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Hypnotic healing

Hypnotherapy can help change harmful behavior and improve well-being

By Shari Rudavsky

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There are no swaying pocket watches evident in Richard Erickson's Carmel office. No mesmerizing pinwheels. No shiny crystals.

But it was here on the taupe leather couch by the window that Nancy May came face to face with her fear of public speaking.

One of Indiana's 59 certified hypnotists, Erickson uses hypnotherapy to guide clients like May through a tour of their subconscious to help them overcome a range of habits, from smoking to overeating to test-taking anxiety.

While hypnotherapy received a nod from the American Medical Association half a century ago, it has yet to fully shed its connection to theatrics.

"A lot of times when you say hypnosis, people will expect you to do a stage act," says Jere Parker, director of Alpha Resources Solutions, a counseling center that offers hypnosis and other therapies. "That's a completely different sort of thing."

Hypnotherapy is about healing, say those who practice it.

Many, like May, who turn to it for help, agree.

At the age of 11, May found herself before a grand jury, required to testify about the death of her mother. The experience was seared in her memory and left her hobbled whenever she was expected to speak in public.

Her job as a senior marketing manager for Greystone Communities, however, calls upon her to do that frequently. So when May saw one of Erickson's fliers, she decided to try hypnosis.

After just one session, she felt her speaking skills had improved. After four sessions, even her colleagues could detect a difference.

"Now I have no problem. . . . It's great to have been able to overcome that," says May. "I didn't have power over it (my anxiety) to know how to reorganize my thoughts."

Unlike cognitive therapy, which works with the conscious part of the mind, hypnotherapy dwells in the subconscious, Erickson says.

When a person experiences a formative event, he or she will continue to have a similar response unless they can teach the subconscious part of their brain to have a different response.

"That part of the brain can't think, but it can learn," Erickson says.

Most of what people turn to hypnotists to learn has to do with controlling habits they don't want to

keep, such as smoking and excessive eating.

These requests are so common that many hypnotists sell CDs that a person can listen to daily to train the brain's subconscious.

Erickson has developed a program called Tobacco B'Gone to help with smoking cessation. Parker offers people who have had one session the chance to buy a CD they can listen to daily at home to reinforce his face-to-face therapy.

"Anything we do 21 to 28 days in a row as a human becomes a pattern or habit," Parker says. "Hypnosis is kind of the diversion of your conscious mind."

That diversion can help conquer a wide range of symptoms.

Increasingly, people are turning to the therapy for help with irritable bowel syndrome and chronic pain management. Hypnosis won't necessarily eliminate the pain, but it may help the body learn how to deal with it.

Hypnosis helped Missdeb Can, a grief counselor in Avon, quit smoking. So about a year ago, she sought Parker's skills to get the better of pain that had led her to take painkillers for 15 years.

"The pain is still there, but I don't recognize it as much as I did," Can says. "There's something about how hypnosis taps the subconscious mind."

Hypnosis also can ease the pain of childbirth. Clarian Health offers women and their birth partners a course composed of six three-hour classes that teaches a mother-to-be how to use hypnosis, rather than drugs, to curb labor pains.

Women who take the \$250 Hypnobabies class receive a CD of birth affirmations they are encouraged to listen to until childbirth.

"This is a way to teach your body that it can have almost a pleasurable sensation. . . . They're given lots of tools to keep themselves calm and feel only pressure during birth," says Sue Galyen, Clarian Health Partners nurse and certified Hypnobabies instructor.

Outside of Indiana, there's little regulation of who can hold him- or herself out as a hypnotist and how or what that person can advertise. Indiana is the only state in the nation that has a board regulating hypnotists. In order to become a certified hypnotist in Indiana, a person must sit for an exam or be a health-care professional. Those who perform hypnotism for entertainment purposes are exempt.

Indiana has 59 certified hypnotists, many based outside the state. That number has been decreasing since the committee was created eight years ago, said Angela Smith Jones, director of the Indiana Hypnotist Committee. About a year ago, the state had 74 certified hypnotists.

In most other states, hypnotists have a "self-policing-type set-up," says Dwight Damon, president of the National Guild of Hypnotists, a group he helped found in 1951.

About 20 years ago, the Guild and others started a movement to have all states license hypnotists. It went nowhere.

"We thought it would be a good idea," Damon says. "It's not a good idea."

His reasons? Licensure would require someone, either taxpayers or practitioners, to shoulder the administrative costs of a board, and it could open the door to third-party payment, something the profession may not be ready for.

Because most states don't license hypnotists currently, most insurance does not cover the treatment. Rates often start at around \$100 for a basic session.

For people like May, ridding themselves of an unwanted habit more than justifies the cost.

Although her fear is largely conquered, she still sees Erickson periodically for reinforcement, a session that can also take place on the phone.

On a recent morning, May settled into Erickson's couch and donned headphones to allow her to concentrate on his voice.

"Take a big deep breath. As you exhale, just take all thoughts from your mind," he said. "The more you hear my voice, the better you become. I'm not omnipotent, I'm just here to help you with your situation."

Erickson encouraged May to think about the evening's presentation and realize that she knows more about her subject than anyone else in the room.

After about 10 minutes, Erickson invited May to open her eyes when she's ready.

May sits for a beat or two, her eyes still closed, breathing deeply. Then her eyes flutter open.

"I feel ready and energized," she said.
