Hypnosis

Tapping the power of the mind

Pocket watches and magic acts are probably two of the more common images that come to mind when you think of hypnosis. However, hypnosis has slowly gained legitimacy as a potential component of care for a number of conditions, particularly for various types of pain. The key to utilizing hypnosis for health care is to be open to its potential power while being aware of its limitations.

Hypnosis is one form of alternative therapy called "mind-body" medicine. It releases the potential of the mind to heal the body.

An altered state

It's not clear exactly how hypnosis works, but it's generally considered an altered state of consciousness — or trance — in which you have focused attention and a heightened ability to respond to helpful suggestions.

Hypnotic states may occur naturally in certain situations, such as when you're engrossed in a book, daydreaming or performing a monotonous activity. To induce one, a skilled practitioner builds a rapport, explains the process guides you to relax, let go of any fears or cynicism, and agree to proceed by focusing and following instructions.

One of the most studied and potentially beneficial areas of hypnosis is pain relief. At its extremes, hypnosis has been used as the sole means of anesthesia during major surgical procedures. More practically, it's been shown to help relieve severe, acute pain associated with childbirth, burn wounds, surgical procedures or dental pain. It can be especially helpful for people who can't take pain medications or for whom medications aren't effective.

Self-hypnosis

The effectiveness of hypnosis as a therapeutic tool hinges on tailoring therapy sessions to individual factors, including your willingness to go along with hypnosis, your therapeutic goals and your medical problem.

Individualization of therapy is one reason hypnosis from an audio recording generally isn't as effective as a session with a skilled hypnotist. Although you may be able to get into a hypnotic trance on your own, it's difficult to effectively give yourself suggestions in this state. Audio recordings that claim to hypnotize are often of limited value because they're not individualized and they can't adjust technique or suggestions based on your reactions.

Still, self-hypnosis or hypnosis from carefully selected audio recordings may help boost or reinforce suggestions from a therapist. If relaxation or brief calming of the mind is a main goal, meditation or deep-relaxation techniques can be just as effective as self-hypnosis.

A trance can be induced most quickly in people who are in severe pain. For example, a therapist may suggest that the pain will fade or that an area of pain will become numb. In some cases, hypnosis works as well as or better than pain-relieving medications.

Studies have shown that other kinds of pain — such as chronic pain associated with cancer or pain associated with tension headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, jaw (temporomandibular) joints and nerves — may be improved using hypnosis. However, a longer process may be needed to get this benefit. This may involve repeated sessions to reinforce suggestions or to train you to be able to hypnotize yourself.

Variable amounts of evidence indicate that hypnosis may be a potential component of regular therapy for many problems, including:

- Reducing anxiety, such as before surgery or before chemotherapy to reduce nausea and vomiting
- Reducing signs and symptoms of asthma and the need for asthma medications
- Reducing ringing in your ears (tinnitus)
- Quicker healing after dental procedures, injuries or hastened recovery from surgery
- Reducing the signs and symptoms of skin inflammation (dermatitis) or for making warts go away
- Stopping smoking
- Improving sexual function in men with impotence without a known organic cause

Hypnosis may also aid standard psychological treatment for problems including phobias, such as flying in a plane, anxiety and others. It also may be of modest benefit for weight loss when used as one part of a multifaceted program.

Usually safe

Hypnosis is generally considered safe, although some adverse reactions have been associated with it when hypnotists have used poor technique. Hypnotism only works when you're a compliant participant. A hypnotist can't make you do things against your will.

Medical hypnotism is often performed by a psychiatrist, psychologist or other health care professional who has had additional training in hypnosis. It's important that your therapist has experience treating the medical condition for which you're seeking help.