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You are very sleepy . . .

Hypnotherapists tout hypnosis as way to achieve goals and change habits
By VICTORIA AHEARN, *The Canadian Press*

UNDER THE SPELL of a soothing voice and soft, ambient sounds, about 200 people slumped down in their chairs and closed their eyes for a giant relaxation and hypnotism session.

"Find yourself in the most beautiful place," Georgina Cannon, founder of the Ontario Hypnosis Centre, told the crowd gathered at the Sutton Place Hotel in Toronto.

"While you're there, notice the colours, the textures ... this is your safe place."

Cannon, who has a doctorate in counselling, was attempting to put the room into a form of hypnosis — a mental state induced by oneself or someone else in order to open up the subconscious mind to positive suggestion.

"No, you won't bark like a dog or cluck like a chicken," she told participants before the session began.

"No one can take over your mind. The only person that's in charge of your mind is you."

The event was timed to coincide with the second annual World Hypnosis Day on Jan. 4 and the onset of New Year's resolutions, which hypnotherapists believe can be achieved by accessing the subconscious mind.

Cannon asked audience members to visualize a garbage bag emitting a purple mist. In it, they were to throw all their possessions, their emotions — and their parents — and then retrieve from the bag what they wanted to carry with them from then on.

One woman later admitted to feeling uncomfortable being asked to put her mother into the bag, while another man said he felt physical discomfort throughout the trance.

Debbie Papadakis, a certified hypnotherapist in Toronto who wasn't involved in the event, said "the conscious is the part of our mind that has the willpower. It's rational, it's analytical, it holds the short-term memory."

"When we go to the subconscious part of the mind, that's where all of the emotions are, all the feelings are, all the beliefs are and all the habits are."

She and others who practise hypnosis say it's a safe way to change habits, phobias, sleep patterns, emotional issues and sometimes even the physical state — including the control of blood flow and pain.

"Sometimes the physical problem will disappear if you go back and find the emotional problem," says Papadakis — an assertion backed up by Dr. Gerard Sunnen, a psychiatrist in New York City.

"In some people there is a repressed, traumatic situation and there's a repressed emotion," Sunnen said from his office.

"There's a mental component of the emotion and a physical component of the emotion ... so if that emotion is repressed, it's too painful, too traumatic to be coming out in the conscious mind and it will continue to be expressed in the body as a symptom."

Sunnen said hypnotherapy may also help speed up recovery from operations and modulate pain, "give it different colours or different shapes in the mind."

Seth-Deborah Roth, a nurse anesthetist in San Francisco, says she used hypnosis to get rid of her insomnia and avoid back surgery for a spinal disc problem brought on by a car accident.

However, she cautioned against believing it's a magic cure-all.

"Our mind does have some control on our bodies," she said from her home. "But I would never tell a cancer patient 'don't do your chemo.' I would never do that."

Roth treated her back pain by putting her hand where the pain was and visualizing the nerves calming down, the blood going to the region and the toxins moving out.

"My hip, literally, was rising and falling. It was like, pulsating," she said. "And I called my husband over — and he's a physician — and I said 'Look at this! Look at this!' and my pain started to go away."

Roth first observed the technique when she was in nursing training and hypnosis was used in place of anesthesia on a patient.

"A fellow needed a skin graft. His face and upper body had been burnt ... so they couldn't get a vein on him in the operating room," she said.

"We couldn't put a mask on his face because he had burns on his face and my anesthesia instructor was talking to him while they did the skin graft. At that time I did not know she was doing hypnosis."

Hypnotherapists cite numerous stories about the treatment being used in place of anesthesia in situations ranging from dental treatments to heart surgery.

"Those are the individuals who can go into what we call a level 6," says Tanya Hreczko, a part-time Toronto hypnotherapist who holds a PhD in physical anthropology and human genetics.

"Anybody can go into a level 1 or 2, and that's where your weight loss and smoking cessation occurs.

"The depth of the relaxation depends on how much you trust the person you're working with, the circumstances and your natural ability to do so."

Hreczko says she used one hypnotism session to treat her irritable bowel syndrome, which had been plaguing her for over 20 years.

She now hops into her recliner nearly every morning for a 10-minute self-hypnosis session involving short, clear, positive suggestions — usually no more than one at a time.

Cannon points out that people only take from hypnosis sessions what they want out of it — in other words, the conscious mind will spring into action and resist what it does not want, thus eliminating the possibility of mind manipulation.

"A lot of people have some very false ideas about what (hypnotism) is," says Cannon, referring to media images of hypnotists swinging pocket watches to put people under, or entertainers touting themselves as hypnotists to make people perform silly acts on stage.

"One of the things I do say is, 'If I could really take over your mind, then I would have Johnny Depp living with me.'"

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