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The power of suggestion: Hypnosis

Hypnosis increasingly is used as serious therapy to help patients control pain and anxiety and alleviate symptoms.

Story by LISA LIDDANE
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For a long time, hypnosis has been the Rodney Dangerfield of health care.

Yes, researchers have long been curious – even as they learn more – about the relationship of mind to body.

Still, among traditional practitioners of big-money, big-education style Western medicine, a practice used by magicians and carnival tricksters hasn't held much sway as serious therapy.



The power of suggestion: Hypnosis Surgical tool: Judy Lasher left, a psychologist, signals that Maria Menendez, awaiting hand surgery, has been hypnotized. Some surgical patients are trying hypnosis in place of anesthesia.

But that may be changing. A growing body of research indicates that hypnosis can help people quit smoking, blunt physical pain and decrease the symptoms of, among other things, irritable bowel syndrome. As a result, hypnosis is popping up as a health tool in places where it was once shunned.

"Hypnosis puts people in a state of hyper-relaxation," said Stephanie Buehler, a licensed clinical psychologist who uses hypnosis at the Center for Optimal Health in Irvine. "(While under hypnosis) a lot of the usual defenses are usually resolved, so that people are receptive to

suggestions and more capable of incorporating them."

Researchers recently have shown what happens in the brains of people who are hypnotized. A 2005 study published in Proceedings of the National Academies showed that people under hypnosis

demonstrated less activity in the part of the brain called the anterior cingulate cortex – which is linked to decision-making – than did people who weren't hypnotized.

Such studies are gradually stripping hypnosis of its showbiz history and legitimizing it in medical offices and hospitals. Doctors, nurses and psychologists increasingly use hypnosis to complement standard treatments. Likewise, an increasing number of patients seek out hypnosis as an alternative to more invasive treatments or drugs.

Buehler says she's used it to help patients manage phobias, such as fear of flying.

"I can put (patients) under hypnosis and desensitize them to the entire process of getting on the plane, the plane taking off, the patients being afraid of the flight, the plane landing and the patients exiting. Under hypnosis, I can teach them to go from something they are afraid of to a safe place. I can teach them that they can have some control and that they can relax."

At Children's Hospital of Orange County in Orange, nurses and psychologists help children manage anxiety and pain with self-hypnosis, said Heather Huszti, director of training for the psychology program at CHOC.

"It's not a substitute for pain medications, but a way to help medications work better," she explained, adding that patients practicing self-hypnosis sometimes require less pain medications.

In January, CHOC will kick off a training program to expand and deepen its health-care givers' understanding and experience in hypnosis, Huszti said.

Of late, self-hypnosis has joined the ranks of the Bradley Method and Lamaze as a popular tool for women to manage the pain of childbirth.

Before getting pregnant in 2004, Cassidy Feliciano of Cypress was determined to avoid epidural anesthesia during labor and delivery. "I didn't want any drugs for me and my baby," she said. So she took hypnosis-assisted birthing classes once a week for five weeks, starting during the sixth month of her pregnancy. Every night for three months, Feliciano, 31, practiced self-hypnosis techniques.

When she went into labor, she knew how to mentally block out the pain.

"I imagined a safe place," she said. "I was sitting in the park with the baby in my arms and my husband behind me. The park is a place we went to several times for picnics before we were even pregnant. It has a lake, with ducks swimming around. I was sitting on a blanket with my knees propped up and I was cradling the baby on my lap. My husband was kneeling behind me, his hand relaxed on my shoulder. His hand was my cue to go deeper into hypnosis."

Feliciano felt calm throughout the process. "It was never really painful. I felt pressure – just pressure, even though I had a sizable tear."

After Feliciano delivered her son, she felt euphoric. "I felt so empowered that my body could do what it did and that my mind had the power over my body to create a painless childbirth."

But some people are more susceptible to hypnosis than others, says Dr. David Spiegel, a prominent hypnosis researcher and associate chairman of the department of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University.

"There's now evidence that genetic factors play a role in hypnotizability," Spiegel said. "Some people have a certain variant of the gene involved in making the neurotransmitter dopamine." Neurotransmitters are chemical messengers in the brain.

Children tend to be more hypnotizable, Spiegel said. Three out of four adults can be hypnotized.

How long the effects of hypnosis last varies. When patients undergo hypnosis with a psychologist and learn self-hypnosis, they acquire tools to help themselves, Buehler said. Those tools cease to be potent if patients use them infrequently or don't seek help when hypnosis isn't as effective.

And hypnosis doesn't work in vacuum. Buehler points out that people trying to lose weight still need to learn about proper nutrition and exercise so that hypnotic suggestions to make the right food choices can work. And people trying to quit smoking, she said, can still benefit from using a nicotine patch.

Buehler cautioned that it's important to be careful in choosing a health-care provider who is licensed to practice hypnosis. There are numerous hypnotists who can claim to treat a host of medical conditions, but may not be adequately trained to provide hypnosis, Buehler said.

The first step to finding a qualified hypnotist is to get a referral from the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis and the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis.

Meanwhile, the research on hypnosis continues.

More than a half-dozen clinical trials sponsored by the National Institutes of Health are looking at how hypnosis can help with preparing women for childbirth, alleviating pain during cataract surgery, relieving hot flashes in breast cancer survivors, and decreasing back pain. Researchers at the University of Washington in Seattle and The Alfred hospital in Melbourne, Australia, are conducting studies to find out if virtual-reality-assisted hypnosis can reduce burn victims' anxiety and pain.

"There are studies that show that hypnosis is stronger than the placebo effect," Spiegel said. "It's not mind over matter, but mind matters."