

Using Hypnosis To Help People With Pain

November 30, 2008 --

Cynthia Bailey, MA, is a counselor who specializes in using hypnosis and relaxation techniques to help people with chronic pain. We first met her at the 2008 Conquer Chiari Research Conference, where her intellect and enthusiasm were readily apparent. Cynthia agreed to go In The Spotlight:

As a counselor, how did you first become interested in hypnosis?

As a graduate student my advisor shared the power hypnosis had on alleviating his chronic migraines when other treatments had failed. My goal as a clinician is to help people, and hypnosis was presented as an effective means for providing relief from symptoms. I believe that a person's mind is very powerful and influential on the physical body, teaching hypnosis is a way to tap into that resource.

What is hypnosis, or a hypnotic state?

Hypnosis is a mind/body healing technique with known physiological effects. Hypnosis is a state of inner absorption, concentration, and focused attention. When our mind is concentrated and focused we are able to use more of our potential and more of the power of our mind. All hypnosis is self-hypnosis so once learned the person has the power to use and practice at later times, it then becomes second nature.

So is hypnosis different from meditation?

In my experience they are more similar than they are different. The practice of either can enhance the psychological and physical wellbeing of the person. The literature demonstrates that the same part of the brain, the anterior cingulate cortex, is utilized when practicing hypnosis and meditation.

What types of problems can you treat with this approach?

Personally I have treated clients that suffer from chronic pain, depression and panic attacks. Other clinicians use it to treat people suffering from chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, dermatologic disorders, anesthesia for surgery, childbirth, symptoms from chemotherapy, anxiety, anger, trauma, acute pain, burns, allergies, sleep disorders, smoking cessation, and weight loss.

What specific techniques would you apply for helping people with chronic pain?

When treating chronic pain the goal is to change the sufferer's perception of the pain. Personally I have begun with teaching muscle relaxation. This is followed with analgesia suggestions that can be used to "turn off" the pain, or the use of images. For instance the clinician may suggest the patient change the "color" of the pain. These suggestions are taught and then the patient should practice them at home to feel relief.

Are there any predictors for whether this will work for a specific person?

Each person experiences hypnosis differently. There are instruments that can be used to assess hypnotic ability however this does not predict the treatment outcome. A powerful predictor for symptom relief is a person's willingness to practice and participate in treatment and the relationship the person has with his or her clinician.

Is there any published research that hypnosis can help with chronic pain?

Yes, there is an abundant amount of literature that demonstrates the efficacy of hypnosis in treating chronic pain.

Research has shown that chronic pain can have a physiological impact on the brain. Do you think treatments such as hypnosis and meditation can mitigate or reverse this? Yes, since pain experiences can be etched into the brain and then re-experienced by stress or memories the neuroplasticity of the brain is modified through the experience of pain. Since hypnosis can diminish pain responses, the sensory aspect of pain and the suffering component can be modified, thus changing the effect of pain on the tissues and neurons.

You recently attended the Conquer Chiari research conference. What is your interest in Chiari? I am interested in treatment outcomes as well as the other factors that may exacerbate the pain symptoms for a person with Chiari, such as anxiety, depression, coping style, and other stressors in the person's life. It is curious that symptoms are not always contingent on the amount of herniation a person experiences.

Do you hope to try these techniques on people with Chiari? I would like the opportunity to treat a person with Chiari.

If a Chiari patient is interested in hypnosis for pain, how should they go about finding someone to help them? I would suggest finding a clinician through the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH). This is a reputable organization that trains and accredits clinicians. The website also has a lot of information that patients may find helpful. Their website is www.asch.net

Is hypnosis something that is licensed? No, however clinicians can receive certification through ASCH.

What should a patient expect to pay? Price is contingent on the area and clinician. Insurance may or may not cover it. In my experience, a clinician may charge anywhere from \$80-250 per session.

Is there anything a patient should look out for to indicate a practitioner may be taking advantage of them? Yes, a clinician that facilitates hypnosis should be competent in general considerations of the problem. A patient should beware of lay hypnotists that do not have a Masters or Doctoral level degree. While in a hypnotic state a person will not do anything that he or she would not normally do, so a

clinician does not have the power to take advantage or manipulate a patient in any extraordinary way. Also, a person cannot get stuck in hypnosis, despite footage from movies. Hypnosis is not related to gullibility, low intelligence, hysteria or any negative traits, in fact hypnotic ability tends to favor intelligent people with high empathy and creativity.

Does this type of pain management work well in conjunction with other treatments? Hypnosis can be used with cognitive behavioral therapy. Other treatments that strengthen the mind/ body treatments are biofeedback, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). I suggest the use of muscle relaxation for any person suffering from pain, when in pain our bodies tense up and we are acutely aware of the pain. I suggest breathing, relaxing, and refocusing which is essentially what is taught in hypnosis. Ultimately, the pain will still be there however it does not have to rule the person's life.