

Can't keep your resolutions? Try hypnosis

Harness your subconscious to curb fears, bad habits

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Hypnotherapist Katherine Zimmerman has been practicing hypnosis for 18 years and written 15 books on the subject. Her office is in midtown Sacramento. Carl Costas / ccostas@sacbee.com

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.

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."

About the writer:

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Hypnosis comes from the Greek word "hypnos," meaning sleep. Ancient Greeks used trancelike states as part of healing.

One of the more modern pioneers of hypnosis was an 18th century Viennese doctor, Franz Anton Mesmer, who used relaxation and soothing words in a therapy which he called Mesmerism ("mesmerizing" comes from his name, as well).

In the 20th century, the late American psychiatrist Milton Erickson was a pioneer of enduring influence in hypnotherapy. Hypnotherapists currently influencing the field include Gil Boyne, David Spiegel and Theodore Barber.

Medical research into hypnosis is ongoing.

Studies published in mainstream medical journals have found hypnosis to provide relief for those suffering from irritable bowel syndrome, fibromyalgia and cancer.

Resources

www.asch.net : The Web site of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis. The

organization was founded in 1957 by Dr. Milton Erickson for medical, dental and mental health professionals interested in hypnosis. There are more than 2,000 members. The site has information and links for the general public.

www.hypnotistexaminers.org : The Web site of the Hypnotist Examining Council, founded in 1973, which certifies more than 9,000 hypnotherapists. Requirements include a minimum of 200 hours of training.

Web sites for some local hypnotherapists

www.trancetime.com Web site for practitioner Katherine Zimmerman and her California Hypnotherapy Academy. (916) 373-1932

www.sacramentohypnosis.com Web site of William Blank, a hypnotherapist specializing in smoking cessation. (916) 487-2530

www.helpmedrronda.com The Web site of Ronda Graf & Associates. (916) 922-3100.

www.sacramentohypnotherapy.com Web Site for Maude Schellhaus. (916) 549-5109.

How to find a hypnotist

Ask friends and medical professionals for referrals. And ask about the training and credentials held by your hypnotist. Three reputable organizations they may belong to are the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, the Society for Experimental and Clinical Hypnosis and the American Council of Hypnotist Examiners.

Some signs of practitioners to avoid:

The hypnotist insists that you are suffering from a past trauma that you do not remember.

The hypnotist thinks you need years of treatment.

The hypnotist doesn't speak with you and seek your input for your script.

-- Alison apRoberts