

# HYPNOSIS: HUMBUG OR HEALING?

Sceptical about the health benefits of hypnosis? You're not alone. However, the latest research suggests that hypnotherapy could be good for your health. By **ROXANNE REID**

I'VE SEEN HYPNOTIST ENTERTAINERS ON TV, but this is different. No hoopla, no melodramatics; just a warm sense of calm sliding from the top of my head, down my neck, into my arms and legs. It's seductively soothing.

Then Cape Town hypnotherapist Paulina Wright asks about my first day at school, and there I am in a classroom, excited by the newness of it all. I can see a blur of children's faces and the teacher in her purple jersey; I can almost smell the chalk.

I don't reveal any embarrassing secrets or subconscious traumas, but it's not surprising – my childhood was happy and I'm still pretty content with my life. But I could get used to that feeling of being at peace, my limbs not quite part of me. And my writer's

mind has loved revisiting a part of my childhood I'd thought was forgotten.

We often associate hypnosis with treating phobias like fear of flying or dentists, but studies also show health benefits in dealing with obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, peptic ulcers and skin conditions. It can relieve pain, too. In 2004, researchers in the US and Germany used MRIs to demonstrate significantly less pain perception in the brains of people under hypnosis. This makes it useful for natural childbirth, migraines or burns, for example.

On the behavioural front, a 1996 article in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* showed that hypnosis increased weight loss by an average of 97 percent during treatment, and more than 146 percent after treatment. And in 2009, the University

of Iowa, US, analysed the results of various studies, and concluded that hypnosis was three times more effective than nicotine-replacement therapy in quitting smoking.

## HOW IT WORKS

Hypnotherapy is the preferred term for hypnosis that has distinct therapeutic goals. Where the hypnotherapist is also a registered doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker, it's referred to as "clinical hypnotherapy." This form of therapy has become increasingly accepted as a mainstream treatment, in part because studies have shown its effectiveness in shortening the therapy time required to change behaviour patterns.

Hypnosis is a state of absorbed or heightened awareness and focus, not unlike losing yourself in a favourite

piece of music. You're always aware of what's happening around you, and can terminate the state at will. By temporarily bypassing your conscious mind and critical faculty, hypnosis helps you communicate with your subconscious mind, where your emotions lie.

Remember how hard it was to concentrate on everything at once when you learnt to drive? It gradually became automatic, because you strengthened neurological pathways in the brain. "In hypnosis the subconscious doesn't differentiate between 'reality' and imagery, so we can implant positive suggestions, rehearse new behaviours and strengthen new neurological pathways in a similar way," says Claudia Klein, owner of the South African Institute of Hypnosis.

Cape Town psychiatrist Cecil Schneider adds, "Suggestions offered in hypnosis are accepted as fact by the unconscious mind unless they're counter to your personal value system." This means you're always in control.

The best predictor of success is motivation, but you need to be honest about possible "secondary gain" from your behaviour. For instance, you may want freedom from chronic pain, but still fear losing the attention it gets you.

## HOW HYPNOTISABLE ARE YOU?

"About 80 to 90 percent of people are hypnotisable," estimates psychologist Kevin Fourie, head of training at the South African Society of Clinical Hypnosis. "Preventers include fear of what you might experience in hypnosis or fear of the hypnotic state itself. Sometimes left-brain, highly analytical people find it more difficult, but can improve with practice."

Essentially, if you're willing to achieve a particular therapeutic goal and don't unconsciously resist, hypnosis could be an option for you. "Where you trust the therapist, and believe and expect hypnosis to work, it will," says Schneider.

And will the effects stick? "Once any unconscious conflicts responsible for maintaining your behaviour are resolved, suggestions during hypnosis are more likely to be permanently effective," Schneider confirms.

## CAN YOU DO IT YOURSELF?

"All hypnosis is really self-hypnosis," says Klein, "but it's best to first let a hypnotherapist help you understand this powerful state." Schneider adds, "Self-hypnosis is more easily attainable after you've been hypnotised by a professional."

Beneficial as self-hypnosis may be, the drawback is that it's unlikely to change deeply embedded behaviour patterns or to resolve suppressed emotion. "That's another good reason to consult a professional first," says Fourie. You may need more formal therapy, like cognitive behavioural therapy, for example, to uncover and deal with your problem. **Q**

## Find a Therapist

- "Hypnotising someone is easy," says Fourie. "More important is that the hypnotherapist is formally trained in psychotherapy and psychodiagnostics." For referral to registered, professionally trained clinical hypnotherapists – doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers – **consult the South African Society of Clinical Hypnosis ([sasch.co.za](http://sasch.co.za))**.
- Those interested in exploring alternative options can try **the self-regulating South African Institute of Hypnotism ([hypnotherapy.co.za](http://hypnotherapy.co.za))** for non-clinical therapy. Members must have at least 150 hours' training from the institute.

## I Tried Hypnosis for ...

### ... panic attacks

When **Christine de Nobrega, 41**, from Cape Town, developed acute anxiety problems, it



turned her life upside down. "Attacks often came daily, I'd get shaky and be unable to speak or function." When medication didn't help, she tried clinical hypnosis. However, "some inner resistance to let go of the controls prevented it from working," she says. "Fortunately, relaxation techniques have worked, to an extent. I get far fewer attacks now."

### ... weight loss

Capetonian **Zulfah Hartley, 32**, used to weigh 110 kilograms. She joined a gym to shift some of that



weight, but ruined the effort by buying chocolates afterwards. "Then I'd go home and pile into potato chips – my big downfall," she says. "After one hypnosis session, I found the smell of such snacks a turn-off. I knew I wouldn't enjoy them." Although surrounded by family who still ate like she used to, Zulfah lost 14 kilograms in six months.

### ... smoking

**Karen Duncker**, from Johannesburg, was 48 when she decided to kick her smoking habit through hypnosis.



"One session, and I was a changed person," she recalls. She gave the two packets of cigarettes in her bag to someone on the street and hasn't had a craving since. That was over three years ago. It's quite a turnaround for Karen, who was smoking 40 to 60 a day. "I can be with smokers and not feel tempted. Not being dictated to by nicotine is heaven," she says.

