

There's Entrancing News About Hypnosis

by Kate Murphy

Hypnosis helped James Williams cut back on his drinking eight years ago. So when he developed a fear of flying after September 11, he again sought hypnotic relief. "I had always thought hypnosis was a stage show kind of thing. But I've found it incredibly effective at getting me to focus on what I want to accomplish," says Williams, 56, a vice-president of Polyonics, a Westmoreland (N.H.) maker of bar-code stickers. Indeed, today he travels by plane without anxiety.

Although still not well understood, hypnosis has gained credibility in the past five years because of research using the latest brain-imaging technology. PET, MRI, and EEG scans show that hypnotized subjects have altered sensory perception -- and they're not just pushovers, play-acting, or highly imaginative, as once thought. Studies show hypnosis can help treat a multitude of disorders from asthma to warts. But it is not a cure-all and can even be dangerous if you go to a practitioner who lacks adequate training.

TUNING THINGS OUT. Hypnosis is a trancelike state that arises when your conscious mind takes a backseat to your unconscious, usually induced by relaxing patter. Forget the swinging watches. You'll more likely be asked to shut your eyes or focus on a fixed object, such as a doorknob. You tune out everything, including your own inhibitions. This makes you highly attentive and open to suggestion.

Some people are more susceptible than others. "It's a blue-eyes, brown-eyes kind of thing," says Dr. Elliot Wineburg, a neuropsychiatrist at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York. "You're either born with the ability or you're not." Hypnotizability has nothing to do with intelligence or gullibility. But it does correlate to whether you're the type who gets totally absorbed reading a book or watching a movie.

The treatments usually last 30 minutes, and many patients report improvement after just one session. Jennie Lauria, a Queens (N.Y.) lab technician, says she kicked a pack-a-day smoking habit after a single visit with a hypnotherapist. More likely, you'll have to go three or four times and maybe also get tapes of hypnotic suggestions to play at night before you fall asleep. The suggestions are usually about positive things that will result from stopping a bad habit, such as how good you will feel and look if you lose weight. Your awareness of pain might be dulled by suggestions that you are floating in space in absolute comfort.

PAIN MANAGEMENT. Various brain scans of hypnotized individuals show they actually perceive what they are told is reality even when it clearly is not. A 2000 study in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* revealed that when hypnotized subjects were told a black-and-white picture was in color, their brain activity was consistent with seeing colors. Other studies indicated brain activity congruent with hearing noises when there were none, or not feeling pain when subjects' hands were submerged in painfully hot or cold water.

It's not surprising, then, that hypnosis is often used to treat chronic pain and help women give birth without resorting to medication. Researchers at Harvard University have found it diminishes the need for anesthesia during invasive procedures such as angioplasty and breast reconstruction and speeds post-operative healing. Hypnosis may also be effective in treating asthma, irritable-bowel syndrome, dermatitis, warts, hives, hemophilia, nausea associated with chemotherapy or pregnancy, undesirable traits such as smoking or overeating, anxiety, phobias, and post-traumatic stress disorder, says Etzel Cardena, president of the Society for Clinical & Experimental Hypnosis (SCEH) and professor of psychology at the University of

Texas-Pan American in Edinburg. He adds that the effects of hypnotherapy generally are lasting, though some patients might relapse after a period of months or years and require more treatment. The success rate depends on your hypnotizability, motivation, and disorder. For phobias, studies indicate it's around 50% after one visit. Hypnosis is most effective when used with psychotherapy and other supportive measures.

Hypnosis can be disorienting or tap emotions buried in your subconscious. Furthermore, you are vulnerable in the hypnotic state. For these reasons, it should be practiced by a licensed professional who operates under a recognized code of professional ethics. Look for medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, or social workers who are certified by the SCEH or the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH). Referrals are available at asch.net, or send an e-mail request to sceh@mspp.edu. Treatment ranges anywhere from \$50 to \$300 per hour, depending on who you see. For some diagnoses, your health insurance may pick up the cost.

HYPNOTIC SUGGESTIONS. Hypnosis is only as effective as your therapist's knowledge of you and your disorder. For example, Williams' psychologist hypnotherapist recognized that his excessive drinking had a lot to do with job-related stress. Therefore, the hypnotic suggestions Williams received encouraged him not only to stop drinking but also to avoid getting "so worked up about stuff at work," Williams says.

It's unlikely someone could get you to do anything that goes against your deeply held values while you're under hypnosis. But if you feel vulnerable, you can ask that a third party be present at the session to keep tabs on the therapist. Although hypnosis can have powerful effects, it probably isn't anything you haven't already experienced when you've stared off into space. Mt. Sinai's Wineburg says hypnosis is on the same spectrum, neurologically and experientially, as daydreaming and meditating. With hypnosis, however, there could be a remedy in your reverie.

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