

Anxiety and Pain

Anxiety and Pain – How Hypnosis Helps Summary of an Article, by David Noonan in the September 27, 2004, copy of Newsweek

Noonan starts the article with an example. He tells the story of Beth, an Indiana housewife, who came down with chronic diarrhea that plagued her for three years. Doctor after doctor told her it was stress-related. She tried diet changes and medicines, but nothing helped. Then she went to see a hypnotherapist. After only a few sessions of hypnosis, the problem disappeared. Two years later Beth successfully tried hypnotherapy for the birth of her second child. Then three years after that Beth again went to see a hypnotherapist, this time to overcome her fear of flying.

Noonan then goes on to state that despite the many widely held mistaken beliefs about hypnosis (due in part because of its long history in the entertainment industry), a growing body of research now supports hypnotherapy, as an effective tool in the treatment of a variety of problems, from anxiety to chronic pain. Several studies using Positron Emission Tomography (PET) have recorded changes that go on in the brain during hypnosis. Researchers are now exploring hypnotherapy's underlying mechanisms, using state-of-the-art imaging technology to document changes in the brain that occur when someone is in a hypnotic state. This increased understanding of how hypnosis works and what it does is making it more and more popular with people whose needs have not been met by the more traditional methods.

Noonan goes on to suggest that to appreciate the therapeutic potential of hypnosis, people first have to forget about things like swinging watches and hapless audience members who prance around onstage, crowing like roosters. He quotes Prof. David Spiegel, associate chair of psychiatry at Stanford University School of Medicine, saying "One of the interesting ironies about hypnosis is, that old fantasy, that it takes away control. It's actually a way of enhancing people's control, of teaching them how to control aspects of their body's function and sensation that they thought they couldn't."

Noonan goes on to suggest that hypnosis is "a form of highly focused attention," an induced state of mind that enables people to alter the way they perceive and process reality. He states that during a typical hypnotherapy session, the hypnotherapist guides the subject into a state of receptive concentration. Once the client is in a state of hypnosis, the hypnotherapist may then use a number of different techniques, for example a hockey player with back spasms was told that when his pads touched his back, the muscles would relax, to address the spasm problem. (This focus on a problem distinguishes hypnotherapy from more passive states, like meditation.) The hypnotherapist then taught this particular client how to use self-hypnosis to reactivate and maintain the therapeutic effect.

Noonan concluded his article by stating that besides pain management and stress reduction, habit control was another popular clinical application of hypnosis; for example, it is routinely used successfully by people who want to quit smoking. When practiced by a professional hypnotherapist, hypnosis is safe.