Psychological and Psychophysiological Effects of Stress Reduction via Group Hypnosis

Olafur S. Palsson, Jan Wickramasekara, & Alan T. Pope

In a controlled study of 32 subjects at the Eastern Virginia Medical School, a six-session group hypnosis intervention was found to be effective in reducing both physiological and psychological aspects of stress. The study was a doctoral dissertation research project conducted partly to evaluate the effectiveness of a brief, standardized and inexpensive hypnotic group treatment for stress-related symptoms, and partly to examine the contribution of central factors in Wickramasekara’s High Risk model to stress levels and to changes in stress. The High Risk model is a comprehensive explanatory and predictive model of the risk for developing stress-related symptoms. It is composed of seven factors which have empirical support as modulators of stress. The central focus of this study was on neuroticism and catastrophizing, two of the three components in this model that are considered predisposers for stress problems.

Method. Thirty-two college students who reported having problems with stress received six 30-40 minute group hypnosis sessions in three experimental groups. One group received hypnotic relaxation and imagery according to a standardized script. The second group received the same script but treatment, but with the addition of specific post-hypnotic suggestions designed to counteract neuroticism and catastrophizing. The third group acted as a waiting-control group and received the same treatment as the second group after the post-treatment assessment of the other two groups. In addition to the six group treatment sessions, all subjects received a hypnosis audio tape for home use for the duration of their treatment.

Results. The post-treatment assessment of the subjects was conducted one to four weeks after the end of their treatment. Significant reductions from pre-intervention levels were found in average skin conductance levels, global and specific stress, trait anxiety, depression, catastrophizing, neuroticism, and the number and intensity of psychological and physical complaints. Of these measures, physiological responses, neuroticism and catastrophizing were the only measures where treated subjects were compared to untreated waiting subjects. The other measures were pre- and post-intervention measures for all three treated groups.

Neuroticism and catastrophizing were furthermore found to be significantly correlated with, and to have synergistic, but partly independent, effects on skin conductance reactivity. Combined in a regression model, they accounted for a large proportion of the variance ($R^2 = .42$) in skin conductance reactivity. A similar additive effect of these two variables on self-reported global and specific stress was also observed. Catastrophizing was furthermore found to be significantly correlated with the subjects’ skin temperatures.

Implications. The stress reduction effects observed in this study were robust and likely to have clinical significance. The results suggest that a simple, short and inexpensive group intervention for stress symptoms may offer an economical and efficient treatment option. Such treatment might be especially applicable where there is need for a quick and large scale intervention for prevention of stress, such as in professions or social groups at high risk for developing stress-related problems.

The results of this study also offer substantial support for the validity of neuroticism and catastrophizing as synergistic and partly independent predisposing factors in the High Risk model. Together, these factors were found to account for a sizable proportion of the variance in both physiological and psychological stress. The study demonstrates the value of a theoretically driven, rather than strictly empirical, approach to stress reduction.

1 Olafur S. Palsson, Virginia Consortium for Professional Psychology
2 Jan Wickramasekara, Eastern Virginia Medical School
3 Alan T. Pope, NASA Langley Research Center

Address correspondence to: Dr. Palsson North Dakota State Hospital Box 475 Jamestown, ND 58402 Phone: (701) 253-3056

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"MidWinter", Continued

hypnotherapy. This year’s meeting was chaired by the current president, William Morgan. It opened with the news that we had retained our seat on APA Council by a comfortable margin, while several other divisions had lost seats. Membership appears to be growing, and there has been a large gain in student affiliates. Items on the agenda included follow-ups on initiatives from last year as well as a variety of new business. One success story involved the division’s efforts to revise the APA ethics code to include a limitation on training unqualified persons to practice hypnosis (see Standards setting the new Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct). Michael Nash reported on the new awards.