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Opening the subconscious can set a healing path

By Michaela Gibson Morris
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Cluck like a chicken if you think hypnosis involves swinging watches or getting verrrry sleeeeeepy.

The reality couldn't be further from the truth say professionals in Northeast Mississippi who use different hypnosis techniques to help people.

Licensed clinical social worker Melissa Ratliff uses hypnotherapy as one tool to help people dealing with traumatic experiences.

"You're not going to do anything you wouldn't do," Ratliff said. "... You'll remember everything."

Hypnotist Steve Dunn of Corinth uses hypnosis to help people stop smoking and conquer phobias.

"It's not mind control; nothing could be further from the truth," said Dunn, who sees clients in Corinth and Tupelo. "If anything, it's more control."

Much of the hocus pocus people associate with hypnosis is stage craft. But chances are you've hypnotized yourself. The altered state that comes with hypnosis has been compared to getting lost in a good book or television program.

"When you're driving down the road and you zone out, you know you are on the road, you are aware of your surroundings," Ratliff said. That feeling is comparable to a hypnotic trance.

The American Society of Clinical Hypnotherapy said hypnosis can be used in psychotherapy and physical medicine, including anxiety and stress management, smoking cessation, sleep disorders, trauma, anesthesiology and gastrointestinal disorders.

Ratliff understands why people are skeptical. She was, too.

"I didn't think I could be hypnotized," she said.

How does it work?

The concept is that hypnosis works by reaching to the subconscious mind, rather than the logical, rational conscious mind.

"It deals with the emotions," Ratliff said.

The subconscious is the place where habits live, Dunn said. It's what lets people swim or ride a bike even if they haven't used the skill in years.

"Unfortunately, the bad habits get stored there, too," Dunn said.

The subconscious can be compared to a 5-year-old child, Dunn said. Logic isn't its strong suit.

"Its job is to keep you safe and happy," Dunn said.

But it often thinks bad habits like smoking or eating lots of cake are the things that keep us happy.

Ratliff and Dunn use hypnosis techniques in different ways.

Dunn, who has been working as a hypnotist for 15 years, uses the techniques to give people suggestions to help address specific problems such as smoking cessation, weight loss or phobias. With a doctor's approval, he'll work with people for pain control.

"It's been very effective with fibromyalgia," Dunn said.

Before he performs hypnosis on anyone, he meets with them to discuss the problem they want to address, then schedules another appointment for the hypnosis.

From that personal history, he creates a story to tell their subconscious to help them.

"It's very personal to them," Dunn said.

He checks back on his smoking cessation clients with semiannual letters; about 70 percent are able to stop smoking.

Hypnotherapy

Ratliff uses hypnotherapy as part of her therapy practice, where she primarily works with people who are dealing with the fallout from some kind of trauma.

She went through intensive course work and a two-year internship to become an advanced clinical hypnotherapist.

She uses hypnosis techniques to relax the clients and help them access the subconscious. She doesn't give suggestions, but helps people clean out the emotional wounds left behind by traumatic events. Many of her clients are victims of physical or sexual abuse, but trauma can come in many forms like violence, divorces and more.

Traditional talk therapy is very beneficial, and she does a lot of it, but she finds the hypnotherapy can often take people to a deeper level.

"It's like talk therapy in light speed," Ratliff said. "... But it's not for everyone. It's just one tool in my tool belt."

She uses age regression techniques to let people revisit traumatic events and fully experience the range of emotions they have been bottling up.

"When you're in a car wreck, you don't have time to freak out," she said.

But when emotions are bottled up long term, they can wreak havoc for some people.

"The mind is a powerful thing," Ratliff said.

But Ratliff is very careful not to color any memories that surface during the age regressions.

"I ask them what they see, what they hear, what they smell, what they feel," she said. "People remember what they're ready to remember."

Ratliff, who is also trained to do forensic evaluations with children who have been abused, does not use regression techniques on people who are headed to court.

Hypnosis and hypnotherapy are not generally accepted in legal settings, and she doesn't want to compromise those efforts, said Ratliff.