

A fresh look at hypnotism



TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

Contrary to popular belief, participants in a hypnotized state know exactly where they are and what they're doing. And the process no longer involves a swinging pocket watch.

The ancient art of suggestion is finding acceptance as a therapeutic tool

January 03, 2008

DAPHNE GORDON
LIVING REPORTER

So you've made your New Year's resolution.

Maybe you want to lose weight or quit smoking. (Again.)

But only three days into 2008, there's a naughty little voice inside your head telling you that the diet can wait until the last of the Christmas cookies are gone, or that cigarettes are the most loyal friend you've ever had.

And with each passing hour, that voice becomes more insistent and seems to make more sense.

There might be a way to silence the troublesome voice: hypnotism.

The perception of hypnotism as a carnival side show in which apparently sane adults cluck like chickens persists, but the ancient art of suggestion is finding increasing acceptance as a therapeutic tool for weight loss and smoking cessation, as well as pain management, immunity building, fertility and stress reduction, among other things.

"I've been doing it for 10 years now, and when I first started, it was considered hokey," says Georgina Cannon, director of Toronto's Ontario Hypnosis Centre.

"Acceptance from the medical community is new," she says, adding that a few hospitals in the United States have hypnotists on staff to help patients with the pain and nausea related to cancer treatment.

Though it's not a substitute for traditional treatments, clinical studies have shown its effectiveness as a supplementary therapy, so many of Cannon's clients are referred by psychiatrists and physicians.

But the techniques can help healthy people, too and they're commonly used to change habits like smoking, overeating, interrupted sleep patterns and nail biting, as well as address phobias such as fear of public speaking and flying.

The process no longer involves a swinging watch, a technique that was created by the British father of modern hypnotism, James Braid, who coined the term hypnotism in the late 19th century.

A hypnotism session is a lot like guided relaxation, says Cannon. After inviting her clients to sit comfortably in a chair and close their eyes, she uses her soothing voice to create visualizations that invoke a deeply relaxed state.

In this aware but relaxed state, the subconscious mind is open to suggestion. The fact that the suggestions affect the subconscious, rather than the conscious mind is what makes hypnotism effective, says Cannon.

"Eighty per cent of what you do is coming from the subconscious," she explains. "Tying your shoes, driving, all of these things are automatic, from how you hold your toothbrush to what presses your buttons when someone says something to you."

The patterns in the subconscious mind are created before the age of 7, she says, explaining that traumatic events like bullying or a critical comment from a teacher can permanently affect the subconscious blueprint.

"Your gut reactions are not necessarily true," she explains. "They're in your subconscious mind, and they might have nothing to do with what's actually

happening in your life. What's happening is just pushing some button in your subconscious that makes you feel afraid or victimized."

But, when applied by a skilled practitioner, Cannon says, hypnotic suggestions can help change those deep emotional patterns.

Contrary to popular belief, participants in a hypnotized state know exactly where they are and what they're doing. And without inner motivation, hypnotic suggestions probably won't work.

"People think I can take over their minds and make them do something that they don't want to do ... But we can only help you if you really want to quit smoking. Some people don't really want to, and we send them home."

Each hypnotism session with Cannon also includes instruction in how to use self-hypnosis. She sells CDs that can help recreate the deeply relaxed state at home or at the office. "I'll do anything to help people understand the power of their own minds and how they can use them," she says. "The client always has the answer inside. That's the real work, that's when it has power, when people make realizations for themselves."

Hypnotists are not licensed by a governing body, so it's important to choose carefully. Cannon suggests asking a potential hypnotist if they have completed at least 100 hours of training, and if they practise full-time or part time.

"It's not a hobby," she says. "Talk to them, spend time shopping around. Make sure you feel trust. Ask if they belong to an association and check their reputation with the association."

Cannon will host a free seminar about hypnosis tomorrow from 7 to 8:30 p.m. at the fourth annual World Hypnotism Day event at the Comfort Suites hotel (200 Dundas St. E.) in Toronto. She'll discuss what it is, how it works and what it can be used for.