

ALTERNATIVE & COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE

Chronic pain sufferers increasingly turn to hypnosis

Hypnotherapist Beth Keil works with a patient. "You decide where you want to go and how you want to get there," Keil says. "My expertise is in guidance as you go."

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By KELLY BOTHUM
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Too many people spend their days suffering in pain. They fight through pounding headaches, cramping muscles and constricted limbs. Doctor visits and prescriptions don't stop the pain, which fatigues them, debilitates them, and keeps them from activities and people they love.

Hypnotherapist Beth Keil believes it doesn't have to be that way. Through the use of hypnosis, she says, pain can be lessened or even eliminated.

"Our perception of pain is in our brain. It's not at the spot of the injury," said Keil, a registered nurse and co-owner of Delaware Hypnosis Partners, in Wilmington. "We can use hypnosis to create comfort and to decrease stress because when we're stressed, the fight-or-flight response turns on. When you can turn off that and turn on

the endorphins, it's a natural painkiller."

Hypnosis has become increasingly popular as more people search for drug-free ways to relieve their pain. Hypnotherapist Colleen M. Stone said many of her clients spend years visiting doctors and trying different medications before they come to her for hypnosis. Her clients include patients with fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, irritable bowel syndrome and old injuries that haven't healed.

"The joke is that we're the last ones they come to, but the first ones they receive help from," said Stone, owner of Advanced Hypnotherapy of Delaware. "They usually come to us after trying everything else."

The American Medical Association approved hypnosis as safe for use in medicine and dentistry in 1958. Over the years, it has been used to improve mood, reduce stress and eliminate bad

habits, such as smoking. Some women use a natural childbirth method called HypnoBirthing to manage pain during labor and delivery.

A National Institutes of Health panel included hypnotherapy as one of several acceptable relaxation methods for treating chronic pain, especially for people with cancer. In Europe, thousands of patients in the last decade have used hypnosis as a replacement for or in conjunction with sedation drugs during surgery.

Keil, who leads self-hypnosis programs for cancer patients at The Wellness Community-Delaware, said hypnosis allows patients to access the subconscious, where beliefs and habits are stored. While they are in a state of hypnosis, patients can replace their old beliefs about pain — such as the thought they must always be in pain — with feelings of comfort. They let go of the pain and feel relief.

During hypnosis, patients typically learn how to focus to get in touch with their subconscious mind, initially with the help of the hypnotherapist. Both verbal and nonverbal cues are used to bring patients into a state of hypnosis. People also can learn to hypnotize themselves by using the cues.

All forms of hypnosis can be considered self-hypnosis because they require the patient to be willing. "You decide where you want to go and how you want to get there," Keil said. "My expertise is in guidance as you go."

When treating patients for pain, Keil requires approval from a doctor because some people need to be able to feel pain because of their particular medical condition.

While hypnosis is an option for some, it's not for everyone, said Dr. Philip Kim, medical director of the St. Francis Pain Center. Most studies have found

that some patients can't be hypnotized, he said.

Working with patients who are often in agonizing pain, Kim said he understands why many people want to find ways to increase their daily activity without relying heavily on pain medication. That's why people try exercise or minimally invasive procedures — like injections such as epidurals and even implanted pumps — to reduce their pain. Others try acupuncture or relaxation programs.

"I think there's a certain value for hypnosis," Kim said.

Stone said emotional stress contributes to the pain many people feel. "Emotional pain takes a toll on your body. It magnifies the physical pain," she said, adding that as people learn to release their pent-up emotional trauma, they feel pain relief.

For 30 years, Bonnie Carmine lived with the pain and discomfort of irritable bowel

WHAT IS HYPNOSIS?

Hypnosis, also referred to as hypnotherapy, is an altered state of consciousness. It is a normal state of aroused, attentive and highly focused concentration. The feeling has been compared to being so absorbed in a movie or novel you lose awareness of your surroundings.

Hypnosis allows patients to focus intently on a specific problem and its resolution while maintaining a comfortable state of physical relaxation. It also helps patients to enhance control over their body responses. It's usually achieved with the help of a hypnotherapist.

A 2002 report by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, part of the National Institutes of Health, found that more than 30 percent of adult Americans used imagery, biofeedback, hypnosis or one of five other relaxation techniques.

SOURCES: MAYO CLINIC, STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

syndrome, a condition in which the bowel doesn't work as it should. The ailment disrupted her activities and caused her to retire early from her job with the Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation.

She sought help from several doctors, but it wasn't until she tried hypnosis that she found relief. After about six hypnotherapy sessions with Stone, Carmine noticed a marked change. She felt more relaxed, more in control of her body. As time went on, she didn't need as much medication for her IBS.

Two years later, her symptoms are still relieved, although she does occasionally have painful episodes.

"For me, it's a mind-gut response," said Carmine, 61, of Milford. "It's not gone by any means, but I'm in the driver's seat."

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