

Medical uses of hypnosis

Imagine that when you eat, you feel satisfied sooner and therefore lose weight more rapidly. Imagine that the pain after heart-bypass or dental surgery feels merely like mild pressure. Imagine that your skin rash is clearing up. Recent clinical studies suggest that hypnosis—a form of deeply imagining desired results—can indeed help motivated people accomplish those health goals.

• **Control pain and speed recovery.** A June 2002 meta-analysis in the journal *Anesthesia and Analgesia* evaluated the results of 20 studies that matched patients treated with standard pain medicines with those who also underwent hypnosis before procedures ranging from breast biopsy to heart-bypass surgery. Hypnotized patients had less pain, less use of pain medication, and faster recovery time than most of the patients in control groups. But hypnotized patients needed to cooperate and listen to tapes at home. In one study, hypnotized heart-bypass patients who didn't do their self-hypnosis exercises had poorer outcomes than the control group did.

• **Relieve gastrointestinal problems.** Hypnosis may help patients with chronic dyspepsia, or indigestion, more than heartburn medicine. A randomized, placebo-controlled clinical study of 126 patients found that hypnotized patients did better overall, required less medication, and had fewer doctors' visits than patients on ranitidine (*Zantac*) or a placebo. In another study, researchers reported that hypnotherapy helped patients with irritable bowel syndrome.

• **Speed weight loss (but not conquer smoking).** Studies have consistently shown that adding hypnosis to cognitive-behavioral treatments for weight reduction increases the chances of short-term success. Over as many as 48 months, hypnotized patients lost more than dou-

ble the amount of weight that patients lost in a program without a hypnosis component. Hypnosis is not, however, particularly efficacious for smoking cessation, according to a review of 59 studies published in 2000. "Many people simply are expecting that something magical is going to happen to them when they're hypnotized," says Steven Jay Lynn, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the State University of New York, Binghamton, who conducted the meta-analysis. But stopping smoking still requires hard work and determination on the part of the patient.

• **Clear up your skin problems.** Hypnosis may help a wide range of skin disorders, reducing the severity of psoriasis, rashes, and warts, probably by suppressing the immune system. Such benefits typically require multiple visits to the hypnotist and regular self-hypnosis to help keep the immune system in check.

HOW IT WORKS

Hypnosis induces a state of high suggestibility. The suggestions that you're given while in a very relaxed state can be used to affect physiological processes normally not under conscious control. Mehmet Oz, M.D., a heart surgeon who co-founded the Complementary Care

Center at New York-Presbyterian Medical Center, uses suggestions designed to relax patients and assure them that they're on the mend. "Feel new strength flowing through you...strong new cells weaving themselves into place...nutrients going directly to the places that are mending," says a follow-up tape that Dr. Oz gives to patients.

People who are interested in the therapy and are also imaginative, trusting, and able to focus their attention may be the best candidates. Of the dozen experts we spoke with, many said that if you sign up for hypnosis, you should be conscientious about doing self-hypnosis exercises and listening to the tapes. Noncompliant patients sometimes do worse than patients who receive standard care, possibly because they're uncomfortable taking responsibility for their own healing.

Hypnotherapy is nontoxic, and side effects are rare: chiefly headache or lingering relaxation that can affect reflexes and concentration. These can typically be corrected with a return visit.

The therapy may be worth a try for those who can find a qualified and experienced practitioner and are willing to shoulder the costs, which may not be covered by insurance. ■

How to find a hypnotherapist

When you're looking for an experienced and qualified practitioner, start by asking your physician or inquiring at a complementary center that's attached to a hospital.

Keep in mind that states do not license hypnotists, so you need to inquire about training and experience. A hospital affiliation indicates the person has been professionally screened. The following organizations can help you

find hypnotherapists nationwide:

- The American Psychological Association. For referrals, call 800-964-2000. For hypnosis information, go to www.apa.org/divisions/div30/.
- The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis. For referrals or for more information, go to www.asch.net.
- The Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis. For referrals, send an e-mail to sceh@mspp.edu.