

Hypnosis: not just a party trick essay sample

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Hypnosis. When many people think of it, they imagine it as a fun and entertaining activity for a party along with magicians, comedians, and karaoke. They think of it as a tool that unscrupulous characters employ, like the antique dealer in the 1991 movie *Dead Again* who used it to regress people to remember past lives so he could locate and steal heirlooms. In spite of hypnosis's popular reputation as entertainment or as a tool of quacks and dodgy characters, in reality it is a valuable therapeutic method employed to help with a variety of problems such as ending harmful personal habits like smoking to controlling symptoms of physical maladies like pain associated with cancer treatment.

The history of hypnosis as a legitimate psychological treatment follows the trajectory of psychiatry and psychology gaining legitimacy as science advancing through the 20th century. An article in an 1885 issue of the journal *Science* discusses psychology's move from the "popular and literary stage to the technical," using hypnosis as a prime example of a technique that began to attract serious psychological attention and experimentation at the turn of the century (S. E. 1885, p. 504). In her book *Before Freud: Hysteria and Hypothesis in Later Nineteenth-Century Psychiatric Cases*, Lilian Furst describes the difficulty these 19th century psychologists encountered in having their practices, theories, and experimental evidence accepted as science. People who treated mentally ill patients were pejoratively labeled "Mad doctors, alienists, and nerve doctors" although it "gradually became clear that psychology was inescapable" when it came to diagnosing and treating mental illness (Berthoff 2010, p. 146, emphasis hers). Since those veritable dark ages for psychology, a multitude of studies have

demonstrated that psychological therapies like hypnosis are useful and have sound science behind them.

Hypnosis is now a well-known and reputable therapeutic technique that can be done with a therapist or even practiced as self-hypnosis. Contrary to popular belief, hypnotherapy is not used so that the hypnotist can gain control over a patient's will and mind, but to "teach people how to master their own states of awareness" ("Hypnotherapy" n. d.). During hypnosis, a patient will become very relaxed, heart rate and blood pressure drops, and brain wave activity may change; at the same time, the patient feels mentally awake ("Hypnotherapy" n. d.). The University of Maryland Medical Center identifies six stages a patient goes through during hypnotherapy. These include reframing the problem, becoming relaxed, then absorbed, dissociating, responding, returning to usual awareness, and reflecting on the experience ("Hypnotherapy" n. d.). Each hypnotherapy session lasts for about an hour; adults typically experience positive results in an average of four to ten sessions, while children under 12 may experience positive results in only one or two sessions since children are more easily hypnotized ("Hypnotherapy" n. d.).

Dr. Deirdre Barrett, a clinical assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, has used hypnotherapy on thousands of people as part of therapy and research on the subject of hypnosis. Part of her research involves what type of people are most easily hypnotized, and she dispels some myths about the type of person who can easily be hypnotized. "Can you be hypnotized? Most people like to think that they can't," Barrett writes, "There is often the suspicion that being hypnotized could label them as being weak-willed, naïve

or unintelligent” (2001, p. 2). However, contrary to this suspicion, Barrett finds that hypnotizability aligns with focus, concentration, and intelligence (2001, p. 2). Another myth Barrett dispels is that of the hypnotist using a swinging gold pocket watch. Instead, she says, “ we ask clients to gaze at a steady object to block distracting visual stimuli” (Barrett 2001, p. 1). In an anecdote about a hypnotherapy session in which a female patient’s psychotherapist wished to observe the procedure, Barrett induces the woman into hypnosis, then realizes that the psychotherapist has also succumbed to the hypnotherapy induction (2001, pp. 1-2). Even to an experienced hypnotherapist, the power of hypnosis induction can be surprising.

Hypnotherapy has many current well-known applications. A patient can be guided by a therapist or a can be trained to practice self-hypnosis. According to the University of Maryland Medical Center, conditions that patients have that can benefit from hypnotherapy treatment include tension headaches, asthma, phobias, insomnia, bedwetting, addictions, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, labor and delivery, stress, tinnitus, skin disorders like acne, psoriasis, and eczema, cancer related pain, alopecia areata, weight loss, eating disorders, and more (n. d.). Occasionally, law enforcement is able to use hypnosis to help gain testimony from witnesses, however there are strict rules regarding the admissibility of such evidence in court (R. T. C. 1981, p. 1203). This is because of the risk of development of false memories, referred to as confabulations.

In recent years, hypnotherapy and its possible therapeutic effects are under continual investigation by researchers. A 1996 study by Whitehouse et al. examined what effects hypnotherapy had on stress and immune response in

first-semester medical school students. Whitehouse et al. reported that “Subjects in the self-hypnosis condition reported significantly less distress and anxiety than their nonintervention counterparts” (1996, p. 249). A 2012 study by Bernardy, Füber, Klose, and Häuser investigated the use of hypnotherapy to treat symptoms of fibromyalgia syndrome. Their study corroborated with others that demonstrated hypnotherapy using guided images could help fibromyalgia patients with symptoms including fatigue, sleep disturbance, and pain (Bernardy, Füber, Klose, & Häuser 2011, p. 11). According to Barrett, the past 40 years of research demonstrate that hypnotherapy techniques are effective, safe, and often a good alternative to drug treatment (2001, p. 2). However, before going to a hypnotherapist, the University of Maryland Medical Center suggests visiting a doctor to understand exactly what needs to be treated and consulting a psychiatrist, because if a diagnosis is incorrect, hypnotherapy could actually worsen a patient’s symptoms (n. d.). Additionally, it is important to seek out a licensed psychiatrist, social worker, or psychologist who has had training in hypnotherapy. The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH) has stringent requirements for endorsement, while The American Psychotherapy and Medical Hypnosis Association requires a six to eight week course before providing certification (“Hypnotherapy” n. d.). A patient searching for a hypnotherapist can also contact The Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis or ASCH, which both retain lists of qualified hypnotherapists. Hypnotists often have specialties, such as dealing with pain management or smoking cessation, so prospective patients should to have a good understanding of their own needs in order to match with an appropriate

hypnotherapist.

Overall, the value of hypnosis and hypnotherapy is highly supported by the psychology community. Although its effectiveness may not be uniform for every person and its value may be greater for some problems than others, continuing research helps therapists and the public understand how hypnotherapy can be used to deal with a multitude of problems. Patients, physicians, and therapists alike should feel confident that hypnosis is a viable modern option that can augment treatment of many disorders,

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