

THE USE OF IMAGERY HYPNOTHERAPY FOR
MIGRAINE HEADACHES: A CASE REPORT

Joseph M. Aquino *

Jefferson M. Fish

RESUMO

O presente trabalho é um relato de como se pode fazer uso hipnótico de imagens para o tratamento de enxaqueca. O procedimento hipnótico inclui sugestões para indução do sono, relaxamento, aquecimento das mãos e resfriamento da cabeça. O caso é discutido em termos dos tipos de imagens utilizados.

The debilitating problem of migraine headaches has plagued many people, and attempts at relief have often failed. However, several hypnotherapists have reported successful treatment of the disorder through the use of hypnosis (Astor, 1973; Daniels, 1977; Graham, 1975; Stambaugh & House, 1977).

Combining the results of investigations on hypnosis with those of biofeedback, Graham (1975) achieved symptom relief by giving the subject hypnotic suggestions for hand warming. Subsequent studies (Daniels, 1976, 1977) demonstrated positive results by adding hypnotic suggestions for forehead cooling to the hand warming suggestions.

Other research has provided information regarding the relationship between hypnosis and imagery. Sutcliffe, Perry, and Sheehan (1970) found a positive, curvilinear relationship between hypnotic susceptibility and vividness of imagery. Furthermore, performance on the Creative Imagination Scale was shown to correlate positively with vividness of imagery (Sheehan, McConkey, & Law, 1978) and with success on the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility (McConkey, Sheehan, & White, 1979). Spanos and Barber (1974) presented compelling evidence indicating that suggestions which carry explicit strategies for imagining are more likely to be efficacious than those without them. It has been said that effective hypnosis involves giving suggestions which include descriptive imagery (Barber Spanos, & Chaves, 1974).

* St. John's University

The implications of these investigations are such that one would expect that the hypnotic utilization of suggestions containing descriptive imagery would aid in the amelioration of headache symptoms. In the case study that follows, the application of hypnotic hand warming and head cooling techniques was attempted in a manner that employed suggestions which appealed to the patient's personal imagery strengths.

Case Description

The patient is a 21 year old female who was seen in therapy by the first author, supervised by the second author, under the auspices of the University Counseling Center. She sought hypnotherapy for the purpose of losing weight. Among her difficulties were headaches which had been diagnosed by her physician as migraines and for which a previous neurological examination had revealed no physical cause. Prior to hypnotherapy, it had been ascertained that she possessed strong auditory but poor visual imagery, though she was uncertain as to whether she would respond to tactile images. She had demonstrated herself to be a good hypnotic subject.

In the sixth hypnotherapy session for weight reduction, she stated that she suffered from migraine headaches on an average of two three times per week. Since it was near end of the session, time permitted only a brief hypnotic procedure for migraines which included suggestions for hand warming and head cooling but did not employ much imaginal material. It was also suggested that she use the procedure herself when she felt the onset of another headache.

She entered the seventh session, a description of which follows, complaining of a headache which had bothered her all day and which she had been unable to relieve through self-hypnosis. The therapist asked her if she wanted to attempt a hypnotic removal of the pain. She readily accepted the idea.

There were four phases in the hypnotic procedure: induction, relaxation, hand warming, and head cooling. In the first of these, a sleep induction was performed, utilizing suggestions of drowsiness, sleepiness, and sinking deeper and deeper into a calm, restful sleep. Here, the therapist adjusted the cadence of his voice in delivering the suggestions to synchronize with the breathing rhythm of the subject.

Suggestions for relaxation were given in the second phase. Images of being in a boat that was floating and drifting on a calm lake were presented to the patient. Since the wind was whistling outside the window at the time, a link between the patient's hearing the wind and relaxation was made. She was told that as she was drifting on the peaceful lake, a breeze was blowing, and as she heard it blowing, it was blowing away all her tension.

The third phase involved the hand warming technique. The subject was asked to imagine holding her hand over a warm, crackling fire, and as the fire crackled, her hand became comfortably warmer and warmer.

In the final phase, before the "awakening", suggestions for head cooling were given, the therapist asked the patient to imagine that a cool, damp towel had been placed on the top of her head and forehead, and that she could feel those areas getting cooler and cooler. He continued, saying that as the dampness from the towel evaporated, the pain and aching in her head were evaporating with it. The entire procedure required approximately 15 minutes, after which the therapist recommended that she repeat it autohypnotically on her own when headaches recurred.

After emerging from hypnosis, the patient reported that her headache was gone. Weekly follow-ups for the subsequent two months indicated that the patient was able to use self-hypnosis to reduce both the frequency and intensity of her headaches. As previously mentioned, she had stated that prior to using the procedure she was averaging two to three headaches per week, whereas she had had only three headaches in the two months following the session.

A consideration of the imagery employed suggests the importance of certain elements. Those images used in the first phase were primarily kinesthetic and tactile-drowsiness, sleepiness, and sinking deeper and deeper into a calm, restful sleep. In the second phase auditory images (her self-reported imaginal strength) were included-the sound of the breeze. The same auditory emphasis was present in the third phase - the crackling sound of the fire. Tactile images were given in the last phase - the feeling of coolness and of evaporation.

Thus, by employing hypnotic suggestions which attended to and built upon the patient's imagery strengths, it appears that treatment was facilitated. It might be argued that hypnotherapy without emphasizing these strengths would have been successful anyway. However, a prior hypnotic attempt at symptom alleviation using little or no descriptive imagery in the suggestions, was less effective. This suggests that the use of imagery was helpful in achieving the rapid and positive outcome. We suspect that the images augmented the effect by making the suggestions more concrete and immediate - and, therefore, possibly more believable.

ABSTRACT

Successful treatment of migraine headaches by making hypnotic use of a patient's imagery strengths is reported. The hypnotic procedure included suggestions for sleep induction, relaxation, hand warming, and head cooling. The case is discussed in terms of the kinds of images employed.

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SUELI MARIA PESSAGNO CARO
Psicologia Clínica

Av. Francisco J. Camargo Andrade, 187 - Cj 06
Campinas - SP

Fone: 41-8999/41-3429