

History of hypnosis

Hypnosis has been used as a therapeutic tool for centuries, but only in the past 50 years have the clinical applications been delineated. As evident in the medical literature, the use of hypnosis by the medical community has increased, partly as a result of a growing awareness of hypnotherapy as an available treatment modality, and also as a result of major improvements in research methodology through strict standardization. Hypnotherapy, once considered to be limited to entertainment, has now proven useful in the treatment of a wide variety of medical illness.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Hypnosis has been a part of the healing arts for centuries. The Egyptians used "sleep temples" in which therapeutic suggestions were made, for example. The clinical applications, however, have not been clarified until recently. Acceptance by the scientific medical community has been limited by commercial exploitation, carnival sideshows, and controversy. The dispute was not whether the patient's symptoms improved, but whether the application was based on sound scientific theory. Hypnosis, however, which has been considered peculiar to regal powers, magnetism, and sleep, has in many cases proven effective. Researchers and clinicians have now introduced theories that are both acceptable and supported by scientific evidence

The modern history of hypnosis begins with Franz Anton Mesmer. In 1766 Franz Mesmer, an Austrian physician, published a dissertation entitled "The Influences of the Planets on the Human Body." Mesmer believed that all objects were subject to magnetic fields that directly influenced health and disease. Mesmer's techniques included elaborate theatrics with costumes, staring in his patient's eyes, and making "passes" over the body to employ his own magnetic field in the restoration of equilibrium to the patient's fluid.

Although the details of his methods are poorly documented, he did enjoy an immense success. His fame spread rapidly, and he treated large numbers of patients. His colleagues and local scientific societies, however, refused to acknowledge his achievements, and he ultimately retired to anonymity. Although his theories are now considered mistaken, his work did offer insight into the potential applications of hypnosis. In 1843 John Elliotson, a distinguished British physician well known for his introduction of the microscope to Great Britain, published a book entitled "Numerous Cases of Surgical Operations Without Pain in the Mesmeric State". He described in detail his personal use of the mesmeric state for the treatment of chorea and rheumatism. He also presented the work of his colleagues, who were able to perform such procedures as the painless release of contractures, incision of abscesses, and dental extraction

A contemporary of Elliotson's, James Braid, introduced the term hypnosis derived from the Greek hypnos (sleep). Braid was also credited with the elucidation of the psychological aspect of hypnosis and the power the mind has over the body. He was impressed by the ease and rapidity with which trance could be induced, and fully recognized that the therapist did not transfer any magnetic, electric, or other physical force. His theory was close to the current understanding that the trance state is independent of the induction technique. His elucidation of the psychodynamic aspects of hypnosis were later adopted by Broca, Charcot, and Bemheim.

Other therapists, such as Freud and Bramwell in 1889, continued their investigations and research use until modern hypnotherapists, such as Milton Erickson and Karen Olness, refined the current clinical application of hypnosis. The exact nature of trance is still unknown; however, theories by prominent physicians have offered insight into the psychodynamics of trance.

The history of hypnotherapy has been filled with controversy, but the therapeutic success and the application of rigorous scientific methods to the use and research has greatly improved the acceptance of hypnotherapy by the scientific community.