



Hypnosis: Is it trickery or is it treatment?

You are not getting sleepy. You are not getting sleepy. Instead, you are using a technique that can moderate pain.

By Nicole Johnston
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Preparing for the birth of her first child, Helena Davis Perry wanted her baby's delivery to be as comfortable and relaxed as possible. She opted for a home birth with the assistance of a midwife. And instead of drugs or an epidural, she chose hypnosis.

Her husband Dan Perry acted as her hypnotist, guiding her into a deeper state of relaxation. "With each contraction, her whole body would change. She'd be panting and her body would be rigid," he recalls. But as soon as he started coaching her, her whole body would relax. "It made me feel fabulous and a part of the whole thing," says Mr. Perry.

Despite some pain, Ms. Davis Perry is convinced of the benefits of hypnosis. "It kept me calm and lessened the intensity," she says. "Without it, it would have been much more painful."

Based on his wife's experience, Mr. Perry now swears by it and uses self-hypnosis himself for relaxation, as well as for pain management of a chronic sinus problem that surgery has failed to alleviate.

The Toronto couple learned about self-hypnosis from their prenatal instructor, Shawn Gallagher, director of Midwifery Consulting Services in Toronto, who offers prenatal classes in childbirth and HypnoBirthing.

A midwife with 12 years experience, Ms. Gallagher used self-hypnosis for the birth of her own eight-pound son, and recalls the birth as remarkable. "remember one contraction hurting, the rest of the contractions I was aware of but didn't care about."

The birth of her second child, a nine-pound daughter, was an entirely different story. "didn't use hypnosis and discovered what a '10' on the pain scale felt like."

Now a certified hypnotist herself, Ms. Gallagher teaches moms-to-be how to reprogram the way their brains perceive, interpret and react to pain. But while she hesitates to suggest that having a baby can be painless, she does believe that most women can have a normal, comfortable childbirth.

Nevertheless, questions remain about how effective a technique often associated with entertainment can be as a legitimate therapy for coping with pain.

Some medical scientists now agree that it can be effective. Dr. Catherine Bushnell, director of research in the department of anesthesiology at McGill University in Montreal, uses hypnosis in her research to help her study how pain is perceived and processed in the brain. "Hypnosis is a valid altered state, and not some parlour [game] with people running around like chickens," she says.

Hypnosis is essentially a state of induced relaxation that you can do by yourself or with the aid of someone else.

Hypnosis has undergone a metamorphosis since its acceptance as a legitimate therapy by the American Medical Association back in 1958. Once used exclusively by medical practitioners bent on probing the subconscious mind out of scientific curiosity, hypnosis has since evolved into a healing therapy.

And it is gaining wider acceptance in the mainstream -- coinciding with the ever-growing popularity of alternative medicine.

In recent years, countless people have used it in an attempt to conquer smoking and overeating. But it doesn't end there. Certified hypnotist Georgina Cannon, director of the Ontario Hypnosis Centre in Toronto, says hypnosis clients range from students trying to improve their study habits, to Bay Street executives trying to overcome shyness or public-speaking anxiety, to chronic-pain sufferers looking for respite.

Although hypnosis was once a therapy sought mostly by women, men now make up half of Ms. Cannon's clientele -- though not necessarily for the same reasons. While both sexes turn to hypnosis for personal motivation, fighting insomnia, or trying to get to the root of their depression, men complain chiefly of anxiety and stress. Women, it seems, are combating issues of guilt and self-esteem.

The lasting effects of hypnosis can vary for individuals, however. Ms. Cannon cautions those who come to her for smoking cessation that some may be tempted to try one cigarette down the road, thinking they're in control of their habit. While most of her clients are successful at kicking the habit through hypnosis, those who feel tempted may benefit from an occasional 'booster' session to keep them focused on their goal.

The continuing doubts about hypnosis, its enthusiasts say, stem largely from the erroneous ideas about it seen in Hollywood movies and popular culture.

Myth #1: At the count of 10, you will be in deep, deep sleep. The participant is awake the entire time, says Ms. Cannon. Hypnosis, simply put, is a state of focused relaxation. The hypnotist - or facilitator - guides the person to a level of relaxation that enables him or her to go into a light trance similar to what we experience while daydreaming or

watching television. Soothing music, dimmed lights and a calming voice help guide the person into an increasingly deeper level of relaxation.

Once total relaxation is achieved, the conscious mind takes a back seat to the subconscious, where the real work begins. The subject is guided mentally to a “safe place” and suggestions for behavioural change are then made.

Myth #2: You will do exactly as I tell you. Nobody can make you do something you find morally objectionable, emphasizes Ms. Cannon. And if you don't want to be hypnotized - you won't be.

Individuals also differ in their level of suggestibility. Ms. Gallagher recalls her hypnosis-assisted birth as being relatively painless. Helena described her pain experience as a six on a scale of one to 10 - but says it was a “tolerable” level of pain.

Depending on the goal, different individualized “scripts” are used for bringing about change - techniques specific to a particular problem. One commonly used is visualizing oneself after the change has been made.

“Athletes do this all the time,” says Ms. Cannon. Whether it's the basketball player mentally calculating his next shot, or the downhill skier visualizing her next run down the mountain, “They visualize success.” And this, she adds, is key to the success of hypnosis.

Myth #3: At the count of 10, you will not remember a thing. In actual fact, most subjects recall the entire session. Ms. Cannon says her clients are often surprised that they remain so aware of what's going on. Even for those with low suggestibility - who don't actually achieve a hypnotic state - most would agree that it's a very pleasant experience. She likens it to a “massage for the mind.”

So how does one know if he or she has been successfully hypnotized?

One telltale sign, says Ms. Cannon, is time distortion. Ms. Davis Perry's delivery was seven hours in total, yet as she recalls it, “I lost all perception of time. It was like I was in limbo. It just seemed to happen all at once.”

The other sign is pain tolerance. When the subject is in deep trance, pinching or twisting of the skin on the back of the hand feels like touch, but is devoid of normal pain sensation.

And now, scientific studies are showing that hypnosis can influence our emotional response to pain, which in turn alters how we respond to it.

The evidence supporting this finding was discovered by Montreal researchers trying to understand how pain is perceived by the brain. Dr. Bushnell, along with colleagues at the University of Montreal, resorted to hypnosis with research subjects as a means of

controlling the emotional response to pain so they could study how the brain processes pain signals from the body.

The researchers studied pain perception both by brain scan, and by measuring the brain's electrical activity with subjects in an alert state and in a hypnotic state, when the subjects' hands were immersed in painfully hot water. Their results, first published in the journal *Science* two years ago and subsequently published in the *Journal of Clinical Neuroscience* this year, came as a surprise to disbelievers, Dr. Bushnell among them.

“I went into this totally as a skeptic,” she says. “Until I saw the brain scans.” According to Dr. Bushnell, just being in a hypnotic state altered activity in the brain, while verbal suggestions of increased or decreased pain perception made more changes.

But considering that pain evokes all sorts of emotional responses -particularly pain that has a considerable emotional aspect to it, such as cancer - hypnosis may be a useful tool in helping some individuals cope with certain kinds of pain.

This discovery of a mind-body connection won't come as any surprise to Ms. Cannon. “We all know the mind and body are one,” she says. “It's one of the most underrated, powerful tools we have -- the mind.”