

Mindful Hypnotherapy and Emotional Regulation: A Psychological Review of Contemporary Evidence

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ABSTRACT

The concept of emotional regulation is an important construct in the field of psychology, as it is crucial for mental health and psychological well-being. The integrative mindful hypnotherapy approach is designed to promote emotional regulation by utilizing focused attention, therapeutic suggestion, self-awareness, relaxation and cognitive flexibility. This paper concentrates on its psychological mechanisms of attentional control, acceptance, cognitive restructuring, interoceptive awareness and stress regulation. Some evidence for possible benefits on emotional balance, resilience and wellbeing exists, however methodological limitations and the need for well designed long term studies exist. More inter-disciplinary work is needed to make mindful hypnotherapy a scientifically-based method for emotional regulation.

Keywords: Mindful hypnotherapy; clinical hypnosis; emotional regulation; psychological well-being; mindfulness; cognitive flexibility.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health conditions can be a global burden and are common causes of disability and decreased quality of life and are a significant contributor to socioeconomic burden worldwide, with depression, anxiety and chronic stress being significant contributors to burden of mental health disorders (World Health Organization 2022). Hence, modern psychology has been increasingly moving towards complementary therapeutic methods that are used to manage emotions, as well as to enhance psychological well-being and health (Gross 2015). Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) have shown to reduce emotional reactivity, depression, anxiety and stress (Tang, Hölzel and Posner 2015; Goldberg et al. 2022). Recently, a new form of therapy has become available: mindful hypnotherapy is an integration between mindful principles and evidence-based clinical hypnosis to assist in regulating emotions and psychological resilience and adaptive coping. With Mindful Hypnotherapy's focus on increasing emotional awareness and self-regulation, mindful focus, suggestions, pictures, relaxing and observation of the self from a mindful perspective is the goal of the therapy. The specific techniques are designed to help foster adaptive psychological functioning, by decreasing negative emotional reactions, enhancing cognitive flexibility, bolstering attentional control, and boosting resilience. The concepts of mindful hypnotherapy align with well-known contemporary psychological theories of emotional regulation, acceptance, cognitive flexibility and resilience, which have been strongly linked to positive mental health outcomes (Gross 2015).

Although there are a few studies on the use of mindful hypnosis for emotional regulation, it has not been studied as extensively as other areas in which clinical hypnosis is effective, such as anxiety, stress, chronic pain and psychosomatic diseases. There are relatively few reviews in the literature that have brought together psychological, psychotherapeutic, neuroscience, behavioural medicine and mindfulness views into a more holistic understanding of emotional regulation, which is spread across various disciplines. Existing literature remains dispersed across psychology, psychotherapy, neuroscience, behavioural medicine, and mindfulness research, with relatively few reviews integrating these perspectives into a comprehensive understanding of emotional regulation. Therefore, the review brings together current psychological theories, clinical hypnotherapy studies, mindfulness literature, and empirical psychological studies to examine mindful hypnotherapy as a potential tool to enhance emotional regulation, critically considers the available evidence, pinpoints areas of inability of current research, and proposes ways for future interdisciplinary research.

Foundations of Mindful Hypnotherapy

Mindful hypnotherapy is a clinical hypnosis technique, which is integrating mindfulness with the well-known clinical hypnosis techniques and improving emotional management and mental health. It integrates mindful awareness and hypnotic principles to help promote self-regulation, attentional stability and emotional resilience, instead simply targeting symptom reduction (Elkins & Olendzki, 2019).

Clinical Hypnosis is a therapeutic technique in which a trained clinician puts a client into a hypnotic state of mind, making him/her more susceptible to suggestions. The American Psychological Association (APA) Division 30 defines hypnosis as

a state of focused attention, decreased peripheral awareness and increased responsiveness to therapeutic suggestions, which is the foundation for psychological and behavioral intervention (Elkins et al., 2015).

One of the methods of mindful hypnotherapy is the focused attention. Hypnosis restricts attention which can aid the person to turn his or her attention away from negative thought patterns, to become more aware of emotions and to develop more adaptive responses to stress and psychological distress (Oakley & Halligan, 2009).

Therapeutic suggestion can help to change negative thinking patterns, boost coping mechanisms and facilitate positive behaviour change. In the present day, hypnotherapy uses collaborative approaches to suggest to people things that they can already do themselves, instead of imposing on them (Kirsch, 1994).

Widely utilized in mindful hypnotherapy, guided imagery is effective in helping to process feelings and restructure thinking. This can be achieved by visualising coping responses and experiences which are meaningful to them and which will support the development of emotional regulation within a supportive therapeutic environment (Hammond, 1990).

Emotion regulation strategies such as relaxation and mindful awareness also help to regulate emotions by decreasing physiological arousal and increasing awareness of body sensations. Techniques to improve the autonomic state of the body and healthier responses to emotional situations include diaphragmatic breathing and progressive muscle relaxation (Jensen & Patterson, 2014).

Lastly, mindful hypnotherapy is not just about short-term symptom relief; it's about fostering lasting emotional strength and mental agility. There is some evidence that hypnosis may be highly effective with patients suffering anxiety, depression, chronic pain and stress-related disorders, and hypnosis is an evidence-based psychological intervention (Montgomery et al., 2013).

Mindful Hypnotherapy Through the Lens of Contemporary Psychology

Because of its role in emotional control, for reducing anxiety and stress and for changing behavior, clinical hypnosis has become increasingly important in the area of empirical psychological research. Traditionally hypnosis has been used for the management of pain and psychosomatic disorders; more recent studies have shown that mindful hypnosis can also be used in emotional regulation processes, such as focused attention, cognitive flexibility, attentional control, interoceptive awareness and psychological resilience. Mindful hypnotherapy is not simply relaxation therapy, however, an integration of mindfulness and suggestion in the area of adaptive emotional processing and psychological functioning (Elkins et al., 2015; Alladin, 2016).

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is the ability to monitor, assess and adjust emotional responses in order to facilitate adaptive functioning (Gross 2015). Gross' Process Model suggests strategies like attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation are consistently shown to be associated with decreased anxiety and depression, while suppression, rumination, and experiential avoidance are associated with psychological distress (Gross 2015). Mindful Hypnotherapy helps to regulate emotions using the power of focused attention, relaxation, therapeutic suggestion and mindful awareness. It can promote the experience of emotions without hyperreactivity, which can help decrease maladaptive responses and increase coping, emotional awareness and cognitive reappraisal. The mechanisms described here fit with current theories of emotional flexibility and self-regulation (Alladin, 2016). This viewpoint is similar to Bonanno and Burton's (2013) concept of emotional flexibility, and their connection with increased resilience, decreased stress, and better psychological adjustment, points to a possible conceptual overlap between Daoism and modern emotion regulation theories.

Psychological Flexibility

In modern psychotherapy, psychological flexibility is an important concept, and is defined in terms of being able to embrace what is happening in the present moment, while also being open to doing what is important and valued (Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson 2012). A general increase in psychological flexibility has been shown on multiple occasions to be correlated with a reduction in depression, anxiety, burnout and emotional regulation. By using Mindful Hypnotherapy, individuals learn to accept their inner experiences while at the same time suggesting and directing thinking patterns, there is greater opportunity to alter the individual's thinking. It fosters non-suppressive awareness of emotion, and aids in the development of emotional flexibility and adaptability to emotional stressors (Yapko, 2018)

Attention and Cognitive Control.

There are two important domains of meditation research that impact emotional functioning: attention and cognitive control. Neuroscientific research indicates that meditation raises sustained attention, executive functioning, attentional switching and lowers automatic cognitive reactivity, which should help to lower anxiety and depressive rumination (Tang,

Hölzel and Posner 2015). Mindful hypnotherapy involves directing one's attention to specific parts of the mind in order to gain greater control and understanding of emotions. Neuro-imaging studies of therapeutic recommendations suggest changes in brain regions relevant to attention, EF and EP in the hypnotic state (Landry et al., 2017); there is some evidence of changes in these regions in this state.

Embracing and Awareness of the Self.

Mindful Hypnotherapy utilizes the hypnosis tools of breathing, relaxation, body awareness and mindful noticing of internal sensations to increase interoceptive awareness and emotional regulation. In modern psychology, the way in which the body communicates its sensations to the brain is also acknowledged as a fundamental mechanism that allows us to become aware of our emotions, resist them and regulate them. Increased interoceptive awareness allows individuals to become more aware of their internal physiological change that can precede and help signal the development of less helpful behavioral responses to their emotional responses. Hypnotic interventions increase bodily awareness to physiological responses to emotional experiences, and help to identify when emotions are activated earlier and to adaptively respond with behaviour. The mechanisms are in line with the current theories of embodied cognition and autonomic regulation (Mehling et al., 2012).

Contemporary Evidence

The empirical data showed effectiveness of the interventions hypnosis (mindful hypnosis) and clinical hypnosis with respect to emotional regulation, anxiety, stress, emotional distress and psychological health. Researches literature on mindful hypnotherapy is limited and clinical hypnosis studies demonstrate some advantages of hypnosis in clinical situations, both psychological and medical. Systematic reviews have demonstrated that hypnosis may cause anxiety, pain, stress and emotional functioning to decrease, and a good safety profile for hypnosis has been established if used by trained clinicians (Häuser et al., 2016). Neuroimaging studies reveal impacts on areas of the brain associated with attentional, executive and emotional functioning (Landry et al., 2017). Furthermore, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and hypnosis can be combined to enhance the regulation of emotions by restructuring them and helping to make adaptive behaviour changes (Alladin, 2016). Yet there are some studies that suggest there are variations in how mindful hypnotherapy interventions are delivered and some studies that show small sample sizes (Montgomery et al., 2013), and some studies that show that the random controlled trials (RCTs) on mindful hypnotherapy are conducted for a limited amount of time, underscoring the need for more longitudinal studies to be performed.

DISCUSSION

Mindful Hypnotherapy is a newly developed integrative technique, combining clinical hypnosis and mindfulness, to enhance emotional regulation and psychological wellbeing. It's focused, suggested, guided, and mindful, and aids in adaptive emotional functioning (Alladin, 2016). The mechanisms are in line with the Process Model of emotional regulation (Gross, 2015) that fosters attentional control, cognitive reappraisal, acceptance and adaptive coping. There are also some parallels with ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) (Yapko, 2018; Hayes et al., 2012) where one accepts experiences and is flexible with behaviour. Neuroimaging results suggest that hypnosis has an impact on brain areas responsible for executive functioning, attention and emotional processing (Landry et al., 2017). However, there are limited research studies, methodological differences, and small sample sizes, which necessitates greater in-depth and rigorous research around mindful hypnotherapy.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

The amount of research into hypnosis has increased significantly, however, there is little documentation of mindful hypnotherapy in psychological research. There is some evidence of potential benefits for emotional regulation, anxiety, stress and psychological well-being, but methodological limitations, including small sample size, variable type of intervention, diversity of outcome measures and lack of RCTs, make it difficult to draw conclusions. Evidence needs to be validated and the implementation of mindful hypnotherapy in clinical practice should be promoted using standardisation of the intervention protocols, larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal follow-up and more rigorous interdisciplinary research.

CONCLUSION

In this review, the possibilities of a form of clinical hypnosis which is rooted in mindfulness principles and evidence-based practice, with a focus on the improvement of emotional regulation, mindful hypnotherapy, are presented. From a theoretical and empirical perspective, mindful hypnosis can provide greater emotional awareness, attentional control,

cognitive flexibility, resilience and psychological well-being, and reduce emotional distress, stress and anxiety. However, the evidence base is a bit varied in design, limited in size and has a lack of high quality RCTs looking at mindful hypnotherapy specifically. Further research with standardized intervention protocols and a longitudinal study design with the use of rigorous clinical trial methods will be needed to further strengthen the evidence base, especially for the integration of mindful hypnotherapy into the contemporary mental health care system.

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