

An entrancing day to be a hypnotist

Today is set aside to honor the profession aimed at helping people succeed.

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YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS – You are getting sleepy ... your eyelids are getting heavy ... you will listen to what I tell you ... you will celebrate World Hypnotism Day ... you will stop thinking of hypnosis as people clucking like chickens, and start seeing it as legitimate therapy for many problems.

OK, we admit it. Any hypnotist worth his swinging pocket watch knows you can't hypnotize people through the newspaper (though, in case it worked: *C all the editor to demand a pay raise for the reporter who wrote this*). But today really is World Hypnotism Day, and, no, that doesn't mean hypnotists have united in a secret plot to mesmerize the masses.

"It's just recognition for the profession, and to let you know you don't have to use magic potions, pills or puffs of smoke to achieve things," said certified hypnotist Robert Otto of Laceyville, Wyoming County. "Your success is in you since birth, and hypnosis just helps you find it."

Otto, of The Institution of Dynamic Hypnosis, has practiced hypnosis since 1980, helping people quit smoking, lose weight and conquer fears, and he's happy to demystify the trade and debunk misconceptions.

The biggest misconception? Hypnotists can't really control you. They might be able to make you cluck like a chicken or crawl under a table to pick strawberries, but they can't make you do something you don't want to do. "No individual would do something unethical or against their moral standards," he said.

Another misconception: susceptibility to hypnosis hinges on how logical and analytical – or skeptical – you are. Anyone can be hypnotized to some extent. It works best when you have a good reason to want it to work.

"Motivation, desire and the willingness to succeed" are the real factors, he said. People who have failed to lose weight through other methods, for example, often come to hypnotists as a desperate last resort, which is a big reason it sometimes work. If you come believing it can't work, it probably won't.

But that doesn't mean you can't be hypnotized, Otto pointed out, it just means hypnosis may not help with your problem. Hypnotism is a means of getting at the subconscious mind. Stage hypnotists use it to get people do silly things. Hypnotherapists use it to synchronize the subconscious with the conscious.

When people try to correct behavior – stop smoking, say – “they try to correct it at a conscious, analytical level.” That can work, but it’s usually temporary. “They have a subconscious level that will drive them back to it.

“Hypnosis goes in and reprograms the computer, so to speak,” Otto said. “We’re changing the whole mind instead of half the mind.”

A good hypnotist can cure some behaviors with one visit and a CD or audiotape, he said. The idea is to plant a positive idea in the subconscious and reinforce it by listening to the CD while drifting off to sleep.

This works for two reasons, Otto insists. First, “The last thing that you are thinking as you lose consciousness at night is continually repeated in the subconscious mind all night long.” Second, “anything repeated to the subconscious mind 30 consecutive days becomes a habit.”

The 30-day rule is also why “stage hypnotism” doesn’t last. People may be hypnotized and convinced of something outlandish – Otto said he once got a skeptic in a lecture crowd to forget the number six exists – but it won’t last more than a few hours without daily reinforcement.

There are many ways to hypnotize. Some practitioners use “progressive relaxation,” talking to the client for 30 or more minutes until the client falls into a relaxed state. (If you want to hear a version of this, you can download an audio clip at www.worldhypnotismday.com.)

There are also speed hypnosis techniques. The classic swinging watch is actually a variation on this. The idea is to focus the conscious mind on one task while accessing the subconscious mind with certain words and phrases. Otto developed a method in which he slowly rotates a client in an office chair.

There is a battle in the hypnotherapy world, though we’re not talking about guys with goatees trying to glare each other into submission. The dispute centers on who is qualified. Some organizations, such as the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (www.asch.net), insist the public should only look for “licensed” hypnotherapists, people with licenses in medicine, psychology or similar fields who practice hypnosis.

Others argue that it’s enough to look for hypnotists “certified” by credible groups. Otto said there are at least half a dozen, including the National Guild of Hypnotists, the International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy Association, and the American Board of Hypnotherapy. They typically mandate minimum training – usually at least 120 hours or so – and minimum apprentice work with a certified member.

Otto said he doesn't really see a big conflict. Licensed medical practitioners who are familiar with hypnosis have no problem referring patients to certified hypnotists, and a responsible certified hypnotist will not take on serious cases – people seeking pain relief, for example – without a referral from a licensed person.

He also promised he did not hypnotize this reporter during the phone interview. We believe him. We believe him. We believe him.

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