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A review of the impact of hypnosis, relaxation, guided imagery and individual differences on aspects of immunity and health.

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Abstract

This review considers psychological interventions involving relaxation and guided imagery targeting immune functions. The review provides evidence of immune control accompanied by reports of enhanced mood and well-being. Three recent investigations of the author and his colleagues with self-hypnosis training incorporating imagery of the immune system are outlined. In two studies, hypnosis buffered the effects of stress on immune functions in medical students at exam time, and the comparison of self-hypnosis with and without immune imagery confirmed advantages to targeted imagery for both immune function and mood, and importantly, fewer winter viral infections. The implications for health were investigated in a third study in patients with virulent and chronic herpes simplex virus-2 (HSV-2). Six weeks of training almost halved recurrence, improved mood and reduced levels of clinical depression and anxiety. Immune functions were up-regulated, notably functional natural killer cell activity to HSV-1. Individual differences in hypnotic susceptibility and absorption have typically been found to predict efficacy. New replicable evidence is reviewed of the importance of cognitive activation, a personality difference whose neurophysiological underpinning is consistent with left hemispheric preferential influences over the immune system. Now that the validation of psychological interventions includes advantages for health, this field of enquiry, which has been characterised by modest, small scale, largely preliminary studies, warrants a greater investment in research.

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