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PERSONAL HEALTH

The Possibilities in Hypnosis, Where the Patient Has the Power

By [JANE E. BRODY](#)

My husband, Richard, smoked [cigarettes](#) for 50 years, having failed several attempts to quit on his own. When a friend told him in August 1994 that hypnosis had enabled her to quit, he decided to give it a try.

“It didn’t work; I wasn’t hypnotized,” he declared after his one and only session. But it did work; since that day, he has not taken one puff of a cigarette.

Gloria Kanter of Boynton Beach, Fla., thought her attempt in 1985 to use hypnosis to overcome her fear of flying had failed. “When the therapist brought me out, I said it didn’t work,” she recalled in an interview. “I told her, ‘I heard everything you said.’”

Nonetheless, the next time she and her husband headed for the airport, she was not drenched in sweat and paralyzed with fear. “I was just fine,” she said, “and I’ve been fine ever since.”

Like many others whose knowledge of hypnotism comes from movies and stage shows, my husband and Mrs. Kanter misunderstood what hypnosis is all about. While in a hypnotic trance, you are neither unconscious nor asleep, but rather in a deeply relaxed state that renders the mind highly focused and ready to accept suggestions to help you accomplish your goals.

Hypnosis has been mired in controversy for two centuries, and its benefits are often overstated. It does not help everyone who wants to quit smoking, for example; then again, neither do other kinds of treatments.

And the patient’s attitude is critical. In the words of Brian Alman, a psychologist who practices hypnosis in San Diego, “The power of hypnosis actually resides in the patient and not in the doctor.”

Roberta Temes, a clinical hypnotist in Scotch Plains, N.J., insists that hypnosis cannot make people do anything they don’t want to do. Hypnosis can succeed only in helping people make changes they desire, she said in an interview.

In her book “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Hypnosis,” Dr. Temes points out that success in achieving your goal is the best proof that you were really hypnotized. She also suggests a second or third session if you didn’t quite reach your goal after the first try.

What Hypnosis Can Do

In effect, hypnosis is the epitome of mind-body medicine. It can enable the mind to tell the body how to react, and modify the messages that the body sends to the mind. It has been used to counter the nausea of [pregnancy](#) and [chemotherapy](#); dental and test-taking [anxiety](#); pain associated with surgery, root canal treatment and childbirth; fear of flying and public speaking; compulsive hair-pulling; and intractable [hiccups](#), among many other troublesome health problems.

Writing in The Permanente Journal in 2001, Dr. Alman said that “useful potential” for benefiting from hypnosis “exists within each patient.” “The goal of modern medical hypnosis,” he said, “is to help patients use this unconscious potential.”

Dr. Alman described a 65-year-old concentration camp survivor who repeatedly choked when she tried to swallow, though examinations of her esophagus revealed no obstruction. After three hypnotherapy sessions, her problem was solved. “I was liberated from my esophagus,” the patient said.

You may not even have to be face to face with a hypnotist to benefit medically. Dr. Temes said hypnosis could be helpful even if done with a cassette tape or CD, or by telephone, which she offers as part of her practice. She said many helpful CD’s could be found through the Web site www.hypnosisnetwork.com.

Ellen Fineman, a physical therapist in Portland, Ore., had had five surgeries to repair a retina that kept detaching. Hoping that a sixth attempt would hold, she used a hypnosis tape prepared by Dr. Temes for patients undergoing surgery.

The hypnosis tape “was very calming and reassuring,” Ms. Fineman said in an interview.

“It told me that I would be in the hands of professionals who would take good care of me and that I’d have minimal [swelling](#),” she said. “This time the surgery went superbly — no inflammation, no swelling and no more detachment. The surgeon was amazed and asked what I had done differently this time.”

While not everyone is easily hypnotized, nearly everyone can slip into a therapeutic trance, Dr. Temes maintains. Another of her patients, Dr. Susan Clarvit, a New York psychiatrist, thought she could not be hypnotized — she was too scientific, too rational a person, she said.

“But I was desperate,” Dr. Clarvit said in an interview. “I was pregnant with my second child and too nauseated to be alive. Dr. Temes asked me what I held most often, and I said a pen. She hypnotized me so that when I held a pen I had an overall feeling of wellness. I held a pen all the time, even while driving, and didn’t feel nauseated.”

Under hypnosis, Dr. Clarvit was given a posthypnotic suggestion that linked holding a pen to feeling well. Such suggestions enable people to practice a new, desired behavior after being brought out of the trance.

Someone trying to overcome snacking on sweets might be told, “When you are hungry, you will eat vegetables.” The suggestion to a smoker might be “you will drink water when you want a cigarette,” and someone terrified of public speaking might be told “you will do [deep breathing](#) when you feel scared.”

Many patients are also taught to practice self-hypnosis to reinforce the new behavior. Dr. Karen N. Olness, a professor of [pediatrics](#) at Case Western Reserve University who is the president of the International Society of Hypnosis, said that “self-hypnosis training in children is an effective and practical strategy to prevent [migraine](#) episodes.”

Indirect Benefits

Sometimes patients with well-established illnesses can benefit indirectly from hypnosis.

Dr. Alman told of a woman with [multiple sclerosis](#) who was treated with hypnosis for [depression](#) that had failed to improve with [antidepressants](#). Almost immediately, he reported, not only did the woman’s depression ease, but her gait and speech improved markedly.

He explained that for many patients the medical problem is so complex that specific directions and commands may be ineffective. The benefit from hypnosis may rely more on unleashing unconscious processes within the patient. He suggested that there exists “a wealth of material in the patient’s unconscious that can be used in healing” but lamented the fact that although medical hypnosis can often produce rapid change even in difficult cases, it is “underutilized as a therapeutic tool.”

As with any other profession, some hypnotherapists are more talented than others. Dr. Temes suggests that word of mouth may be the best way to find someone practiced in hypnosis for the kind of problem you’re trying to solve. Also helpful is the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, at www.asch.net, which maintains a referral list of therapists, both certified and not, by location and specialty.