

# MEDICAL HYPNOSIS: Evidence-Based Therapy for Chronic Pain and More

Hypnosis can offer hope for patients seeking help for both medical conditions and conscious or unconscious behaviors.

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**WE HAVE** more control over our mind and body responses than we realize, even when diagnoses may cause us to feel powerless. When we are under mental or physical stress, often due to choices we make or circumstances that seem fully out of our control, we are more likely to have worsened pain, gastrointestinal symptoms, poor immune responses and susceptibility to illness because our bodies can't function optimally. Hypnosis is commonly used to help with these things, from habit control, phobias, weight loss, improved sports or testing performance, confidence or a myriad of other desired changes.

For instance, we've all made choices that have negatively impacted our lives — even repeatedly made poor choices without understanding why. Our responses come from witnessed, actual or implied input or behaviors from others that we have consciously or, in most cases, unconsciously accepted as our own. For example, we exercise (or not) or we eat healthy foods (or not), typically because we learned that behavior from the people with whom we were raised, observing what family, friends or others do (or don't do). We may get suddenly angry about something little, blowing it all out of proportion and don't know why, vowing never

to do it again, yet we do, sometimes over and over again. Consciously, we know how we want to respond and that we want to make different choices. Yet, although many of us really want to choose differently or be different, it can seem impossible because it feels “normal” or “right” or “like something we have no control over.” These are all examples of behaviors or reactions that arise from unconscious patterns.

However, hypnosis helps us to choose differently, and choosing differently can get us out of the ruts worn in our brains (from reactions on repeat) and create new, desired responses. In addition, the tool of hypnosis (based on research when used by medical and mental health professionals) can also be used in clinical settings to improve medical problems, as well as facilitate desired changes by empowering us to make different choices. In fact, research has proven that medical hypnosis (generally referred to as “clinical hypnosis”) is an effective treatment for countless medical and mental health conditions.

Following is an overview of clinical hypnosis, including brief technical explanations to highlight this effective, yet underutilized option for treating chronic pain and more.

### What Is Hypnosis?

The word “hypnosis” typically brings to mind its portrayal in stage shows, television or movies. Stage-show hypnosis, unlike clinical hypnosis, is used purely for entertainment, offering no therapeutic claims. These performers choose extroverts from the audience who enjoy being the center of attention. These individuals are chosen because they are most likely to “go along” with the show, or there may be “plants” in the audience who appear randomly selected.

However, the authentic form of hypnosis referred to in this article is not contrived, and it is utilized solely by healthcare professionals. According to psychologist Irving Kirsch, PhD, hypnosis is both an experience and a procedure. “Hypnosis is a state of inner absorption, concentration or focused attention that assists in altering some aspects of thought, emotion, behavior or perception. Hypnosis is a procedure during which a health professional or researcher suggests that a client, patient or subject experience changes in sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings or behavior.”<sup>1</sup> A simpler definition is that hypnosis focuses on what we desire, while shutting out our conscious thoughts or the external messages from others that get in the way.

The [Mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org) website adds, “The essence of the hypnotic experience is a reduction in the general awareness of what is going on around you, and an increased focus-

of-attention on internal experiences or on more narrowly defined external experiences. A goal of hypnosis is to access this experiential state and harness the power of it, allowing you to access your strengths and resources to resolve difficulties and promote the changes you desire.”

Hypnosis typically involves four steps: 1) creating a state or condition for hypnosis to occur, 2) advancing the inner absorption that’s been initiated, 3) providing repetitive messages related to an individual’s desired outcomes and 4) the return to full awareness or alertness, generally feeling refreshed, energized, peaceful and relaxed, all of which nicely co-exist. Hypnosis enables one to imagine a different way of being, opening the door to change.

### The Mind-Body Connection

Western medicine has taught us — healthcare professionals and patients alike — to separate issues into mental (mind) or physical (body). But new findings in neuroscience prove what many of us have known all along: That separation does not exist. Patients may have been told by their care providers

#### What Can Medical/Clinical Hypnosis Treat?

Hypnosis helps many medical and mental health conditions, in addition to general life issues:

- Phobias
- Behavior or habit control issues, including smoking cessation or addictions
- Weight issues
- Enuresis (bed-wetting)
- Self-confidence
- Performance enhancement
- Insomnia
- Asthma
- Hot flashes during menopause
- Gastrointestinal disorders (now known as functional gastrointestinal disorders)
- Pain control related to surgery, childbirth, cancer, fibromyalgia, burns, headaches (migraine and tension), etc.
- Skin conditions, including warts/psoriasis
- Side effects of medicines, cancer, chemotherapy or radiation treatment, including nausea and vomiting
- Trichotillomania (hair pulling)

Hypnosis continues to be explored for further use in many other conditions. It enhances traditional treatments and empowers those who use it to improve their health.

## Hypnosis Resources

- American Journal of Medicine: [www.amjmed.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0002-9343%2820%2930946-3](http://www.amjmed.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0002-9343%2820%2930946-3)
- American Psychological Association: [www.apa.org/topics/psychotherapy/hypnosis](http://www.apa.org/topics/psychotherapy/hypnosis)
- American Society of Clinical Hypnosis: [www.asch.net/aws/ASCH/pt/sp/home\\_page](http://www.asch.net/aws/ASCH/pt/sp/home_page)
- Cleveland Clinic: [my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22676-hypnosis](http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/22676-hypnosis)
- Medical Hypnosis: An Underutilized Treatment Approach by Brian Alman, PhD (2001): [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6220618](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6220618)
- *Medical Hypnosis Primer Clinical and Research Evidence* by Arreed Franz Barabasz, Karen Olness, Robert Boland and Stephen Kahn (editors): [www.routledge.com/Medical-Hypnosis-Primer-Clinical-and-Research-Evidence/Barabasz-Olness-Boland-Kahn/p/book/9780415871785](http://www.routledge.com/Medical-Hypnosis-Primer-Clinical-and-Research-Evidence/Barabasz-Olness-Boland-Kahn/p/book/9780415871785)
- Michael Yapko, PhD, Podcast Interview: [feelinggood.com/2023/03/06/334-clinical-hypnosis-featuring-dr-michael-yapko](http://feelinggood.com/2023/03/06/334-clinical-hypnosis-featuring-dr-michael-yapko)
- Milton H. Erickson Foundation: [www.erickson-foundation.org](http://www.erickson-foundation.org)
- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health: [www.nccih.nih.gov/search?q=hypnosis&sitelimit=](http://www.nccih.nih.gov/search?q=hypnosis&sitelimit=)
- National Pediatric Hypnosis Training Institute: [www.nphti.org](http://www.nphti.org)
- Ran Anbar, MD, FAAP, Interview on “Crushing Doubt” Podcast (Dan Ratner, PhD, June 2, 2022): [youtu.be/vX7DN2F7SHg](https://youtu.be/vX7DN2F7SHg)
- Rich Roll Podcast: The Surprising Neuroscience of Hypnosis: Myths, Truths and Use Cases with David Spiegel, MD (Oct. 17, 2022): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8fPEXRLX2s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8fPEXRLX2s)
- Society of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis: [www.sceh.us](http://www.sceh.us)
- Steve Eichel, PhD, ABPP (Zoe D. Katze’s owner): [www.dreichel.com/articles/dr\\_zoe.htm](http://www.dreichel.com/articles/dr_zoe.htm)
- The Medical Power of Hypnosis (BBC, May 29, 2022): [www.bbc.com/future/article/20220519-does-hypnosis-work](http://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220519-does-hypnosis-work)

that either 1) nothing is wrong with them and it’s all in their head or 2) they can’t find anything abnormal, so there is nothing more they can do for them. Yet, we are whole beings, and in reality, we are not sectioned out into physical, mental, emotional, spiritual or social divisions. Humans simply created those divisions to discuss and explore them, and even use them for billing purposes.

Our thoughts affect the ability of our body to function. Thoughts or emotions trigger the release of hormones and neurotransmitters in the brain, which can affect various physiological responses such as heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, digestion and immune system functioning.

Negative thoughts and emotions can activate the sympathetic nervous system, which responds to outside threats, leading to chronic stress and the release of stress hormones. Positive thoughts and emotions promote relaxation, happiness and overall well-being, triggering the parasympathetic nervous system, which manages healing. The relationship between thoughts, physiology and emotions is complex and bidirectional. Any aspect of us affects all of our biology in some way, all the time.

Hypnosis is a powerful tool for accessing the subconscious mind, where beliefs and behaviors are rooted. When positive suggestions are repeated during hypnosis, they are integrated into the subconscious mind, allowing desired changes in behavior and thoughts to take place.

## How Does Hypnosis Work?

Research keeps shedding light on how hypnosis works. And, rather than causing hypnosis to appear as mysterious

or magical, the findings provide yet more evidence of the incredibly complex functioning of these miraculous bodies we inhabit. Objective evidence shows that hypnosis produces noticeable changes in the brain through available methods of testing typically reserved for research purposes.

- An electrodermal sensor measures changes in heat and electricity passed through the skin by nerves and sweat. The relaxation response is evidenced by findings of heart rate, heart rate variability, respiratory signals, electrodermal activity and other physiological or body function parameters.

- Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies compare blood flow increases believed to be related to neuronal activity, showing that hypnotic suggestions can activate specific brain regions called the anterior cingulate cortex, insula and prefrontal cortex. About eight years ago, researchers at Stanford Medical Center, headed by renowned psychiatrist and hypnosis researcher David Spiegel, MD, showed clear evidence of hypnosis in the brain that showed fMRI testing confirmed changes occurred during hypnosis (Figure 1).

- Electroencephalogram (EEG) testing involves sensors that record the electrical activity of the brain. Various studies using EEG testing during hypnosis found that early hypnosis shows movement from our usual active state (which appears as beta waves) into slower alpha waves and then, once deeper into hypnosis, these further slow down to reveal theta waves. Hypnosis is not “sleep,” although to some it may appear that way. The brain waves that correlate with sleeping are delta waves, which less commonly present during very deep hypnosis.

- Positron emission tomography (PET) shows 3D images of the inside of the body. PET scans can also be useful to

## Figure 1. How Does Hypnosis Work?



In **diagram 1**, decreased activity occurs in the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, shown in green, which correlates with relaxation and the ability to focus. This is part of the brain's salience network, which is responsible for psychological functions like decision-making, evaluation processes and emotional regulation.

In **diagram 2**, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DPC), shown in blue, becomes less connected to the medial prefrontal cortex and the posterior cingulate cortex, which are parts of the default mode network of the brain, shown in purple. These connections are strongly associated with neural activity and cognitive tasks, so these decreased connections serve to quiet the critical mind, increasing openness to chosen suggestions.

In **diagram 3**, increased activity is seen between the DPC, shown in blue, and the insula, shown in tan. The DPC is associated with executive functions such as working memory and self-control, and the insula is a small region of the cerebral cortex that plays a significant role in pain perception, social engagements, emotions and autonomic control. The autonomic nervous system controls involuntary or unconscious responses to regulate physiological functions like breathing and the beating of our hearts. This increased activity improves the mind-body connection.

Source: Williams, SCP. Study Identifies Brain Areas Altered During Hypnotic Trances. Stanford Medicine News Center, July 28, 2016. Accessed at [med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2016/07/study-identifies-brain-areas-altered-during-hypnotic-trances.html](http://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2016/07/study-identifies-brain-areas-altered-during-hypnotic-trances.html).

show changes occurring in the brain during hypnosis. However, since this requires administration of radioactive material, it is infrequently used to validate changes related to hypnosis research.

### Is Hypnosis Valid?

Many respected studies and journals establish the validity of hypnosis. There are two peer-reviewed professional hypnosis journals: 1) the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis' *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* and 2) the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis and The International Society of Hypnosis-affiliated journal titled the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*. Each has been publishing research related to hypnosis since the 1950s.

Further, a PubMed search for "hypnosis" returns 16,000-plus articles from these professional hypnosis journals and other respected journals. In addition, the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (under the National Institutes of Health) is currently funding large-scale studies evaluating the efficacy and mechanisms of hypnosis treatments.

### Is Hypnosis Regulated?

Although research shows hypnosis is valid, there is not a standardized protocol for its regulation. In the United States, hypnosis is not regulated at the federal level, and only a small number of states specify guidelines for practicing "hypnotism" without a license. The remaining states do not regulate hypnosis, so there are zero requirements for practitioners' background, education or training.

All U.S. states, however, have laws prohibiting the practice of medicine without a license. Regulated, licensed health professionals with a master's or doctoral degree from an accredited institution can obtain training for clinical use of hypnosis. They have foundational knowledge about medical or mental health conditions, which is necessary to treat individuals most effectively, with or without the use of hypnosis. To ensure properly credentialed professionals are providing clinical hypnosis services, their state licensure and training should be confirmed by patients before seeking treatment.

While lay hypnotists can offer assistance for habits and vocational and avocational issues, it is illegal for them to


treat clinical conditions.

Beware: Lay hypnotists may display impressive-sounding “certifications” and even “degrees” that look official. However, individuals should not assume the awarding organizations are legitimate. Fraudulent organizations may be providing fake credentials without requirements other than a credit card to pay for them. An example of this is the story of Zoe D. Katze, PhD, who was granted her PhD and various “certifications” from multiple groups.<sup>2</sup> “Dr. Katze” is a cat whose story can be read by going to the website listed in the Hypnosis Resources.

### Clinical Hypnosis: Another Option to Help Improve Life

Hypnosis is empowering. Once we understand the power of suggestion that may have caused us to feel stuck or unable to change, we begin to question everything that we had automatically accepted as fact. The tool of hypnosis can be used to facilitate change to a choice of our own choosing. It is a viable option that allows us to truly make a difference in the management of our health, emotions or simply life in general.

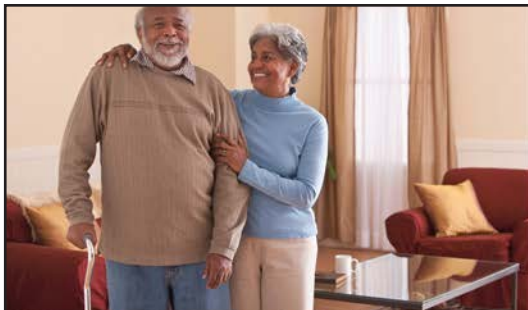
Clinical hypnosis can be effective for patients or someone they are caring for with a condition that is responding poorly to standard medical treatment. If patients are wondering how they can feel better or how unconscious patterns in life are keeping them from making needed changes, clinical hypnosis may be the most effective treatment to consider.

For those inspired to learn more, see Hypnosis Resources; it provides a list of reputable sources, many of which include stories about the ways patients have benefitted from clinical hypnosis. 

### References

1. Kirsch, I. Defining Hypnosis for the Public. *Contemporary Hypnosis*, 1994;11(3):142–143. Accessed at psycnet.apa.org/record/1995-22602-001.
2. Dr. Zoe D. Katze, Certified Hypnotherapist. Essex Watch, Jan. 23, 2014. Accessed at essexwatch.com/blog/1673/dr-zoe-d-katze-phd.

SUSAN (SUZE) KOPYNEC, MPAS, PA, ASCH Certified, is licensed to practice medicine and provide hypnosis sessions in the state of North Carolina. However, she is available as a resource to answer questions or assist in locating a properly trained professional within the United States or internationally. Her contact information can be found at Storychangers.com.



The Myasthenia Gravis Association (MGA) is committed to supporting individuals and communities affected by myasthenia gravis.

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