

CLINICAL REPORT

THE USE OF HYPNOSIS AND BRIEF STRATEGIC THERAPY WITH A CASE OF SEPARATION ANXIETY AND SCHOOL REFUSAL

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Abstract

This paper is a case report on a 14-year-old, Year 9 pupil ('Jane') presenting separation anxieties and long-term school attendance difficulties (school phobia). Referral was made to the psychology service from a pupil referral unit. Parental views included their concerns about non-attendance, difficulties separating from her parents, and the need for confidence building and coping with stomach pains and panic attacks.

The intervention consisted of a preliminary interview to gather information and decide upon appropriate action, two individual therapy sessions, and two follow-up review meetings. Hypnosis and brief strategic therapy techniques were used in the individual therapy sessions. Techniques included the use of metaphor, positive reframing of negative associations, tasking and relaxation training with suggestions for confidence building and anxiety-reduction. The metaphor and the tasks chosen were particularly helpful because they utilized information given by the pupil about her family and their new puppy. A metaphor about the puppy incorporated aspects of the pupil's presenting problem and was used to provide positive suggestions about successful early learning experiences, separation and independence. Other aspects of this intervention also helped in bringing about a successful outcome. Acceptance and acknowledgement of negative feelings helped to develop trust, and firm expectations about the pupil's own resources to cope encouraged her confidence.

At the follow-up, the pupil reported no recurrence of the panic attacks or stomach pains, and attendance had improved from 3% to 67% (over 10 and seven weeks respectively), rising to 90% attendance for the following school term (12 weeks).

Key words: hypnosis, school phobia, anxiety, therapy

Background information

Jane's attendance at infant school was regular. Her parents first became concerned about her attendance after transfer to primary school. That same year (Year 3), Jane transferred to another primary school. Her attendance was regular that year.

Her parents recalled difficulties with Jane relating to some members of staff, and with her relationship with another pupil. Jane's anxiety when preparing to go to school intensified, and her parents became increasingly concerned about how to manage her distress and irregular attendance throughout the Years 5 and 6. The family received advice from the local child and family guidance clinic. The outreach teaching support service was involved when Jane transferred to secondary school as a Year 7 pupil, and the psychology service was also consulted for advice. Arrangements had

been made for Jane to be met on arrival at school, and escorted from the school gate to her tutor base. Although Jane was unhappy parting from her mother each morning, appearing anxious and tense and crying, staff reports indicated an improvement over the next three weeks. After Jane had arrived and settled in class, no further concerns were identified. Jane was also considered to be a pupil whose attainments were at an age-appropriate level.

These arrangements broke down following a short illness, a further absence and the onset of menstruation. Jane would not return, so her parents sought an alternative secondary school placement starting after the Autumn half-term in Year 7.

The outreach support teaching service was involved that term, and Jane's attendance increased up to Easter and reduced in the summer term (85% attendance over the year). In Year 8, Jane was reported as being extremely distressed when attempting to go to school, complaining of stomach aches and experiencing panic attacks (25% attendance). In Year 9, Jane enrolled at a pupil referral unit providing secondary education for pupils who have experienced significant difficulties attending mainstream education. Jane was referred to the psychology service in the first term because of concern about non-attendance (3% attendance over ten weeks). Parental views about Jane's needs and the purpose of psychology involvement were obtained; these included their concerns about school attendance, difficulties separating from them and the need for confidence building, and for coping with panic attacks.

Interventions

First session (1 hour)

An appointment was made to meet Jane and her parents at the pupil referral unit. Although the parents had brought Jane in, she was too distressed to attend the meeting. The parents were interviewed with the teacher in charge of the unit present whilst the tutor or one of the parents attempted to reassure Jane.

The main purposes of this interview were to gather information about Jane, her family and her interests; to listen to her parents and attempt to validate their feelings and normalise their perspective; and to look for ways to support Jane and to assist her return to full-time education.

I was told by her parents that Jane's non-attendance and the recurrence of her 'acute feelings . . . like panic attacks' had become steadily worse and were affecting her confidence and self-esteem. Her parents also felt stressed about the consequences within the family – e.g. the reaction from their younger daughter (Year 4) – and about their own lateness for work.

We discussed the possibility of a phased return, starting with morning sessions only, and it was agreed that I would work with Jane individually, to provide strategies for coping with panic attacks and emotional reaction to attendance using relaxation techniques. It was important that I also met Jane briefly, not just so that I would be a familiar face, but also because it gave me an opportunity to affirm the strong feelings she held, to let her hear that many other students had had similar feelings and experiences that came and went away, and to suggest that there were many ways to help this happen.

Second session (1 hour)

Jane was due to be seen two days later at the unit, but had a panic attack that morning so the venue was moved to the Educational Psychology base. Jane was accompanied by her mother and seen individually for 50 minutes. This session began with information gathering from Jane. Jane told me that she worried a lot, and frequently

had stomach aches, and she started panicking in the car on the way to school in the mornings. She would often feel all right before getting in the car, but then her breathing would quicken. This pattern had started well before Year 8, and happened most days, but was worse on Mondays. Jane said she wanted to be able to get to school without these feelings and to attend full-time.

Next, we talked about Jane's interests and what she enjoyed doing – cooking, dancing and going to Guides. Jane told me she liked animals, and that she had recently got a puppy. Discussing leisure activities and things that gave pleasure, set a context for introducing the idea of relaxation as a strategy, and the feelings associated with relaxation and comfort.

Jane's puppy was used as a metaphor to give positive suggestions about successful early learning experiences, separation and independence, using the idea of a healthy puppy's growing up, being weaned, leaving its mother for a family that will adore it, learning its name, being house-trained, and learning to walk to heel and all the other tricks and routines of life at home and outside.

Jane was then given suggestions to close her eyes, relax, and breathe deeply and comfortably, and to imagine that she was getting into the car on a Monday morning. The intention was to access some of the associated negative feelings, and Jane said that she had a sinking feeling in her stomach. Jane was instructed to open her eyes, and was distracted from these feelings (with unrelated talk), and then given repeated suggestions to close her eyes again, relax, breathe deeply and comfortably, and to imagine a picture of something that made her feel really great – relaxed, happy and confident. After three or four attempts, it was clear from the non-verbal cues that Jane had found a positive and resourceful image. Again, Jane was instructed to open her eyes, was distracted, and then was given suggestions to close her eyes, relax, breathe deeply and comfortably, and to imagine that she was now ready to get into the car for the school trip next Monday.

When the car door closed, Jane was given suggestions to see that resourceful image whilst continuing to feel comfortable, confident and relaxed. This process was repeated four times – i.e. suggestions for relaxation, imagining the journey, seeing the positive resourceful image and accepting the positive feelings associated with it, and re-orientation and distraction.

At the end of the session, Jane was given a 'homework' task, namely to notice any changes and new learnings accomplished by her puppy and to tell me about them at the next session.

Third session (1 hour)

Jane was not well the following Monday, but attended the pupil referral unit for the morning sessions as agreed, from Tuesday to Friday. Jane's mother described this as her best attendance for over four months, and Jane had had no recurrence of the stomach aches or panic attacks. I worked with Jane individually, then together we discussed her future attendance.

The session began with 'problem-free' talk about the task – what changes Jane had seen in her puppy. Next, we talked about Jane's successful attendance, to affirm the progress that she had made. Jane still seemed apprehensive and uncertain about being able to increase her attendance to include the afternoon sessions (i.e. to attend full-time), so the idea of using techniques to assist in relaxation and to experience more comfortable feelings – which Jane had already achieved with the trip into school – was introduced as a way for her to feel even better about herself when she stayed for the afternoon sessions.

Jane was given an exercise that encourages progressive relaxation – counting down with the imagery of a staircase, through the entrance to a special room, and on to a special desert island. The exercise included suggestions and metaphors for confidence-building and anxiety-reduction.

When we discussed attendance, it was agreed that Jane would attend the morning sessions for two more weeks, followed by full-time attendance.

Follow-up

Jane attended for the morning sessions, but experienced some further difficulties with attendance after the school holidays. She was placed on 'home tuition' for a few weeks, based at the unit, and seen again in the third week of the new term for a brief review meeting (15 minutes). Her attendance whilst on 'home tuition' had been very good. She seemed more comfortable about returning for the morning sessions first, increasing to full-time after the half-term, and she reported herself still free from the previous panic attacks and stomach pains. A further short review meeting (10 minutes) took place a month later, after she had begun to attend the unit on a full-time basis. She seemed very positive about being able to maintain full-time attendance in future (her current attendance was 67% over seven weeks). Jane's attendance over the next term (12 weeks) rose to 90%.

Conclusions

The improvement in Jane's school attendance can be attributed to her motivation to change and replace unwanted patterns of behaviour. Difficulties with relationships at school had raised her anxiety about attendance. Her subsequent illness and the onset of menstruation affected her confidence and self-image further, whilst home and maternal attention provided security and comfort. The recurrent panic attacks and stomach pains led to non-attendance and increased dependency upon her parents, especially her mother. The use of relaxation, and exercises to reframe unwanted behaviours and feelings, helped Jane to feel differently on her journey to school. Firm expectations that were held about her ability to return and cope helped to give her confidence, and her confidence was also encouraged by the support and flexibility provided by her teachers and parents. The use of the family's puppy as a metaphor, in 'problem-free' talk and for homework or tasking, also provided an ideal opportunity to utilize information provided by Jane that paralleled her situation, exploited positive feelings and provided a context for suggestions about successful early learning experiences, independence, separation and growth.

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