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Monterey County Herald
March 2, 2008

Does Hypnotism Work?

Harvard research showed people under hypnosis could be convinced to see colors where there were none.

By TRACY WHEELER
Akron Beacon Journal

AKRON, Ohio — The shiny pocket watch swings back and forth in front of your eyes.

"You're getting sleepy," the hypnotist whispers. "Sleeeeeepy."

Forget all that. Real therapy-based hypnosis is nothing like the TV version. In fact, chances are, almost all of us have been very close to our own hypnotic state, without ever seeing a hypnotist.

Have you ever been driving, only to realize that you don't have any recollection of the last 20 miles? Yet you were awake and alert enough to change lanes and stop at intersections.

Or have you ever been reading a book, only to get so lost in the subject that you forget your surroundings and lose all track of time?

That's very much like hypnosis — you're awake, yet in an altered state of consciousness.

The subconscious mind

When we think with our conscious mind, we're using reasoning and decision-making skills, said Linda Popp, founder of Akron, Ohio's Medical Hypnosis Center for Wellness. But under hypnosis, a person enters his or her subconscious mind, which allows the patient and therapist "to enter the domain of the problem."

"Sometimes people have a problem and they don't know why," Popp said. "They'll come in and say, 'I don't know why I do what I do,' because, consciously, they don't know. But subconsciously, they can go into a place to have access to that because it's a state of concentrated awareness."

The patient is awake, but in a daydreamlike state, she said, in which the mind becomes about 10 times as concentrated and the body becomes 10 times as relaxed.

Hypnosis has been touted as a tool to help treat pain, depression, anxiety, phobias, bad habits (like nail biting), smoking and weight gain. It's even been used to treat obvious physical ailments like migraine headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, skin conditions, surgical recovery, nausea, childbirth and impotence, among other conditions.

The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association support the use of hypnosis as an appropriate part of therapy.

"Is there evidence that hypnosis works?" the psychological group asks on its Web site. "Yes."

The organization highlights a study, published in the journal *Gut*, that found 12 weekly hypnosis sessions helped patients with irritable bowel syndrome. Out of 204 patients, 58 percent of the

men and 75 percent of the women reported significant relief of symptoms immediately after finishing treatment. Of those who reported initial relief, 80 percent were still improved up to six years later.

Recent research at Harvard showed that people under hypnosis could be convinced to see colors where there were none.

And researchers at the University of Iowa used functional MRIs to show that hypnosis alters brain activity in a way that relieves pain. The brain scans showed that different areas of the brain "lit up" when pain was inflicted on the patients who were under hypnosis, resulting in significant pain reduction. Hypnosis reduced pain in all 12 patients, from an average score of 8 out of 10, down to less than 3 out of 10 and even no pain in some.

Reports by the National Institutes of Health point out that hypnosis helps women have shorter labor and more comfortable deliveries. It can even improve the immune system by boosting white blood cell activity.

No longer used by some

Still, not everyone is convinced.

The Northeast Ohio chapter of the American Lung Association stopped using hypnosis as a smoking-cessation option several years ago, based on clinical practice guidelines released by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It found that an independent review of hypnotherapy trials "found insufficient evidence to support hypnosis as a treatment for smoking cessation."

The NIH has a similar position, saying that the effects of hypnosis on smoking, alcohol consumption and overeating are mixed.

The Summit County Tobacco Prevention Coalition has also stopped offering hypnosis as an option, said Jill Oldham, director of Community Health Education.

Follow-ups in 2004 determined hypnosis was not "enough of a success" to warrant further sessions, Oldham said. The staff also has concerns that there is no process to check the credentials of hypnotists, meaning "anyone can state they are a hypnotist."

"On the flip side," Oldham said, "different things work for different people. While I don't think we would discourage people from trying a variety of tools to help in the quitting process, I would not advocate for (hypnosis) to be the only tool.

"Usually a combination of techniques offers the best chance for success. Much like having to eat right and exercise to lose weight, when you quit smoking you have to deal with the physical impact of nicotine on your system as well as the social aspect of the addiction. In other words, changing daily routines, dealing with triggers, etc."