

'Hypnosis' may conjure up images of swinging pendulums and fairground trickery, but it's a technique that's enjoying a renewed interest from the scientific and medical community. In the Netherlands, a unique study is under way, to assess the impact of the technique on a common bowel disorder.

"If I'm at a party and I have to explain to people what I do, I tell them and they go, 'Oh my God!'", laughs Carla Menko-Frankenhuys, an experienced general and psychiatric nurse who now specialises in hypnotherapy. In the smart consulting room of a general practitioners' medical centre in Aerdenhout, near Amsterdam, she's taking a young man through some relaxation exercises. 'Michael' suffers from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and has become so afraid of diarrhoea attacks that he no longer goes out with his friends. He's twenty three years old. Hypnosis was a last resort he says, although some positive reports in the press led him to be "pretty enthusiastic about the idea". After just a couple of sessions and some homework with a CD, Michael feels the techniques are helping: "I'm pretty happy about it because I'm working on it. Yes, I'm positive," he smiles.

PLEASE SET IN SEPARATE QUOTE BOX TO ONE SIDE: "The three 'active ingredients' of hypnosis are dissociation, absorption and suggestibility. Dissociation is 'parallel consciousness' – I'm talking to you here and at the same time your mind is thinking about something else. Absorption we can conceptualise as focused attention. Suggestibility can be conceptualised as role-playing." Dr Eric Vermetten, psychiatrist.

Carla emphasises that an open attitude and a willingness to practise at home are essential if hypnotherapy is to help patients with a surprisingly wide range of complaints. "I'm not a magician. It's something I can teach them but they have to make it their tool". By getting her patients to first relax, Carla then encourages them to focus their thoughts on their "inner world" before engaging their imaginations in visualising and reducing the problem at hand. In her practice, she deals a lot with chronic pain and cancer patients, but also with anxiety, weight loss eating disorders, headaches and various other symptoms. "There's a big range of problems that can be addressed with hypnosis – so anything that's stress related, or a lot of chronic disease like MS (multiple sclerosis), lots of bowel diseases." [A lot of chronic diseases get worse because of stress.](#)

The effects of hypnotherapy on adults with IBS have been studied over a couple of decades by Dr Peter Whorwell and colleagues at the University Hospital of South Manchester in the UK. But thanks to a chance meeting between him and Dutch doctor Marc Benninga, who's a paediatric gastro-enterologist at the Academic Medical Centre in Amsterdam, new research is now under way, which explores the efficacy of hypnosis in children suffering from the debilitating chronic pain of IBS. "We did a pilot study in 10 children," Dr Benninga explains, "we noticed it was successful in the majority of the children so then we needed a larger study".

PLEASE SET IN SEPARATE QUOTE BOX TO ONE SIDE: "Peter Whorwell described in his studies that during or after hypnotherapy the [typical for IBS] hypersensitivity of the gut will disappear. So we looked at hypersensitivity of the gut beforehand and in the week after stopping the intervention and hopefully there will be something showing it disappears. But then again, you can ask me, 'how does it work?' and I don't have an

answer to that. It will be a question for further research." Paediatric Gastro-enterologist Dr Marc Benninga.

More than 50 children have now been enrolled in the project, and randomly assigned to one of two groups: "One group is treated by a gastro-enterologist – that's me," smiles Dr Benninga. "I give them conventional treatment, a high-fibre diet in combination with keeping a pain diary, and I see them **6 times** frequently during three months." The second group gets the **conventional treatment** same basic treatment plus 6 sessions of hypnotherapy with Dr Benninga's partner on the project, Carla Menko-**Frankenhuis**.

To balance the extra time and attention given to the hypnosis recipients, Dr Benninga makes his 6 consultations last 30 minutes instead of the customary 10. Carla meanwhile tries to make her hypnotherapy sessions as standard as possible, although she concedes that since she has to work with the individual imaginations of different children and the way they respond to the language she uses, various elements of the study are not distinctly measurable: "It's different from a regular medical study where you give medication or you don't."

PLEASE SET IN SEPARATE QUOTE BOX TO ONE SIDE: "I enjoy working with little children so much, because they go right into it. Children are much more in tune with imagination. I find adults need sort of permission to go into it. Once they do they love it!" hypnotherapist Carla Menko-Frankenhuis

The Dutch research is just one of many recent case studies and clinical studies involving hypnosis, according to Dr Eric Vermetten – a psychiatrist at the Central Military Hospital and University Medical Centre in Utrecht, who's also the Chair of the Dutch Society for Hypnosis (NVVH). "I think there's a revival of interest in hypnosis and we see that reflected in the amount of studies," he says. "We know the brain and stress and hypnosis are linked together, that you can enhance your neuro-immunological response and by boosting that may be able to use it for specific disorders and minimise or even eliminate the symptoms underlying."

In addition to studies which show the clinical benefits of hypnosis, there have also been those which investigate the phenomenon itself, revealing a genuine alteration in brain activity, for example, using magnetic resonance imaging techniques. "With the appreciation we have of the mechanisms underlying these effects... it's not obsolete or occult or mystic," opines Dr Vermetten. "We're maybe at a time now in the beginning of the new century when there's a new appreciation for the phenomenology that hypnosis brings about."

Dr Marc Benninga for one has certainly been impressed. "'Miracles' happened in the room of the hypnotherapist," he says of the earliest findings of his study on IBS in children. "Some of them didn't go to school for 6 months because of the pain and after only one session there was no pain and they could go to school." Although, he adds, "in my group I also did a little good work!"

Dr Benninga and Carla Menko-**Frankenhuis** both stress that their study is far from over yet though. The final consultations are being completed now and then there will be a 6 month follow up. Dr Benninga: "We know that relapse is very frequent, so we want to be sure if a 'cure' by hypnotherapy will last at least more than 6 months. So I expect we'll have all the results at the beginning of next year."

AUDIO – “This report features in a special edition of the Research File – click to hear the whole programme.” (Audio available from 1st thing Monday morning – Media Surface: Research File : hypnosis)

PICS:

From English: Science Unit: Pictures : End July.... Carla 1 / 2
4295 – 4299 – Dr Marc Benninga

Other pics from relevant websites?

LINKS:

NVVH (Dutch only) <http://www.nvvh.net/page.php>

International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis

<http://ijceh.educ.wsu.edu/main.htm>

IBShypnosis.com <http://www.ibshypnosis.com/index.html> Article by DR Peter

Whorwell <http://www.aboutibs.org/Publications/hypnosis.html>