

# Management of Panic Attacks through Timeline Therapy Under Hypnosis: A Case Study

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## Abstract

Panic attacks are associated with somatic complaints including sweating, shortness of breath, trembling, fear of dying, heart palpitations, etc. In addition to pharmacological treatment, different studies have disclosed that psychological intervention has a noteworthy impact on the management of panic attacks. The current case study was focused to see the effect of Time Line Therapy (TLT) under the Kappasinian model of hypnosis with an associated Circle Technique (CT) for the management of panic attacks. The client was referred by a cardiologist for psychological assessment and management of the panic attacks. After taking a complete history and psychological assessment, the issue was identified and the patient undertook a brief hypnotic session to administer TLT with CT. TimeLine therapy produced a significant positive effect on the symptoms associated with panic attacks under hypnosis and with CT.

**Key words:** Panic attacks, hypnosis, circle therapy, timeline therapy, anxiety, panic disorder.

## Introduction

According to American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder-5 (DSM-5), panic disorder comes under anxiety disorders which are considered as the most prevalent psychiatric illnesses with severe psychological and physical manifestations.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety disorders including panic attacks may arise due to multiple factors including psychological, social, any traumatic incident and with or without any genetic predisposition which may alter neuropsychological and neurochemical functions.<sup>2</sup> Panic attacks are characterized by reoccurring unforeseen panic attack in which patients may face a sudden period of intense fear that can discomfort a person within a minute. With panic attacks or anxiety, you worry all the time and you find it impossible to concentrate. One can easily feel tired and irritable. Panic attacks

also show signs of physical symptoms such as sweating, heart palpitations, and breathlessness.<sup>3</sup> Panic attacks may arise unexpectedly, however, many people with experience enable themselves to escape such events which might trigger panic attacks.<sup>4</sup> Symptoms of panic attacks worsen in comorbidities like depression, and such cases are reported with poorer prognosis and outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Literature has suggested a variety of treatment options including pharmacological as well as non-pharmacological. Studies have shown that pharmacological agents including tricyclic antidepressants (TCA), selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) have been effective in managing panic attacks.<sup>6</sup> Among the non-pharmacological treatment options, psychotherapy like Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) has shown positive results in the management of panic attacks.<sup>7</sup> However, CBT requires more sessions for significant effectiveness. In addition to CBT, other communication approaches like Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP), Time Line Therapy, hypnosis, etc are also being used which are brief in intervention as compared to CBT.<sup>8-9</sup> So, NLP-based intervention may be more effective with less time for managing panic attacks. Further, if an NLP approach like TLT is used under hypnosis can be more effective, during hypnosis, patients are hyper-suggested. Hypnosis can be induced through different approaches, a more practical approach to hypnosis is through the Kappasonian model of hypnosis. In the

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Kappasonian model of hypnosis, the patient is given an overload of message units that disorganizes critical thinking leading to hyper-suggestibility.<sup>10</sup> As the patient is suggested for the positive experience during the hypnotic state when the patient starts experience relaxation, an associated technique the CT is applied to boost this positive experience.<sup>11</sup>

## Case Report

A 30-year female, A.T. was referred by a cardiologist for the assessment and management of panic attacks. The lady was having symptoms of sweating, breathlessness, trembling, heart palpitations, loss of control, and fear of death for two months. She was also taking benzodiazepines prescribed by a psychiatrist but there was no permanent relief. She also added that she is single living with her parents and has one married sister. She had a very limited social life and very limited food and water intake since she was experiencing panic attacks. Further on interviewing, it was noted that she started to experience anxiety and panic attacks since the Corona Virus Disease-19 (COVID-19) started and her brother-in-law was tested COVID-19 positive. Moreover, daily news about COVID-19 through electronic and social media complicated her symptoms.

## Case assessment and management

Based on a brief history, signs, and symptoms, according to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders-5 (DSM-5), the patient was assessed with a panic disorder associated with COVID-19.<sup>12</sup> For the management of panic attacks and other symptoms of anxiety, TLT was used under hypnosis and an associated technique CT was also used to enhance the positive experience. CT was very effective to enhance the desired outcomes when under hypnosis a positive experience was created, the patient was instructed to draw a circle clockwise as the patient felt the positive experience increasing. The patient was suggested to keep drawing the circle until he/she achieved the desired outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

## Procedure

The TLT under hypnosis and the associated technique CT was used as:

The patient was asked to go for a therapeutic session to get rid of the symptoms and she gave her consent to undergo the session. The main objective of this agreement was to build trust and keep the patient in confidence.

The patient was explained the concept of TLT that every issue appears in a time line and

becomes a part of the past. The timeline consists of three points i.e. Past, Present, and Future. The anxiety issue/s appears somewhere in the past, and at the present, you are fine, however as you move somewhere in certain situations/stressors in the future, the anxiety symptoms may appear. The timeline concept is shown in Figure.

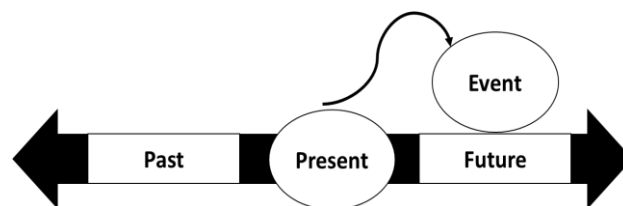


Figure: The concept of timeline.

The client was also explained, "During the session, your eyes will be closed and you will not be allowed to speak. You will be suggested to relax and as you will be feeling relaxed, you will give a signal with your left index finger. During this relaxation, you will be suggested to feel this timeline, and as you will feel this timeline, then the present and finally you will be suggested to feel the situation in an event as you do in physical and you will give a signal with your left index finger. At this moment, you will hear a sound and you will start feeling relax and relax, and as you will be feeling relaxed, you will start drawing a circle clockwise until you are totally fine and relax and you will be provided with a pen and paper".

The patient was hypnotized through the eye fascination technique, i.e. the patient was instructed to focus on a central point of an image and not to blink the eyes. However, the patient was suggested to close the eyes as she felt her eyes were tired.

She was continuously suggested, "Keep drawing the circle until the desired state and stop drawing the circle and give the signal with the finger". In a few moments, she stopped drawing the circle, and gave a signal with the finger. Meanwhile, she was asked to answer an irrelevant question, "do you smell popcorns". This is called break the state which is used to distract the patient not to remember the negative experience. In addition to TLT in the next two follow-up sessions, psycho education was provided about the nature of the (infection) and coping statements were given to enhance confidence. Her contact with the therapist remained for one month, and she did not report any symptoms of panic attacks.

The Ethical approval was obtained from Ethical Review Committee of The University of Lahore, Lahore.

## Discussion

The current case study showed an effect of TLT under hypnosis and with an associated technique the CT in managing the symptoms of COVID-19 associated panic attacks. TLT under hypnosis and CT sessions showed a positive effect on the symptoms of panic disorder associated with the COVID-19 situation. This case study was carried out to see any effect of TLT under hypnosis and with CT. TLT is a structured communication-based brief intervention that showed more effectiveness under hypnosis. This can be due to the suggestibility, as during hypnotic state, the patients are under subconscious mind which is a state of hyper-suggestibility. There are different approaches for the induction of hypnosis, however, the Kappasonian model of hypnosis follows a recent scientific approach. The hypnotic state was induced through the eye fascination technique, i.e. the client was instructed to focus on the center of a picture without blinking her eyes which disorganized the critical mind of the client which accesses the subconscious mind.<sup>10</sup> This model of hypnosis has been already shown its positive effects in managing psychological as well as physical issues.<sup>13</sup> Besides, CT was also used to boost the positive experience, actually as the client started feeling the positive experience, the experience was boosted by associating withdrawing a circle in a clockwise fashion.<sup>13</sup>

According to the Kappasonian model of hypnosis, the effect of suggestion under hypnosis varies from person to person and it depends on suggestibility which is of two types i.e. physical and emotional. The physical and emotional suggestible people prefer suggestions in loud and low voice tones respectively.<sup>10</sup> The patient was tested for emotional suggestibility and she was given suggestions in a low voice tone. The suggestibility was tested through a projective technique i.e. handwriting analysis of the patient. Individuals with emotional suggestibility show narrow loops in the letters like g, y, and rounded loops are observed in physical suggestible.<sup>10</sup> The outcome may not be the same if suggestions do not comply with the respective suggestibility style. The outcome is also affected if the therapist is unable to manage his/her voice tone according to the suggestibility of the patient.

Further, the CT was also used to boost the positive experience, i.e. as the client's negative symptoms start reducing and positive symptoms increasing during the hypnotic state, and the increase of positive symptoms is associated with drawing the circle. This is because the subconscious mind works with minimum resistance

and the positive experience is augmented if something is associated with it. Interestingly, CT is amazing in the way that, when the client draws a circle, it never ends until the client is suggested to stop drawing and the subconscious mind's performance is doubled for the positive experiences. Besides, CT also works on the principles of perceptual distraction that might be responsible in lower the effect of COVID-19 stressors.

Briefly concluding the current study that TLT is an effective modality in managing the symptoms of panic attacks associated with the pandemic situation of COVID-19. TLT was performed under the hypnotic state and with CT for COVID-19 linked anxieties. This intervention may not be able to produce such outcomes if TLT is performed solely for panic attacks and other stress-related issues. The important implication of TLT under hypnosis is that it is a brief intervention as compared to other psychological and behavioral interventions. However, this might be tested for a larger population to validate and generalize its results. Besides, she did not experience the symptoms for one month, so, we cannot envisage the longer effects of TLT and for this purpose, longitudinal research should be designed on more clients.

**Conflict of interest:** None declared.

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