

Migraines and Hypnosis

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Headaches are prevalent. Highly prevalent. In fact it is estimated that approximately 47% of the worlds population will have had at least one headache in a year making headaches one of the most common disorders of the nervous system (WHO, 2014). There are a number of different types of headaches including cluster headaches, medication overuse headaches, tension headaches and migraines. Migraines are characterized by a number of factors, including unilateral pain (pain on one side of the head), nausea, and moderate to severe in intensity levels of pain. Migraines can also last anywhere from 4 to 72 hours. They are disabling and disruptive to daily life. Migraines themselves are subdivided into a number of categories and classified according to whether they are episodic or chronic. Chronic migraine is the term used for someone who has 15 or more migraines a month for three or more months.

When working with migraine patients a few points are important to remember. First, it is imperative to have a referral from your clients GP or Neurologist stating your client has a diagnosis of migraine. Headaches can be caused by a number of factors so it is important to rule out any secondary pathologies. Secondly, is it important to know as much about the disorder as possible so that you can help your client with informed suggestions.

Orthodox medical intervention for migraines includes medications such as beta-blockers, anti-epileptic drugs and triptans. In many instances the way in which these drugs assist with migraines is unknown. Nonetheless,

only 22% of people with chronic migraines use migraine-specific medications and of the remaining 78%, 34% reported using opiates or barbiturates (Bigal, Borucho, Seranno & Lipton, 2009). Tylenol is an example of an opiate analgesic (narcotic). One issue with taking medications is that opiates and barbiturates can be addictive. When a pattern of dependence on these medications develops, overuse of the medication can cause an increase rather than a decrease in headaches which is probably not the objective migraine sufferers have in mind when they set out to treat their migraines. It also makes the case for using hypnosis as a treatment option even more appealing.

Other information to be aware of when using hypnosis to treat migraines are migraine triggers. Stress is the single most prevalent trigger of migraines so it may be worth asking your client about the primary and secondary areas of their life which are a cause of stress for them, and building suggestions to address the various issues so that their stress levels are reduced. It is important to remember that the stress may be external or internal and as hypnotists we can seek to change the perception of those stressors. Other triggers include specific foods. Anecdotal reports of foods triggering migraines are as varied as chocolate to cheese and red wine to citrus fruits. Analgesic suggestions will also form part of the treatment program for any migraine sufferer and being creative with this will keep our clients motivated to use the various strategies so that they can decrease the discomfort. There is significant evidence to show that hypnotic suggestion used for pain relief relative to traditional

(non-hypnotic) interventions has a moderate to large effect on pain management (Montgomery, DuHamel and Redd, 2000). The literature regarding hypnosis used specifically for migraines is equally supportive and also prolific. In my own PhD research I developed and recorded hypnosis mp3s for migraines and delivered them to the study participants via an online platform. The results were pretty spectacular. A 48% drop in headache disability in just ten weeks and a 60% drop in pain catastrophizing in ten weeks. E-health programmes are in their infancy and while some studies have evaluated the use of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) delivered online, to the best of my knowledge this was the first study to prove that hypnosis delivered via an online platform was effective and secondly that it was effective in reducing migraine disability and pain catastrophizing in migraine sufferers. Approximately 5-10 % of men and 18-25% of women suffer with migraine making this a significant population who can benefit from hypnosis. Some of the benefits for your clients include relaxation, a new perspective and, for those who can subsequently reduce or eliminate medication, no more nausea, dry mouth or any other unpleasant side effects of medication. ▼

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