

A-Z of alternative therapies

# Hypnotherapy

From tackling phobias to aiding weight loss, hypnotherapy is recognised as a gentle but effective way to treat tricky health issues. But does it really work?

**H**ypnotherapy probably isn't the first solution that springs to mind if you're searching for a cure for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), eczema or arthritis. But patients swear by it and hypnotherapy has been widely researched and successfully treated a diverse mixture of conditions including addictions, weight problems, pain, insomnia, phobias and high blood pressure.

The history of hypnosis is relatively short. It was first developed just over 200 years ago by a young physician in Vienna, Franz Anton Mesmer, who believed hypnosis could help balance cosmic energy in the bodies of his patients and cure illness. In reality, though, hypnotherapy is not mystical but merely a state of deep relaxation.

You remain in control throughout the process, so put to rest fears of acting like a chicken or revealing hidden secrets. Embarrassing antics seen on stage have been widely put down to lively volunteers, a highly charged atmosphere and too much alcohol! Hypnotherapy places you in a light trance, under which you can still talk and move as normal, and you remember everything that happened during the session.

Best known for helping you beat phobias and kick habits such as smoking and overeating, hypnotherapy can also build on existing skills, such as speaking foreign languages and sports performance.

## HEALING WORDS

'Hypnotherapy is like overwriting a mental video tape,' explains Ursula James, vice president of the British Society of Clinical Hypnosis. 'We all know we should be eating healthily and taking more exercise, but our thought patterns keep us stuck in bad habits such as overeating. By making suggestions to your unconscious mind in a state of hypnosis, we are replacing the negative thoughts behind bad habits such as "I can never lose weight" with a positive belief that you can.'

Introducing new perspectives is a fairly simple process. Suggestions are made during hypnosis to create mental images. If you want to quit smoking, for example, you

may be asked to visualise yourself in situations where you normally smoke, but feeling happy without a cigarette.

The therapist and client establish a goal at the start of treatment. 'Hypnotherapy can only enable you to do what you want to do,' explains James. 'If, say, you are scared of spiders and you want to be able to remove one from the bath, hypnotherapy can make this possible.'

By putting you in touch with your inner voice, the one that knows what's best for you, hypnotherapy helps you pay attention to your instincts and intuition again. 'This is why it's so effective for overcoming phobias. You become aware of how irrational they are,' says James.

## MIND'S EYE

Hypnotherapy can also tackle emotional issues, including low self-esteem, as well as anxiety-related conditions such as obsessive compulsive and post-traumatic stress disorders. Treatment focuses on helping the individual recall the traumatic event in a more relaxed state, removing the association of fear and allowing them to feel more capable. To boost self-esteem, doing some positive mental rehearsal and imagining yourself feeling calm and confident in stressful situations, and recalling times when you felt good in the past, can help.

The technique's ability to harness the power of the mind over the body can also improve physical conditions. Visualisation exercises can help bring relief to people experiencing asthma, skin complaints and chronic pain. A study by Withington Hospital in Manchester found hypnotherapy improved IBS symptoms in 71 per cent of patients. Patients may be guided to imagine their skin healing, or their gut as a free-flowing river. In fact, as long as they have a good attention span, children over the age of six can undergo hypnotherapy after careful consideration to check it's appropriate for their condition.

'Hypnosis has even been shown to be effective for enhancing fertility, as it reduces stress and works with the part of the mind that controls unconscious functions,' says James. 'It helps women cope with body changes during pregnancy and can reduce morning sickness. I teach women self-hypnosis techniques that help them feel more in control when giving birth.'

## CELEB CRISIS

Presenter Kate Garraway visited Ursula James to stay focused during the birth of her first baby, using self-hypnosis.

'When starting maternity leave, the fear of giving birth hit me and I had panic attacks.

'I found it really easy to get to grips with the self-hypnosis techniques. It feels odd at first; after seeing hypnosis in films you expect something dramatic to happen. But I managed to relax and settle into the right frame of mind.

'The worst thing about going into labour for the first time is fear of the unknown. Panic can stop you thinking clearly, but the techniques helped me remain calm and remember what I'd learnt in my ante-natal classes.

'The self-hypnosis techniques helped me keep a positive attitude, which is absolutely crucial during labour!'

Most people can undergo hypnosis, although no one can be hypnotised against their will. Being calm and relaxed beforehand makes treatment easier, so it's crucial to find a therapist you feel at ease with. For overcoming bad habits, one session should be enough, but complex conditions may require more. However, 'You should never need more than three sessions,' assures James. 'Many people also find that hypnotherapy CDs are useful for reinforcing suggestions made during a session, and resolving problems more quickly.'

## DO IT YOURSELF

Self-hypnosis, when taught by a therapist, can be a valuable skill. It allows you to use your conscious mind to relax yourself and make positive affirmations and suggestions. Your conscious mind acts as the hypnotist, employing relaxation techniques, and subsequently making suggestions to your subconscious mind.

Hypnotherapy doesn't have to be used to treat a condition, though. It can help you perform better in job interviews, and even combat flagging motivation.

'Hypnosis is a simple way of harnessing your inner potential. It can help you overcome myriad psychological and physical conditions and be the best that you can be,' says James. These are big claims for a therapy that relies 100 per cent on the power of the mind, but according to James, 'I've seen women who've experienced years of anxiety-based illnesses, such as trichotillomania (hair pulling) and even hysterical paralysis, recover fully with hypnotherapy.'



● Ursula James practises at the Benjamin, James & Associates clinic in west London. To make an appointment, call 0207 262 1659, or visit [www.ursulajames.com](http://www.ursulajames.com).

● Ursula also offers hypnotherapy CDs for a variety of conditions, which can be ordered from her website or by calling 0845 055 9191.


● For more information on hypnotherapy or to find a therapist, call the British Society of Clinical Hypnosis on 01262 403 103 or visit [www.bschn.org.uk](http://www.bschn.org.uk).



Hypnotherapy can help you perform better in job interviews

put to the TEST

## 'I felt totally in control throughout the session'



**Subject** Karen Kelly  
**Profession** Senior marketing executive  
**Age** 29  
Karen had an appointment with Ursula James, the resident hypnotherapy expert on *This Morning*.

and happy events in my life. I felt calm but wasn't convinced that I was relaxed enough for the treatment to work.

'Ursula guided me to imagine two light switches. One was new and surrounded by red lights, the other was old and dusty. I visualised turning the new switch off, and ripping it out of the wall, before flicking on the old one. I think this was meant to symbolise switching off my panic about the tube. In a very soothing voice, Ursula also made suggestions, telling me that I was in control of my fear and felt safe on the tube.

'I felt totally in control throughout the session – more focused than sleepy. After

Ursula brought me out of hypnosis, she asked me how long I thought I'd been under. I was amazed when she said it was almost 45 minutes – it felt more like 15!

'I still felt anxious when I braved the tube with a friend on the way home, but my fear was definitely manageable. I even kept calm when it stopped for a minute in a tunnel. This could have triggered a panic attack before.

'I wouldn't say I was totally cured of my phobia. I've yet to go on the tube alone, but hypnotherapy has definitely helped me control my feelings. I'll continue to practise the techniques, and hopefully my fear will reduce even more.'

WORDS: HANNAH FREGARD. PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES, LFI