in the workplace, how can women come to understand and approach competitiveness in themselves and others in ways that are growth-promoting?

It is ironic that the word “compete” comes from the Latin *competere* meaning “to seek together.” Current usage defines it as striving for an objective (position, profit, prize), with no mention of “togetherness” (or, relationship). Another common definition of “compete” is to be in a state of rivalry, in which there is relationship, but it is in conflict or opposition. These current definitions of competition are a reflection of our Western socialization.

**Socialization’s Influence on Competition**

Developmentally, competition may play a different psychological role for women and men. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1987) propose that “Whereas women search for self through connection with others, men search for self by distinguishing themselves from others” (p.122). Thus for boys and men, competition aids differentiation. It is an act of selfhood, and consequently, something to be sought. Yet for girls and women, “competing can be an internally terrifying experience” (pp. 122-123) of threatening important relationships by saying, in essence, “I am not the same as you.” It can feel like both annihilation of the other as well as loss of self because, for women, self-identity is in relation to others. Consequently, withdrawal from competition may be a more manageable stance for many women (p. 123).

Eichenbaum and Orbach (1987) also propose that feelings of competition in women stem from undermining feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (p. 126). Taken from an adaptive perspective, competitive feelings can reflect the positive desire for recognition, for the right to be one’s own person and to overcome crippling self-doubt. Consequently, if women can use these feelings to understand rather than judge themselves, it may allow them to move forward and fulfill their personal ambitions.

In her book *Catfight*, Leora Tanenbaum (2002) points out that, in reality, women have always competed, primarily with each other. Despite the expectation that women are “relaters,” she asserts that women are conditioned to view each other as adversaries rather than as allies.

Tanenbaum points out that, historically, there have been few legitimate arenas in which women could compete and prove their femininity—in other words to have feminine power. Those arenas include being attractive, marrying a “good catch,” and having “faultless children” (p. 20). The other side of the bind is that competitiveness has traditionally been viewed as unwomanly. Consequently, competition between women has typically taken a more covert route, and has been destructive rather than constructive for women as a group.

Tanenbaum’s research emphasizes that competition is socially conditioned, related to power and, for women, has taken place in highly personal realms rather than in the
development and expression of abilities in arenas such as the workplace or sports. These personal forms of competition do not build self-esteem because they have to do with attracting power—specifically through union with a powerful man—rather than claiming one’s own power. Mariah Burton Nelson (1998), an author and former professional athlete, points out that participating in competitive sports, for example, helps one not only learn what it takes to succeed, but also how it feels to be victorious; “that winning is fun and losing is no disgrace;” and how to be subordinate to no one (p. 10).

In her book *Embracing Victory*, Nelson (1998) also comments that women struggle with competition because men have defined it. As women entered the workforce, they had to learn to play “men’s rules,” which governed most business operations. Understandably women have felt ill-prepared and uncomfortable, because they didn’t know the rules and the language.

In addition, Nelson points out that there are different competitive styles, one being the “Conqueror,” which is more familiar to men. The “Conqueror” style is based on domination over enemies, where winning is everything. This style can readily be observed in the military as well as various sports and business arenas. Nelson contends that women shy away from this model because they know or can imagine what it is like to be conquered. Furthermore, women typically have been the losers in the game of sexism. They know how painful that is and prefer to avoid a win-lose dynamic. And, experientially, competition is a very different game when one is the less powerful one in the situation.

**Toxic vs. Healthy Competition**

In order to move forward, it is important to remember that competition in and of itself is neutral. As the above-mentioned theorists and authors point out, competition per se is neither good nor bad, productive or destructive. There is gender conditioning as well as different competitive styles that influence the experience and impact of competition. Extracting from this literature, there are several elements that may make competition “toxic” for many women. These elements include: a) a one-upsmanship attitude, as embodied by Nelson’s “Conqueror” competitive style; b) narrow ideals for what is acceptable behavior, clearly seen in Western culture’s beauty ideal, as well as workplaces in which only certain narrowly defined (read “familiar, male”) behaviors are considered to reflect “competitive edge;” c) situations in which winning or succeeding is solely defined by the outcome and the process of “how the game is played” is ignored; and d) a competitive mindset that disregards or disrespects the integrity of others involved.

If competition is not toxic by nature, what can competitive situations contribute to our development and well-being so that women are encouraged to embrace these opportunities? First, competitive situations compel us to strive—to work for excellence, to push our capacities. Second, competitive situations bring home the reality that the universe is not a bottomless well. Life is full of situations where the goods are limited. There will be times that we win the prize and times that others will, and that is just part of the natural order of life. Third, striving to be better is a process for building self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-esteem. Engaging in competition rather than retreating is empowering. One also learns how to handle defeat and disappointment. These are positive aspects of competitive situations that, as a group, men have benefited from much longer than have women.

The author proposes the following as elements of healthy competition.

a) Healthy competition embodies an attitude of “striving together” toward
achievement rather than one-up/one-down domination. True, only one person or team will leave with the prize. Yet it is equally true that each participant provides a reference point to the others, encouraging efforts to match their performance or to excel it.

b) Healthy competition embraces an attitude of generosity rather than exclusion. By expanding our definition of what is acceptable, we can move from “I can’t compete by those rules” or “I have to play dirty because I don’t fit the rules” to “We all learn and benefit from diversity” and “Different strokes for different folks.”

c) Healthy competition focuses on abundance rather than scarcity. True, the objective may be scarce (i.e., only one position or one prize). However, the process provides abundant opportunities to learn about one’s self, develop skills and test one’s capacities. One can focus on “How does this situation enrich my life?” or “How is competing against this person allowing me to challenge myself?” rather than “What if I lose?”

d) Healthy competition involves a mindset that “it’s not personal.” In a study of women in competitive careers conducted by the National Association of Insurance Women (NAIW, 1998), a main conclusion was that women believed that men’s ability to keep matters on a business rather than a personal level was key to their effectiveness as competitors. So, helping women with the mindset that “it’s not personal” may enable them to more comfortably claim their competitive strivings.

e) Healthy competition is made possible in an atmosphere of respect for others and positive regard for one’s self. One may not have control over others’ attitudes, but you can choose how to “show up” in competitive situations.

Implications for Clinical Practice and the Use of Hypnosis and Self-Hypnosis

When considering practical tools to enhance women’s effectiveness in competitive situations, it is important to stay cognizant of two points. First, there are positive aspects of competition and there are specific elements that may distinguish healthy from toxic competition. Discerning these points can enable women to claim their own competitive strivings rather than disown them and lose a source of power. Second, there are spoken and unspoken “rules of competition” that operate in workplace settings that are powerful, that they may not embrace, and that they likely have limited power as individuals to dramatically change. Women need ways to inoculate themselves when they must work with others who embody a toxic approach to competition.

There are numerous creative ways to use hypnosis to enhance women’s effectiveness in competitive situations. Five applications are discussed below, illustrated through the examples of Anna and Emily.

1. Exploring a client’s memories and internalized messages about competition

Hypnosis is a powerful tool for accessing images, impressions, and conclusions that may be influencing a client’s reactions to competition on unconscious, conscious, and visceral levels. For some clients it may be possible to access positive, supportive associations as well as negative, inhibiting ones.

Anna’s strong assertions that she wasn’t competitive suggested that there were some historical roots to her reactiveness. Anna was a good hypnotic subject, quickly learning
self-hypnosis strategies for calming her anxiety. Thus the author suggested that hypnosis might be a helpful tool for exploring early influences on her vulnerability to Betsy’s competitive behavior.

A version of the affect bridge (Watkins, 1971) was useful for the hypnotic exploration. When Anna was in a moderately deep, comfortable hypnotic state, the author suggested that she imagine being with Betsy when Betsy was “acting competitively.” When Anna indicated with a head nod that she accessed a memory, the suggestion was given to notice the reactions in her body and mind, then to amplify them as if she was turning up the volume using a radio dial. Anna signaled when the sensations were amplified as strongly as she was willing to experience them. Then the suggestion was given to let those sensations take her back in time to a memory, stored in her inner mind, where she had experienced the same or similar feelings. Anna indicated with a head nod that she accessed a memory. The suggestion was given the “observing part of her mind” could notice and store the details of the memory. Another suggestion was given that her experiencing self could now go back to an earlier memory in time where she experienced the same feelings. Again similar suggestions were given to notice and store the details. The procedure was repeated one more time. Then Anna was re-alerted, with the suggestion that her observing mind could carry back all relevant information to the “present time and place.”

Debriefing her hypnotic experience, Anna reported that she recalled very vivid memories from her childhood that involved her sister. Anna described her younger sister as vivacious and “always stealing the show,” which meant the attention of her parents and other adults. Anna dealt with the sibling rivalry by becoming “the smart one,” a role in which her sister had no interest. Anna reported that while she had known these “facts” of her childhood, the strong emotions experienced during hypnosis made her realize their powerful influence on her.

2. Reframing to support a shift of perspective

As one begins to explore the elements of toxic competition and identify healthy, constructive elements of such strivings, clients may need assistance in shifting long-held perspectives toward adopting a different model. Hypnotic reframing techniques, incorporating some of the concepts discussed early, can be useful here.

In Emily’s case, the idea that Susan could be feeling competitive with her was a reframing in itself. However, Emily needed more than this conscious awareness to help her to cope more effectively with her boss. Hypnosis was introduced early in Emily’s treatment as a tool for managing her stress and fatigue. She particularly liked the “Inner Strength” technique (McNeal & Frederick, 1993), and had accessed a compassionate, secure part of herself. Her inner strength was anchored to stroking her wrist gently, amplifying her feelings of compassion and inner security.

In hypnosis, a mental rehearsal technique was used in which Emily recalled herself in past situations reacting to Susan’s negative comments and behaviors toward her. Suggestions were given to let the memory fade, and that, in a moment, she would go back into those situations, but with a different resource, her inner strength, and a different perspective, that criticism from others may be a sign that they feel threatened and competitive. Next, it was suggested that Emily activate her anchor (stroking her wrist gently) and feel the strong presence of her compassionate, secure self. When Emily indicated with a head nod that she was connected to her inner strength, suggestions were given to stroke her wrist a few more times to amplify her experience, and then to return to the situations with Susan, with her
resource “close at hand.” Emily was reminded that she could gently stroke her wrist at any
time to remain in contact with her compassion. Emily nodded when the experience was
completed; she was guided back to a special place in her mind to enjoy the quiet and comfort,
then re-alerted.

Emily observed that the two scenarios, with and without her compassion, felt very
different. In the second version, she felt calmer, viewing Susan’s behavior as reflecting
something about herself, rather than Emily. Hypnotically enhanced cognitive-behavioral
assertiveness strategies were then used to build upon Emily’s hypnotic experience.

3. Managing visceral arousal

If competition has been viewed as threatening to self and relationships, the body’s
fight-or-flight biological system likely has become wired for avoidance and/or aggressive
responses in competitive situations. Hypnotic and self-hypnotic techniques can be used to
de-condition the automatic visceral reactions and replace them with more adaptive responses.
Some clients might prefer to neutralize their reactiveness to competitive situations while
others might prefer to shift the arousal to that of excitement and energy.

Anna felt her emotions quite viscerally. She described her response to perceptions
of Betsy’s competitiveness as “sinking into myself like a dark wet blanket. Yet my body is on
alert, like waiting for Betsy to drive by and splatter me with her ‘stuff.’”

Anna reported that she had experienced these sinking feelings and states of arousal
since childhood. We talked about the body’s fight-or-flight mechanism, the conditioning of
physiological responses, and ways to de-condition these responses that would involve
practicing over a period of time. This educational approach appealed to Anna’s intellectual
style and diminished some of her embarrassment about her reactions. Preferring to neutralize
her arousal, various relaxation and breathing techniques were introduced in hypnosis over
several sessions to amplify and reinforce their effectiveness. The phrase “calm body, clear
mind” was paired with her breathing exercises and body relaxation techniques. Since her
arousal could get quite high, it was decided to first tape the interventions, with Anna using
the tapes for practice. As she was able to manage her arousal more effectively, Anna stopped
listening the tapes and used self-hypnosis.

4. Enhancing coping mindsets and strategies

a) Recall that the women in the insurance industry study perceived men as having
a competitive advantage in not taking rejection or losing personally. The coping attitude:
“This isn’t personal, I just need to do my best” can be practiced and integrated using
hypnotic mental rehearsals.

As Emily reframed Susan’s critical behavior as a sign of competitiveness, she
developed a coping attitude that felt right for her: “This is about Susan, not me. I can feel
compassion for her yet not take it on as my problem.” We integrated this coping attitude into
various hypnotic mental rehearsals.

b) The TV technique (Brown & Fromm, 1986) can be used to review competitive
work situations “with the emotional volume turned down,” enabling a client to more objectively
identify elements of success as well as obstacles to problem-solve.

The TV technique helped Anna to gain distance from Betsy’s behavior in the
following way. In hypnosis, it was suggested to Anna that she was sitting in a very comfortable
chair in a pleasant room. There was a large plasma TV screen on the wall, and she held the
remote control in her dominant hand. When she pressed the “on” button, a video appeared
on the screen that was a video of Betsy and a woman that looked like Anna. Betsy was behaving in her most competitive way. It was suggested that Anna mute the audio, and watch the scene until the video ended. When it ended, Anna nodded her head. Then it was suggested that the video would replay. This time, while sitting comfortably in her chair, Anna could fast-forward, reverse, pause, or play the video in whatever way she liked, while calmly observing the behavior and listening to the conversations of the two women until the video ended. Finally, it was suggested that she could watch the video as many times as she liked, until it no longer interested her. Anna nodded when that occurred. Next, suggestions were given that Anna watch the video one more time, and notice what the other woman did successfully when Betsy was acting competitive, as well as notice what the woman did that contributed to the competitive interaction. Anna nodded when the video was finished. Suggestions were given for the imagery to fade, and Anna was re-alerted.

In debriefing the session, Anna explored what she had experienced and learned. She was able to observe ways the “other woman” (representing herself) continued to perform competently as well as acted in ways that may have unintentionally reinforced Betsy’s negative behavior toward her.

c) Adaptive self-suggestions can be anchored in hypnosis to bodily or external cues commonly encountered in competitive situations. For example, a client might anchor the internal question “What can I learn in this situation?” or “In what ways can I best contribute here?” to a behavioral cue associated with competition.

In example 3 above, Anna anchored her self-suggestion “calm body, clear mind” to her visceral cues when in competitive situations.

Emily anchored the question “What does Susan need?” to Susan’s criticisms of her. This anchoring reinforced that the criticalness was about Susan, not her.

5. Developing protective buffers for highly competitive environments

Recognizing the importance of “inner work” to bolster effectiveness, women also need to be prepared to deal with men and women who operate from the metaphoric “shark,” “snake,” or “junkyard dog” competitive stances. Hypnotic techniques that can be useful here include:

a) Metaphors such as learning to “take your sail out of their wind” or visualizing a daunting competitor as a particular animal to accurately remember who one is dealing with or to neutralize their impact.

Since Anna wanted to stay in her job position and become a recognized expert, she realized that she needed strategies to deal more effectively with competition. She liked the idea of representing different styles of “political behavior” as animals, as a way to increase her sensitivity to and awareness of different motivations. In hypnosis, Anna visualized different individuals “playing politics” as she put it. As she imagined each person and their associated behavior patterns, it was suggested that an animal would come to mind that symbolized in picture form what her intuition was sensing. After re-alerting, time was spent discussing the images and how she could use them in the moment to gain healthy emotional distance, and respond to the situation in a self-enhancing way.

b) Imaginal structures such as the “protective bubble,” or suits of armor or teflon, to reduce absorption of toxicity from others’ behavior, looks, and words.

As Anna’s sense of humor emerged, her imagery became more playful. She imagined herself in a bright blue spandex body suit off of which others’ negative behaviors and words bounced, protecting her from internalizing them.
c) Associational techniques that connect one to wise inner guides, core parts of self or memories of supportive others to reduce the sense of aloneness and vulnerability when in the presence of a very difficult competitor.

Over time, Emily spontaneously accessed her inner strength as a resource when entering competitive situations, such as negotiating contract terms with an aggressive attorney for the other side.

Conclusion

As women gain in professional and political power, they can reshape the terms of competition in the workplace. Acknowledging that such “sea changes” occur slowly and over time, it is possible in the present moment for individual women to re-align their perspective on competition and enhance their ability to respond in competitive settings. Hypnosis and self-hypnosis can be powerful tools in this process.

References