

Anxiety and Magical Thinking

By David D. Burns, MD¹

Dear Tuesday group members:

I have had a new insight of sorts about the treatment of anxiety. As you all know, Magical Thinking is the mindset that triggers Outcome Resistance. The patient believes that, although the anxiety is painful, it protects him or her from some greater catastrophe. And we know that the treatment is not likely to be effective if you do not deal with the Outcome Resistance effectively before trying any anti-anxiety Methods.

An obvious example is the patient with OCD who believes if he stops washing his hands 50+ times a day, he will get contaminated and something awful will happen to himself or his family—like developing a fatal illness. So although he is suffering, he thinks of his OCD as something positive. You see this type of Outcome Resistance in every type of anxiety. Another example would be the perfectionistic student who has intense test anxiety and studies like crazy to avoid failure. But in spite of his suffering, he may be reluctant to be “cured,” so to speak, because he is convinced his intense worrying is the key to his success. The role of Magical Thinking in Outcome Resistance is familiar to all of you.

My new insight is that Process Resistance for anxiety can also result from Magical Thinking, but in this case the Magical Thinking works in the opposite direction. The patient probably believes that if he or she uses Exposure to confront some intense fear, the Exposure and upsurge in anxiety will trigger a catastrophe.

For example, a woman with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) who worries constantly about her husband or children dying in some accident may refuse to imagine this catastrophe using Cognitive Flooding. That’s because she thinks the very act of fantasizing them in some horrible accident may actually trigger that very catastrophic event. So she may refuse her therapist’s request to use Cognitive Flooding because she thinks she will end up being responsible for the deaths of family members. This type of thinking can apply to all types of Exposure—cognitive, classical, or interpersonal. In each case, the patient believes that the exposure techniques are extremely dangerous and must be avoided.

Of course, in the second example of the woman who constantly fears the death of her husband and children, the Hidden Emotion Model kind of cries out to us loudly—is she hiding some anger toward her husband and children?

But my point is that the Magical Thinking works at both ends of the anxiety spectrum, but in opposite ways. The patient appears to believe that some ongoing anxiety will lead to increased safety, but that a big increase in anxiety during exposure will trigger

¹¹ Copyright © 2017 by David D. Burns, MD

increased danger. For example, the patient with panic attacks may think that she or he will really die or go crazy during an induced panic attack.

If any of the members of our Tuesday group could comment on this apparent paradox, it would help me. It is almost as if the patient wants to preserve a low or moderate level of anxiety, and not let the anxiety get too low or too high. I am just thinking out loud and hoping for some feedback!

I guess the short version is that we could think of Magical Thinking as the cause of Outcome *and* Process Resistance for anxiety. Does that make sense?

David

A group member just replied:

Hi David,

Yes, this makes perfect sense. In just the same way that magical thinking brings about outcome resistance in an anxious patient, it can also bring about process resistance. In both cases, the patient fears he or she may cause harm by letting go of or even working on the anxiety. Did I get that right?

Ted

David's Response to Ted

Yes, thanks, Ted. And it is interesting but mildly confusing to me because the Magical Thinking works in opposite directions at the two ends of the anxiety severity spectrum. On the one hand, the patient believes the anxiety keeps him or her safe (plus loved ones), and at the same time the patient believes that the anxiety is dangerous and will cause some catastrophe if it is not "controlled" or contained. So the patient doesn't want it to disappear—for fear something awful will happen—and doesn't want it to get too intense during exposure—for fear something awful will happen.

Of course, the common factor is Magical Thinking, and humans do have a proclivity to believe in goofy things that cannot possibly be true. Cults are only one example of this, among many examples of superstitious thinking we can see in the world.

Also, believing in things that aren't true can happen when people are in a hypnotic trance. For example, when I was a teenager I hypnotized people all the time. When kids were capable of a deep trance, they could open their eyes and still be in a trance. So you could give them the suggestion that so and so had left the room. Then I would say I was going to show them some cool magic tricks, like making something float. Then I would hand something, like a spoon or pencil, to the person I had said was not in the room, and ask the hypnotized subject what he or she was seeing. They would say, "It's floating!" That's because, I assume, they could not "see" the person who was holding the object and moving it around in the air.

Were they just playing along for the gag? It did not seem that way.

Con artists, cult leaders, politicians, and sometimes even evangelists, will capitalize on peoples' intense desires to believe things that simply are not true. But I am getting off topic so I will quit now!

David

Ted's reply to David:

Hi David,

That is fascinating what you say about hypnotizing people when you were a teen. I would be interested to learn how you did that.

It certainly seems Donald Trump is hypnotizing the country right now. It is very scary, but fascinating to witness.

Ted

David's reply to Ted:

Hi Ted,

You asked how I learned hypnosis as a teenager. I was walking past the door of a magic store in Phoenix, because I used to love to study and learn magic tricks. In the window of the magic store, I noticed that two books were displayed, each costing 25 cents. One was called "25 Ways to Hypnotize Your Friends," and the other was called: "Miraculous Hindu Feats—Anyone Can Do." So I bought them both and read them with intense excitement and fascination.

I did not know if the hypnosis stuff would work, but tried it with a friend and simply followed the instructions. I asked friend to stare at a candle flame in a slightly darkened room, and then said stuff like, "Stare at the flame. You will notice that your eyes are getting heavy, notice how heavy the lids are getting, heavier and heavier, let them close and try to open them. Notice they are hard to open because the lids are heavy and sticky, heavier, and heavier all the time. Each time I count a number, from 10 to 0, you will close and open your eyes. Each time, it will be harder and harder to get them back open.

Ten--Now close and open your eyes. Notice that is harder to open them now, because the lids are heavier, heavier.

Nine-- Close and open your eyes again. Notice that is even harder to open them now, because the lids are heavier, and stickier. Heavy and sticky.

I did the same with Eight, Seven, etc. and began to add the suggestion that when we got to zero, he would no longer be able to open his eyes, because the lids were so heavy and stick, heavy and stick, and impossible to open.

Then I said, Zero—Now you will discover that when you close your eyes, you will not be able to open them again because your lids are so heavy, so sticky, they will not open. Try, try as you can, but you cannot get them to open."

I was surprised that my very first subject seemed to be trying intensely, squiggling his face and wrinkling his forehead, but he simply could not get his eyes to open up again,

Then I used the recommended methods in the book to deepen the trance, all kind of standard and semi-corny hypnosis stuff, but it also worked, and was quite a shock to my system. I said, "Concentrate on my voice. You will hear nothing but my voice. Nothing will bother you. If there are sounds of other people, or sounds from outdoors, you will not notice them, and they will not bother you. You are going deeper, and deeper. You are going down a staircase, one step at a time, deeper and deeper, you are going into a deep and peaceful sleep," etc.

Over time, I did more and more far out things with hypnosis, usually party fun kinds of weird and crazy things. About one third of my friends seems to be very hypnotizable. And once they were into a deep trance, I gave them a post-hypnotic suggestion, that whenever I said a certain word, like "flower," they would be instantly and deeply hypnotized again. And that also worked.

When I was a high school senior, I built a hypnosis machine to hypnotize my friends. It worked very well, and I won the science award for it!

We had many zany adventures with hypnosis—pranks of different kinds, and kids were incredibly fascinated with hypnosis. It was endlessly interesting to hypnotize a friend, and then give all kinds of crazy suggestions, and post-hypnotic suggestions as well. And the book gave tips on things that you could do that were amazing, and I also thought up all kinds of crazy things.

But one day, a high school teacher told me that hypnosis was dangerous, and I shouldn't be doing it. So I got frightened and stopped, and didn't use it again until I was a psychiatrist. But by then, the thrill was gone, so to speak, as I had to use it in a responsible way, for example to help patients stop smoking, and could no longer do the cool and wild teenage stuff with it.

The other book I bought at the magic store was also interesting, but strange. The book jacket promised that the reader would learn to do all kinds of miraculous Hindu feats, things like putting your fingers in molten lead without getting burned, or sticking needles through various parts of your body without pain or bleeding. And the thing was, there was no real "trick" to it. The book just told you to do the thing, with a couple tips on how to avoid serious injury.

For example, the book just said that when you stick your fingers in the molten lead, make sure they are very dry, and not moist, or else you will get badly burned. Also, it said that you should stick your fingers into the molten lead smoothly and pull them out in one continuous motion, not too fast and not too slow. And if you did it right, you presumably wouldn't get burned! I never tried that trick!

And the one about the needles—you just kind of pull on some flesh and stick a needle through! No trick there either! I have to confess that I didn't try that one either, or any of the "miraculous" Hindu feats! But I did hugely enjoy the hypnosis book.

I think when you are a child or teenager, the world can seem filled with magic, intrigue, fantasy, and adventure. I am still fascinated with magic, and magicians, like the spectacular TV show called the "Carbonaro Effect." Wow, that guy is simply amazing!

But the brand of magic I practice now is different, and has to do with bringing people from depression and anxiety to states of joy, self-esteem and inner peace. And that has become by far my favorite form of magic!

David