



## ALL IN THE MIND

Hypnotherapy is experiencing a resurgence, addressing all manner of ills. It's proving surprisingly effective. Or is it the placebo effect?

**“LOOK INTO MY EYES, THE EYES, THE EYES, NOT AROUND** the eyes, don't look around my eyes, look into my eyes, you're under,” says the charmless stage hypnotist character Kenny Craig from *Little Britain* in a parody that makes hypnotists the world over wince. Hypnosis has been the subject of fascination, intrigue and ridicule for centuries. But now researchers are coming around, even if they still don't understand why or how it works.

The origins of hypnotism are credited to the work of Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer. Back in the 1700s, Mesmer advocated the use of magnets in medical treatments but was ultimately discredited, his techniques deemed unscientific. Following in his murky footprints, British doctor James Braid coined the name “hypnotism”, taking *hypnos* from the Greek word for sleep, and explained the process on the basis of well-established laws of psychology and physiology.

It worked. By 1958, both the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association recognised hypnotherapy as a valid medical procedure and since 1995 the National Institutes of Health has recommended hypnotherapy as a treatment for chronic pain. In England, hypnosis has become one of the most commonly used complementary therapies, with an estimated 353,000 patients feeding into a burgeoning industry.

The use of hypnosis is on the increase across the globe, with applications ranging from the treatment of insomnia, to asthma, weight loss, and childbirth, along with nervous disorders including stress and anxiety. “I'm working with somebody ready to go in with stage three cancer – before the ops. For this case, the aim is to achieve a positive frame of mind. If you believe it's going to be okay, there's much more

of a chance that it's going to be. I'll see that patient two to three times and work alongside the medical people,” explains hypnotherapist Edward Arran, who works across a slew of clinics in the UK.

As hypnotherapy throws off the mantle of scepticism cast largely by performers convincing people they are chickens on stage, there is a growing recognition of the therapy's benefits. Many will say it's the placebo effect, but science is paying it more than a passing nod. “If your mind believes something, it releases real chemicals. [So] if your mind believes something is true, your body responds as if it were true. We know that,” says Arran, relating a fact confirmed by scientific research. “So if you want to get rid of pain, the body has a capability of numbing itself. Hypnotists know this. You focus the mind on one thing to the exclusion of everything else.”

What really counts is whether it works, rather than how it works, and hypnotherapy is showing some impressive results. There's little doubt a hypnotic suggestion in the mind can have measurable effects in the body – a Stanford study asked subjects to imagine that they were eating, and their gastric acid secretions increased by 70 percent; while Harvard Medical School published a study showing that patients who had 15 minutes of hypnosis before surgery needed less pain medication afterwards.

“When you break hypnosis down to what it truly is, it's really the acceptance of an idea in the mind. Whatever your vehicle is to do that – whether or not it is marketing, repetition, hypnosis, advertising, teaching, parenting or whatever, it's the idea in the mind, uncritically, without anything else,” Arran patiently explains in beautifully-modulated tones. “All hypnosis does is help you enter a learning state of mind where you can accept, remove or replace ideas without the guard on duty saying ‘I can't do that.’”

Arran believes that in many cases we deal with the symptoms, rather than the causes, especially in regard to health issues such as anxiety and weight loss. “In the society we have, you go to the counsellors, you go to the CBT [cognitive behavioural therapist], you take the tablets, you do all these normal, rational, logical medical things. Or you can fix it,” he says with a confident smile.

Arran's conviction is infectious, but the persistent image of stage hypnotism feeds into the sceptical mind. Unusually, he's quick to credit these performers' skills – they are just applying them to entertainment over healing. “The stage guys will hypnotise someone standing up with stage lights, with an audience, with music, whereas hypnotherapists won't,” he says. “But combine the capabilities of the two – of being able to do that in that quick way – I think a lot of doctors don't look at it because they think it takes 20 minutes to hypnotise someone and they've got 10 minute appointments, but it can take 20-30 seconds if you're good at it.” His soothing tones suggest he's in those upper echelons.

There's the trick – find a skilled practitioner and you may reap the benefits touted by a mounting pile of scientific evidence, from easing migraines to lowering blood pressure. Find a less talented tout and you might just squawk like a chicken. 🐔

**WORDS GISELLE WHITEAKER**