Suggestibility
The following text borrows extensively from Wikipedia, which offers a helpful synopsis of suggestibility.

Suggestibility is the quality of being inclined to accept and act on the suggestions of others. A person experiencing intense emotions tends to be more receptive to ideas and therefore more suggestible. Generally, suggestibility decreases as age increases. However, psychologists have found that individual levels of self-esteem and assertiveness can make some people more suggestible than others, which has resulted in the concept of a spectrum of suggestibility.

Definition
Attempts to isolate a global trait of "suggestibility" have not been successful, due to an inability of the available testing procedures to distinguish measurable differences between the following distinct types of "suggestibility":

- To be affected by a communication or expectation such that certain responses are overtly enacted, or subjectively experienced, without volition, as in automatism.
- Deliberately to use one's imagination or employ strategies to bring about effects (even if interpreted, eventually, as involuntary) in response to a communication or expectation.
- To accept what people say consciously, but uncritically, and to believe or privately accept what is said.
- To conform overtly to expectations or the views of others, without the appropriate private acceptance or experience; that is, to exhibit behavioral compliance without private acceptance or belief.

Wagstaff's view is that, "a true response to [a hypnotic] suggestion is not a response brought about at any stage by volition, but rather a true nonvolitional response, and perhaps even brought about despite volition", the first category really embodies the true domain of hypnotic suggestibility. Self-report measures of suggestibility have made it possible to isolate and study the global trait.

Suggestibility and hypnosis
The extent to which a subject may or may not be "suggestible" has significant ramifications in the scientific research of hypnosis and its associated phenomena. Most hypnotherapists and academics in this field of research work from the premise that hypnotisability (or suggestibility) is a factor in inducing useful hypnosis states. That is, the depth of hypnosis a given individual can achieve in a given context with a particular hypnotherapist and particular set of beliefs, expectations and instructions.

Dr. John Kappas (1925–2002) identified three different types of suggestibility that have improved hypnosis:

- **Emotional Suggestibility** A suggestible behavior characterized by a high degree of responsiveness to inferred suggestions that affect emotions and restrict physical body responses; usually associated with hypnoidal depth. Thus the emotional suggestible learns more by inference than by direct, literal suggestions.

- **Physical Suggestibility** A suggestible behavior characterized by a high degree of responsiveness to literal suggestions affecting the body, and restriction of emotional responses; usually associated with cataleptic stages or deeper.

- **Intellectual Suggestibility** The type of hypnotic suggestibility in which a subject fears being controlled by the operator and is constantly trying to analyze, reject or rationalize everything the operator says. With this type of subject the operator must give logical explanations for every suggestion and must allow the subject to feel that he is doing the hypnotizing himself.
However, it is not clear or agreed what suggestibility (i.e., the factor on hypnosis) actually is. It is both the indisputable variable and the factor most difficult to measure or control. What has not been agreed on is whether suggestibility is:

- a permanent fixed detail of character or personality:
- a genetic or chemical psychiatric tendency:
- a precursor to or symptom of an activation of such a tendency:
- a learned skill or acquired habit:
- synonymous with the function of learning:
- a neutral, unavoidable consequence of language acquisition and empathy:
- a biased terminology provoking one to resist new externally introduced ideas or perspectives:
- a mutual symbiotic relation to the Other, such as the African conception of uBunthu or Ubuntu:
- related to the capacity of empathy and communication:
- female brain / left-brain characteristics of language-interpretation and garnering negative connotations due to (disputable) gender bias from a male-dominated scientific community:
- a matter of concordant personal taste between speaker / hypnotist and listener and listener's like of / use for speaker's ideas:
- a skill or a flaw or something neutral and universal.

Existing research into the phenomena of hypnosis is extensive and randomised controlled trials predominantly support the efficacy and legitimacy of hypnotherapy, but without a clearly defined concept of the entity or aspect being studied, the level an individual is objectively "suggestible" cannot be measured empirically. It makes exact therapeutic outcomes impossible to forecast.

Moreover, it logically hinders the development of non-bespoke hypnotherapy protocol. On this latter point, it must be pointed out that while some persuasion methods are more universally effective than others, the most reliably effective method with individuals is to personalise the approach by first examining their motivational, learning, behavioural and emotional styles (et al.). Few hypnotherapists do not take a case history, or story so far, from the clients they will be working with.

Hypnosis is rarely a 'battle of wills'. Predominantly, people instinctively feel more subjectively comfortable when receiving positive suggestions in the understanding-framework we understand most easily. In practice, most people are less likely to resist the ideas for optimism or fresh perspectives if they: a) Concur with other ideas already held b) Are consistent with favorite decision-making patterns c) Flatter our self-identity to a level we accept d) Contain positive rather than negative enforcement - toward something good rather than away from something bad e) Are suggested in terms that mirror sensory combinations that person experiences the world through...making it easier for the suggestion to "make sense" - as in Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).

**Autonomy and suggestibility**
The intrigue of differences in individual suggestibility even crops up in the early Greek philosophers. Aristotle had an unconcerned approach..."The most intelligent minds are those that can entertain an idea without necessarily believing it."{Aristotle}

This perhaps is a more accurate echo of the experience of practicing hypnotherapists and hypnotists. When anyone is absorbed in rapt attention in someone else's inspiring words as they outline an idea or way of thinking, the subjective attention is held because of the logic, the
aesthetic, and the relevance of the words to one's own personal experience and motivations. In these natural trance states, just like those orchestrated purposefully by a hypnotherapist, your 'critical faculties' are naturally less active when there is less you would naturally be critical of. It is perhaps the "necessarily believing it" that is problematic, as this conception of suggestibility raises issues of the autonomy of attributing belief to an introduced idea, and how this happens.

**Suggestibility vs. susceptibility**

Popular media and layman's articles occasionally use the terms "suggestible" and "susceptible" interchangeably, with reference to the extent to which a given individual responds to incoming suggestions from another. The two terms are not synonymous however, as the latter term carries inherent negative bias absent from the neutral psychological factor described by "suggestibility."

In scientific research and academic literature on hypnosis and hypnotherapy, the term describes a neutral psychological and possibly physiological state or phenomena. This is distinct from the culturally biased common parlance of the term "suggestible." Both terms are often bound with undeserved negative social connotations not inherent in the word meanings themselves.

To be suggestible is not to be gullible. The latter pertains to an empirical objective fact that can be shown accurate or inaccurate to any observer. The former term does not. To be open to suggestion, has no bearing on the accuracy of any incoming suggestions: nor whether such an objective accuracy is possible. (As with metaphysical belief.)

Some therapists may examine worries or objections to suggestibility before proceeding with therapy: this is because some believe there is a rational or learned deliberate will to hold a belief, even in the case of more convincing new ideas, when there is a compelling cognitive reason not to 'allow oneself' to be persuaded. Perhaps this can be seen in historical cases of mass hypnosis where also there has been media suppression. In the individual, unexamined actions are sometimes described by hypno- and psycho-therapists based on outgrown belief systems.

The term "susceptible" implies weakness or some increased danger that one is more likely to become victim to and must guard against. This is supported when it is reduced to its Latin etymological origins. It therefore has a negative effect on expectation and itself is a hypnotic suggestion that suggestions must be noticed and guarded against. Hypnotic suggestions include terms, phrases, or whole concepts where to understand the concept includes making sense of a subjective sensation, or a framework for the appropriate response... simple one-word forms of this include the word terrorism where to understand the concept, one must understand the notion of terror and then understand in the sentence that it is meant to refer to "that" given object.

**Suggestibility and language acquisition**

Much of the contention and concern about suggestibility as an Achilles heel in the armour of human autonomy is unfounded. Cognition of a phrase must occur before the decision how to act next can occur: because the concepts must exist before the mind. Either they are suggested from the mind itself, or in response to introduced suggestions of concepts from outside - the world and its scenarios and facts, or suggestions from other people.

A suggestion may direct the thoughts to notice a new concept, focus on a specific area within the world, offer new perspectives that later may influence action-choices, offer triggers for automatic behaviour (such as returning a smile), or indicate specific action types. In hypnotherapy the portrayed realistic experience of the client's requested outcome is suggested with flattery or urgency, as well as personalized to the client's own motivations drives and taste.
Common experience of suggestions
Suggestions are not necessarily verbal, spoken, or read. A smile, a glare, a wink, a three-piece suit, a scientist's white coat, are all suggestive devices that imply more than the immediate action. A hypnotist uses techniques that use these instinctive "fillings-in of gaps" and changes to how we respond to a scenario or moment. In the therapy setting, a hypnotist or hypnotherapist will likely evaluate these automatic cognitive leaps, or dogma, or any self-limiting or self-sabotaging beliefs.

Being under the influence of suggestion can be characterized as exhibiting behavioral compliance without private acceptance or belief. That is, actions being inconsistent with one's own volition and belief system and natural unhindered action-motivations. This could hinder the autonomy, expression or self-determination of an individual. It could equally supersede emotions with rationally chosen, deliberate long-term results.

Experimental suggestion vs. clinical suggestion
The applications of hypnosis vary widely and investigation of responses to suggestion can be usefully separated into two non-exclusive broad divisions:

- **Experimental hypnosis**: the study of "experimental suggestion", of the form: "What is it that my group of test subjects actually do when I deliver the precise standard suggestion ABC to each of them in the same experimental context?" (i.e., given a fixed suggestion, what is the outcome?)
- **Clinical hypnosis**: the study of clinical suggestion directed at the question: "What is it that I can possibly say to this particular subject, in this specific context, to generate my goal of having them do XYZ?" (i.e., given a fixed outcome, what is the suggestion?)

Many scholars and practitioners use the wider term clinical hypnosis to distinguish clinical hypnosis in as rigorously controlled a trial setting as possible, from clinical hypnotherapy (i.e., a clinical intervention in which therapy is conducted upon a hypnotized subject).

Non-state explanations of hypnotic responsiveness
According to some theoretical explanations of hypnotic responses, such as the role-playing theory of Nicholas Spanos, hypnotic subjects do not actually enter a different psychological or physiological state; but, rather, simply acting on social pressure — and, therefore, it is easier for them to comply than to disobey. Whilst this view does not dispute that hypnotized individuals truly experience the suggested effects, it asserts that the mechanism this takes place by has, in part, been "socially constructed" and does not, therefore, require any explanation involving any sort of an "altered state of consciousness".\[2\]

Child suggestibility
When talking about suggestibility it is important to not overlook the part of the population that is the most susceptible to influence, children. Children have an ever developing mind that is constantly being filled with new information from sources all around them. Thus, researchers have identified key factors, both internal and external, that are strong markers for suggestibility in children.

Internal
- **Age**
  Children have a remarkable ability to remember events in their lives. The real variability between ages in suggestibility is the amount of detail provided for an event. Memory detail will be great for older children. The problem as it relates to suggestibility is when children, and even adults, blend previous knowledge of similar experiences into their recollection of a single event. Children, particularly younger children, are prone to including details that are
similar yet unrelated to the specific event showing that the age of a person is critical in their susceptibility to influence.

- **Prior Knowledge**
  As mentioned before, the possession of prior knowledge that relates to an event can be particularly dangerous when dealing with child suggestibility. Prior knowledge, as it relates to suggestibility is the use of past experiences to help reconstruct past or current events. Prior knowledge of an event can actually be effective at producing accurate recall of a particular situation, but can also be equally as effective at producing false memories. Research showed that when presented with a previously familiar situation, children were likely to falsely recall events as if they had happened.

- **Gist Extraction**
  Although children are extremely likely to recall false memories when past events are similar to a current event, they will also recall false memory details that are seemingly unrelated to the event. Researchers named this phenomenon global gist, which is a representation that identifies connections across multiple events. Children will falsely recall information that fits with their representation of the events around them.

**External**

- **Interviewer Bias**
  Interviewer Bias is the opinion or prejudice on the part of an interviewer, which is displayed during the interview process and thus affects the outcome of the interview. This happens when interviewers pursue only a single hypothesis that supports what they already think, and ignore any details that counter their hypothesis. The goal is not to get the truth, but simply corroborate what is already believed, and some believe this to be a necessary way of extracting information from children.

- **Repeated Questions**
  It has been shown that asking children the same question over and over again in an interview will often cause the child to reverse their first answer, especially in yes or no questions. It is the child’s belief that since the question is being repeated that they must have not answered correctly and need to change their answer.

- **Interviewer’s Tone**
  Children are extremely perceptive of people’s tones, especially in an interview situation. When an interviewer’s tone dictates the questioning, a child is likely to construct memories of past events when they actually have no memory of that event. An example would be that when a positive tone is used, it has shown to produce more detailed and accurate accounts of events. Conversely, it has also been shown to have the opposite effect and produce just a lot of false information to appease the interviewer.

- **Peer Interactions**
  Children’s accounts of events can be greatly distorted by information from their peers. In some cases, children who were not present at the time of an event will recall being at the event, and details of the events. This information most likely has come from their peers. These children also most likely speak up just so not to feel left out.

- **Repeating Misinformation**
  Repeating misinformation is simply when an interviewer gives a child incorrect details of an event. This technique is used over several interviews and occurs several times within a single interview. It has been shown to have a great effect on the accuracy of a child’s recollection of an event, and eventually, the misinformation will be included in the child’s account of a given event.
Other cases of suggestibility
It is claimed that sufferers of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) are particularly suggestible. While it is true that DID sufferers tend to score to the higher end of the hypnotizability scale, there have not been enough studies done to support the claim of increased suggestibility.

Aspects of crowd dynamics and mob behaviour, as well as the phenomenon of groupthink are further examples of suggestibility. Common examples of suggestible behavior in everyday life include "contagious yawning" (multiple people begin to yawn after observing a person yawning) and the medical student syndrome (a person begins to experience symptoms of an illness after reading or hearing about it). Placebo response is also thought to be based on individual differences in suggestibility, at least in part. Suggestible persons may be more responsive to various forms of alternative health practices that seem to rely upon patient belief in the intervention more than on any known mechanism. Studies of effects of health interventions can be enhanced by controlling for individual differences in suggestibility. A search of the Mental Measurements Yearbook shows no extant psychological test for this personality characteristic. The Gudjonsson suggestibility scale is questionable for this kind of purpose due to its narrow focus. However, see the [1] (MISS) for a recently developed self-report scale. In addition to health-related implications, persons who are highly suggestible may be prone to making poor judgments because they did not process suggestions critically and falling prey to emotion-based advertising.

Notes
1. Subjects participating in hypnotic experiments commonly report that their overt responses to test-suggestions occurred without their active volition. For example, when given a suggestion for arm levitation, hypnotic subjects typically state that the arm rose by itself – they did not feel that they made the arm rise.[2][510]

References
3. http://www.stonybrookmedicalcenter.org/psychiatry/kotov_r

Further reading
• Binet, A., "La Suggestibilité", 1900.


