Is hypnosis an effective form of therapy? [1]

Dear Alice,

What is your opinion about hypnosis? Is it dangerous? Does it really work? I have a few issues about my personality that I would like to work on and the more I read about hypnosis, the more I think this is what I need. It almost sounds like magic to me. Would this kind of therapy help me with my many problems such as: self-confidence, communication problems, control of my emotions, sexual intercourse pain, etc.? As you see, I have quite a few things to work on and I really hope that hypnosis will help me. However, I wanted to get your opinion about it before I go ahead and do it. Thank you very much for your wise advice.

Desperately wanting to improve my life.

Answer

Dear Desperately wanting to improve my life,

Many people want to change aspects of their personality or have self-improvement ideas in mind, so your question is a good one! Scientific research shows that hypnosis may be a helpful tool for stress, anxiety, and pain reduction. It is especially beneficial when used in concert with other forms of therapy and medical treatment. However, there is no evidence that establishes a scientific relationship between hypnosis and effective treatment of your concerns about self-confidence [2], communication problems [3], control of emotions [4], or pain with sexual intercourse [5]. Fortunately, there are many other ways to explore your concerns therapeutically, and ultimately, with the advice of your health care provider or counselor, you'll be able to determine the treatment path that best suits your specific needs.
With its roots in ancient Greece, hypnosis has been present in various cultures throughout history. Hypnotherapy got its name from the Greek word *hypnos*, or sleep—this makes sense, because during hypnotherapy, the individual being hypnotized is intended to reach an altered state of consciousness called relaxed focus. After being recognized in the mid-20th century as a medical procedure, hypnosis was deemed an effective treatment for chronic pain by the National Institutes of Health in 1995. In the present, hypnotherapists are certified by various organizations, but no single one of them is recognized in the United States as the gold standard. Therefore, your best bet is to reach out to a licensed medical health care provider who has special training in hypnotherapy, rather than a hypnotist with no official medical licensing.

In terms of empirical research, scientists are only certain that hypnotherapy has minor effects on the body, such as changes in skin temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, and brain wave patterns. However, these effects are not markedly different from those induced by other forms of relaxation and are not necessarily therapeutic. Although much more research is needed to establish hypnotherapy as an effective treatment for specific medical and psychological conditions, it is suspected to incite neuroendocrine pathways in the brain, which may affect emotion regulation and pain management. Generally, until further research is conducted, scientists will remain uncertain as to exactly how or why hypnosis has these effects in some individuals. For more information, take a look at the American Psychological Association’s information about hypnosis.

The safety of hypnosis has not been thoroughly researched, but it is known that hypnosis will not cause you to lose control of your mind or body or do something you don’t want to do. Hypnotherapy is usually not recommended for patients with various psychiatric illnesses, dissociative disorders, or post-traumatic stress disorder due possible risk of exacerbation of symptoms. It can also cause headache, drowsiness, anxiety, dizziness, distress, and the creation of false memories. Hypnotherapy should never be substituted for more scientifically established and empirically proven treatments or therapies for various conditions and illnesses. Using hypnosis in conjunction with proven therapies may be helpful; it can also be used experimentally for individuals with conditions that have no established medical treatments. Hypnotherapy should not be used as a sole approach to illness.

Your first step may be to locate and work with a health care provider for your sexual intercourse pain and a counselor for the other three issues you mention. Each provider will be able to help you identify treatment options and goals regarding the issues you wish to address. If you are open to hypnosis, contact your insurance provider to help you locate medical providers or therapists in your network who support complementary and alternative approaches. Additionally, if your current health care provider does not have training in hypnotherapy, s/he should be able to refer you.

Lastly, be patient with yourself. Change is hard and often more successful when done gradually. You’ve taken a giant step forward by identifying the areas you want to improve. Now, take one step forward at a time and you’ll get there. Best of luck on your journey toward self-growth!

Alice!

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