

Hypnosis for Anxiety

By Susan Lee Bady, CSW, BCD

Of all the many ways people use hypnosis, one of the most frequent is to help them overcome anxiety. And that is with good reason. Anxiety is, after all, one of the most common of human problems. It may show up as a formal diagnosis—such as agoraphobia, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder or a phobia. Or it may result from and be a part of the various challenges life presents us—giving up smoking, taking a difficult exam, handling a serious medical problem, going through a divorce, or realizing that we or a family member has a serious mental illness.

Our body is hardwired to experience anxiety, as part of the fight-flight mechanism that activates bodily functions to cope with stress. Sometimes, this is a valuable attribute that can save our lives in a dangerous situation or motivate us to perform at a high level. On other occasions, as we have all experienced, our anxiety can overwhelm us and interfere with our functioning.

And this is where hypnosis comes in because: (1) the hypnotic induction is a highly relaxing experience and (2) the hypnotist can add additional suggestions (or imagery) to relax, to see things in perspective, or to overcome the shame people often feel about being anxious. Or he/she may use one or more of the valuable techniques within hypnotic work—finding a safe place, seeing a protector, gaining an awareness of one's inner strength. This work not only helps the person to calm down, but can also help him/her gain new insights and grow from the experience. Here are a few examples:

"Mary" walked into my office last week badly congested due to a cold. She told me how anxious she felt because she went to work despite her illness and made many serious mistakes. I did a simple hypnotic induction and told her there was a wise part of her that could help her out. Within a minute her whole face relaxed, her congestion eased and her breathing became easier. "I really didn't do so badly," she said, "I am too hard on myself. Like going to work even though I'm sick."

Medical problems are very responsive to hypnotic work. Joseph came into session anxious about next week's operation on his knee that he feared would maim him for life, even though doctors had reassured him that he would be all right. Rachel had to have an operation for cancer that she wanted to put off because she was so afraid. In both instances I taught them exercises to lessen their anxiety and manage pain to the point that both reported it had been less frightening an experience than they had expected. Rachel continued the hypnotic work to deal with the impact of the cancer,

making many changes in her life she would not have found the strength or impetus for before, she said.

I practice self-hypnosis almost every day and pass this skill on to most of my patients. Although the human species is hard-wired for anxiety, it's also important to know that we simultaneously have within ourselves the capacity for calm and strength and hypnosis can help access them.

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