

REVIEW

Hypnosis in Contemporary Medicine

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Abstract

Hypnosis became popular as a treatment for medical conditions in the late 1700s when effective pharmaceutical and surgical treatment options were limited. To determine whether hypnosis has a role in contemporary medicine, relevant trials and a few case reports are reviewed. Despite substantial variation in techniques among the numerous reports, patients treated with hypnosis experienced substantial benefits for many different medical conditions. An expanded role for hypnosis and a larger study of techniques appear to be indicated.

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Synopsis:

This review pertains to the use of hypnosis for conditions not believed to be primarily psychological. Results of controlled trials, review articles and case reports are presented.

Hypnosis is described as an attentive, receptive focal concentration, with the trance state being a normal activity of a normal mind occurring regularly, as when reading an absorbing book or daydreaming.

Evaluation of hypnotic subjects by positron emission tomography (PET) show results that imply that hypnosis is not a process of simply following instructions, but actually involves a change in the brain's perception. By using electroencephalography, changes were seen during hypnosis that could not be evoked by waking imagination.

The American Psychiatric Association, in 1961, indicated that hypnosis has definite application in the various fields of medicine and in 1996, indicated that there was strong evidence for the use of hypnosis in alleviating pain associated with cancer.

Hypnosis generally is considered a benign process with few contra-indications.

Hypnosis appears to be particularly useful and yields better results when it is specifically requested; consequently, clinical trials may underestimate the benefits of hypnosis compared with those obtainable by a proficient, experienced hypnotist.

Clinical Trials of Hypnosis

Allergy: Immediate-type hypersensitivity reactions were suppressed in 66% of patients given brief direct suggestions in hypnosis.

Anesthesia for Pain Relief: A review in 2000 indicated that hypnosis offered a moderate to large analgesic effect for many types of pain, and was noted to benefit most patients.

Anesthesia for Surgery: A 1999 review of more than 1650 surgical cases using hypnosis combined with other methods for conscious sedation promoted the safety and patient comfort afforded by hypnosis. This form of anesthesia was used instead of general anesthesia for a broad range of surgical procedures. The authors concluded that hypnosis prevents pharmacological unconsciousness, allows patient participation, and may allow a faster recovery and a shorter hospital stay.

Dermatology: Direct suggestions in hypnosis on patients with predominantly refractory warts resulted in a cure rate of 80% with no recurrences. A review of the use of hypnosis in dermatology supports its value for many skin conditions not believed to be under conscious control.

Gastroenterology: Patients with irritable bowel syndrome had significant improvements in well-being, bowel habits, distention symptoms and pain, with no relapses at 18-month follow-up. Patients who were read a 5-minute script before surgery had a significantly earlier return of bowel function. They also had a shorter mean duration of hospital stay (6.6 vs 8.1 days).

Healing from surgery or injury: Patients that received positive suggestions for healing showed significantly improved healing at 1 and 7 weeks postoperatively compared with a control group that received supportive attention to the patients' concerns.

Hematology: Patients with hemophilia who were assigned to receive hypnosis had a significantly decreased need for transfusions.

Hypertension: At 6 months, a hypnosis group had mean decreases of 13.3 mm Hg systolic and 8.5 mm Hg diastolic below their baseline blood pressures.

Neurology: Hypnosis has been used successfully for treatment of headaches.

Obesity: Trials in the 1980s showed significantly greater weight loss for those treated with hypnosis and behavior therapy compared with those who received behavior therapy alone, and this effect persisted or increased with time.

Obstetrics: Hypnosis provides a significant decrease in complications, fewer surgical interventions, and a shorter hospital stay.

Oncology: Patients with metastatic breast cancer benefited from self-hypnosis with significantly less pain and an increased duration of survival.

Otorhinolaryngology: Patients with chronic tinnitus treated with hypnosis improved significantly in 7 of 10 disturbing symptoms compared with a group treated with masking techniques.

Pulmonary Medicine: A study of asthmatic patients reported 54% of patients treated with hypnosis having an "excellent" result and 21% becoming symptom free and discontinuing medication.

A 1970 study used a single 12-hour group hypnosis session for volunteer smokers who had unsuccessfully tried other methods of smoking cessation. The program achieved an 88% 1-year abstinence rate.

Rheumatology: Patients with refractory fibromyalgia (mean duration, 8.5 years) who were randomly assigned to receive hypnosis obtained significant improvement compared with those assigned randomly to physical therapy alone.

Surgery: Significant benefits of preoperative hypnosis include less anxiety and decreased blood pressure, reduced blood loss, enhanced postoperative well-being, improved intestinal motility, shorter hospital stay, reduced postoperative nausea and vomiting, and reduced need for analgesics.

Urology: A review of the personal experience and techniques of an experienced practitioner cited an 88% success rate using hypnosis for impotence in almost 3000 patients.

In a trial of hypnosis for chronic (mean, 7 years) urinary incontinence, at 1 month 58% were symptom-free and another 28% were improved, with cystometric testing at 3 months objectively confirming the benefits.

Conclusion

Many important trials reviewed here have helped to establish the utility and efficacy of hypnosis for several medical conditions, either alone or as part of the treatment regimen.

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