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Using Hypnosis to Reduce Stress Related Problems of Single Parenthood

by

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The United States has one of the highest adolescent child bearing rates in the world. About 10% of women 15 to 19 become pregnant and about 60% bear a child. Of these over 90% elect to keep their babies at home. Approximately 30% of these girls are not married. Of the group which is married, over one half are divorced within six years. This results in a substantial number of young women who are raising children without the support of a male partner. (8)

These young women have stressful physical, social and psychological life events resulting from their pregnancy and lone parenthood. Young mothers are twice as likely to die from hemorrhage and miscarriage and 1.5% times more likely to die from toxemia due to poor diets. They lack job skills and some studies have indicated that about 80% do not finish high school even though there are federal and state regulations confirming the right of school age mothers to an education. Teenage mothers are less likely to work and are more likely to be on "welfare" than older mothers. Young families are also more likely to be poor compared to older ones. Over three fourth of young mothers have no health insurance and most day care centers do not care for children under two years of age which means that even though some young women do have jobs the care of their children is custodial at best and destructive at worse (8).

These stresses are thought by many to cause various psychological and physical problems due to over activation of the sympathetic system. The "fight-flight" response in which the adrenal glands are activated occurs in response to

the stresses. This causes an increase in blood pressure, heart rate and breathing. The person feels trembly and may have nausea, cold hands and other symptoms (2,4,6). Under long term activation the immune response and circulatory system are thought to be negatively effected. Holmes and Rahe found that a cluster of life events or stressors could lead to various stress related illness within two years of the events (2,4).

Pregnancy has been found to be both a stressor, which when combined with other life stress events can lead to illness, and also as the "illness" resulting from stress. (2) Teenage pregnancies are often surrounded by many stressful events which can often be documented. The social readjustment rating scale is composed of specific events or stressors which have been given numerical ratings. Common ones surrounding adolescent pregnancies are as follows: marital separation - 65 , divorce -73 , pregnancy -40 , gain of new family member - 39 , change in financial state - 38 , change in number of arguments with significant others - 35 , trouble with inlaws - 29 , stopping school - 26 , beginning or stopping work - 26 , revision of personal habits - 24 , change in residence or schools - 20 , change in social activities - 18 . When the numerical rating of these stress events are added together a summation of over 400 results. Research indicates that individuals having a score of 300 or higher have an 80% probability of an illness or health problem within two years of a cluster of stressful life events.

Common stress related health problems and conditions found in young women are headaches, ulcers, ulcerative colitis, spastic colon, overeating, lethargy, insomnia, chronic bladder and vaginal inflamation, menstrual dysfunctions, anxiety attacks, various conversion reactions and even heavy drug or alcohol use. (2,6) However, in opposition to the stress response is the "relaxation response" (1). The relaxation response can be elicited by various activities such as meditation, bio-feedback training, relaxation exercises, physical exercise and hypnosis. The result of these activities are lower blood pressure, heart rate

and secretion of adrenal hormones, slower breathing and in short a feeling of calmness and clearer thinking. As an aid in relaxation, stress reduction and the relief of psychosomatic related conditions hypnosis has been used for centuries. Under the guise of relaxation techniques many helping professionals today are using hypnosis techniques. These methods include systematic muscle relaxation, imagery and visualization which are also inherent in hypnosis. Hypnosis techniques have been shown by researchers to be effective in reducing stress and elimination of psychosomatic dysfunctions. (5)

The technique of hypnosis and teaching self hypnosis to young mothers can help to elicit the relaxation response, reduce tensions and promote clearer thinking so that positive steps can be made by these young women in their maturing process. The author has had success with young women in reducing tension and various psychosomatic conditions by using an Ericksonian approach to hypnosis which is permissive and nondirective (3). Positive self esteem reinforcement, a signal or "anchor" to elicit relaxation and the teaching of a self induction technique is usually carried out over a two session period. Before hypnotic suggestions are used to eliminate pain or medical problems the client is first asked to check with her physician or medical clinic to rule out serious illness. Clients are also encouraged to exercise regularly as a method of relieving tension and as an aid in weight control. They are also asked to visualize various positive things which they want to accomplish in their life while under trance.

Hypnosis can be used in a group or individual setting though it is usually more effective when accomplished on an individual basis or with a group under six as the facilitator can work with each person individually.

The following is a typical case history in which hypnosis was used:

"Anne", age 19, has a year and a half old daughter. Her husband left her after six months of marriage. She lives at home with her divorced mother who works as a clerk typist for the University. The client works as a counter clerk in a fast foods chain. A neighbor takes care of the child.

She is a high school graduate and would like to go to vocational school to become a licensed practical nurse if she had the money. There is some fear that she might be laid off her job because of the poor economic situation. She barely makes enough money to pay for the baby sitter and help her mother with food and housing expenses.

Over the past few months she has had increasing bouts of spastic colon and diarrhea. Her physician has prescribed tranquilizers but she does not like to take them as they cause her to "feel funny". She states that she finds it hard to relax, it is often difficult to sleep at night as she worries about losing her job and she states that she is tense and anxious most of the time. She nibbles a lot when at home and is beginning to gain weight. She does not exercise.

After discussing with the client the nature of hypnosis and various alternatives and exercises acceptable to her, a light trance state was induced by the "eye closure" method. She was asked to visualize a pleasant spot and was given positive self esteem reinforcement by suggesting that she was capable, likeable, etc. She was given a signal of putting her left hand on her right wrist when she was in a situation at work or at home when tension began to mount. It was also suggested that when she begins to feel tense that she take several deep breaths. For weight control and general tension reduction it was suggested that she do half an hour of exercise in the morning with an exercise TV show, that she might instead drink cool water and nibble on raw vegetables when she felt hungry or do deep breathing exercises. She felt very relaxed and calm after the session.

On the second visit she stated that several times during the week she had used the wrist signal and deep breathing when things had begun to get rough at work or with her mother and that she felt relaxed and calm. She said that she had not had one spastic colon attack the whole week. She also said that 3 times during the week she had exercised and had felt much better after she had done so. She said she still could not control her eating habits in the evening as she was still making popcorn and had not tried vegetables even though she liked them.

Under trance, breathing, exercise and wrist signal was reinforced to produce relaxation. Eating of crispy vegetables was again suggested along with evening exercise. She was also taught the "eye roll" method of self hypnosis induction and it was suggested that she could reinforce the signals, exercise, etc. while under trance on her own. After the session she said that she felt clear headed and relaxed.

Three months later the client telephoned to say that she was now exercising almost every day and had lost about 5 pounds. She had only had one spastic colon attack after a severe fight with her mother and was trying to find some way to move into an apartment with a friend. She stated that she was able to think clearer and was exploring the possibility of a loan so that she could go to school.

In conclusion hypnosis can be a useful technique to help adolescent mothers learn how to relax as an aid in reducing strain related illnesses.

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