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## Hypnosis Gains Clout

Abby Luby

Updated 12:10 p.m., Monday, November 21, 2011



Hypnosis has graduated from a fun, mind-control stage-act reputation to a loftier and more serious function accepted by the medical community. Photo: IStockphoto.com, Coloroftime / ©iStockphoto.com

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She's a fast-paced, 40-year-old woman who is driven to "get things done." Her super-woman, type "A" personality feeds an inner mandate to multi-task. But constant use of her cell phone while driving caused several small car accidents. She tried to stop using her phone on the road but couldn't. The woman, a Norfolk resident who has asked to remain anonymous, resisted

living at a slower pace and ended up in the office of [Meg Tocantins](#), a certified hypnotist in Stamford.

"Many of my clients come to me for compulsive behavior -- they feel out of control," Tocantins says. "Hypnosis is all about feelings. You're anxious, mad. What can we do to get rid of that feeling?"

Gaining control over undesirable behavior can be successfully treated with hypnosis, the [Mayo Clinic](#) says on its website. Most people who use hypnosis do it to stop smoking, lose weight and improve public speaking or athletic performance. Serious mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders and various phobias also can be treated with a variety of hypnotherapies.

Yes, hypnosis has graduated from a fun, mind-control stage-act reputation to a loftier and more serious function accepted by the medical community. In 1961, the [American Psychiatric Association](#) said in a position statement that "hypnosis has a definite application in the various fields of medicine" and that physicians "would be seeking psychiatrists for training in hypnosis." Decades later, in 1996, the [American Medical Association](#) said there was "strong evidence for the use of hypnosis in alleviating pain associated with cancer."

Devra Braun, a psychiatrist at [Integrative Medicine](#) and Psychotherapy of Greenwich, uses hypnosis and self-hypnosis either separately or with other therapy treatments. She works with [Linda Smith](#), a nurse practitioner and certified hypnotherapist.

"Many come to us for depression, migraine headaches, anxiety and chronic pain," explains Braun, whose patients initially undergo a diagnostic interview to determine what treatment will be most effective. Sessions generally start with what Braun calls a progressive muscle relaxation exercise. "It's soothing and helps the person to turn inward and allows their orientation to the outside to gently fade away."

Relaxation and quieting the mind is essential for hypnosis because it preps the mind to be receptive to suggestions. There are various levels of hypnosis ranging from a deep trance, where one is vaguely aware of the hypnotist, to being relatively alert and cognizant of what's happening. Whatever the level, the subconscious is open to ideas while the conscious mind becomes relatively dormant.

"Some people who come to me are still skeptical about hypnotism -- they want to know if I will make them cluck like a chicken," Tocantins says. "I can't make them do anything they don't want to do."

Once in a suggestive state, some hypnotists guide you to a "pleasant, secure place" to diffuse any tension and to access memory. Certified hypnotist Jean Masters of Stamford used this approach to help a woman cut back on compulsive night bingeing.

"In the hypnotic state she was able to recall certain feelings and emotions associated with that particular eating habit," Masters says. "She remembered she was taken to a hospital to see her dying grandmother for the last time. Her grandmother was losing weight and wasting away as she neared death. As a young girl, you could see how she incorrectly concluded that being skinny means you'll die. Lodged in the subconscious mind, this could be the main reason why she was overeating."

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Digestive problems, even those as severe as irritable bowel syndrome, may be controlled by hypnotism. "I've seen tremendous improvement in just a few months," says a Greenwich woman who has suffered with IBS and asked to remain anonymous. She started hypnotherapy with Braun about six months ago to get a handle on

managing what she describes as a debilitating anxiety and worry she experienced when away from her home and not near a bathroom.

"If I'm driving or we're traveling, I worry about getting that uncomfortable feeling or stomach ache and then having to find a bathroom. It's a horrible way to live. I don't want my kids to have that anxiety."

Weekly hypnotherapy sessions helped and one day, without thinking, she had to get each of her kids to different places. "I had eaten and didn't think anything about it until I got home. I realized it just never dawned on me. It was both liberating and amazing."

Experts say some of the easiest habits to kick using hypnosis are smoking and losing weight. [Kathy Hayes-Bloch](#), a licensed clinical social worker who uses hypnosis and psychotherapy in her Ridgefield practice, says people who want to lose weight can get what they need in one appointment.

"It really depends on how resistant they are to the losing weight," she says. "Sometimes more appointments are needed. I also suggest they have a better eating plan and keep a food journal." Bloch reviews her patients' journals, which help her to target bad eating habits. She also suggests other pleasurable activities to replace eating.

A 49-year-old woman from Monroe says she smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for 25 years. Four years ago she sought out hypnotist [Heidi Vollmer](#) in Norwalk, and finally kicked the habit.

"Hypnosis for me was like a reinforcement of what I wanted," says the former smoker. "I went to Heidi for help and haven't had a cigarette since then."

While under hypnosis, Vollmer suggests to her smoking patients that they weren't born smokers. She uses stories and lessons that their unconscious minds take literally and are able to remember once the hypnosis is over.

"An example of a story I tell smokers is about a little girl who has to jump off the diving board at the deep end of the pool. There is the metaphor of jumping in -- you can't just stick your toe in, you have to do it or not do it."

Using language via stories and metaphors is a powerful and effective hypnosis method known as Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Developed in the early 1970s, the theory behind it is that using the right language -- words and metaphors -- can connect with and ultimately change behavioral patterns. [Bill Sadick](#), a certified hypnotherapist in Norwalk, says NLP works because it eliminates resistance to suggestions often caused by the conscious mind.

Sadick uses "anchoring," an NLP method that jump starts the brain the same way a feeling of nostalgia kicks in when we hear an old torch song.

"Our unconscious mind recognizes both good and bad anchors," says Sadick, who works primarily to help kids and teens get better at sports or improve their study habits. "Kids often think about when they struck out, not that great triple they hit. But with anchoring in hypnosis, they can focus instead on the great experiences and successes that happened in the past."

Hypnosis sessions typically range in price from \$140 to \$200 and are usually about 45 minutes to an hour. Many hypnotists create recorded messages on disc for patients to play back at home, reinforcing suggestions made during a session. For some, hypnosis offers a double lesson about learning to relax so they can tap into an inner awareness, at least according to the super woman on overdrive mentioned in the beginning of this story.

"Hypnotism really helped me," she says. "Now I have a choice to either multi-task when I drive or just relax and listen to the radio. It's a choice I make mindfully." HL

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