

## Hypnotic Cognitive Therapy For Chronic Pain

Because there is limited research on Chiari, sometimes it can be beneficial to look at studies on populations with similar symptoms or issues. With that in mind, a group of psychologists recently reported success in reducing pain levels of spinal cord injury patients using what they called hypnotic cognitive therapy. Spinal cord injuries are a reasonable substitute for Chiari given that they both involve damage to the nervous system and often result in chronic, neuropathic pain.

The study recruited 23 adult participants who experienced pain daily for at least six months that was due to a spinal cord injury. The participants underwent 4 weekly sessions and were asked to practice certain things on their own daily. Different types of cognitive based therapy have been shown to be beneficial in helping people cope with chronic pain. In fact, Conquer Chiari has sponsored studies which showed that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) – which is a form of cognitive therapy – helped Chiari patients accept their pain and become more engaged in daily activities. Hypnotic cognitive therapy, according to the authors, aims to amplify the lasting effects of cognitive therapy by delivering it to people in a hypnotic, or relaxed, state.

The hypnotic part of this treatment involved a triggering event which was a “deep, satisfying breath” followed by a guided relaxation of each part of the body. Finally, participants were told to visualize themselves going down 10 floors in an elevator to a favorite place which they had previously described. Once the participants were in a relaxed state, each week involved a different cognitive message, or focus, such as accepting uncertainty around their pain, helpful versus unhelpful thoughts, and visualizing yourself in the future with reduced pain. The hypnotic part of the first session was recorded and sent to each subject, who were asked to listen to it at least once a day and then in addition try to put themselves in a relaxed state for 5 minutes several times a day (using the triggering breath) without the help of the recording.

Pain was assessed at the start of the study, after the 4-week treatment, and at a 12-week follow-up using a numeric scale of 1-10. The researchers also measured depression, sleep, and several other factors. After the 4-week intervention, participants reported an average reduction in pain level of 27%. At a 12 week follow-up, this had increased to 31%. At the 12-week mark 38% of the participants had experienced at least a 30% reduction in pain intensity. In addition, there was a significant decrease in depression levels and a significant improvement in sleep. Finally, 91% of those in the study reported they were satisfied with the treatment. Interestingly, the treatments were delivered remotely through Zoom and the researchers showed that this was just as effective as a similar study which was done in-person.

It should be noted that 12 weeks is not a long follow-up period, so it is not clear if the gains fade over time. It is also important to point out that the main researcher has a financial interest in the success of this type of therapy through a company he has equity in. Still, given the huge need in the Chiari community for any type of therapies to help with chronic pain, this one might be worth investigating further.

**Source:** The efficacy, safety, and satisfaction of telehealth-delivered hypnotic cognitive therapy for chronic pain in spinal cord injury: A pilot study with historical controls. Bombardier CH, Chan JF, Stensland E, Barber J, Jensen MP. J Spinal Cord Med. 2024 Sep 3:1-12. doi: 10.1080/10790268.2024.2395080. Online ahead of print. PMID: 39225543

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