

Hypnosis for Health by Dr. Andrew Weil

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Three weeks before my daughter's birth, I asked hypnotherapist Steve Gurgevich, PhD, a friend and colleague, to do a session with my then wife Sabine. The baby was in a posterior position (her spine against Sabine's spine) at the time, which can cause long, painful labor. Steve did an hour long session, encouraging Sabine to talk with the baby, asking her to turn around before the beginning of labor and help make the labor quick. When the session ended, Sabine was very relaxed. Not much later, Sabine suddenly clutched her belly and bent over. "I think the baby's turning," she said. Later that day, our midwife examined Sabine and reported the baby was now in an anterior position (her spine against Sabine's belly), having turned within 20 minutes of being asked to do so. The baby came right on her due date, and labor lasted a mere two hours and six minutes.

Hypnotherapy in which practitioners encourage patients to enter a trance, a state of heightened suggestibility, to promote physical or emotional health doesn't always have such dramatic or immediate effects. Yet, I've seen this mind-body approach produce excellent results in many illnesses, from eczema and irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) to back pain and panic attacks. While you're in a state of trance, the practitioner offers suggestions tailored to your specific needs. For example, he may suggest that a person with IBS picture the wavelike motions of their digestive system slowing down and becoming smoother to reduce cramping and diarrhea. Your unconscious mind can then transmit these thoughts and images throughout your mind and body, influencing them in ways that seem impossible in ordinary states of consciousness.

Hypnotherapy is increasingly being used in mainstream medicine, thanks to mounting evidence that it works, as well as research showing how the human brain responds to hypnosis. Researchers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute found that during a hypnotic state aimed at pain control, the brain's prefrontal cortex (Which controls concentration) directed other areas of the brain to inhibit the perception of pain.

Hypnosis Offers a Host of Health Benefits

Below are some conditions that hypnotherapy can help, usually as part of a broader treatment plan. A typical course of hypnotherapy may require one to five visits. Your health insurance may cover this if it's performed by an MC, a PhD, a dentist, or a licensed social worker. Once the practitioner has taught you how to access the trance state on your own, you can start using self-hypnosis on a regular basis to maintain or improve health.

Gastrointestinal Disorders

Several studies show that hypnotherapy can benefit people with IBS, whose symptoms include abdominal pain, bloating, and changes in bowel habits. In a recent study, 204 IBS patients attended 12 one hour hypnotherapy sessions. Seventy-one percent reported improvement in symptoms after the hypnotherapy course. Of those 81 percent maintained their improvement up to five years (Gut, November 2003). This therapy also shows promise for treating functional dyspepsia, a type of chronic indigestion. In a British trial, 126 patients received one of three treatments regular hypnotherapy sessions, psychological counseling, or the acid suppressing drug Zantac for 16 weeks. Even 40 weeks after treatment ended, the hypnotherapy group still had fewer symptoms like nausea and bloating, needed less medication, and had fewer doctors' visits than those in the other two groups (Gastroenterology, December 2002).

Skin Conditions

Research suggests that hypnotherapy can be helpful in treating a wide range of skin conditions, including dermatitis, eczema, psoriasis, rosacea, and warts. In a six week trial, people with warts on their hands or feet who attended twice weekly hypnotherapy sessions lost significantly more warts than those who used topical salicylic acid (a standard treatment for warts), a topical placebo, or no treatment.

Surgical Patients

A meta analysis of 20 controlled studies found that patients who received hypnotherapy before or during surgery fared better than 89 percent of patients in control groups. Among the benefits were reduced anxiety, pain, and postoperative nausea and vomiting, less blood loss, and shorter hospital stays (Anesthesia and Analgesia, June 2002).

Pain

In another meta analysis of 18 studies, hypnosis relieved pain in 75 percent of the people studied (International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis, April 2000). I often recommend this therapy as part of an integrative treatment program for chronic pain conditions like fibromyalgia, arthritis, headache, and back or neck pain.

Cancer Patients

Research shows that cancer patients who receive hypnotherapy prior to or during chemotherapy sessions have less nausea and vomiting afterward. Plus, a National Institutes of Health panel found strong evidence that it can relieve some pain associated with cancer.

Pregnancy and Childbirth

Several studies have found that hypnotherapy can reduce morning sickness and it's been used for more than a century to control pain during labor and delivery. Also, there's some evidence that it can shorten labor time and help turn babies from the breech (bottom down) position to the proper (head down) position.

Allergies and Autoimmunity

There are many disorders marked by overactive immune function, including allergies, asthma, and autoimmune diseases such as lupus, multiple sclerosis, and rheumatoid arthritis. A hypnotherapist can offer suggestions and images designed to restore balance to the immune system, and I've found this approach can help ease symptoms in many patients with these conditions.

Anxiety and Phobias

As a form of relaxation training, hypnotherapy has proven effective in treating anxiety, panic disorder, and phobias. Some health plans have begun covering it to treat post traumatic stress disorder.

Weight Control

Studies show that adding hypnotherapy to cognitive behavioral treatments for weight reduction can increase the chances of losing weight and keeping it off. While hypnotherapy won't magically melt pounds, it can be helpful for reinforcing motivation, and for helping people change their behavior and attitudes about eating and physical activity.