

## Hypnosis in Managing Cancer Pain Symptoms

Patients facing the challenges of cancer often require integrated and innovative health care strategies to manage the many levels of problems that they face in dealing with such a devastating diagnosis. In addition, their families may struggle with helping to manage the patient's depression, anger, denial, nausea, and fatigue. Over the past decade, patients have increasingly sought complimentary medicine approaches (such as guided imagery, bio-feedback, touch therapy and hypnosis) to minimize treatment side effects, and aid in their adjustment to illness.

As a complementary therapy, hypnosis is gaining increasing importance and utilization. Hypnosis, however, has been practiced for many decades and was formally recognized as a "legitimate" medical treatment by the British Medical Association in 1955 and the American Medical Association in 1958. In spite of this legitimization, many traditional medical practitioners, including oncologists, are unfamiliar with hypnosis and its benefits for their cancer patients.

### Definition of Hypnosis

Hypnosis is an altered state of consciousness, fundamentally different from everyday awareness. It is characterized by a narrowed focus of attention and heightened ability to respond to suggestion. While in hypnosis, one may more easily alter one's perceptions and suspend critical judgment. Hypnosis theorists and practitioners generally agree that hypnosis can potentiate major changes in perception and belief. In fact, patients act upon verbal and nonverbal suggestions quite commonly in medicine. Suggestions are responded to either with or without hypnosis;

the function of hypnotic induction is to enhance the responsiveness to suggestion (Kirsch, 1990; Rhue, Lynn, & Kirsch, 1993). The hypnotist simply "guides" the patient, assisting in reaching the hypnotic state in which they respond more readily to their own or to another's suggestions.

### Hypnosis and Cancer

While hypnosis is thought of as a "passive modality," it requires work and intentional thought by patients. It can be especially helpful for people with cancer. Many cancer patients report that their life has come to feel controlled by the disease and its treatment. Hypnosis can allow the patient to feel an "inner space" away from this burdensome external focus. Second, hypnosis is often accompanied by relaxation. Cancer patients often feel besieged by treatments and the medical system, and the release of tension can be profound and without side effects. Third, this technique is easily learned, immediately helpful, and it is "portable." One can even practice self-hypnosis in common situations, without elaborate preparation. Finally, hypnosis is an adjunctive therapy, which can augment results of other traditional and non-traditional therapies. For example, studies have shown that hypnosis can assist patients in "memorizing" the therapeutic effects of cancer chemotherapies, immune therapies, or other interventions to reinforce those positive treatment effects after the conclusion of active treatment.

### Hypnosis and Symptom Management

Hypnosis is useful in the management of anxiety and stress related to cancer. In fact, I believe that it should be added early to the "tool kit" of every interested cancer patient. Cancer carries both physical and psychological distress. Stress reduction

can be learned quite easily, and it does not require deep hypnotic levels to master. In fact, many patients find it difficult to go into hypnosis without first becoming relaxed. In addition to anxiety management, this early mastery through the use of self-hypnosis often enhances self-confidence and the feeling of self-control, which can ultimately aid in managing one's response to illness and pain.

### Pain and Cancer

Pain is one of the most dreaded concomitants of cancer. As early as the 1950's, Butler found hypnosis helpful in managing cancer pain in highly susceptible patients (Butler, 1954a, b; 1955a, b). Research has shown that hypnosis enhances the pain relief provided by analgesics (Cangello, 1960, 1961). Subsequent studies have confirmed that patients with limited hypnotic ability who enter into light to medium trance levels experience reductions in pain intensity (Leviton & Harbaugh, 1992; Hilgard, 1975).

Clinically, I have found that due to high motivation and a trusting therapeutic relationship, many cancer patients can effectively use hypnosis to alter their levels of pain. For instance, patients can be offered suggestions to decrease or turn down pain, to move pain to a less troublesome part of the body (or outside their body), to substitute for less bothersome sensation for the pain, or to not recall pain at a later date. These techniques often gain effectiveness over time; that is, patients learn to become masters over their own pain. One successful encounter in altering a painful episode allows the cancer patient to look forward to the next situation with more hope and positive expectations.

## Nausea and Vomiting

Hypnosis has been found helpful for reducing the nausea related to cancer chemotherapies. Nausea often can be a more debilitating symptom than pain. Nausea also can be "conditioned" such that patients will become nauseated and vomit en route to receive their chemotherapy, or upon smelling the ward or the medication that once caused them to become ill. Several studies have affirmed the effectiveness of hypnosis for adults and children in the management of cancer-treatment-related nausea and vomiting (Cotanch et al, 1985; Hockenberry & Cotanch, 1985; Carey & Burish, 1987; Syrjala, Cummings, & Donaldson, 1992). Jacknow (Jacknow, Tschann, Linck, & Boyce, 1994) evaluated hypnosis versus standard anti-emetic medications in a group of twenty newly diagnosed pediatric cancer patients, offering supplemental anti-emetic medications as needed. Nausea, vomiting, and anti-emetic medication usage were monitored during two courses of chemotherapy as well as at two and four months post-treatment. Children employing hypnosis used significantly less anti-emetic medication than the medication-only group. The hypnosis group also reported significantly less anticipatory nausea although this effect waned in post treatment analysis. These studies suggest that hypnosis is an effective adjunctive treatment and may assist patients to suffer fewer anticipatory problems, while potentially enhancing the positive effects of anti-emetic medications.

## End of Life

When cure is not possible, patients are able to utilize self-hypnosis not only as a means of aiding in symptom control, but also in preparing emotionally and spiritually for death. I have had the privilege of working with several individuals who have created a truly transformational experience through the use of hypnosis. These indi-

viduals seemed determined to "not be a victim" of their disease, and to use hypnosis to help them stay in physically and emotionally "in control" while displaying an extraordinary capacity to love others. One such case is detailed in Hypnotherapy and Dying: Joshua's Journey (Handel, 1998).

## Conclusion

Cancer patients are finding many alternative strategies to manage problems associated with their illness. Hypnosis is a method of management found to be helpful for several of the common problems experienced by the cancer patient. It is relatively safe, when taught by professionals, and usually it is easily learned. Healthcare professionals can utilize hypnotic techniques daily at the bedside without significantly slowing their work pace. Both patient and professional may find cancer less burdensome following hypnotic training, due to enhanced sense of self-efficacy, less fearfulness, and deepened bond between patient and teacher.



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# CANCER

## Managing Its Pain and Symptoms

This brochure is presented for the information of the general public, to discuss the applications of hypnosis available for dealing with such matters as habit control, stress, excessive eating, smoking, fears, motivation, self-confidence, concentration, learning enhancement, attitude modification, pain management, insomnia, goal-setting, relationships and other areas which lead to unhappiness, dysfunction or difficulty in achieving personal goals.

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