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Psychology: Hypnosis a useful therapy for many problems

By SCOTT SMITH, For The Capital

As you read this you may notice that you are beginning to feel very relaxed. Your body may start to let go of all tension and your breathing may slow down to a nice rhythm, like ocean waves gently rippling into shore.

With each passing moment, your body and mind may become more and more relaxed and you may begin to feel more and more comfortable, confident and happy. Now, how do you feel?

Hypnosis is actually one of the oldest forms of psychological therapy in the world but for a variety of reasons it is also one of the most misunderstood. Due largely to stage performers and the way the mass media, such as television and movies tend to portray hypnosis, many people don't understand its therapeutic power for positive change. Because of the many myths that have been created about hypnosis it is one of the lesser utilized but more effective therapies available.

One of the greatest myths about hypnosis is that someone "takes control" of your mind and makes you "do things." This has led to disturbing beliefs that people can be hypnotized against their will and forced to do bad things or behave against their principles. In truth, all hypnosis is actually "self hypnosis" with the subject maintaining control and continuing to behave according to their core principles, morals, ethics and beliefs. People cannot be hypnotized against their will and made to do things they would not ordinarily do.

Another myth is that hypnosis is "magic" or involves outside forces beyond our control. Some fundamentalist religions have even held the mistaken belief that it "taps" into the power of other world forces and is thus not advised. In truth, hypnosis involves the heightened attention and concentration of the subject himself in order to more effectively process information and regulate thought and emotion for the desired positive outcome. In a state of heightened concentration the mind is able to eliminate distractions and "program" itself more efficiently for the desired treatment goals.

There are many ways to achieve a state of hypnosis. In fact, states similar to hypnosis occur all the time in regular, daily life. If you have ever been absorbed in a book or movie in such a way that all other thoughts and distractions were absent, you were likely in an altered state similar to hypnosis.

In this state of mind, time may seem to pass very quickly and there is a sense of focused alertness. Other activities that are deeply absorbing may reproduce similar experiences but without the added therapeutic benefit of hypnosis.

As a therapy, hypnosis helps patients use this natural human ability to their advantage and enter into a heightened state of concentration. A therapist trained in hypnosis facilitates the subject's ability to achieve a hypnotic or trance-like state. This state is comparable to that achieved during deep relaxation or meditation. In this state, the body is often relaxed with the mind focused on the pre-determined relevant, therapeutic issues.

Hypnosis has been used as a therapeutic tool for centuries but it has undergone more than its fair share of modern validation as well. It was first approved as a therapy by the American Medical Association in 1958 and later by the American Psychiatric Association in 1961. This is in light of repeated outcome studies which have shown that it is an effective therapy for a variety of problems as well as for performance enhancement and self-improvement.

One of the most well-known clinical uses of hypnosis is for the treatment of physical problems and pain. It has even been successfully used as an adjunct and sometimes even a replacement for surgical anesthesia. Meta-analysis of research on hypnosis to treat pain shows that it is useful for many types of pain and can even reduce the length of stay in the hospital by speeding up recovery after surgery. Use of hypnosis for pain relief in surgery can lead to reduced use of medication and thus fewer side effects such as nausea and drowsiness. Hypnosis is also often used to alleviate pain caused by chronic tension and migraine headaches.

Hypnosis is well known for its help with negative habit disorders related to addictions, smoking and obesity and for building positive habits such as exercising, weight loss and abstinence from drugs and alcohol. Hypnosis is a useful tool for "deprogramming" negative behaviors and "programming" healthier behaviors in their place.

Hypnosis can be very useful as an adjunct to treatment for anxiety and other distressing emotional states. In fact, the very nature of a hypnotic induction often involves achieving a deep state of relaxation which can lower blood pressure, heart rate and increase alpha brain waves.

Hypnosis can be very helpful for test anxiety, social phobia, panic disorder and other anxiety based problems. The relaxed state of hypnosis is also the perfect condition for imprinting the goals and motivations for healthier, more productive thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

It is also a good tool for working on the substrates of unhappiness and depression by using hypnosis to build a more positive sense of identity and self-esteem.

During this relaxed physical and emotional state, post-hypnotic suggestions can be made to help sustain positive behaviors. Post-hypnotic suggestions work in a similar way as to when the brain continues to work on a problem outside of immediate consciousness.

This is somewhat like the processing that goes on when you have trouble remembering something but then have the answer literally pop into your head later. Your brain kept working on the problem as you went on to other thoughts and activities.

Hypnosis can help to instill goal directed motivations and positive beliefs that continue to reside in your subconscious mind to help direct you throughout the day - and throughout your life.

While therapy is regulated through mental health licensure, the use of hypnosis as a therapeutic tool is not always regulated. In order to make use of hypnosis it is best to find a therapist who is specifically trained in the use of hypnosis as a clinical tool. This training is usually certified by reputable professional organizations like the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis or the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis.

With a well-trained therapist, the use of hypnosis can be a powerful ally in meeting therapeutic goals and in changing life for the better.

If learning how to unlock the power of your own mind in order to overcome difficulties or build healthier and happier behaviors is appealing to you, don't hesitate to seek help using hypnosis as one of your tools for self-improvement. Now, take a deep breath

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