

Summaries of Three Research Articles on Hypnosis as Treatment for IBS

1. Whitehead, W. E. (2006). Hypnosis for irritable bowel syndrome: the empirical evidence of therapeutic effects. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*. 54(1): 7-20.

This article analyzes 11 published studies, including 5 controlled studies, that measure the therapeutic effects of hypnosis for IBS. It points out the strengths and limitations of the studies and discusses their results from seven different angles: success rate, degree of impact on symptoms, scope of therapeutic benefits, predictors of treatment response, maintenance of therapeutic gains, limitations of current research, and the need for future work. In spite of the limitations of some of the studies, Whitehead concludes:

“...these studies report consistent IBS symptom reduction that is substantial, is associated with broad improvement in psychological well-being and life functioning, can be just as readily achieved by patients who have not had relief from standard medical care, and may generally be expected to last for years. The cumulative weight of this research, which now includes a placebo-controlled trial, four other controlled trials, and a very large case series with long-term follow-up, leaves little doubt that hypnosis is the best choice, rivaled only by cognitive-behavioral therapy, for effective treatment of severe IBS patients who fail to respond to medical management.” (p. 17-18)

2. Tan, G. , Hammond, D.C., & Gurralla, J., (2005). Hypnosis and irritable bowel syndrome: a review of efficacy and mechanism of action. *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis*. 47(3): 161-178.

This article examines the evidence for efficacy of hypnosis in reducing IBS symptoms by reviewing the 10 studies Whitehead critiques (see above) as well as 4 additional published studies for a total of 14. This article also discusses evidence suggesting possible mechanisms of action that could be at work in the use of hypnosis for reducing IBS symptoms.

The discussion of the evidence for the mechanisms of action, while fascinating, was inconclusive, suggesting only further lines of research that need to be pursued. However, the review of the evidence for the efficacy of hypnosis in treating the symptoms of IBS was more definitive. In the conclusion, the authors state:

“A significant amount of research with consistent results exists and justifies the use of hypnotherapy for pain relief and symptom management in IBS patients. When evaluated according to the efficacy guidelines of the Clinical Psychology Division of American Psychological Association (Chambless & Holon, 1998; Chambless et al., 1998), the use of hypnosis with IBS qualifies for the highest level of acceptance as being both efficacious and specific because of the multiple randomized, control group studies and comparison with a placebo control condition. Hypnotic treatment of IBS should be accepted in medicine and psychology as an evidence-based practice.” (p. 174)

3. Gerson, D. G., Gerson, J., Gerson, M.J., (2013). Group hypnotherapy for irritable bowel syndrome with long-term follow-up. *Intl. Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 61(1): 38–54.

This study had two goals. The first was to measure the effectiveness of gut-directed hypnotherapy for IBS patients delivered in a group format. The authors used the IBS Severity Score to measure symptom severity pre and posttreatment. They also did follow-up measurements at 3, 6, and 12 months posttreatment. The second goal of the study was to attempt to identify outcome predictors by giving patients a number of questionnaires to complete before treatment and correlating answers to treatment outcomes. There were a total of 89 subjects of which 14 dropped out. All the subjects in the study had intractable IBS symptoms despite attempts at prior medical treatment. The treatment method was very closely based on the North Carolina Protocol for IBS Hypnosis (Palsson 2006) the main difference being that the hypnosis was delivered to patients in a group format.

The authors found several treatment predictors in their data, but perhaps the most important results were their findings about group treatment effectiveness. The results were that, of the 75 treatment completers:

“Significant improvement occurred at all time periods after termination of therapy and was sustained throughout the length of the study. According to the IBS symptom severity score, 60% of subjects reported significant symptom reduction at the time of their final questionnaire, 1 year after termination of therapy. In addition, there was a marked shift in symptom category (Francis et al., 1997) from severe and moderate to mild and remission.” (p.48).

The authors also state:

“After 1 year, the most dramatic changes from pretreatment to 1-year posttreatment were the reduction in the severe group from 25 to 9 and an increase in the number of patients in remission from 0 to 11.” (p.46).

And finally, they state:

“In conclusion, we have demonstrated that gut-focused hypnotherapy in a group setting results in a significant reduction in symptoms, which is sustained for 1 year after termination of treatment....With our demonstration that a group protocol is effective, we hope that this more cost-effective approach will encourage other centers to include hypnotherapy in their armamentarium for chronically suffering IBS patients..” (pp.50-51).