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Prescription: Hypnosis

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Catherine Rosensteel

Catherine Rosensteel had a lot going on in her life six years ago when she learned that she needed hip replacement surgery.

"My hip was falling apart, and I couldn't have been more distressed," said Rosensteel, an artist from Hempfield. "I was worrying about the future and ruminating about the past, and I was obviously in emotional as well as physical distress."

She was in pain, and her blood pressure was so high that it almost kept her from having the surgery. And like many people who are under stress, Rosensteel realized that sometimes she was either panting or holding her breath.

Then Rosensteel met Dr. Phil Kearney, an optometrist with an office in South Greensburg who used hypnotherapy to help patients adjust to contact lenses. He later developed relaxation techniques and expanded self-healing programs.

They worked together, and with hypnosis Rosensteel's blood pressure dropped. She also used it to manage her pain after the surgery, and to ease the ongoing discomfort of arthritis.

"The pain in my life can sometimes be very debilitating," Rosensteel said. "That's when I find that I can use self-hypnosis to calm myself down and take a few deep breaths, and that's when I see everything in my mind come together."

Rosensteel, 63, is among the growing number of Americans who use hypnosis to modify behavior or control pain.

"Self-hypnosis is the only kind of hypnosis there is," said Dr. Paul J. Friday, chief of clinical psychology at UPMC Shadyside, in Pittsburgh. He has been using hypnosis for 30 years, has published papers on the topic and has taught medical hypnosis to other professionals.

"It is not something that people have done to them," Friday explained. "It is something that people learn to do to themselves. That's very important to get across."

Various types of hypnosis have been practiced for centuries. In France in the late 1700s, Anton Mesmer studied trance-like states and believed they were generated by "animal magnetism." Although his theory was discredited by medical societies -- including a commission headed by Benjamin Franklin -- his clinical work was so noteworthy that the effect was dubbed "mesmerism."

Doctors later attributed the hypnotic state to dissociation caused by brain disease, or to a level of sleep. Other doctors found that whatever hypnosis was, it alleviated pain, particularly in childbirth.

In 1958, the American Medical Association published a two-year study by the Council of Mental Health that supported using hypnosis in certain dental and medical settings. Since then, researchers have continued to explore the link between psychology and the effect of hypnosis on the conscious and subconscious mind.

The Western Journal of Medicine defines hypnosis as "the induction of a deeply relaxed state, with increased suggestibility and suspension of critical faculties."

"Once in this state, sometimes called a hypnotic trance, patients are given therapeutic suggestions to encourage changes in behavior or relief of symptoms," it states. "For example, in a treatment to stop smoking, a hypnosis practitioner might suggest that the patient will no longer find smoking pleasurable or necessary. Hypnosis for a patient with arthritis might include a suggestion that the pain can be turned down like the volume of a radio."

Not everyone is convinced that hypnosis works -- and not every patient responds to hypnotherapy.

"Some people swear at it and some swear by it," Friday said. "Those who swear at it don't understand it, and those who swear by it still hold it a mystery, something that is not thoroughly understood."

Yet hypnosis has become so mainstream that some hospitals offer sessions to help treat eating disorders, promote weight-loss and help smokers quit.

Excelsa Health recently offered stop-smoking sessions by John Weir, of Munhall, who at age 25 is one of the youngest members of the National Guild of Hypnotists and the Hypnotism Society of Pennsylvania.

"It's actually been medically proven that hypnosis is better than nicotine replacement therapies for quitting smoking," he said.

Elizabeth Auld, a compensation specialist for Latrobe Hospital, signed up for Weir's program in June because she wanted to lose weight.

"It wasn't that I learned anything new," she said of the program, part of the Highmark Lifestyle Returns program offered to Excelsa staff. "I already knew about diet and exercise, but for some reason I wasn't able to do it."

The morning after the group session, Auld said she was ready to start getting into shape. It was a matter of relaxing enough so

she could accept what her mind already knew, she said.

Auld, 43, of Hempfield, already has lost 18 pounds, and people are noticing.

"When I tell them how I'm doing it, they think I'm crazy," she said. "But I would recommend hypnosis to others."

In addition to helping Excelsa workers with weight-loss and smoking cessation, Muir presented an introduction to hypnosis this month as part of a training program for volunteers with Excelsa Home Care and Hospice.

"We want our volunteers to be knowledgeable and have an understanding of the many different avenues that come up in health care," volunteer coordinator Joan Roth said.

Weir, who has been practicing for six years, said he focuses on helping people learn to help themselves relax, sleep better and reduce stress.

One of his clients, Virginia Weisman, 62, of Fox Chapel, consulted him when she suffered from insomnia.

"I was up pretty much the whole night, and when you stay up the night, the next day you are pretty much a mess," she said. "I went to doctors and they pooh-pooed it, and I tried all the things like watching what I ate in the evenings, and they didn't want to give me sleeping pills."

Weisman said she was able to sleep better after Weir taught her to relax with self-hypnosis.

"I think your mind controls a lot of things, and you can become the controller of your mind," she said.

Kitty Lagorio, of Peters in Washington County, consulted Weir for help with managing pain. A knee injury was still giving her trouble, even after surgery. An active woman in her 50s, Lagorio said she did not want additional surgery.

With hypnosis, she was able to relax her knee, allowing her to walk better.

"It didn't cure me, and I still need a knee brace," Lagorio said. "But I am now up to walking about three miles a day. The rheumatologist that I see is very supportive (of hypnosis), but the surgeons were a little colder."

UPMC's Friday studied hypnosis when it was taught by the late Dr. Kay Thompson in the School of Dentistry at the University of Pittsburgh. He said he finds it a useful adjunct to various therapies, in treating anxieties, phobias and pain, for example.

"I just used a combination of cognitive behavior therapy and hypnosis on a patient who had gone 38 years without stepping in an elevator," Friday said. "She 'graduated' by going up the U.S. Steel Building all by herself, and then she is going on the Duquesne Incline. That ended 38 years of absolute terror for her."

In other applications, the Journal of the National Cancer Institute found that women who used self-hypnosis before breast cancer surgery had less pain, nausea and fatigue afterward. And a National Institutes of Health panel ruled it an effective intervention for alleviating pain from cancer and other chronic conditions.

Study continues: A Harvard psychologist is trying to prove that hypnosis can speed healing in body tissues, and doctors at the University of Washington trying to determine if hypnosis can help burn patients get through painful treatments.

Hypnosis also may have value during childbirth, and in fields as varied as dermatology, dentistry and gastrointestinal care. And it is widely used to promote the general well-being of adults who need to quiet and redirect their minds when under physical, mental and emotional stress.

"Hypnosis can be very effective for cognitive and medical procedures," Friday said.

And there are no unwanted side-effects.

"You have everything to gain" if it works, he said. "The worst thing that can happen with hypnosis is nothing."