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# The amazing power of the mind

**Dr John Butler\*** describes how you can influence your patients' imagination to ensure that their dental experience, and yours, is the very best possible.

**D**ental care is important not only to the health of our teeth and gums, but also to our overall health. A dental professional who succeeds in influencing patients to take oral health seriously is, quite literally, a lifesaver.

You influence people by getting them to *want* to do what you suggest, that is, by motivating them. And motivation comes from our emotions. In order to be motivated, we have to create a strong positive feeling about achieving our goals. The stronger the feeling, the more we are motivated. Even when we seem to do the opposite, and create a feeling of fear to motivate us to avoid something, the *actual* motivation is the feeling of relief at our escape from this fear.

Influencing emotions is done through the imagination. This is the amazing power of our mind that can make a virtual reality in our heads, and whenever we imagine something, feelings about it happen automatically. So if we want to have a happy feeling, we can call to mind a happy memory, or imagine something happening in the future, which will make us happy. Equally, if we are having an unpleasant feeling such as pain, for instance, we can override or change it by imagining a

different feeling. I have often done this, and I have taught many others to do this – it is called hypnoanalgesia, or hypnoanaesthesia.<sup>1</sup>

Hypnosis is the art of using your imagination purposefully, to change your feelings about things; for instance, to make a child (or an adult) want to brush his or her teeth. What often happens with motivation, is that there is an 'official' policy that the person has – 'oh yes, I will do this' – but day by day when the time comes, another motivation has a stronger pull on the imagination – 'I'll just finish doing this', 'I'll do it later', 'I'll start properly tomorrow', 'I'll make an appointment next month' etc. So it takes a special effort to install a new motivation system, attaching positive emotion through the imagination to the actions that will be helpful to our health. Over more than 200 years of hypnotherapy research and practice, scientists and clinical professionals have discovered that there are certain techniques and approaches that work best with the imagination and the emotional mind.

Dental patients are very good subjects for this, as they are in an immediate situation where they may suffer pain, they are fearful of this but need treatment and so they *want* to trust you, and you are in a position of professional authority. You are the one in the white coat, with all the equipment. You are the one standing up, in charge; they are the ones lying back in the chair, complying with your directions. This all makes an impression on their imaginations. Research has indicated that in these situations, patients are likely to respond rapidly to hypnosis.<sup>2</sup>

Using hypnosis, you can guide and direct not only the patient's physical actions ('take a seat', 'open your mouth' etc), but also their imaginations and emotions, to make the treatment session relaxing and pleasant for

them, and to motivate them to come for regular hygiene sessions and to follow your guidance about taking care of their teeth. Your professional authority gives you a good starting point to influence your patients, and this can be added to by using hypnosis.

When I teach dental professionals to use hypnosis to help their patients, I start by teaching them to use it on themselves. I find this is the best way to learn from their own experience how powerful their imagination is and how to use its power to change their

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feelings rapidly and easily. This gives them real confidence for doing the same with their patients. Using practical exercises in the class, they are always surprised by how they can affect their feelings, including their physical reactions and sensations. Try this simple exercise for yourself.

*Close your eyes and imagine taking a lemon and cutting it in half, then cutting a slice from one of the halves. Imagine putting the slice in your mouth, and the sharp tang of the taste and smell of the lemon. Once you imagine it strongly enough so that you experience the taste and smell, your mouth fills with saliva. You are affecting your body, just by using your imagination.*

Some people respond more quickly than others, because some people have more vivid imaginations than others. In hypnotherapy, we would say that there is a stronger connection in their brains between the conscious and the subconscious, or imaginative, parts. But everybody has *some* connection, and connections get stronger with practice. So when you are asked, can anyone be hypnotised, the answer is yes, provided they can understand what you say and are able and willing to pay attention.

The style of speaking directly to the imagination, which then may respond to a greater or lesser degree, is known as suggestion. When you learn hypnosis, you use suggestion to feed a stream of ideas to the imagination, which you intend to influence the person's emotions. The person is influenced not only by your words, but also by your tone of voice, your facial expressions and your movements and postures in their presence. This is why it is very helpful to use hypnosis to get your own imagination on-side. Much of the human brain is taken up with making very fast, subconscious judgements of whether other people are trustworthy or not. I know from my own experience of having dental treatment sessions that what I want to see is a relaxed, confident professional who convinces me that they are happy to see me and know that they are going to make the session easy and pleasant.

My brain can tell the difference, particularly when the person giving the treatment is literally in my face, between a genuinely caring and relaxed person whose own imagination is positive, and a tense person who is trying to cover up with a superficially cheerful manner. In the presence of a genuine positive attitude and confident commitment to my welfare, I relax immediately and my imagination starts to have a positive experience. I can, of course, hypnotise myself,<sup>1</sup> but it is much harder when a tense or anxious person is working on me.

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A positive imaginative experience will benefit not only the patient, but also your practice. Research indicates that patients value empathy and personal care in a dental practice very highly, and it is a major factor in their loyalty to a practice and in recommending it to others.<sup>3-5</sup>

Research also indicates that many cases of dental phobia and dental anxiety result from experiences with dental treatment which were not only painful, but where the dental professionals involved were seen as unsympathetic and uncaring by the patient.<sup>6</sup> So those dental professionals did succeed in

making an impression on their patients’



imaginations, but it was negative and has resulted in that person losing trust in dental professionals generally, which you now have the opportunity to turn around, using the imagination again. With an estimated 12% of adult patients in the UK suffering from severe dental phobia, this is a major opportunity.<sup>7</sup>

You do care about your patients, or you probably would not be reading this magazine, but unless you know how to convince your patients’ imaginations of this, they may not benefit from your care as much as they could. Your patients’ imaginations are going to be active in the treatment session in any case, and can have either a positive, neutral or negative experience. With hypnosis, you have a range of options available to turn that experience into a positive for you and the patient:

- Using informal hypnosis, that is, not using a formal trance induction but using hypnotic techniques in interacting with patients – these are very rapid and easy and fit in with your usual routines
- Using formal hypnosis, that is, with a formal trance induction, which is a specialised set of suggestions to bring about a profoundly relaxed state in a patient – there are very rapid methods of doing this, too
- Using recordings of suggestions to help an anxious or phobic patient before coming in to the practice for a session and to keep up a positive attitude between sessions
- Using live preparation sessions to help an anxious or phobic patient before coming in for treatment
- Using self-hypnosis to keep up your own motivation during a long working day – the more personnel in a practice do this, the more harmonious and reassuring to the patient their dental treatment experience will be.

Most professionals who use hypnosis to help them in their work find it fascinating, adding an extra dimension to their work experience which is rewarding in every way.

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