CARBON DIOXIDE THERAPY

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November 6, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *CARBON DIOXIDE THERAPY*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=66758

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychiatry, Psychophysiology, Historical Therapies

1. Core Definition

Carbon Dioxide Therapy, often historically termed CO2 inhalation therapy or carbogen therapy, refers to a physical psychiatric treatment characterized by the therapeutic administration of a gas mixture primarily composed of carbon dioxide (CO2) and oxygen (O2). This intervention was designed as a means to rapidly induce a state of temporary unconsciousness in patients suffering from specific psychological and psychophysiological disorders. The fundamental goal of the procedure was not respiratory enhancement, but rather the creation of a profound, transient physiological interruption, intended to disrupt deep-seated, pathological patterns of anxiety, conversion, or habit formation rooted in the patient's nervous system. The treatment was considered radical for its time, demanding precise control over gas mixture ratios and duration of exposure to achieve the desired therapeutic outcome--a complete, though short-lived, functional cessation of consciousness.

The application of high concentrations of **carbon dioxide** functions as a potent central nervous system (CNS) stimulant and depressant, depending on the dosage and exposure time. Initial inhalation causes hyperventilation and stimulation, but continued exposure quickly leads to severe respiratory acidosis, cerebral hypoxia, and ultimately, coma. Practitioners believed that this rapid physiological disruption could "reset" the faulty neural circuits underlying certain neuroses. The technique is distinct from modern uses of CO2 in controlled surgical settings or respiratory medicine, where lower concentrations might be used to monitor breathing patterns or stimulate deeper respiration; here, the induction of unconsciousness was the deliberate and central therapeutic step.

2. Historical Genesis: The Work of Ladislaus Joseph Meduna

The development and popularization of Carbon Dioxide Therapy are attributed almost entirely to the Hungarian-American psychiatrist, **Ladislaus Joseph Meduna**. Meduna began experimenting with this therapeutic modality in the 1920s, although it gained wider recognition and application in the United States and Europe primarily throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Meduna's interest in physical therapies stemmed from his earlier, foundational work relating biological factors to mental illness, most notably his controversial, yet historically significant, exploration of pharmacological convulsive therapy using metrazol, which served as a precursor to modern electroconvulsive therapy (ECT).

Meduna's rationale for developing CO2 therapy was rooted in observations that states of profound physiological shock or alteration sometimes led to symptomatic improvement in psychiatric

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patients, particularly those suffering from non-psychotic neuroses. He hypothesized that these neuroses represented deep, maladaptive conditioned reflexes or habits that were highly resistant to traditional psychotherapeutic intervention. By forcing the brain into a state of unconsciousness via controlled asphyxia, Meduna believed he could temporarily suspend these pathological patterns, thereby allowing the patient to re-emerge into a state where new, healthier responses could be learned or spontaneous recovery could occur.

The rise of physical therapies during this era--including insulin coma therapy, ECT, and various forms of hydrotherapy--provided a receptive environment for the adoption of CO_2 therapy. These treatments represented a concerted effort by psychiatry to find rapid, biologically impactful interventions for debilitating mental illnesses, moving away from purely verbal psychoanalytic models for certain refractory conditions. Meduna's method was distinguished by its focus on **anxiety** and **conversion states** rather than severe psychoses, marking it as a unique tool within the early somatic psychiatry toolkit.

3. Mechanism of Action: Physiological and Psychological Interruption

The immediate mechanism of action hinges on the extreme physiological response to inhaling a mixture containing high levels of CO_2 (typically 30% carbon dioxide and 70% oxygen, or 'carbogen'). When this mixture is inhaled, the partial pressure of CO_2 in the blood rises rapidly, leading to a state known as hypercapnia. This causes a dramatic shift in the body's acid-base balance, inducing severe **respiratory acidosis**. Acidosis profoundly affects neuronal membrane stability and function across the brain.

Physiologically, the brain attempts to compensate for the sudden acidity, resulting in massive dilation of cerebral blood vessels. While this increases blood flow, the simultaneous depressant effect of CO_2 on the CNS, combined with the extreme metabolic stress, quickly overwhelms regulatory processes. The patient experiences a cascade of physical sensations--dizziness, tingling, rapid heart rate, and often intense fear--before losing consciousness entirely, typically within 20 to 60 seconds. This brief, chemically induced coma is the moment Meduna identified as the therapeutic window.

Psychologically, the interruption served multiple functions. First, the intensity of the experience was sometimes believed to function as a powerful counter-conditioning mechanism, shocking the patient out of their neurosis. Second, the enforced break in consciousness was seen as a chance for the patient's ego and defense mechanisms, which maintained the neurosis, to be bypassed or exhausted. Upon regaining consciousness, which occurred rapidly when the gas was removed, the patient would often report feelings of profound relaxation, emotional catharsis, or a temporary reduction in symptoms, which was then leveraged by concurrent psychotherapy to solidify positive change.

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4. Target Conditions and Clinical Rationale

Carbon Dioxide Therapy was specifically recommended for a spectrum of conditions that were believed to involve persistent, conditioned, or involuntary physical manifestations of psychological distress. The primary indications included severe, chronic **anxiety**, encompassing generalized anxiety disorder and panic attacks, and **conversion disorder** (historically known as hysteria). It was also applied to certain forms of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and phobias, particularly when those conditions had proven resistant to traditional psychotherapeutic approaches.

The rationale for targeting these specific conditions rested on the hypothesis that the physiological rigidity and intractable nature of the symptoms required an equally radical physical intervention. For conversion disorder, where psychological conflict manifests as physical symptoms (e.g., paralysis, blindness) without underlying organic pathology, the physical interruption provided by the CO_2 inhalation was intended to break the pattern linking the mental state to the somatic symptom. Similarly, in chronic anxiety, the therapy aimed to disrupt the habitual, self-perpetuating cycle of hyperarousal and fear.

Crucially, CO_2 therapy was generally considered inappropriate for patients suffering from severe psychotic illnesses, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, where Meduna had earlier focused his convulsive therapies. The distinction lay in the perceived etiology: CO_2 therapy addressed neuroses and maladaptive habits, while other physical methods targeted the more profound disorganization seen in psychosis. The effectiveness was often measured not just by the cessation of symptoms, but by the patient's subsequent ability to engage more constructively with their environment and with ongoing psychological counseling.

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5. Administration Methodology

The procedure for **Carbon Dioxide Therapy** was standardized but required careful medical supervision due to the inherent risks. The patient would typically lie down comfortably and be instructed to breathe the gas mixture through a face mask. The mixture was delivered from compressed cylinders, usually consisting of 30% CO_2 and 70% O_2, though concentrations could be adjusted based on the patient's tolerance and required depth of unconsciousness.

The administration was intentionally brief. The therapist would maintain the flow until the patient exhibited clear signs of unconsciousness--usually marked by the cessation of voluntary movement and breathing--and then immediately remove the mask. The patient would rapidly recover consciousness, often within moments, and be monitored closely. Sessions were generally short, lasting only a few minutes, but treatments were often prescribed in a series of 20 to 50 sessions, administered several times a week. The cumulative effect, rather than a single 'shock,' was considered essential for long-term behavioral reprogramming.

The setting often resembled an anesthesia induction, highlighting the medical gravity of the procedure. Post-treatment, patients frequently reported residual effects such as headache, confusion, or emotional lability, which were viewed by proponents as evidence of the profound physiological impact necessary for therapeutic change. The controlled environment ensured that if respiratory or cardiac complications arose--a persistent risk--immediate resuscitation measures could be applied.

6. Efficacy, Controversy, and Decline

Initial reports regarding the efficacy of Carbon Dioxide Therapy were often highly positive, particularly in Meduna's own clinic and among early adopters. Anecdotal evidence and uncontrolled studies suggested high rates of success for acute anxiety and specific neurotic symptoms. However, as the therapy spread, standardized double-blind studies were rarely conducted, and the efficacy became highly disputed. Critics argued that any perceived benefit was likely due to the strong placebo effect, the profound emotional reaction to the near-asphyxiation, or the concurrent, supportive psychotherapy that invariably accompanied the physical intervention.

The therapy faced significant controversy primarily related to **safety and ethics**. Inducing unconsciousness through respiratory arrest carries inherent risks, especially for patients with underlying cardiovascular or pulmonary issues. Reports of severe side effects, including cardiac arrest and prolonged respiratory distress, contributed to its poor safety profile compared to emerging alternatives. Ethically, the procedure was criticized for its traumatic nature and the coercive element of forcing a patient into an altered state of consciousness against their biological survival instinct.

The eventual decline of Carbon Dioxide Therapy began in the late 1950s and accelerated rapidly through the 1960s with the advent of modern psychopharmacology. The development of highly effective anxiolytics (like benzodiazepines) and antidepressants provided safer, less invasive, and more easily administered treatments for the conditions CO_2 therapy was designed to address. By the 1970s, CO_2 therapy was largely obsolete in mainstream psychiatric practice, relegated to the history books as a curious and aggressive relic of early somatic psychiatry.

7. Further Reading

Ladislas J. Meduna (Wikipedia)
Treatment of Anxiety States by CO_2 Inhalation (Historical Journal Article Review)
Conversion Disorder: A Comprehensive Review (NCBI)

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