

Can't keep your resolutions? Try hypnosis

Harness your subconscious to curb fears, bad habits

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If you want your New Year's resolutions to stick, you just might want to consider some backup – from your own mind.

Hypnosis is one way to get your mind's attention. The process relies on entering a relaxed but focused trancelike state in which you are very receptive to suggestions.

The practice has slowly but surely been edging from the fringe into the mainstream of treatment for bad habits and some medical conditions. Theories about how and why it works vary, but there is growing evidence from clinical trials that it can be effective.

"I'm so desperate I'm even willing to try hypnosis" used to be the standard line of those who called, according to Katherine Zimmerman, who has practiced hypnosis since 1989 and opened the California Hypnotherapy Academy in midtown in February.

"I don't hear that anymore," she says.

It's not a standard offering in most health plans, but some doctors see its usefulness.

"I have had patients who have used hypnosis for many conditions, and especially to quit smoking," Dr. Kay Judge wrote in an e-mail. (Judge is one of the medical directors of Sutter's Downtown Integrative Medicine program and a regular contributor to The Bee's Adrenaline page on Sundays.) "In the case of resolutions like quitting smoking, and if you have tried everything else, and want to try hypnosis – go for it."

PG&E recently started a hypnosis program on a trial basis in Sacramento, San Francisco and Fresno for employees who want to quit smoking.

In most cases, hypnosis is not provided through work or health insurance. A series of sessions with a hypnotist to work on smoking, for instance, will generally run from \$200 to about \$600 in the Sacramento area. A single session runs from about \$100 to about \$300. Zimmerman charges \$175 for an initial 90-minute session, \$125 for subsequent one-hour sessions. She says most problems can be dealt with in a half-dozen sessions.

From skeptical to referral

Catherine Wergin was the biggest eye-roller among the students in the room when Zimmerman came to make a presentation when she was in a nursing class at the UC Davis Medical Center in 1999.

"I was a complete skeptic," she says with a laugh.

A few years later, Wergin was planning to fly to Hawaii for vacation. She went to Zimmerman for a few sessions to overcome her fear of flying.

"I got on the plane with no real problem," she says.



Hypnotherapist Katherine Zimmerman has been practicing hypnosis for 18 years and written 15 books on the subject. Her office is in midtown Sacramento.

Earlier this year, she worked with Zimmerman again, to help her reduce anxiety and pain during pregnancy and childbirth.

Today, Wergin, who is 37 and lives in Land Park, works as a nurse practitioner with the Sutter Medical Group.

"I'll recommend patients to (Zimmerman) when I just can't help them," Wergin says. "I think it's kind of remarkable stuff."

Of nails and pounds

Mike Brannon was sold on hypnosis more than 30 years ago, when a dentist who practiced it on the side helped him stop biting his nails. More recently, Brannon, now 51, went to Zimmerman in the fall, determined to lose weight.

"I have to change habits, and if I can use all the assets – memory, subconscious, conscious – I might be able to do it," he says. He has lost 20 pounds so far.

There's nothing new-age or trendy about Brannon, who lives in Galt and works in construction: "I'm a very regular person, very straightforward," he says.

No butts about it

Anne Brackett was 28 and living in Boulder, Colo., when she saw an ad in the paper for a group hypnosis class at a YWCA to help people quit smoking. She was smoking more than a pack a day and thought she'd give it a try.

"I didn't think I was being hypnotized," Brackett says. In fact, she thought it was sort of goofy to sit there with her eyes closed listening to the leader say, repeatedly, "You will forget to remember to smoke."

But she did just as the leader suggested.

"I never wanted to smoke again," Brackett says.

Today, 30 tobacco-free years later, Brackett who is 58, lives in Elk Grove and works as a respiratory therapist.

"I dismissed so much, and this taught me not to do that," Brackett said. "The problem is that medicine tends to be conservative."

From magic to mainstream

Along the way toward respectability, hypnosis is shedding its flaky image of the past. It doesn't require quacking like a duck, walking around in a daze wearing flowing robes or submitting to someone else's control. Construction workers, medical professionals, attorneys, schoolteachers and others use it to lose, gain or alter behaviors.

And today's hypnotists won't be confused with tarot-card readers at a Renaissance fair.

Zimmerman, for instance, looks and sounds like a college counselor or professor. For an interview at her midtown office, she's dressed in a smartly tailored suit with a pretty scarf, her voice and manner attentive and gentle.

Zimmerman says that, rather than a truly altered state, hypnosis is an everyday occurrence.

"As you go to sleep at night, you're in a state of hypnosis; when you wake up and don't know what day it is, you're in a state of hypnosis," Zimmerman says.

During such times, suggestions are particularly powerful in shaping expectations and future behavior. For instance, when clients who suffer from insomnia are in session, Zimmerman may simply tell them, "You'll go to bed and sleep great."

The one prerequisite is a desire for change.

"It is extremely successful when people are willing to change," Zimmerman says.

Ronda Graf, a local hypnotist in practice since 1998, says that resolutions are a natural fit for hypnosis.

"January and February are our busiest months," she says. It seems fitting that Jan. 4 is the fourth annual World Hypnotism Day.

Maude Schellhous, another hypno-therapist in town, who has worked in the field for more than 12 years, said that she knows whenever hypnosis makes the news – as it did when Ellen DeGeneres worked with hypnotist Paul McKenna on her show in October 2006 to quit smoking.

"Every time she mentions it on TV, I get calls," Shellhous says.

Graf, like other practitioners, says most people respond to visual suggestions and imagery. It's important to guide smokers to see themselves as nonsmokers in the mind's eye and to give them verbal cues, or "anchors," to help them tap into that vision and reinforce it. For example, when clients are faced with the temptation of an unwanted behavior, Graf may suggest they say to themselves, "Cancel, cancel, cancel, I'm in control."

Zimmerman and other hypnotherapists say the biggest barrier for many people is a fear of losing control. She and others explain that when hypnotists such as Terry Stokes perform at the State Fair, inducing audience members to do truly peculiar things (including acting like animals), people are seeing an authoritative type of hypnosis designed for amusement rather than the therapeutic variety in which a therapist offers suggestions for change rather than commands.

"There's still a notion that this is silly entertainment," says Bill Blank, a hypnotist who has been in practice about 20 years locally and focuses on smoking cessation.

In fact, hypnosis can restore feelings of self-control rather than reducing them.

"It's so empowering," says Karen Cisneros, a marriage and family therapist who lives in Elk Grove. She went to Zimmerman for help with weight loss and other issues about two years ago. She weighed about 200 pounds and now weighs 130 pounds.

"Some of the biggest things that helped me was realizing that I do have control over my eating, and realizing I had to make a priority for myself to make sure I got exercise," she says. "No one's making me bark like a dog."

Another common misconception, Zimmerman says, is that not everyone can be hypnotized.

"It's so natural, but people think it must be something they've never felt before," Zimmerman says. "Anybody can learn to do this, and on some level it is magic."

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