

YOU'RE GETTING SLEEPY...

'NOW, QUACK LIKE A DUCK'

HYPNOSIS IS FAR MORE THAN JUST A GOOD PARTY TRICK. BUT EVEN THOUGH IT'S BEEN AROUND FOR CENTURIES IN THE MEDICAL WORLD, IT STILL HAS TO FIGHT FOR ITS PLACE AS A RECOGNISED THERAPY.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

You may picture a swinging pocket watch and being on stage quacking like a duck when you think of hypnosis. It's hard not to. But while it may be funny to watch a grown-up getting in touch with their inner poultry,



Dr Sherin Bickrum

let's just say stage hypnotists haven't really helped hypnosis with its positioning as a therapy.

Beyond the silly is the fear and/or cynicism associated with it. Some consider hypnosis almost as a form of possession, worrying that you can be hypnotised into doing terrible things, whereas others see it as entirely fake: a big money-making scheme that simply doesn't work.

'If you look at the literature, hypnosis is a part of many cultures,' says psychotherapist and certified hypnotherapist Dr Sherin Bickrum. Also a trained hypnotherapist, Jeanie Cavé, clinical psychologist

A man with short dark hair, wearing a green t-shirt with a floral pattern, black trousers, and red suede shoes, is sitting on a green armchair. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a wall covered in a large, detailed mural of various plants, including pink flowers and a colorful bird in flight. The floor is a black and white checkered pattern.

Hypnotherapist
Philip Mouton

and owner of Impact Therapy Centre, says, 'There's nothing mysterious or esoteric about hypnosis. It's neuroscience, but because of its sordid history, people don't seem to understand that.'

What is hypnosis?

Even though it's often associated with cheap parlour tricks, hypnosis has its roots firmly in medical history. There's evidence of its use 5 000 years ago in ancient Egypt, where the sick would be housed in 'sleep temples' and put into a trance-like state to help them heal. In the 1700s, German physician Franz Mesmer treated patients using 'mesmeric' techniques (yes, that's where the word 'mesmerised' comes from). Then, in 1841, Scottish surgeon James Braid started putting his patients into a trance by having them fixate on objects. He went on to popularise the term 'hypnosis', after Hypnos, the Greek god of sleep (although we now know that hypnosis isn't sleeping). After that, there's a long and complicated history that involves rivalries and murder plots, which all makes for a fascinating read, but none of that gets us any closer to how it actually works.

Sherin describes being in a state of hypnosis as a 'heightened awareness'. The consciousness is a continuum where some levels are connected to awareness and others less so. 'If you think of this continuum of consciousness as a line, starting with being in a coma (having the least awareness) on the far left and moving through a temporary loss of consciousness, a dream state and being awake (fully aware), you'll find hypnosis (hyper-aware) further to the right on this line.'



Clinical psychologist
Jeanie Cavé

“Think of your conscious mind as a storefront: it’s a neat representation of who you are, but it can’t possibly hold everything,” Jeanie says. “The rest is kept in two storerooms: the unconscious mind and the subconscious mind.” The unconscious comes preprogrammed at birth; it’s what is responsible for keeping us alive. The subconscious is a blank slate when we’re born and, as we grow, it’s filled with information that keeps us emotionally safe. Through hypnosis, we’re able to

bypass our conscious mind and talk to our subconscious and unconscious.

This access happens more often than you think. Hypnosis is akin to losing yourself in a movie or a book, when the outside world fades and you are completely focused on what’s in front of you.

And, in case you were wondering, stage hypnotists are for real. “They use a method called rapid induction hypnosis,” Sherin says. And they know how to spot people who are open to the process.

How can hypnosis help?

There are two stages to hypnosis: ‘induction’, where you go into a relaxed state; and ‘suggestion’, in which, through prompts, you’re invited to imagine another way of living, depending on the condition you’re trying to solve.

“Through hypnotism, you can give the unconscious and subconscious minds updated information,” Jeanie says. “And, as long as that information is healthy, it will be accepted.”

Hypnosis has been known to help people with physical issues like weight loss, nail biting, insomnia and sleepwalking, as well as more emotional or psychological problems like anxiety, depression, eating disorders and even chronic pain. Essentially, it can help with any kind of relational pattern you’re trying to break.

As Jeanie explains it, therapy focuses on insights, whereas hypnotherapy takes those insights into action. “Some people have done beautiful work with talk therapy, but sometimes they can’t make the connection between what they know and what they do.” That’s when hypnosis can be useful.

A boyfriend had once persuaded Thea* to stop smoking, but as soon as they broke up she started again. “I couldn’t just go cold turkey; I knew I would need help,” she says. She thought hypnotherapy would be as good as anything to try. After just one session, she quit smoking.

“I drove home and it was only when I pulled up outside my house that I realised I hadn’t lit up once, even while sitting in traffic,” she says. It’s been 13 years since she smoked her last cigarette. “It’s not easy, even now, after all these years. But I wanted to stop, and it’s

a choice I still make every day.'

As a teenager, Karys* struggled with overeating. 'I was bullied at school and basically spent all my time alone eating all the yummy things,' she says. She heard that a family friend's daughter had used hypnotherapy to treat her depression and, after just one session, was able to discover the root of it.

That woman later went on to study hypnotherapy herself, and ended up treating Karys for her binge-eating. 'Within days of my first session, my appetite was under control and I was only eating small portions, and only when hungry.'

Karys has since had further hypnotherapy to treat her anxiety and depression, and to this day uses self-hypnosis techniques. 'I even gave birth to my son with no medication and no complications, using hypnobirthing techniques.'

Well, if it were that easy, why doesn't everyone use hypnotherapy to change dysfunctional behaviour? As Jeanie puts it, 'Success in hypnosis depends on three things: a person's natural ability for hypnosis, their clear understanding of how safe hypnosis is and how it works, and the accuracy of the post-hypnotic suggestion that the hypnotherapist offers.'

When it doesn't work

Almost everyone can be hypnotised if they are willing to work with the therapist. Jeanie explains that three conditions need to be in place for successful hypnotism: 'One, you must consent to it – in spite of what Hollywood would have you believe, you actually can't be hypnotised against your will. Two, there must be a way for you and the

hypnotherapist to communicate. And, three, there must be freedom from fear.'

Still, some people find that hypnosis does not work for them. 'The mind isn't going to give up anything without understanding what it will lose in the process,' Sherin says. 'And the gains must be more than what you believe you're going to lose.'

'Ultimately, hypnosis won't work if your goal conflicts with another need,' Jeanie says.

In cases where hypnosis doesn't work, Sherin says, properly understanding the problem is important. 'I have a simple approach to any sort of healing: you can google solutions, but if you don't understand the underlying issues, you cannot fix the problem.'

Karys remembers how, although hypnosis had helped treat her binge-eating as a teen, she actually started to under-eat because she wasn't treating the underlying condition: anxiety and depression.

What about self-hypnosis?

Anyone can self-hypnotise, and it can be very therapeutic. In fact, we do it all the time when it comes to relaxation visualisations, journalling and meditation.

'Self-hypnosis can be useful for manageable things, like relaxation or sleep, but perhaps not anything that could invite a traumatic event to the fore,' Sherin says. 'In those cases, it's useful having somebody there who knows what to do.'

Jeanie agrees. 'When you go back to past lives and past childhood experiences, there I would say you need to work with somebody who can contain and debrief you after you've had that experience.'

Yay or nay

There's been a lot of misconception around hypnotherapy, but as Jeanie reiterates, it's important to remember that it is not a loss of control, and it is not a loss of consciousness. 'It's simply a pattern of brainwaves, a state of mind, in which we bypass the critical faculty for selective thinking.' Although some may chalk it up to the placebo effect, many can testify to the wide range of therapeutic and personal development benefits.

'Before fixing anything, you need to understand not just the condition but also the purpose it serves you,' Sherin says. 'And sometimes those answers are not obvious.'

* Surnames withheld

False memories

In the '80s, 'recovered memory' therapy led to thousands of false allegations of satanic ritual abuse. How could these people remember so clearly events that never happened? One theory is so-called false memories. 'With regression work, you've got to be incredibly careful not to suggest a particular experience as a possible explanation for something the person is experiencing, because it can then create a false memory,' Jeanie explains. 'It's a process we call confabulation, where the mind makes up memories to explain the phenomenon.'

This is why, when doing past-life work or memory regression, you should work with someone you can trust, and certainly never alone. People on psychedelics can experience false memories too. 'And we have no way of knowing whether those memories are real or not,' Jeanie says. 'But that doesn't matter to the brain: if the brain remembers it, then it's as good as real.'

THE DAY I WAS NOT TOLD I WAS GOING TO QUACK LIKE A DUCK

By Vanessa Raphaely

If asked, I would characterise myself as a rubber duck. Not perpetually optimistic or cheery, but the kind of person who, when sinking, rights herself no matter what and pops back up again. But the past 18 months... good grief and deep breath... have been an assault on my robust self-confidence. Gone is my notion of indestructible resilience and the perception that all, no matter how difficult right now, will eventually turn out okay. Of course, this unsteadiness has not affected me alone. All of us are wobbling.

Like many others, I've scrambled to put in place a mental health scaffolding to hold me and my battered resilience in place. The one method I hadn't really considered as a tool was hypnosis. Actually, that's not quite true: I did consider hypnosis every time I opened my fridge to self-medicate with calories. Every time I saw a passionfruit chiffon cake, followed by my unforgiving scale, I wondered whether there was a way to hypnotise me to stop loving second helpings.

One of the first things Philip Mouton told me when we met to chat about hypnosis as a therapeutic tool was that he would not be waving a magic wand that would make chiffon cake, roast potatoes and second helpings taste like sewage. (I was sad about that.) Philip, who used to be a risk management specialist in the banking sector, recently decided to follow his true passion and qualify as a hypnotherapist with the International Medical & Dental Hypnotherapy Association in the US. He's also a member of the South African Institute of Hypnotism.

Of course, I had arranged to see Philip initially for mostly shallow, selfish reasons like passionfruit chiffon cake, but always at the back of my mind is the wellbeing of

our offspring. 'Kids,' he says, 'especially teenagers, need increasing emotional support. They're growing up in demanding times, under pressure from media stereotypes and our high-performance culture. Additional factors like bullying or divorce can cause a lot of stress in periods of vulnerability, which can cause anxiety, depression, eating disorders and self-harm. Hypnotherapy can be very effective in uncovering the root cause, clearing the unresolved emotions and reframing it in the subconscious processes.'

The best way to be convinced is to try it yourself. And, of course, I did.

We decided just to do an intro that would take stressed 2020/21 me to a relaxed and happy place. After one session, I'm a convert. Was it dramatic? No. Was it scary? No. Was I unconscious of everything around me? No.

Philip suggested I lie back and count backwards. He told me to imagine heavy-lidded eyes. Using his super-powers (a restful, deep voice, and slightly mesmerising aubergine velskoene), he took me, in my imagination, down some steps into safe and happy places I remembered from years back. These memories were all related to nature and escape: beaches, ski slopes, rivers, mountains... While I never felt asleep or out of control at any point, the time I spent 'under' just flew past.

When Philip counted me back, I would have sworn the whole experience had lasted 5 minutes, not the 20 that it had, in fact, taken. He mentioned that time distortion is actually a sign of hypnosis. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, and felt rested, refreshed and extremely relaxed. Imagine the happy feeling when you've spent a few hours doing all the things you love doing on a glorious summer's day. *That feeling.*

A qualified hypnotherapist can help you deal with past traumatic events. Philip likened the process to unpeeling the onion of our life-long survival strategies and, in a safe environment, dismantling them. Built as they were by younger, more fearful versions of ourselves, they can be rebuilt from a place of adult power.

Would I trust my own trauma and unresolved grief to a hypnotherapist? Yes. I'd take my time to ensure the person was accredited, educated, ethical and equipped – and then I would. ❖

HOW TO FIND A REPUTABLE HYPNOTHERAPIST

Find a therapist registered with a regulatory body so you have recourse if you're unhappy with the service provided, Jeanie advises.

If you're looking for a therapeutic treatment, find a psychologist who's also a trained hypnotherapist. 'When it comes to someone who's not qualified as a psychologist, I would then go on referrals,' Sherin says.

'Don't be afraid to ask for their qualifications,' Jeanie adds.

Lastly, trust your gut. 'You need to have a connection with the person,' Sherin says. 'If that's not there or you don't trust them, it won't work.'

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