Self-Hypnosis and Pain

Self-hypnotic suggestions can be a particularly useful form of relaxation strategy when managing your pain experience. By using self-hypnosis, it is possible both to transform the pain experience itself and also to change your relationship to that experience.

There are many possible ways of changing our experience of physical sensations. The only limits are the limits of the imagination. As you are probably aware, the imagination knows few limits!

Sometimes, it can help to deeply relax ourselves before giving ourselves hypnotic suggestions. Sometimes, just allowing ourselves to go along fully with these suggestions can send us into a trance even without prior deep relaxation.

**What is a trance?**

It’s important to know that trances aren’t special mystical experiences that only qualified hypnotists can induce. In fact, trances are part of our everyday experience. If you’ve ever driven a car and suddenly found that you’ve been driving along for miles on automatic, you’ll know what being in a trance is all about! Indeed any time you get really engrossed in something (such as, a good book, or an interesting task) you can shift into a trance.

Often a sign of being in a trance is that time is distorted. People may describe ‘losing track of time’. Hours can fly by and yet only seem like minutes. On the other hand, it can seem like many hours have passed and yet you’ve only been in a trance for a few minutes.

So, we all go into trances on a frequent basis. The trick about developing skills in self-hypnosis is to take control of when you go into a trance and what you do with it. In other words, developing skills at self-hypnosis is an opportunity to take control of your physical and emotional experience.
Developing skills at self-hypnosis

**Becoming really effective and skilled at using self-hypnosis is a matter of practice.** The more you practice, the more skilled you become. It will help to experiment with a variety of different approaches to find those that suit you best and in what circumstances each of the approaches is the most useful.

**Before you begin, consider seriously the pain that you experience.** Is there a good reason why you might want to hold onto it? Is it helping you to get something you want or need, such as attention or rest? Make sure that, if you have been holding onto your pain, you first ensure that you plan other ways of getting what you need. In this way, you will be making sure that you really can make a difference because you really want to make a difference.

**When you first begin to practice self-hypnosis, it can be useful to do this at a time when the pain is not too bad.** As you become more familiar with self-hypnotic approaches, you will find it easier to use when the pain is more intense.

It has been found that, through self-hypnosis, the length of time that pain relief lasts increases over time. **With perseverance, increasingly long periods of relief from pain can be achieved.**

Gaining control over pain in this way may involve using self-hypnosis once or twice a day (mornings and evenings can be especially good times to practice this). **Find out through experimenting what works best for you.**

It is usually helpful to think in terms of reducing rather than removing pain. So, if you imagine a scale of 1 to 10, if you start from feeling that your pain level is 7, then you might first have the aim of reducing it to 5 or 4. Reaching this level may feel more comfortable. In time, you may find yourself reducing your pain level to 2 or 3. You may find that this feels even better. It is possible to find that your pain reduces to 0. This can be wonderful! Even if you reduce your pain just some of the way, allow yourself to notice the difference between the old level and the new level. **Congratulate yourself on the control you have achieved.**
Self-hypnotic techniques for pain management: basic approaches

There are many possible techniques and imagery that we can apply to change our physical and emotional experience. You might even find that you already use some of these techniques without even being aware that you are doing so. However, you can make them even more effective if you use them intentionally.

With practice, self-hypnotic techniques can become a very powerful way to transform your experience of pain. Listed below are some of the basic approaches to pain management. Allow yourself to experiment with each of these approaches. You may find that some work well at certain times and others are more useful at other times.

Here are just some ideas of what you might choose to do in order to transform your experience of pain.

1) Changing your physical experience
Consider some of the ways in which you might be able to change your physical experience by seeing the physical sensations as something other than pain or by minimizing the sensations as trivial or unreal.

For example,

- See yourself as a T.V. or film character (such as Bionic Woman or Robocop) with mechanical limbs that are insensitive to pain.
- Imagine that the affected area of your body as being numbed by a powerful drug (such as Novocaine).
- What is especially good with some kinds of headaches is to imagine your arms are getting warm and heavy (repeat the words to yourself “my arms are getting warm and heavy”). Also, suggest warmth in your legs, or your hands and fingers. (Headaches can be helped by directing blood flow away from your head and towards your extremities).

2) Recalling pain relief
Often, you can make powerful changes to your physical experience of pain by recalling the effect of something which has helped to relieve your pain in the past.

For example,

- Imagine the feeling of ice on the painful area or, on the other hand, you might imagine a feeling of heat. Some people find hot baths or lying down in the sun soothing. So, you might want to recall one of these experiences.
If you have had experience of finding a TENS machine helpful, then let yourself recall how that can change your physical experience.

Recall the relieving effects of an analgesic medication.

Whatever it is that you decide to recall, allow yourself to fully enter into your remembered experience. So, take yourself completely through the experience from the very first action you take through to the very last effect. Use all your senses, recall what you see and hear and smell and taste and, of course, what you feel.

3) Changing the situation
Consider some of the ways in which you might see yourself experiencing the pain in a very different type of situation that would help you to bear it.

For example,

- See yourself in a car chase having been shot and yet continuing to be chase or be chased. (You might imagine yourself as a police detective or as a secret agent).
- See yourself as an injured marathon runner, determined to keep on going to the finish line.

4) Changing your language
Consider some of the ways in which you might describe your physical experience in ways that will change how you think about it.

For example, as you notice your pain:

- Rather than ‘pain’, describe it as a ‘sharp sensation’
- Rather than ‘hurting’, describe it as ‘vibrating’
- Rather than ‘stabbing’, describe it as ‘tingling’

Be creative and try out different ways of describing your experience.

5) Calming talk
Often, there are opportunities to use our previous experiences of pain in order to reassure ourselves about our current experience.

So, when you are going through a painful experience, you may wish to repeat the following to yourself:

- “This may be painful for a while but I know that it will subside in time and that I shall feel better afterwards.”
- “I have often experienced this much pain before and I know that I can keep relaxing through it.”
6) Taking a detached perspective
This is sometimes called ‘dissociation’. We can begin to change our physical experience if, rather than staying fully inside our experience, we become more like a detached observer looking on at what is happening. We can then begin to view the physical sensations as if we are an interested outsider.

For example,

- You might decide to analyse the physical sensations and then compare them with those in another part of your body. (In this way you can also begin to refocus your attention on non-painful areas).

- You might reflect on the nature of the sensations that you are experiencing as if you were preparing to write a report about them.

7) Mental Distractions
Often, it can help to focus our minds on other things than painful physical sensations. There are many possible ways of keeping your mind occupied.

For example,

- Remember or imagine being somewhere that is really relaxing for you (such as on a beach or in the countryside, or in your garden). In order to fully give your attention to this experience, use all your senses. See all the things that you’d see, hear all the sounds that you’d hear, smell all the smells, taste all the taste, and feel all the good feelings that you’d feel.

- Look around you for things that you can become engrossed in. It might be something on T.V. or an article in a magazine or a good book or a crossword or a jigsaw or drawing a picture or needlework or doing some car maintenance. The list is endless! Choose something that you know from experience will really interest you and involve your full attention.

- If there’s nothing around about you to engross you, go inside yourself for ideas. Do some complicated mental arithmetic calculations, remember or make up lyrics to a song, work out the most scenic route between two points, plan your weekend ahead. Again, the list is endless. Use the power of your imagination to help you through painful times.

- Focus upon a part of your body that is feeling comfortable. Take time to explore exactly how it feels in that part of your body. Notice how warm or cool this part of your body feels. Notice the weight of this part of your body. Notice what sensations you can feel, and how they may change moment to moment. Consider how your heart and brain have a part to play in helping this part of your body feel and function the way it does. Allow yourself to become engrossed in this part of your body.
Self-hypnotic techniques for pain management: Advanced tools

The techniques that have already been described are just the beginning of what you may find useful in altering your physical and emotional experiences. Once you have found out just what a powerful tool your mind can be in transforming your experience, all sorts of possibilities will open up to you for self-hypnotic suggestions.

Below are some of the most useful types of imagery with pain. Allow yourself to experiment with several of these approaches. Find out through your experiments which work best for you. Allow yourself to be creative. Go beyond these suggestions to discover all that you can do for yourself through self-hypnosis. You might imagine yourself as a tailor, designing a number of different suits or outfits for yourself, making sure that they fit you perfectly and that each is designed in just such a way that it will put you in the best light for each of the situations you might find yourself in.

1) Gaining control over your pain
Experiment with the following,

- Scan your body…gather any pains that are there into a ball…Begin to change its size…allow it to get bigger…just imagine how big you can make it…now make it smaller…see how small you can make it…is it possible to make it the size of a grain of sand?...change the size in several directions…Now, allow it to move slowly out of your body, moving further away each time you breathe out…Notice what you experience with each breath out, as the pain moves away…see it disappear into the far distance…

- A large coloured (choose your colour) scarf floats from the sky and comes to rest in your hands…You fold it and place it over the painful area…Allow the scarf to be absorbed into your body and let it wrap itself around the pain, trapping the pain in its fibres…Now, imagine a pocket appearing in your body and see a corner of the scarf peeking through…Gently withdraw the scarf through the pocket, drawing the pain out with it…Now, drop the scarf into a waste basket at your feet and walk away from it, feeling yourself comfortable and pain free. (Alternatively, imagine letting the scarf be wafted upwards on a current of air and drifting off into the distance).

- See yourself sitting on a bed of luxuriously soft grass beside a beautiful deep pond. The water is a deep indigo blue…Allow yourself to slip into the cool, soothing waters and swim slowly about the pond…Feel any pain being drawn through your skin into the water and falling to the bottom of the pond…Let yourself continue to swim around until you are completely relaxed and comfortable and all the pain has been drawn through your body and fallen into the depths of the pond…swim back to the edge of the pond and climb out.
• Be present with your pain...Let it take on a shape, any shape that comes to mind...Become aware of the dimensions of the pain...What is its height?...What is its weight?...What is the depth of the pain?...Give it a colour...And a shape...Feel its texture...Notice whether it makes any sound ...let your hands come together with palms turned upwards as if forming a cup...Put this pain object into your hands...Consider how you would change the size and shape and colour and texture of that pain object...Let yourself decide what you would like to do with the pain...Just accept what feels right to you...You might decide to throw the pain away or move it somewhere else or place it back were you found it...And notice how the experience of that pain might be changed through making the decisions that you’ve made.

• Examine your pain thoroughly...Describe it to yourself...Is it like a hot poker in your back, or like as if hot oil is spreading over your shoulder, or like needles stabbing your foot?...Picture what the pain might look like...Is it a large coin, or a vivid colour, or a pool of water...See the coin, or colour, or pool of water, or whatever it is you choose, get smaller as your pain recedes, even slightly...Keep your mind concentrating on just the pain (you may find that you want to experiment with three or four different images before you find the one that seems easiest to work with)...As you imagine, allow yourself to take deep regular and satisfying breaths...Continue to focus on the pain and imagine a tiny portion of your pain escaping with each escaping breath...The image of the coin, or pool, or colour or whatever you have chosen might begin to shrink or fade...As you inhale, call the pain back that left...Continue this cycle of letting go of some of your pain as you breathe out and call the pain back as you breath in...As you continue, see and feel the pain becoming less each time you breathe out. See more of it leaving each time and the image shrinking or fading even more each time. Then see it coming back as you breath in...Continue this process of gaining control over this image of your pain and the feelings that go with this...Decode what you wish to do with the image and the feelings (Do you want to let them go completely, or change their intensity or quality, or keep them as before?)...Allow yourself to act on this decision and notice how much control you can have over this pain experience.

• Contrast your experiences in different parts of your body. For example, if you have pain in your right leg but not your left leg, then concentrate on the feelings in your right leg, including the pain...Then, allow yourself to contrast this with the feelings in your left leg, noticing how different your left leg feels. Describe the feelings in each of your legs using colours, sounds and pictures to symbolise how each of your legs feel. Then, experiment with combining each of these two sets of descriptions. For example:

"My right leg feels like a red bell, pounding with each beat of my heart. And my left leg feels cool and well and pleasant. It feels like a purple plum, cool and soft and comfortable. I can imagine the purple plum
striking the red bell. The softness of my left leg would make a soft sound as it made contact with the bell. Perhaps the purple of my left leg might rub off on the redness of the bell. I can feel how the softness and gentle wellness of my purple left leg might blend with the redness of the bell and make it ring more quietly. I can even feel my right leg throb less as I imagine the red turning into purple.

- Think of your pain as a colour and imagine you can really see this colour in you body. Pay close attention to the qualities of this colour. See the shade and hue, the size and shape of this colour. Once you have made a really good picture of the colour of the pain in your body, begin to imagine that this colour is altering, for the better. You might imagine this colour fading, or becoming lighter or paler, or draining away.

As the colour alters more and more, notice how this feels. Begin to imagine drawing into your body a more comfortable colour. See this comfortable colour developing in that part of your body that had the pain.

Allow it to become just the right size and shape, just the right shade and hue. Allow it to be the most comfortable colour it can be. Notice how this feels.

A similar approach would be to go through the same steps but concentrate on the sound of your pain (or even, the taste or smell of your pain if you can imagine this).

Play around with the images that you have created to see how they can be combined in ways that lead to pain reduction.

2) Communicating with your pain
- See yourself sitting in a beautiful and peaceful place...Locate the pain and ask it to come out and communicate with you...Let the pain assume some kind of physical form, such as a small creature with a friendly face...Allow it to say everything it needs to and listen to it respectfully and with an open mind...Find out what its positive intention is towards you...As you come to understand the learning that your pain has come to share with you, thank it and tell it what you have learned...Notice the creature giving a cheery smile and a wave and walking away from you, its mission accomplished, so that it no longer needs to communicate with you through giving you pain.

- Imagine taking a lift down through layers of consciousness until you reach a deep level of your unconscious...Imagine the lift door opening and finding yourself in a long corridor with many doors...Imagine walking down the corridor and seeing many doors, each with the name of a body part...Go to the door which has the name of the body part which is the source of your pain...Knock on the door and imagine the door being opened by another you (the one that represents the body
Imagine being welcomed into the room and let yourself have a conversation with this body part, finding out all it has to tell you, particularly about what it needs from you. When you’ve finished this conversation, thank that part of you, leave the room and return to the lift. Allow yourself to return up in the lift until you become fully conscious once more.

3) Time regression

Time regression works by recalling a time in your life before your present experience of pain. Take some time to allow yourself to develop feelings of relaxation, perhaps by focusing on your breathing for a while. Begin to recall a time in your life when you were free of pain. For example, if you have arthritis in your feet, experiment with the following:

- Remember the times before the arthritis began, when your feet were free from pain. Remember the walks you may have taken, perhaps near home or on holiday. Remember the short trips you have made to and from your kitchen to get something nice to eat or drink. Recall how good it may have felt to get up in the morning and stand in the shower or lie in the bath, letting the soothing water flow over or around you. Remember how pleasant it might have been to put your feet up at the end of a long day. Remember how much fun it may have been to have danced, or run, or swum. Allow yourself to enter into these good memories, using all your senses to see, hear, smell, taste and feel your experience. Recall the details of a particularly special experience, recalling the feelings as if they were just happening. And notice how your feet feel as you remember them feeling as light as air or comfortably warm or cool or strong or relaxed. And describe and develop this experience. For example, “I may find that as I remember that wonderful time my feet will feel numb or maybe cool, perhaps more light than numb. I may notice that whenever I think of this experience, my feet get this same feeling of numbness or coolness. I may find that the comfort in my feet lasts for a short time or perhaps it will last longer than I thought possible”… Be aware of even small changes in the amount of pain you feel and encourage and expand this small feeling by using more suggestions. For example, “I notice that a slight tingling has begun in my right foot. It’s a pleasant feeling and I may find that just as a drop of blue dye in a pail of cool water spreads out, this cool numbness can also spread. It can be like walking down a hill with each step easily gliding into the next. I may even find my momentum taking the walking into a trot, like the numbness in my toes going into my foot.”

4) Time Distortion

This can be an especially useful technique if you find that you have periods of time when your pain is relatively more intense and periods of time where there is less or no pain. It depends upon our ability, when feeling good, to lose track of time and to find that time has passed much more quickly than we were aware.
Use this approach when you are feeling relatively comfortable and with less pain. Allow yourself to deeply relax and prepare yourself for self-hypnosis. Let yourself focus on this time of comfort…Visualise and imagine an experience that will give you the idea of stretching time (so, you might imagine the comfort as being part of a long running film, or as having contact with a friend, or as an enjoyable holiday, or as a long slow balloon ride, or as eating a 10 course meal)…Find ways of encouraging this experience to expand. For example, “this comfortable feeling is like watching Lord of The Rings (or Gone with the Wind or Star Wars or…). It can be fascinating to see how long this feeling may last. It may be a pleasurable feeling to watch each scene unfold and the story develop.”

Another approach could be to suggest “I may find that time is like a rubber band that can stretch and pull a long way. My feelings of peaceful comfort can expand and stretch in the same way.”

Yet another approach is to imagine a period of travel; “I can imagine talking a long trip, passing through many towns. And each town has an inn where I can stop to rest. I can feel the comfort and relaxation of that first inn right now. Perhaps this feeling of comfort and level of relief will last until I get to the next inn. And as I pull out of the driveway, I can look up the road and almost see the lights of the next town and the next inn. I may find that the road to the town is shorter than I might think and I may be surprised or curious to notice that I still feel comfortable and soothed as I come up to the next inn. I can visualise the inn now, getting closer and closer.” Let the trip take as long as you like and fill the space between towns with descriptions of what you might see along the way.

Through this sort of suspension and expansion of time, you may find that your conscious mind loses track of time. In this way, you can lengthen the span of pain relief and the intervals of pain may get shorter.
**Final Thoughts**

Self-hypnotic techniques can sometimes take time to master. You may well find that each time that you use one of these techniques you become increasingly skilful and the effect you have on your experience of pain may become greater and may last longer. Your pain may well have been around a long time. **Allow yourself time**, therefore, to develop your skills in using self-hypnosis **so that you can increase your control of pain**.

And, most importantly, **use your imagination**. Your conscious and unconscious may already know what sorts of imagery, ideas and approaches will best suit you. Allow yourself to experiment with some of the ideas suggested here. Go beyond them. You may well find that there are even better ways of changing your experience of pain. Play around with the thoughts and images and feelings that come to mind.

Sometimes it can help to think of several possible examples of images to use before you begin your self-hypnosis, so that there is plenty of material available. If you find something particularly useful, you may wish to make a tape recording of yourself talking through it to help you easily move into your desired state.

Self-hypnosis is **an opportunity to use your creative mind to its full** in service of your physical and emotional well-being. You may well find that it is an opportunity worth taking.

*Some of these ideas for hypnotic suggestions are taken from books by B.Alman and P.Lambrou (Selfhypnosis, Brunner/Mazel, 1992) and D.Brigham (Imagery for Getting Well, Norton, 1994).*

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