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Eliminating Fears, Phobias, and Anxiety Using Hypnosis

For centuries hypnosis has been a heavily debated subject, and due to its mysterious element, several misconceptions have arisen. These misconceptions include: hypnosis is a form of mind control or brainwashing; a person can be made to do or say anything while under hypnosis; when a person is hypnotized they are in a state of unawareness and do not remember anything, and a person can become stuck in hypnosis and never wake up. All of these however are not true. In fact, “hypnosis can be used to improve your general functioning and make you feel better mentally and physically” (Hadley 16).

Much to people’s surprise hypnosis is not a new practice. Hypnosis, in one form or another, has been used in civilized and uncivilized cultures since the dawn of time. Ancient cultures such as the Assyro-Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, and Chinese have all used some form of hypnosis. However, the generally accepted beginning of hypnosis came from the work of an Australian doctor named Franz Anton Mesmer during the 1700s (Cheek 3). Mesmer used the ancient shaman practice of engaging his patients “in a powerful process of visualization and suggestion during which he willed them to be healed” (Hadley 14). Mesmer literally ‘mesmerized’ his patients into the belief and expectation that they would be cured. However, it wasn’t until the late 1800’s that an English physician named James Braid gave mesmerism a scientific explanation. He believed mesmerism to be a ‘nervous sleep’ and coined the word ‘hypnosis’ which is derived from the Greek word ‘hypnos’ meaning sleep (Hadley 16). Braid

showed that hypnotized subjects are often times abnormally susceptible to impressions on the senses. Also, that much of their behavior is due to suggestions made verbally. In nineteenth century France, researchers Auguste Ambroise Leibeault and Hippolyte Bernheim were the first to regard hypnosis as a normal phenomenon (Hadley 16). They found that expectation is the most important factor in the induction of hypnosis and that suggestibility is its essential indicator.

Despite these discoveries the field of hypnosis still received much criticism from medical and scientific fields alike. The evidence presented for hypnosis was usually in the form of a clinical case history, which was unconvincing to skeptical scientists who required well-documented laboratory experimentation as a criterion of validity (Cheek 3). It wasn't until the 1950's that hypnosis experienced a rebirth (Hadley 16). During this decade researchers found new and important uses for hypnosis in therapy. Today, the trance state is being recognized as an effective tool for modifying behavior and healing. "Once the scientific method has been applied to hypnosis, it has been shown to be increasingly effective in a wider variety of maladies than anyone ever thought possible" (Marcuse). David L. Cheek and Ernest L. Rossi, authors of Mind-Body Therapy, report "the recent data and theories emerging in the field of hypnosis may enable the true-believing clinician and the skeptical laboratory researcher to join hands at last in a united effort to create a new science of mind-body healing" (3).

Hypnosis is commonly used to change behavior. In an interview with Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist Laurie Miller, she described hypnosis as "a natural state of mind, not a state of sleep, that can produce extraordinary levels of relaxation of the body, mind, and emotions. The principles and theories upon which hypnotherapy are based are accessing and utilizing the power of one's inner resources". Forbes Robbins Blair, author of Instant Self – Hypnosis, says that "hypnosis is a state of narrowed attention in which suggestibility is greatly heightened" (19).

Therefore, hypnosis is the best method for helping people overcome fears and phobias as well as helping people reduce anxiety.

There has always been a question about hypnosis's fundamental nature and if hypnosis really produces healing at the physiological level within the body or if its therapeutic effects are merely the result of suggestion. Ernst and Josephine Hilgard, authors of Hypnosis in the Relief of Pain, explain that "hypnosis and suggestibility are closely related, although not necessarily the same" (16). Susceptibility to suggestion is greatly increased during hypnosis, which is one of the primary reasons for using hypnosis. There are four types of suggestion: verbal, nonverbal, intraverbal, and extraverbal (Kroger 12). William S. Kroger and William D. Fezler, authors of Hypnosis and Behavior Modification, say that "suggestibility refers to a suggested act that is uncritically carried out without the individual's logical process participating in the response. Suggestibility is potentiated whenever an individual repetitively hears any one of the four types of suggestions, either singularly or in combination, that is, by progressive contiguity"(13). The greater your suggestibility is, the easier you will be able to be hypnotized. It is interesting however that "although hypnosis is commonly induced with suggestions for relaxation and even sleep, brain activity in hypnosis more closely resembles that of a person who is awake" (Kihlstrom).

"The main difficulty in the widespread use of hypnosis involves the problem of hypnotizability in patients" (Marcuse). In an article titled "Hypnosis and Health", author John F. Kihlstrom observed that "cross-sectional studies of different age groups show a developmental curve, with very young children relatively unresponsive to hypnosis and hypnotizability reaching a peak at about the onset of adolescence". This means that not all hypnotic treatments can be

universally applied to the same degree of effectiveness. However, after you have been hypnotized once you are more susceptible to being hypnotized again.

“A typical hypnosis session begins with an induction procedure in which the person is asked to focus his or her eyes on a fixation point, relax, and concentrate on the voice of the hypnotist”(Kihlstrom). The induction is what produces or causes the hypnotic state. There are several different kinds of inductions, varying in time, approach, length, and tone. “The language of an induction is designed to communicate opinions, thoughts, and feelings. It focuses your attention on yourself, your inner experiences, and your body. It helps you to become absorbed into the realm of imagination and to communicate below the level of consciousness” (Hadley 28). This enables people to see the true cause of their fears and anxieties.

Anxiety, fears, and phobias are the most prevalent psychological disturbances in our society today. A vast majority of the population experience either some form of fear or anxiety. Although interconnected, anxieties, fears, and phobias are all distinctly different from one another. Anxiety is the feeling of apprehension and fear characterized by physical symptoms such as [palpitations](#), sweating, or feelings of [stress](#). Surprisingly enough, anxiety often rises out of the thought of potential danger rather than the actual danger. Fear is when you feel afraid, anxious, or apprehensive about a possible or probable situation or event. Lastly, a phobia is an uncontrollable, irrational, and persistent fear of a specific object, situation, or activity. Ronald A. Kleinknecht, author of [The Anxious Self](#), wrote about the positive and negative effects of fears and anxieties. He said that although “the emotional experience of fear and anxiety can at times be exceedingly restrictive and can impair or hinder performance, at other times it is of great value in avoiding harm and can serve as an important source of motivation” (44).

The causes of fear and anxiety can be anything from classical conditioning, a person's environment, or genetics. The behavioral school of psychology believes that phobias or fears develop through a process of conditioning or learning and that they can be reconditioned or unconditioned through the processes of behavioral therapy (Zane 111). Another theory was proposed by Dr. Eysenck who stated that fears are derived from intuitive reactions, which were used by primitive man in dealing with life-threatening situations that he encountered in his natural environment.

Hypnosis works to decrease a person's anxiety as well as rid people of their fears in several different ways. One of these methods is behavior modification, which "has come to be a term for the application of learning principles to changing behavior in desirable directions" (Hilgard 55). Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist Laurie Miller said that she uses hypnosis to help people overcome fears by "working at it from two directions. First, in order to create change you have to be able to create the positive outcome in your mind. Second, is addressing the source of the issue". She also went on to describe how she helped a client overcome a fear of lizards. Her client was getting ready to go on a trip to Mexico and knew that she would be confronted with lizards. Therefore, she sought out hypnosis to help overcome her fear. During one session the client was told to search her mind for the cause of her fear, and realized that her fear of lizards had come from her brother putting a lizard in her hair when she was younger. Knowing the cause of the fear Laurie was able to use hypnosis to place her patient in the mind frame of the lizard while in her hair. When her patient realized how terrifying the experience must have been for the lizard she was able to overcome her fear. This story is a prime example of another method known as age regression, which is when you identify the specific event that caused the fear and sever all emotional ties to it.

Another technique hypnotherapists use to rid people of fears and anxieties is pair bonding, which is when you pair a past positive experience with the present negative experience that causes the fear (Hadley 103). Operate conditioning is another method that can be used. Operate Conditioning strives for an appropriate balance between reinforcement and extinction so that behavior can be shaped and made to move in a desirable direction. However, not all people will have the same results. “One individual may get rid of a lifelong fear in a relatively short period of time; another person with the same fear may need to work on stress and self-esteem in addition to treating the fear itself, taking incremental steps to achieve complete elimination of the phobia” (Hadley 8).

It is also important to remember that a phobia may have a deep emotional origin and treating it may bring other emotional problems to the surface. For example, a woman named Jenna was very shy and did not like social gatherings because they made her anxious. After several social gatherings, which she perceived as torturous, she developed a fear of driving at night. This fear allowed her to escape from most forms of social activity. Using hypnosis, a hypnotherapist would reveal the true cause of Jenna’s fear of driving at night and then have her face that fear. In Jenna’s case it would be having her overcome her dislike of going to social gatherings. Hypnosis helps people by taking them back to the origin of their fear so they can release it. In the book, Hypnosis for Change, the authors John Hadley and Carol Staudacher describe it perfectly by saying that hypnosis helps “by reprogramming your subconscious using a positive posthypnotic suggestion in regard to your specific fear”(103). Furthermore, hypnosis can be used to instill self-confidence in a person so they are better equipped to overcome their fear or phobia. “A therapist may also use hypnosis to give authoritative suggestions to a patient. The patient may, for example, be directed under hypnosis to feel calm and free of fear when he

enters the phobic situation, or he may be instructed to observe a snake or dog as a harmless creature, or he may be given instructions which are designed to counteract the frightening perceptions and imaginings which he has in the phobic situation” (Zane 132).

Since many people develop anxiety as a result of a fear or phobia, hypnosis is used similarly for the treatment of anxiety. Hypnotic inductions help people with anxiety to relax, replace irrational beliefs with new responses, and release anxious feelings. “Anxiety can be managed as long as your thoughts about difficult situations are realistic and accurate” (Hadley 212). Hypnosis equips people with the skills to help their bodies respond calmly to seemingly frightening situations, and teaches them to replace catastrophic thoughts with truthful statements that explain the nature of the symptoms.

Hypnosis has proven to be a very effective way to help people overcome their fears and phobias and decrease their anxieties. As you have seen, the field of hypnosis has greatly evolved and is now becoming a more respected and widely used technique for behavior modification. The only limitation to the effectiveness of hypnosis is a client’s willingness to accept change. When a person has a secondary gain, which means a person is benefitting from their fear, they have to work harder to obtain positive results. For example, someone who has a fear of leaving the house never has to work or run errands. Similarly, a person who is afraid of heights may thrive off the attention that it brings to them. However, in most cases hypnosis has proven to be an extremely effective tool for creating change. In order for the field of hypnosis to advance the general public and medical doctors alike need to be properly educated about the value of hypnotherapy in augmenting wellness. Another important step for the field of hypnosis would be having hypnotherapy covered by medical insurance just as chiropractic and acupuncture visits

are, because it is clear that hypnosis offers the most beneficial results in helping people overcome fear, phobias, and anxieties.