Mental Health and Hypnosis

Hypnosis -- or hypnotherapy -- uses guided relaxation, intense concentration, and focused attention to achieve a heightened state of awareness that is sometimes called a trance. The person's attention is so focused while in this state that anything going on around the person is temporarily blocked out or ignored. In this naturally occurring state, a person may focus his or her attention -- with the help of a trained therapist -- on specific thoughts or tasks.

How Does Hypnosis Work?

Hypnosis is usually considered an aid to psychotherapy (counseling or simply therapy), rather than a treatment in itself. It helps with psychotherapy because the hypnotic state allows people to explore painful thoughts, feelings, and memories they might have hidden from their conscious minds. In addition, hypnosis enables people to perceive some things differently, such as blocking an awareness of pain.

Hypnosis can be used in two ways, as suggestion therapy or for patient analysis.

- **Suggestion therapy:** The hypnotic state makes the person better able to respond to suggestions. Therefore, hypnotherapy can help some people change certain behaviors, such as to stopping smoking or nail-biting. It can also help people change perceptions and sensations, and is particularly useful in treating pain.

- **Analysis:** This approach uses the relaxed state to find the root cause of a disorder or symptom, such as a traumatic past event that a person has hidden in his or her unconscious memory. Once the trauma is revealed, it can be addressed in psychotherapy.

What Are the Benefits of Hypnosis?

The hypnotic state allows a person to be more open to discussion and suggestion. It can improve the success of other treatments for many conditions, including:

- Phobias, fears, and anxiety
- Sleep disorders
- Depression
- Stress
- Post-trauma anxiety
- Grief and loss

It also might be used to help with pain control and to overcome habits, such as smoking or overeating. It also might be helpful for people whose symptoms are severe or who need crisis management.

What Are the Drawbacks of Hypnosis?

Hypnosis might not be appropriate for a person who has psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations and delusions, or for someone who is using drugs or alcohol. It should be used for pain control only after a doctor has evaluated the person for any physical disorder that might require medical or surgical treatment.

Some therapists use hypnosis to recover repressed memories they believe are linked to the person's mental disorder. However, hypnosis also poses a risk of creating false memories -- usually as a result of unintended suggestions by the therapist. For this reason, the use of hypnosis for certain mental disorders, such as dissociative disorders, remains controversial.

Is Hypnosis Dangerous?

Hypnosis is not a dangerous procedure. It is not mind control or brainwashing. A therapist cannot make a person do something embarrassing or that the person doesn't want to do. The greatest risk, as discussed above, is that false memories can be created.

Who Performs Hypnosis?

Hypnosis is performed by a licensed or certified mental health professional who is specially trained in this technique.

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