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Healing powers of hypnosis explored

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Rita Boggs leans back in her chair, eyes closed, arms loose.

A soothing voice urges her to relax, to breathe in fresh air and release the pain that has plagued her since a car accident left her with a serious back injury when she was a teenager. The voice comes from the woman in the chair next to her. It's not her doctor or her psychologist.

Teresa del Giudice is a certified hypnotist.

Hypnotism is no longer a parlor game. It's taking an accepted role in medicine and psychology. People like del Giudice (pronounced JUDICE) use it to help patients manage pain, quit smoking, lose weight and even give birth. Medical studies are beginning to back it up. A study this summer in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute found that hypnosis helped breast cancer patients by reducing their pain and recovery time during and after surgery. Other studies have shown that it's effective in healing wounds and mending bones.

The idea is that the mind may be able to do a lot more than we give it credit for. Through hypnosis, people might lessen their need for such things as prescription drugs. A woman in labor might be able to avoid pain medication. A person who wants to lose weight could avoid extreme diets.

Deborah Lallier uses hypnosis as one of several tools in what she calls "energy therapy" at the Center for Natural Medicine on Hope Mills Road.

"We're more powerful beings than we realize," she said. "There is so much scientific research, it's almost ridiculous not to consider them. We're moving to a more mind-spirit-body connection."

But there's still a lot of skepticism from people who think hypnotists are going to use their techniques to control them or embarrass them.

"Nothing could be further from that," del Giudice said.

She spends much of her time winning over the reluctant. But even so, Fayetteville supports at least two people who use hypnosis to make a living.

There is enough demand to regularly fill a class del Giudice teaches on self-hypnosis at Fayetteville Technical Community College. And even though the classes are predominantly full of women, she counsels many men in her downtown Fayetteville office. They are firemen, police officers and soldiers returning from Iraq. One soldier came to see her and said he wanted help with an addiction to chewing tobacco.

“That was the least of his problems,” del Giudice said. “The paranoia was eating him alive.”

Hypnosis is often used to help people uncover the reason behind bad habits. A woman named Della went to del Giudice for help with weight loss. “I don’t see myself in the same light,” said Della, who asked that her last name not be used. “I’m able to let go of a lot of eating habits that were just that, habits, protections.”

She has lost 34 pounds. “I can call it a medicine. It healed me in so many ways,” she said.

But many physicians balk at the idea of hypnosis. Rita Boggs is the exception. Her doctor knows about her visits to del Giudice’s office and has even given his blessing.

So on a Sunday afternoon, del Giudice leads her through a series of mental exercises. Boggs sits in a recliner in the corner of del Giudice’s office. She’s relaxed, long red hair pulled over one shoulder. Del Giudice has asked Boggs to imagine plunging her hand into an icy cooler. Boggs pictures the last Coca-Cola sitting on the very bottom. When she imagines drawing out the icy cold soda, Del Giudice tells to her to take that numb feeling in her hand and transfer it to the pain in her back.

“Cool,” Boggs murmurs, and del Giudice smiles and says, “Isn’t that a beautiful thing?”

There are other techniques the two of them try. Through each one, del Giudice guides her until she is more and more relaxed. She hopes that Boggs will be able to re-create these feelings on her owns. There are few days when Boggs doesn’t have pain in her back and neck. She uses a cane, and doctors tell her that she has spinal stenosis, a medical condition that narrows the spinal canal and puts pressure on her already fragile spinal cord.

Boggs slowly works her way through the exercises until del Giudice gently asks her to open her eyes. When she does, she smiles and pats del Giudice on the arm.

“Cool. Thanks, Doc.”