

Mind Over Menopause

Cancer survivors turn to alternative methods to reduce hot flashes

By Susan Glairon
The Daily Times-Call

After doctors removed her second ovary, Lara Penningroth found herself suddenly plunged into menopause.

Almost twice an hour, she would become unbearably hot and drenched in sweat, though her co-workers would complain of being cold. Her heart would palpitate, and she would feel anxious. At night, she'd wake up soaked and then have trouble falling asleep again.

And Penningroth, who was only 38 at the time, could not take hormone-replacement therapy to alleviate her sudden and intense symptoms, because studies show it would increase her risk of cancer reoccurrence. She is also a breast cancer survivor.

"Until it passes, you feel miserable," said Penningroth, 39, an international customs broker for United Parcel Service.

Penningroth, who lives in South Carolina, recently began trying hypnosis to treat her symptoms, and she said it is working. Her mother-in-law, Longmont psychotherapist Stacey Arnett, led her in several hypnosis sessions, and now Penningroth does a self-hypnosis session every night.

"It's been amazing, actually," said Penningroth, who calls herself a skeptic.

Across the country more hypnotherapists are treating women for menopause symptoms as women have become increasingly dissatisfied with traditional treatment options, such as hormone replacement therapy, says Bonnie Miller, director of clinical hypnotherapy for the New Orleans, La.-based, Methodist Health System Foundation Inc.

"Although hypnosis may not be as widely accepted as a mainstream treatment, it's gaining respect from physicians and health care facilities," she says.

For decades, women have used hormone-replacement therapy to alleviate menopause symptoms, such as severe sweating, disrupted sleep, rapid heartbeat, anxiety and panic attacks. But cancer survivors who experience early menopause from the effects of chemotherapy have had fewer options.

In addition, women who have not had cancer have been searching for alternatives to hormone-replacement therapy, after a 2002 study by the Women's

Health Initiative concluded that women who received such therapy were at an increased risk of breast cancer.

Hypnosis has been used since the 1950s to treat pain, and several studies over the past few years indicate that hypnosis may be of significant benefit in treating unpleasant menopause symptoms. They include a study published in the July 2004 American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis and another study by the London Regional Cancer Centre, published in a 2003 issue of "Women's Health Issues," a publication of the Jacobs Institute of Women's Health.

Relaxed, but in control

When using hypnosis to treat menopause, mental imagery suggesting "coolness" is used, as well as suggestions to manage anxiety, control stress and reduce insomnia.

"There are so many misconceptions of hypnosis being a zombie state," said Arnett, a certified counseling clinical hypnotherapist whose own menopause symptoms diminished after using hypnosis.

"(Those hypnotized) are aware of what is going on around them, and they are in complete control," Arnett said. "At the same time, they are very, very relaxed, and that state of relaxation lets the unconscious be open to suggestions. And if the suggestions are acceptable, they are incorporated into that person's reality."

For Arnett, 53, menopause began about two years ago, with 15 to 20 hot flashes every day. During those episodes, she felt anxious and flushed, and it felt like needles were poking her face, she said.

After she tried hypnosis, her hot flashes disappeared and she felt relaxed and confident, Arnett said. The effects lasted for three to four months, and the benefits would continue with periodic, additional sessions.

"People have to think about (hypnosis) differently than Western medicine, where you take a pill and it goes away," Arnett said. "You have to keep tweaking it."

Zoilita Grant, director of the Colorado School of Counseling Hypnotherapy in Longmont, said that in the past year, she has treated at least a dozen women for menopausal symptoms with hypnosis, and after three to six sessions, all of them could manage their symptoms.

Lisa Corbin, medical director of the University of Colorado Hospital's Integrative Medicine program — which combines traditional medicine with complementary/alternative therapies — said she has never heard of using hypnosis to curb unpleasant menopausal symptoms. She recommends

alternative therapies for treating menopause, such as acupuncture or relaxation and breathing techniques.

Based on studies and anecdotal information, the response rate for women using such techniques to curb unpleasant menopausal symptoms is between 35 percent and 50 percent, Corbin said.

Corbin also said women can help reduce menopausal symptoms and reduce discomfort by avoiding alcohol, dressing in layers, wearing breathable clothing, decreasing caffeine use and sleeping in a cold room.

Hormone-replacement therapy is still used to treat osteoporosis, Corbin said, and it is still standard treatment for menopause, although it's not for cancer survivors, and it's not a first-line treatment anymore. "Try alternatives first," she said.

Jillian LaVelle, president of the Bonita Springs, Fla.-based International Association of Counselors and Therapists, uses a hypnosis process with her clients in which she helps them draw heat away from the core of their body. LaVelle said she tells clients to rate the temperature in their hands before and after the process. Then clients use imagery to increase the temperature in their hands and draw it away from the rest of their bodies. LaVelle said most women can easily master this technique within two weeks.

"I let the client know that 30 percent of the women who go through this passage in their lives do not have hot flashes or night sweats," LaVelle said. "If others can do this, they can too."

Penningroth is a believer.

"Nothing else has ever worked," she said. "This is dead on."

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