

Hypnosis: Another way to manage pain, kick bad habits

During hypnosis, you might receive suggestions designed to decrease your perception of pain and increase your ability to cope with it. Alternatively, you might receive suggestions designed to decrease cravings.

Have you ever been totally absorbed while reading a book, cooking or watching a movie? Did you zone out to the point you didn't notice what else was going on around you? If so, you've experienced a trance-like state that's similar to what happens to you during hypnosis.

Although its medical uses aren't entirely understood, hypnosis appears to help with a variety of health conditions, when provided by a certified hypnotherapist or other qualified clinician. These range from helping to manage pain from chronic conditions to easing the symptoms of asthma to kicking bad habits like smoking.

What is hypnosis?

Hypnosis, also referred to as hypnotherapy or hypnotic suggestion, is a trance-like state of mind. It is usually achieved with the help of a hypnotherapist and is different from your everyday awareness. When you're under hypnosis:

- Your attention is more focused
- You're deeply relaxed and calm
- You're more open to suggestions, and less critical or disbelieving

The purpose of hypnosis is to help you gain more control over your behavior, emotions or physical well-being.

It's not clear how hypnosis works. Hypnotherapists say that hypnosis creates a state of deep relaxation and quiets the mind. When you're hypnotized, you can concentrate intensely on a specific thought, memory, feeling or sensation while blocking out distractions. You're more open than usual to suggestions, and this can be used to change your behavior and thereby improve your health and well-being.

Who is hypnosis for?

Hypnotherapy has the potential to help relieve the symptoms of a wide variety of diseases and conditions. It can be used independently or along with other treatments. For example, it's one of several relaxation methods for treating chronic pain that has been approved by an independent panel convened by the National Institutes of Health.

According to preliminary studies, hypnotherapy may be used to:

- Change negative behaviors, such as smoking, bed-wetting and overeating
- Reduce or eliminate fears, stress and anxiety
- Treat pain during childbirth and reduce labor time
- Control pain during dental and surgical procedures
- Relieve symptoms associated with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Lower blood pressure

- Control nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy
- Reduce the intensity or frequency of headaches, including migraines
- Treat and ease the symptoms of asthma
- Hasten the healing of some skin diseases, including warts, psoriasis and atopic dermatitis

Although hypnosis may have the potential to help with a wide variety of conditions, it's typically used as one part of a broader treatment plan rather than as a stand-alone therapy. Like any other therapy, hypnosis can be helpful to some people but not to others. It seems to work best when you're highly motivated and your therapist is well trained.

Types of hypnosis

There are a variety of hypnotic techniques. The approach you choose depends on what you want to accomplish as well as your personal preferences. Your hypnotherapist may make a recommendation regarding the best technique for your condition.

For example, in one method a hypnotherapist leads you into hypnosis by talking in a gentle, soothing tone and describing images that create a sense of relaxation, security and well-being. While you're under hypnosis, the hypnotherapist suggests ways for you to achieve specific goals, such as reducing pain or stress or helping to eliminate the cravings associated with smoking cessation.

In another technique, once you're under hypnosis, the hypnotherapist helps stimulate your imagination by suggesting specific mental images for you to visualize. This conscious creation of vivid, meaningful pictures in your mind is called mental imagery, and it's a way to help bring about what you want to achieve. For instance, hypnotherapists can help athletes visualize what they want to accomplish before they perform it physically, such as shooting baskets or hitting a golf ball.

Self-hypnosis is a third technique. A certified hypnotherapist teaches you how to induce a state of hypnosis in yourself. You then use this skill on your own to help yourself.

Although hypnotherapists, like other health care practitioners, each have their own style, expect some common elements:

- A typical session lasts from 30 to 60 minutes.
- The number of sessions can range from one to several.
- You generally bring yourself out of hypnosis at the end of a session.
- You can usually resume your daily activities immediately after a session.

Myths about hypnosis

If you've ever seen hypnotism used as entertainment in a stage act, you've probably witnessed several of the myths about hypnosis in action. Legitimate clinical hypnotherapy practiced by a qualified professional is not the same process as that performed on stage.

Myth: When you're under hypnosis, you surrender your free will.

Reality: Hypnosis is a heightened state of concentration and focused attention. When you're under hypnosis, you don't lose your personality, your free will or your personal strength.

Myth: When you're under hypnosis, the hypnotherapist controls you.

Reality: You do hypnosis voluntarily for yourself. A hypnotherapist only serves as a knowledgeable guide or facilitator.

Myth: Under hypnosis, you lose consciousness and have amnesia.

Reality: A small number of people who go into a very deep hypnotic state experience amnesia. However, most people remember everything that occurred under hypnosis.

Myth: You can be put under hypnosis without your consent.

Reality: Successful hypnosis depends on your willingness to experience it. Even with voluntary participation, not everyone can be led into a hypnotic state.

How to choose a qualified professional

Hypnosis as a practice is not regulated in most states, so it pays to be very careful when selecting a therapist. Certified lay hypnotherapists are individuals who have completed 200 or more hours of training in hypnosis but don't have additional professional health care training. Licensed health care professionals who practice hypnotherapy, such as psychologists, doctors and social workers, are trained in hypnosis in addition to their university training.

Apply the same care in choosing a hypnotherapist as you would a doctor. Ask someone you trust for recommendations. When you find a potential hypnotherapist, ask questions such as:

- Do you have training in a field such as psychology, medicine, social work or dentistry?
- Are you licensed in your specialty in this state?
- Where did you go to school, and where did you do your internship, residency or both?
- If you're a lay hypnotist, how much training have you had and from what school?
- What professional organizations do you belong to?
- How long have you been in practice?
- What are your fees? Does insurance cover your services?

Risks of hypnosis

Hypnosis conducted under the care of a trained therapist is considered a safe complementary and alternative medicine treatment. Adverse reactions, such as headache, dizziness and nausea, can happen but are uncommon.

Use special caution before allowing a hypnotherapist to help you restore lost memories. In this type of hypnosis, some people actually create "memories" from their imagination. These "implanted memories" can be very troubling to you and your loved ones. You should avoid this type of hypnosis.