

# Medical Applications of Hypnosis and Imagery

by Linda Clements-Urick, C.Ht.

Although hypnosis techniques have been accepted by the AMA as a therapeutic tool since 1958, many health professionals are unfamiliar with their numerous applications which include dermatological disorders, sleep disorders, pain control, asthma, tinnitus and autoimmune disorders, to name only a few. I have personally had good success with the elimination of genital warts and insomnia as well as pain reduction in clients with migraine headaches, back discomfort and cancer related pain.

Today I will be addressing hypnosis and specifically the use of imagery techniques as they relate to chronic pain management, as an adjunct to conventional treatments for disease and pre and post-operative healing treatments.

The first step is to define hypnosis and imagery. Hypnosis is an altered state of mind that occurs when the conscious mind becomes overloaded with information, triggering the fight/flight mechanism and bypassing the critical mind resulting in a state of hyper-suggestibility.

Imagery is a technique that is often used while a client is experiencing this hyperaware state of hypnosis. Martin L. Rossman, M.D., who has written extensively on imagery and healing, defines imagery as a “flow of thoughts you can see, hear, feel, smell or taste.”

Understanding the true scope of hypnosis and imagery as therapeutic tools is facilitated by a review of the way the brain processes information. The Nobel prize winning work of Dr. Roger Sperry showed that the two sides of the human brain think in very different ways and are simultaneously capable of independent thought. The left brain is primarily responsible for speaking, writing, and understanding language. It houses our reason and logic and is the seat of the conscious mind and the source of the little voice in your head that is constantly talking to you.

The right brain, on the other hand, processes information in pictures, sounds, spatial relationships and feelings. It is more creative and intuitive and is the seat of the unconscious mind. Dr. Rossman explains this difference very well in his book *Healing Yourself*.

*Imagine a train coming around a curve in the track. An observer is positioned on the ground, on the outside of the curve, and he observes the train to be a succession of separate, though connected cars passing him one at a time. He can see just a little bit of the cars ahead of and behind,*

*the one he is watching. This observer has a left brain view of the train.  
(The brain is processing sequentially.)*

*The "right brain" observer would be in a balloon several hundred feet above the tracks. From here he could not only see the whole train, but also the track on which it was traveling, the countryside through which it was passing, the town it had just left, and the town to which it was headed.  
(The right brain is processing simultaneously)*

So changing ones' perspective of a situation, changes the experience of the situation. Herein lies the key to the success of imagery in pain control and healing.

Dr. David E. Bresler, an innovator in the field of therapeutic imagery, demonstrates the difference in a more experiential way that you can try yourself right now.

Using verbal language, the left brain, order yourself to salivate. Just think about this command and see how much saliva you can manufacture. Perhaps you are able to produce a little, but probably not a lot. This is because the parts of the nervous system that regulate salivation don't respond readily to verbal commands.

Now try this. Imagine you are holding a big, juicy, yellow lemon in your hand. Feel it's nubby texture and smell it's fresh aroma. Imagine taking a knife and slicing it open. The juice runs down your fingers as you raise it to your lips and take a big bite out of the lemon. Taste the delicious tartness as you roll the juice around in your mouth and feel your mouth begin to pucker and water.

If your were able to put your senses to work during that illustration then you were probably able to produce substantially more saliva the second time around.

If thinking about a lemon can create a physiological change, what happens when you think of yourself as a helpless victim of a disease? Or imagine yourself in pain that is hot, burning, tearing, stabbing or gnawing? When we focus our attention on thoughts like this, we are unconsciously utilizing imagery and hypnosis to our own detriment.

Many people who suffer chronic pain are in a state of hypnosis because of the information overload occurring in the conscious mind. They are unconsciously visualizing images that interfere not only with their ability to tolerate pain, but to heal. During a hypnosis session, utilizing imagery of an opposite nature, we can alter the persons' perception of the experience and thereby reduce their discomfort and promote the healing process.

## **Pain Reduction Techniques**

One symptomatic technique for pain control that is particularly effective when the patient or client finds it difficult to concentrate, is **glove anesthesia**. This involves inducing hypnosis using a progressive relaxation. Starting with the head or the feet, suggestions are made that each successive area of the body become more relaxed with each breath taken. This is an important step in any form of pain reduction since tension tends to exaggerate pain. Clients are then taken through an imagery exercise where it is suggested they create feelings of numbness or coldness in one of the hands. This hand then becomes a “glove of anesthesia” in the mind and they are able to place the glove anywhere on the body where pain is felt.

This exercise gives the client a sense of empowerment. When they realize they can numb their own hand whenever they want, they begin to feel a sense of control over the pain and they regain a sense of hopefulness.

Another technique that I have had excellent results with is the **Control Room**. The client must first rate the intensity of the pain on a scale of one to ten; ten being the most intense, and one the least intensity. Then begin the progressive relaxation to release any tension or tightness in the body. After deepening the trance, have the client imagine he is going to his own master control room where he is able to locate the apparatus that is responsible for the specific area of the body where he is experiencing pain. He is then instructed to turn the pain up one degree. Once this has been accomplished, the therapist then instructs the client to progressively turn down the pain, one degree at a time, until the client reaches a desirable level of comfort. By first turning the pain up, the client recognizes his own ability to control the degree of pain.

While still in the control room, the therapist can have the client describe the image of the pain in terms of color, temperature, mood, size, shape, consistency and density. Once the image has been defined then we can consider ways to change it to make it more comfortable for the client. For instance, perhaps “red hot” changes to cool, pale pink or blue. Loud and angry becomes quiet, still and calm. When the image has been changed, the pain changes too and is able to subside. It is often more workable to change one aspect of the pain at a time, first the color, then the temperature etc.

**Symptom substitution** is another symptomatic technique for dealing with pain in a slightly different way. This technique teaches the client to move pain from one area of the body to another, less disruptive area. For example, a headache that is throbbing all along the right side of the face and into the temple, can be moved, through the power of suggestion and imagery, to a little finger. This allows the client a sense of control, but does not eliminate or reduce the pain. The client can think more clearly and is able to explore the message the pain is trying to communicate.

## **Pre and Post Surgical Healing**

Both the autonomic nervous system and the immune/inflammatory response system can be mobilized through the use of imagery, which means that it is not limited to the manipulation of pain. It is also an important tool for self-healing. At major hospitals in the Los Angeles area, imagery has been used pre and post surgically with positive results. Many patients respond by healing faster, experiencing less pain and developing fewer infections.

Prior to surgery, an imagery exercise that I have used with clients is to have them imagine the ill or damaged area of the body that is to be removed or repaired. Have them describe it in detail, giving it form, shape, color, size, sound, texture etc. Then have them place that image to one side in their mind.

Now have them imagine an image of recovery, healing and health; an image of what the body will be like when it has healed and is well again. All of the senses should be utilized to create this new image. Vision, sound, touch, taste, smell and feeling. Then have them place that image to one side.

They are now asked to imagine that the first image is evolving into the second one. Some people see this as a movie or video, some draw intermediate images and others sense the evolution of one into the other. Teaching self-hypnosis or making a tape, affords a client the benefits of repetition, which of course, reinforces the message to the subconscious mind that the healing process has already begun.

Post surgery exercises are numerous and varied. One of my favorites is to have the client imagine being in a favorite place in nature. This place should evoke a feeling of safety and security and a deep sense of relaxation and calm. It is a place where no one else can intrude and only those who are invited by the client can appear. Once this place has been thoroughly explored with the senses, the client imagines being healed with their favorite piece of music, color, texture or a combination of all three, allowing it to wash over them and focusing it's healing power on the affected area.

For those clients who respond favorably to water, the following is an excellent exercise. Imagine a body of water (pool, pond or stream) infused with healing energy. As you splash this healing fluid on your body, imagine it being absorbed by the skin, muscles and organs and traveling through the bloodstream so that the affected areas of the body are healed by the water. If it feels right to you, immerse your entire body in this healing pond as the healing energies work their magic.

Clients who are suffering with a disease such as cancer and who are undergoing chemotherapy treatments often find imagery exercises help them to remain positive during a process where control is at least temporarily out of their hands. Imagining several fireman/rescue workers dressed in white spraying a cleansing,

healing liquid into the body can make a person more comfortable with chemotherapy. As the liquid finds each and every nook and cranny, the body is totally cleansed of the disease.

### **Pain and Illness as Symptoms**

Studies in England and the U.S. have shown that an astonishing 50-75% of all problems presenting to a primary care clinic are emotional, social, or familial in origin, but are being expressed by pain or illness. When we fail to express important emotions, surround ourselves with emotionally unhealthy people or remain in abusive relationships, it is often manifested in pain or illness in the body. Exploring the symptom that is manifested can lead to enlightenment and enable a client to make important lifestyle adjustments and healthier personal choices.

One way to do this through imagery is to begin with a visual description of the symptom; size, color, texture, temperature etc. Then identify its voice or sound. Perhaps it sounds reedy, raspy or gruff. It may even have a smell. Allow the client to assign certain qualities to it such as angry, menacing, indifferent or impatient. The more detailed the image, the better. Once the image has been described then we have the client engage in a dialogue with it. We find out what it wants or needs, why it has shown up and what the client can do to prevent it from returning. Sometimes it is useful to call forth an inner advisor to facilitate this dialogue.

In this way, the symptom informs the client as to what changes need to take place in order for the healing process to begin. It is important that the client understands that symptoms are messengers telling us to pay attention to something we have neglected or ignored. Once we have been alerted to the problem, we can often allow the symptom to subside.

One last healing technique that I use on a regular basis with clients recovering from surgery or illness that has produced good results, combines direct and indirect suggestions with imagery and anchoring.

Have the client imagine himself at the top of a beautiful staircase as a healthy, completely recovered and more resourceful person, one whose body is healing with each passing minute. Suggestions are made that the client feels stronger, physically and mentally and is asked to imagine the healthy color of his skin, the healthy shine of his hair and the clarity of his eyes all of which reflect his internal health. It is suggested that he feels more energetic with each breath and that he is breathing in positive health and breathing out any negative ideas, thoughts or images that could inhibit the healing process. He is asked to imagine himself eating healthier foods, exercising and taking more time to enjoy healthy pursuits. He is encouraged to remember a time when he felt totally healthy and energized and to relive those feelings each time I touch his hand. (anchoring positive feelings) Suggestions are made that elicit images of the client receiving the

support and love of friends and family who are cheering him on to health. Mobilizing as many of the senses as possible makes the perception of the experience more real to the client and produces more successful results.

As the client walks down the staircase he is asked to allow these feelings, images and sensations that he has experienced at the top of the stairs to grow stronger and more powerful with each step he takes toward the bottom.

At the bottom of the staircase is a small table on which sits a glass of water and a pill or tablet. This pill represents whatever quality is needed to facilitate the healing process, for example, calm, relaxation, positive thoughts etc. By dropping the pill into the glass of water, the water is infused with the same healing properties of the pill. The client is then asked to imagine drinking the water as he absorbs all the positive elements of the pill. Clients who think analytically, may need an extra suggestion that the qualities of the pill will remain within them and become a permanent part of them after the water has been eliminated through urination.

This article barely scratches the surface of the numerous applications for hypnosis and imagery in the healing process, but will perhaps serve as an introduction to those hypnotherapists who currently offer limited services and who wish to expand their practice to include adjunctive services to more traditional medical treatments.

To learn more about hypnosis and specifically the use of imagery in healing, Dr. Martin L. Rossman, M.D., Dr. David E. Bresler and Jeanne Achterberg, Ph.D, have all written books on the subject which shed a great deal of light on the process and its numerous applications.

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