
Medical Hypnosis in the Hospital

by Gérard V. Sunnen, M.D.

[BACK TO HOME](#)

Hypnosis has many applications for relieving distress in hospitalized patients. Gérard V. Sunnen, M.D., a psychiatrist and hypnotherapist, describes the ways in which hypnotic techniques can help patients undergo medical procedures, surgery, and rehabilitation therapy and cope with life-threatening illness. Sunnen cites evidence from the research literature of the benefits of hypnosis for hospitalized patients with medical conditions and presents several case illustrations.--Editor, Journal of the Institute for the Advancement of Health

Hospitalization, even with all available medical technology, remains a trying experience. The same concerns, apprehensions, and fears exist today as they did centuries ago in the face of dangers to well-being and sometimes to life itself. The psychological well-being of hospitalized patients is, therefore, not only for humane considerations but also for reasons connected to health and recovery: patients may do better when undergoing procedures, recovering from operations, or surmounting the side effects of treatments if they are relaxed, rested, and feeling hopeful.

Hypnosis is a process by which an individual is guided from his or her usual state of consciousness to a condition that is marked by psychological and physical relaxation; altered perceptions such as the slowing down of time or a change in one's body image; and a shift from analytic to synesthetic thinking, that is, the mind shows less dependence on logic and a greater receptivity to sensations and feelings. The resulting change in perception and thinking is known as a trance. The nature of the trance state varies from one individual to another.

The ability of hypnosis to induce deep multilevel relaxation, to quell anticipatory anxiety, to increase tolerance to adverse stimuli, and to intensify affirmative imagery can be adapted to the hospital setting for maximizing the mind's contribution to healing.

Hypnosis has recently seen a resurgence in its medical applications, with increasing sophistication in the ways it has been used for many clinical problems, in and out of the hospital.(1) Equally important, modern hypnotists, in contrast to earlier ones who tended to be authoritarian in their approach, encourage patients to determine the nature of their own experiences, that is, to develop their unique potential in their trance.

They are also mindful of psychodynamic considerations. Thus, they use permissive and often frankly meditative methods and function as a guide to point the way to conditions of consciousness that are conducive to psychological adjustment and growth.(2)

Hypnosis in Special Procedures

Procedures performed under local anesthesia with or without sedation are often anticipated by the patient with the same apprehension as those requiring general anesthesia. The idea of being conscious during a procedure may be reassuring in one respect and unsettling in another. On one hand, the patient's sense of control is maintained; on the other hand, the patient may feel uncertain as to how he or she will deal with the experience. Even a simple procedure, like a spinal tap, can be approached with dramatic imagery: the mental picture of a needle may be much larger than the actual size of the needle. Similar distortions may also occur with regard to other procedures, such as cardiac catheterization, bone marrow biopsy, or sigmoidoscopy.

The anticipatory anxiety generated by the patient's fantasies about a procedure should not be neglected. It can turn a routine stay in the hospital into a nightmarish experience and negatively sensitize the patient to future hospitalizations.

The following case history illustrates some of the principles of hypnosis when used in the hospital with certain medical procedures:

A 52-year old woman who had never been hospitalized was admitted for workup of a lung shadow. She was to undergo a bronchoscopic examination the following day. When she became agitated and highly anxious, a consultation was requested. Hurriedly wiping away some traces of tears to appear more presentable, she looked distraught and restless in her bed. Anticipation of the procedure, which had been explained to her in a cursory and hurried fashion, had left her in a state of panic. She imagined a large, cold, straight metallic tube being pushed into her throat and saw herself in the agonies of choking. Yet, on another level, she spoke amazingly candidly and rationally: "Doctor, I've been a smoker for many years. I think tomorrow they will find that I have cancer. But I think I can come to terms with it." The procedure was explained once more to her. The tube was described--a picture of it was even drawn--as flexible and as leaving plenty of space for air to pass. She was told that the more relaxed she would be, the more easily air could pass. The benefits of deep, autonomic nervous system relaxation were evident to her, and she heartily agreed to attempt a hypnotic experience.

