



A HEALTHY DOSE OF HYPNOSIS

Alternative therapy slowly gains acceptance among doctors, patients

by Michael Schroeder

BREATHING PROBLEMS, STRESS, anxiety, headache pain. Brian Larsen, a 24-year-old with cystic fibrosis, says he's better able to control them all using self-hypnosis. "You can't manipulate matter or anything like that, but it has helped me manage pain and other problems effectively," says Larsen, whose pediatric pulmonologist, Dr. Ran Anbar, taught him how to achieve the altered state of consciousness when he was 13.

Larsen still requires treatments and medicines for cystic fibrosis, but the Albany, N.Y., resident says the ability to focus his attention

through hypnosis has allowed him to exercise longer without breathing difficulty, sleep better and forgo pain medications for occasional headaches. "You're more aware and in control of everything that's going on," says Larsen, adding it's improved his outlook on life.

Researchers, including Anbar, have found hypnosis — used in medicine since the 19th century and achieved through a combination of relaxation and narrow focus — can speed healing, reduce pain, decrease stress and help people manage chronic diseases. Those practicing the discipline,

from psychologists, doctors and dentists to individuals trained in hypnotherapy who aren't licensed in a health field, say it's finally, albeit slowly, gaining acceptance in clinical settings.

The latest governmental figures show more than a half million people annually turn to the alternative therapy for everything from ulcers to respiratory ailments. About 16 percent of Angie's List online poll respondents say hypnosis worked for their health issue, while another 45 percent are open to trying it.

Still, insurance companies typically don't cover hypnosis — citing insufficient evidence of effectiveness. Sometimes it's integrated into other care, with no charge added,

but sessions can last 30 minutes to several hours and cost \$65 to \$350 depending on a practitioner's experience, location and other factors.

There's also virtually no regulation, which has led to fiery debate about who's qualified to practice clinical hypnosis or hypnotherapy. Even terminology is hotly contested.

“YOU'RE MORE AWARE AND IN CONTROL OF EVERYTHING THAT'S GOING ON.”

Some health professionals who prefer to use the term “hypnosis” say it's a tool, a state of concentration that can facilitate therapeutic intervention, but not a therapy in itself; and regulation of the term



Photo by Lori Van Buren | As a youth, Brian Larsen's doctor taught him in two sessions how to hypnotize himself. Today he uses it to help manage cystic fibrosis and breathe easier while biking.

"therapy" keeps others from calling themselves hypnotherapists.

But perhaps the most damning obstacles for hypnosis are public perception — the stereotypical image of an entertainer waving a watch to get an audience member to quack like a duck — and that most health care consumers don't realize it's even an option. "Years

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ago, I would have doubted its wide range of applications," Anbar says, conceding he, too, once thought of it as a parlor trick. Now half his clinical work involves hypnosis, which he uses to address everything from asthma to abdominal pain.

It took Anbar two sessions to teach Larsen self-hypnosis, a process

by which he also teaches patients to formulate self-suggestions that help with treatment and healing. "My bias is to teach self-hypnosis, because I believe in the end, all hypnosis is self-hypnosis," he says. Others — particularly those in the mental health field — prefer to do hypnosis in their office, but often, either way, patients are taught to use what they learn to help them away from the office as well.

David Spiegel, the director of the Center on Stress and Health at the Stanford School of Medicine in Stanford, Calif., and a psychiatrist who's used hypnosis in his practice for 40 years, agrees it's a versatile tool. He says large randomized clinical trials show people who undergo hypnosis before painful medical procedures typically require less medication, have fewer complications and less anxiety, and get through the procedure faster.

Angie's List members say they've undergone hypnosis or performed self-hypnosis to recover more quickly from knee surgery, block pain during natural child birth and deal with stress.

But it doesn't work for everyone. Spiegel says about one-third of the adult population can't be hypnotized, while other experts and hypnotherapists believe anyone open to being hypnotized, except for some people dealing with certain mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia, can potentially benefit. "In over 17 years of practice, I've only met five people I could not hypnotize," says Valorie Wells, a highly rated licensed psychologist and hypnotherapist in Kansas City, Kan.

Stacie Murrer, a highly rated dentist in Monroeville, Pa., who offers hypnosis as an alternative to needle pricks of anesthesia for routine procedures such as fillings,



Photo by John Altdorfer | Peg Schmidt of Pittsburgh uses self-hypnosis to block pain when her dentist, Stacie Murrer, works on her teeth.

says children are most open to the idea that they can control what they feel by using their mind. Research shows the younger set tend to be easier to hypnotize, likely because they're more suggestible.

Once relaxed, Murrer tells children they have an imaginary switch

HYPNO-CREDENTIALS

Certification is a confusing affair in hypnotherapy, with some acronym overlap, and experts sharply divided on what's most meaningful, or whether you need it at all. A spoonful of the alphabet soup:

CCHT, Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist. The nonprofit American Council of Hypnotist Examiners insists on 300 hours of instruction for this certification.

ASCH, American Society of Clinical Hypnosis. Sixty hours of ASCH-approved hypnosis education is needed to qualify for full certification. Most members aren't board certified in hypnosis, but all are required to be licensed health care professionals.

CHT, Certified Hypnotherapist. Earned through the International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy

Association, this requires a minimum of 120 hours of training and proficiency in performing and explaining basic hypnotic procedures. No health care licensure is needed to get this type of certification.

SCEH-ACE, Active Commitment to Excellence. This certification from the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis requires at least 40 hours of training in approved workshops,

a minimum of two years using hypnosis and a commitment to excellence based on a written plan. All members must be licensed health care professionals.

CH, Certified Consulting Hypnotist. The National Guild of Hypnotists Inc. — the country's oldest and largest certifying body — requires a minimum of 100 hours of hypnosis training to be a certified member.

in the back of their head connected to the tooth she'll be working on. "When the tooth is turned off, they can stay comfortable," she says. If the patient feels pain, Murrer administers anesthesia.

While under hypnosis, member Peg Schmidt of Pittsburgh has had fillings done by Murrer without Novocain. "I went as far as having a root canal without anesthesia," she says. "I did not feel a thing. I was shocked."

Hard to imagine for anyone who's ever writhed in a dentist's chair, but experts say pain is all

“BY THE THIRD VISIT, THE SHOULDER HAD STOPPED SHAKING TOTALLY, THE NYSTAGMUS WAS GONE.”

in the brain. It tends to hijack attention, Spiegel explains, but over time we can train our mind to partially or fully block it out.

Despite advances in the understanding of this discipline, some basic questions still loom large, such as what qualifies as a hypnotic state, what training is necessary to induce this state and how one should go about finding a competent hypnotist. There's no shortage of organizations certifying hypnotherapists, with training ranging from a weekend to hundreds of hours. And very few states regulate the practice, though some, such as New Jersey, limit scope of practice

or require supervision. Indiana recently eliminated its licensing program, citing lack of consumer and professional interest, and many say the industry is best served by self-regulation and competition.

Some professional associations like the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis say training hours are irrelevant without a license in a health care profession — something most certifying bodies don't require but ASCH does. "A non-licensed 'hypnotist' may place the patient at significantly higher risk of mistreatment or misdiagnosis," says Anbar, the group's president-elect.

Others, including Randal Churchill, president of the American Council of Hypnotist Examiners, which requires 300 training hours to be a certified clinical hypnotherapist, argue practitioners who aren't licensed health professionals tend to have more training in hypnosis itself and say the rift is more about turf than safety. Still, most agree anyone considering hypnosis for health reasons should ask about an individual's training, experience and spend time getting to know them before undergoing hypnosis.

A doctor's referral is also recommended. "I won't work with anyone who has a diagnosed medical or psychiatric condition without a doctor's referral," says Lynda Malerstein, a highly rated hypnotherapist in Los Angeles. Malerstein says she's undergone hundreds of hours of training in



Photo by Sara Cozolino | Los Angeles-based hypnotherapist Lynda Malerstein speaks soothingly and helps Debbie Heisman tune out distractions; narrow focus is a key component of hypnosis.

hypnosis; she's board certified by the National Guild of Hypnotists, among other organizations, but she isn't licensed in a health profession. She concedes Anbar's point that one could miss a diagnosis without medical training, but says she provides a supplemental service — not a replacement — to medical and mental health care.

Angie's List member Debbie Heisman credits Malerstein with helping her overcome mysterious balance and shaking issues, which befuddled doctors and began when she returned from a long flight to Australia in 2007. Her left shoulder, sometimes both shoulders, shook frequently, as did her eyes, a condition called

nystagmus, making objects appear as if they were bouncing. "By the third visit [with Malerstein], the shoulder had stopped shaking totally, the nystagmus was gone," Heisman says.

She still requires a cane to get around, but Heisman relies on it much less than she did. And, while she was never a skeptic of hypnosis, she's certainly a believer now. "It's like nothing I've ever encountered," she says. "If you go with the flow, you can accomplish so much." ☽

— Additional reporting by Jackie Norris



If you've been to a psychologist, doctor or another professional who performed hypnotherapy, please submit a report about your experience.