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The school of relaxation

Once dismissed as a sideshow, hypnotherapy could be set for a starring role in the nation's classrooms. **Caroline Dyson** waxes lyrical about creative relaxation

Say the word “hypnosis” and what do most people think of? Answers to this question usually include Paul McKenna, swinging pocket watches and, thanks to the TV programme Little Britain, the phrase, “Look into my eyes, look into my eyes!” Schools and school children are probably the furthest things from people's minds. However, things may soon change.

Hypnosis involves entering a pleasant, natural state of relaxation, referred to as a trance state. Many of us experience this trance state regularly. Have you ever been so absorbed in a film or book that you don't notice someone enter the room or you fail to hear something that someone says to you? This is a trance

state, or to put it a different way, an altered state of consciousness. You are not asleep (a common misconception about hypnosis) but neither are you fully alert and awake. In this trance state the mind is more suggestible and the active resistance of the conscious mind can be more easily by-passed, making hypnotherapy highly effective and often yielding quick results. If a person is willing to accept the suggestions,

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there is usually no reason why it will not work. The opposite is also true, which ensures that no-one can be made to do anything against their will, the fear of which often prevents people from turning to hypnotherapy for help.

Hypnotherapy is still struggling to shake loose its controversial status, acquired largely because of a lack of accurate knowledge amongst the population. However, if administered by a properly trained clinical hypnotherapist, it is perfectly safe with no adverse side effects. Currently, there is still no single regulatory body for clinical hypnotherapy training, but plenty of reputable training schools exist and often clinical hypnotherapists voluntarily adhere to a code of conduct associated

with other helping professions, such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

Historically, there has been a distinct lack of well-grounded research into hypnotherapy, but this is beginning to change. People are opening their minds to the possibility that hypnotherapy does not have to be a last resort and has many clinical uses far removed from what can be seen in stage hypnosis shows, which bear very little resemblance to clinical hypnotherapy. The NHS is now beginning to recognise the potential benefits, and some training for doctors now includes information on hypnotherapy. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) now also acknowledges hypnotherapy in their guidelines as a recommended form of treatment for irritable bowel syndrome. The tide is certainly turning in the medical sector, but where does that leave education?

Schools are dynamic places, continually changing as they are pushed and pulled by new initiatives and policies. Most education professionals would now agree that no child will ever learn effectively and achieve their potential academically if they are not emotionally comfortable and secure. Education has steadily become more holistic and educators now appreciate the impact personal life events have on school performance, recognising that emotional competence and good self-esteem underpin the ability to learn, achieve and be happy within school and beyond. Rarely is this more important than for children with SEN, especially those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). So how can hypnotherapy help these incredibly vulnerable pupils?

Hypnotherapy offers something quite different to the usual techniques regularly

offered in schools, such as stickers, incentive charts and strategies based on operant conditioning principles. That is not to say that such techniques do not have their place – they can work extremely well – but often pupils with SEN and especially SEBD can be on incentive charts for most of their school life. Many pupils do not find them motivating, and teachers often rate them as unsuccessful in establishing long-term behaviour change. Hypnotherapy

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is a fun and novel approach which is accessible for pupils who struggle with motivation or who may be completely disengaged from previous interventions or therapeutic approaches.

Hypnotherapy still relies on a willingness to change (as it can't make someone change against their will), and it can be presented formally or informally to suit the needs of the pupil. What's more, because it is enjoyable, pupils are often willing to practise the techniques between sessions, making the whole process more efficient and effective.

It is an extremely versatile approach; a skilled hypnotherapist can adapt the techniques to suit boys or girls with any cognitive ability from approximately five years upwards, regardless of academic attainment. It can help pupils with other areas of need, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning difficulties, anxiety disorders, speech

and language difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD), although the latter can prove difficult, though not impossible, due to the need to use imagination.

The results of hypnotherapy can generally be seen very quickly, which is great for maintaining motivation and raising self-esteem and is also a big advantage in the current financial climate, where everything is measured for cost-effectiveness. One of the fundamental principles behind hypnotherapy is the premise that the client (be they an adult or child) holds all the answers to their own problem and the hypnotherapist works simply as a facilitator in finding the solution. This is very useful for pupils with SEBD who often suffer from feelings of low self-worth and believe they are helpless to change things in their lives. Hypnotherapy can help them realise that they have control over how they respond to life events, even if they can do little to actually control the events themselves. This can be wonderfully empowering and help the pupil accept responsibility for themselves and their actions.

Many of the techniques taught are readily transferable to multiple situations, so pupils learn valuable skills they can use in diverse ways to help them in their often rapidly changing and turbulent lives. This can increase resilience and hopefully provides a buffer to potential mental health difficulties later in life, something that is sadly all too frequent in pupils who are labelled with SEBD at school.

Arguably, one of the most important things pupils learn from hypnotherapy is how to relax. Too often this skill is underestimated, yet it is so fundamental to our physical and emotional health. If we cannot relax in appropriate ways, we

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may choose less appropriate methods, such as drinking alcohol, smoking or taking drugs. Frequently, pupils with SEBD are stressed and anxious and this manifests itself in dangerous or socially unacceptable behaviours that are the reason they are identified with SEBD in the first place. Through hypnotherapy, pupils are taught how to relax in a very deep way, both physically and mentally. They learn how they can quieten their minds and escape from the stress and

Hypnotherapy teaches pupils ways to manage themselves physically, mentally and emotionally, a skill that is all too often lacking for many pupils with SEBD. It can help with a vast range of issues, even problems that a pupil may choose not to disclose to the hypnotherapist. It can help with physical problems, such as sleeping difficulties, bed wetting/soiling, eating issues, sensory sensitivity and tics, and with emotional difficulties, like coping with anger, anxiety, stress,

Pupils are taught how to relax in a very deep way, both physically and mentally

pressure of their challenging personal circumstances, albeit temporarily, so that when they return to their normal lives they can view things from a different perspective and with a renewed energy.

grief, sadness or obsessive behaviour. It can also provide great assistance with psychological issues, such as phobias, stammers, dealing with trauma and bad habits, and with specific school-based issues, like exam anxiety, school phobia, bullying, concentration difficulties, low confidence and fears regarding public speaking, making mistakes or academic work. The list is almost endless.

The vast majority of people can be helped by hypnotherapy, but children and young people are the most suitable because they are so open-minded. Suggestibility has been shown to peak between the ages of seven and fourteen years, when young people are developmentally less analytical than adults and more inclined to accept things at face value. Younger children are in a trance state most of

the time, as anyone who works with infant-aged children will probably agree. Trance for children and young people is anything from daydreaming or making up a story to playing creatively with a toy. They can be guided into trance far more quickly and easily than adults and are often more creative with ideas to solve their own problems in terms of metaphors and imagery, which are the most frequently used tools when using hypnotherapy with children and young people.

As Dr Margot Sunderland, Director of Education and Training at the Centre for Child Mental Health, states in her book *Using Story Telling as a Therapeutic Tool with Children*, "The natural language of feeling for children is that of image and metaphor, as in stories and dreams". We need to get into the world of the child and talk to them in their language if we are to stand any chance of helping to guide them safely through it.

Hypnotherapy is a safe, effective and enjoyable intervention with a vast range of applications and offering a multitude of benefits. Let us hope that in the not-too-distant future its application in schools with vulnerable children and young people will be better understood and more widely practised. It may not be the answer for every pupil all of the time, but it certainly offers creative and fun solutions and can provide possibilities for pupils for whom standard interventions have proved unsuccessful. There is nothing to lose and everything to be gained. **SEN**



Further information

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www.releasehypnotherapy.org.uk