

KEY WORDS

Dental hypnosis, procedural pain, dental anxiety, occupational stress, dental care team

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To gain an insight into the use of rapid hypnotic techniques and advanced rapport skills in interventional healthcare
- To evaluate patient and team benefits of procedural hypnosis, including business efficiency
- To examine how “whole team” training can be achieved quickly, efficiently and cost effectively

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PROCEDURAL HYPNOSIS: A POWERFUL TOOL FOR REDUCING STRESS, ANXIETY AND PAIN IN CLINICAL DENTAL CARE

ABSTRACT

Dealing with stress, negative feedback and unrealistic demands can be a daunting experience for the dental healthcare team, potentially resulting in job dissatisfaction and reduced performance levels. Learning how to cope with stressful situations and associated circumstances by developing advanced rapport skills in interventional healthcare can help in the management of stressful situations in dental practice. These skills can also help to decrease anxiety and level of pain experienced by the patient. This article outlines how stressful encounters can be managed in the dental practice environment by applying hypnotic techniques for anxious and stressed patients to better cope with dental interventions.

Introduction

Successful general dental practices rely on the effectiveness of a close-knit team of dentists, therapists, hygienists, nurses, receptionists, and managers. The team members are dependent on each other's performance and ability to communicate with the patient and with each other. In recent years our teams have been subjected to increasing pressure due, in part, to negative feedback and unrealistic demands that patients may voice^{1,2} as well as workload pressures such as “adverse working conditions, economic recession, inflation, disparities in workload and payment, toxic

organisational culture, physical and verbal violence, anxiety, depression, burnout, and the consequent disruption of work-life balance”.² In turn, teams have experienced increased stress levels often resulting in a rise in inter-team conflict and a consequent decline in job satisfaction, staff retention, and performance levels.^{1,2} It is increasingly recognised that team communication skills directly affect the quality of patient care and outcomes.^{3,4} When teams are engaged in stressful procedural, surgical or emergency care, a transference of emotions occurs regularly.⁵ One stressed person, either the patient or a healthcare professional,

can raise the tension in the room. A stressful room has the potential to result in poorer patient outcomes.⁵

An unpleasant experience can embed itself in the patient's memory, and dental treatment in itself can precipitate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in patients.⁶ Dental interventions in particular have a reputation for creating this problem. PTSD can then become an extra challenge when patients present for repeat procedures, which commonly occur in dentistry.

While stress is contagious, relaxing the stressed person in the room can be sufficient for everybody else in the room to calm down.⁷ However, this begs the question: how can we as dental healthcare practitioners acquire the skills to relax the stressed patient, or ourselves, and thereby relaxing the room, particularly when there is little or no extra time available?

Procedural hypnosis skills for frontline staff

Classical hypnosis training is often understood as a tool for deeper exploration of a patient's mind with ample time to do so. However, even then – including in the mental health field – hypnosis is an adjunct to what a practitioner is trained to accomplish. Hypnosis in itself is not psychotherapy. It is simply a state of focussed concentration with diversion from outside stimuli and openness to suggestions. Because time at the dental frontline is valuable and every word counts, training for frontline staff must focus on safe and practical skills that can be applied quickly. These skills must fall within the scope of their practice – in this case helping the patient remain on the dental chair to allow completion of the intervention they require, with as much comfort as possible. As such, teams can be trained in a “hypnosis-light” approach with emphasis instead placed on instant rapport, giving the patient a sense of control, and helping staff find word choices that work for their own personalities, and their patients' needs.⁸ Frontline staff using this style of communication often do not need to use a formal hypnotic induction, keeping the interaction efficient. In this paper, we will call this approach “procedural” hypnosis.

A very quick intervention at the start of the clinical encounter may have a prolonged effect. In analysis of the standard care groups of patients in three prospective randomised trials, pain experienced tended to increase over time when the patient was in the treatment environment.⁹ This is likely related to our genetic makeup: in settings of ambiguity, we tend to interpret ambiguous stimuli as painful and once one painful stimulus had been experienced, all subsequent ones tend to be experienced even more painfully.¹⁰ Using a few comforting words at the start of a procedure along with building instant rapport, avoidance of negative suggestions, and allowing patients to focus on their own experience, fundamentally alters this progression of pain and anxiety. Empathic attention, in the form of rapport skills and avoidance of negative suggestions, decreases the steepness of increasing pain and anxiety over time; the addition of positive hypnotic suggestions leads to a rapid decrease of both pain and anxiety.¹¹⁻¹³

It is important to be cognisant that patients in the dental environment are already in a highly suggestible state. This response means that negative or inappropriate language can make the patient's pain and experience worse. Clinical trials demonstrated inclusion of diminutives, such as “you'll only feel a little pain”, can greatly increase the distress for the patient; also, emphasis afterwards, such as “this wasn't that bad”, will lead to increased anxiety for the next presented stimulus.¹⁴

As well as careful choice of words, visualisation can also be used to allow the patient to integrate elements of what is happening into their current experience.¹⁵ Visualisation can be suggested as easily as “where would you rather be?” In a dental setting it is important not to have a patient go to a place from the past because one never knows what kind of adverse events the patient may immediately recall. Since one may not know all the patient's likes and dislikes in words and sounds in the surgery, a verbal immunisation upfront is helpful: “Use all the sounds and noises to deepen your own experience and let the rest go by” and “Use only suggestions that are helpful for you”. Sometimes this last sentence is enough when one

doesn't have more time. When patients are very anxious, it is important to address their anxieties or worries in order to allow themselves to enter into a relaxed state.

If a more formal approach is preferred or required, then a short script can be used to ensure consistency and as a record. Example scripts can be accessed at the Comfort Talk® Pro application (app) (Hypnalgescics, LLC., Brookline, MA, USA).¹⁶ The advantage of a script is that one staff member can start reading, then another staff member can take over when the first person has to move away or engage in other activities. When a team member begins reading a script in a stressed-out room, the sound level and stress level in the room quickly diffuse. The use of a script has been shown to reduce the amount of intravenous sedation required on induction of anaesthesia in paediatric patients.¹⁷ Familiarity with the script helps the staff to occasionally drop in a few helpful sentences during a routine procedure. For example, when a patient may start to feel anxious and breathe fast, one might say “With each breath in, take in strength, and with each breath out, think calm” or “With each breath you take in, take in strength, and with each breath out, let a little more tension out of your body”.

To keep the approach safe for individuals who have not been trained in psychotherapy, the authors advise that hypnosis is not used with patients with multiple personalities, acute depressive illness who may have suicidal tendencies, or those whose dental treatment resulted from criminal assault since their testimony against the assailant may be discarded.

Benefits of procedural hypnosis for patients

Using procedural hypnosis can lessen anxieties, fears, and pain. With training in procedural hypnosis there is a strong focus on rapid rapport and hypnotic language. Careful choice of positive words and avoidance of negative suggestion is within all of our competences. This could even be termed “effective communication”, which is the focus of the GDC's continuing professional development (CPD) outcome “A”¹⁸ and is something we can all be

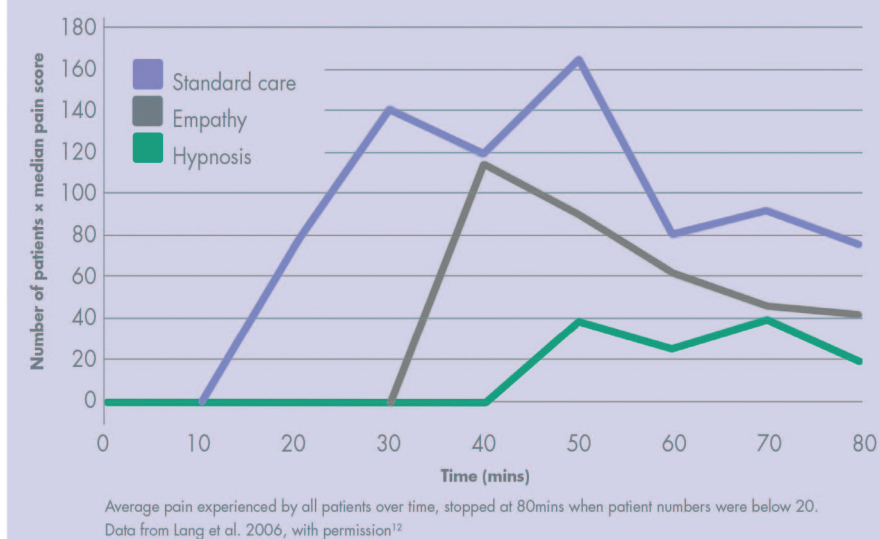
bettering ourselves in. The use of negative suggestions has been shown to worsen clinical outcomes, so training in choosing our words more carefully will therefore help our patients by reducing both their pain and anxiety.^{14,19,20}

Research into interventional radiological procedures has shown that patients who presented with high negative affect (i.e. heightened frequency/intensity of negative emotions) experienced more negative events during interventional radiological procedures than those who presented with low negative affect (18% versus 8%).²¹ Those with high negative affect also received twice the sedative and three times the volume of opioid drugs during interventions.²¹ Two more trials showed that patients with a greater anxiety prior to procedures not only experienced greater pain but also their interventions took longer, they received more drugs and had more adverse events than other patients.^{22,23} Use of “empathy” during treatment consists of advanced rapport skills; “hypnosis” uses these rapport skills as well as hypnotic language.²² When using hypnotic techniques with both high and low negative affect patients, it is clear to see that it is the most successful strategy in both reducing pain experienced and the time needed for the intervention, compared to standard care or empathy.²² The authors suggest that dental interventions will benefit similarly.

Of particular benefit in a fast-paced dental environment is training to facilitate our patients’ use of self-hypnotic techniques. It has been shown that patients who use such techniques find their perception of pain during an intervention increases less steeply and that their anxiety decreases significantly over time.¹² Overall, patients are in treatment for less time and experience lower anxiety and less pain when hypnotic techniques are used (Figure 1).¹² In one clinical trial, patients’ use of a relaxation app¹⁶ in the waiting room was shown to significantly decrease any pain and anxiety experienced.²⁴ Pain in the group of patients using the relaxation app decreased significantly from the beginning to the end of the waiting room time by a mean of -0.76 (95% confidence interval [CI] -1.14 to -0.37 ; $p < 0.001$) but did not change significantly in the background audio

FIGURE 1

AGGREGATED PAIN EXPERIENCE OVER TIME



(BA) group with a mean -0.25 (95% CI -0.56 to $+0.05$; $p = 0.141$). Anxiety also decreased significantly from the beginning to the end of the waiting room time by a mean of -0.81 (95% CI -1.21 to -0.41 ; $p < 0.001$).²⁴

There are benefits to patients beyond reduced pain, anxiety and medication required for sedation or analgesia. Hypnotic suggestion can reduce surgical and post-surgical blood loss by up to 65% compared to control subjects²⁵ and can improve healing. The recordings in the aforementioned relaxation app include optional extra choices, including “Surgery” or “Balanced Body” which can also help post-operatively (see Figure 2).^{16,24} Further patient benefits are numerous, the range of which is outside the scope of this article as each of these additional benefits alone could be the subject of their own article!

Benefits of procedural hypnosis for the dental team

For the whole team to function cohesively, consideration must be given to our interactions in the team and to improving them, as necessary. Improving our communication will positively impact inter-team relations leading to reduced conflict and stress.^{3,4} If all it takes is one person in the room to relax the atmosphere then having all team members able to do this would provide

benefit to themselves and each other.⁵ Having learned these skills (please see the “Training in procedural hypnosis” section), team members also have the opportunity for them to positively impact their lives outside of work. Being able to facilitate improved communication and patient outcomes may also improve patient feedback and reduce unrealistic demands which patients may have voiced; this in turn could help to increase staff retention, job satisfaction, and performance levels.^{1,2,26}

Benefits of procedural hypnosis for the business

It has been shown that magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) healthcare sites trained in procedural hypnosis both attracted and retained more patients, received greater patient satisfaction scores, and had fewer no-shows.²⁷ Conversely, the untrained sites had more no-shows and therefore an underutilisation of equipment,²⁷ and staff anxiety negatively impacted patients’ emotions and ability to complete their examinations.²⁸ As such, intervention with hypnosis can increase effectiveness of the team, attract and retain patients, increase attendance rates, maximise use of available equipment/space, improve patients’ ability to complete their examinations, and improve patient satisfaction scores.²⁷⁻²⁹ All of this improves cost effectiveness of the business

FIGURE 2

COMFORT TALK® APP SCREENS, ALLOWING CHOICE OF COMFORT TALK® AND EXTRA SELECTION¹⁶



and enhances practice management. As an aside, resources – such as the Comfort Talk® app¹⁶ – can also be personalised for smooth integration into daily routine.

Training in procedural hypnosis

It is important to always work within our competence and professional boundaries – that is non-negotiable. Frontline staff should use hypnotic techniques only for settings that they usually deal with in their daily work, i.e. pain and anxiety management of dental patients. Training to use techniques in hypnosis will ensure we are aware of our own capabilities and use this powerful tool correctly.

Improving patient experiences can be achieved by training frontline staff and teams in observable and teachable skills that have been validated in extensive clinical trials using methodology now called Comfort Talk®.^{27,29,30} A clinical trial, funded by the National Institute of Health (NIH),¹¹ confirmed that these observable and teachable hypnotic techniques could improve patient outcomes. A clinical trial was also used to determine what works and what doesn't, and to validate that this training produced cultural changes enabling organisations to sustain, over time, improved positive patient outcomes.²⁴ Training in this methodology is provided

via a combination of online pre-learning³¹ and live, face-to-face training sessions. The online, self-directed, training is delivered in bite-sized elements, which can be digested during short down-times at workstations or on phones. By connecting patient outcomes with training, it was found that even staff initially unwilling to be trained in hypnotic techniques and refusing to use the techniques somehow changed their behaviours because their patients experienced less pain.³⁰ Beliefs about the pain experienced by our patients and how it should be managed can be firmly engrained and hard to change.³² It is therefore critical to dedicate a fair amount of time during the live training to overcoming resistance in the trainees themselves. The final stage of training is an observed follow-up in practice while treating patients the next day, which helps cement new skills into daily work and provide the trainees with an initial sense that their new skills are useful and practicable.

In the UK there are two hypnosis societies which offer introductory and advanced ongoing training in hypnosis: the British Society of Clinical and Academic Hypnosis (BSCAH) and the British Society of Medical and Dental Hypnosis (Scotland) (BSMDH).^{33,34}

BSCAH also works with Birmingham City University to offer postgraduate training at diploma and PGCert level.³⁵ Alternatively, self-training could be accomplished by reading, for example, *Patient Sedation Without Medication*.⁸ Looking to the future, the British Societies envision a world where hypnosis is a standard component of healthcare, striving to make hypnosis training more accessible and to advocate for its inclusion in medical, dental and psychological curricula. By continuing to promote research, education, and professional development, they aim to enhance the quality of care provided to patients across the UK and beyond. BSCAH are presently working to provide specific procedural courses, hopefully available by the end of 2025. BSMDH continues to offer courses to delegates across the UK while currently working on welcoming the wider hypnosis community to Glasgow for the European Society of Hypnosis Congress, August 2026. To date, however, Comfort Talk®¹⁶ is the only pathway validated by research as effective and reproducible within a short training time. It is available in the USA, Canada, Holland and the UK.

Conclusion

Using interpersonal skill training that includes rapid and safe hypnotic approaches produces a sustainable cultural change and a happier workplace. Patients may experience less procedural pain and anxiety, improved healing and fewer post-operative complications. Individual staff members feel the satisfaction of helping patients and teams work together better. The business receives improved patient outcome reports as well as fewer no-shows and complaints. Overall, patient experience and outcomes are improved for patients and the team.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Co-author, Elvira Lang is Founder and CEO of Comfort Talk®

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