

The New York Times

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January 16, 2005

Hypnotherapy: Mind Over Matter

By MARY REINHOLZ

CAROL DENICKER put some soft background music on the CD player before she guided her five hypnotherapy students into the uncharted waters of the subconscious. "At the count of 10, slowly close your eyes and open them -- your eyelids are so heavy," Ms. Denicker intoned. "They're getting heavier, and the trance is deeper."

Next, she told the students, who were seated at a conference table at her hillside home here: "You are in deep hypnosis. Your feet, even your toes are relaxed."

Moments later, when the students opened their eyes, each of them had different reactions to what it was like being in an altered state.

"I was in a deep trance, but I was aware of your voice, and it was very soothing," said Kathy Newberger of Baldwin, a social worker and psychotherapist who wants to use hypnotism in her private practice. She later told a reporter, "It's like sedating yourself without drugs."

Linda Statam, a Sag Harbor real estate broker who also teaches meditation classes, said, "My body felt very heavy, but I realized that I could get up and walk out."

And so it went that early January afternoon. The students had paid \$1,950 each to learn an ancient art that is veering into the mainstream. Once derided as a sinister form of mind control or as the stuff of stage tricks and party games, hypnotism is now used in many hospitals with patients who want to overcome addictions, chronic pain, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome and insomnia -- and that's for starters.

"It's been referred to as a belief in fantasy," Ms. Denicker said in an interview. "It's a trance state. And it's not some foreign weird thing. We go in and out of trances every day. Think of hypnosis as a perceptual adjustment."

Some health-care practitioners say that the claims of some hypnotherapists are largely based on testimonials and anecdotes and cannot be supported by scientific fact.

"There's no data to support any effectiveness long-term for weight reduction or smoking cessation or for addiction to drugs and alcohol," said Dr. Harold L. Pass, a psychologist who is a professor of clinical psychiatry at Stony Brook University's School of Medicine. But Dr. Pass,

who uses hypnotherapy with his patients, says it works well for stress management and is especially effective when used with other therapies.

Dr. Herbert Spiegel, a Manhattan psychiatrist and a nationally known expert on hypnotism who teaches it at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, said hypnotherapy belonged in the field of psychotherapy and should be practiced only by state-licensed psychiatrists and psychologists.

He said he was surprised to learn that the Health and Wellness Center at Farmingdale State University offered hypnotherapy by interns who are participating in a National Guild of Hypnotists program that Ms. Denicker developed. Dr. Spiegel contends that the guild is "not professionally recognized."

Ms. Denicker, the president of the guild's Long Island chapter and the founder of North Shore Hypnosis, her private practice, countered that some psychiatrists "get a day's worth of training" in hypnosis. "And that's why they come to me because they'll get more comprehensive and specific applications through the guild," she added.

She said that the guild, founded in 1951 by a group of Boston hypnotists, holds annual conferences and publishes research findings in its journals. Students undergoing the 100 hours of guild training Ms. Denicker offers have to be recertified each year, she said.

A former graphic designer, Ms. Denicker has been a practicing hypnotherapist since 1993 and an instructor since 2000. She said that once her students complete their written exams, they have the option of practicing as interns at the university's Health and Wellness Center, which offers free hypnotherapy sessions to students, faculty members and employees.

Clients include students who are "trying to deal with the stress of exams or to improve their study habits," she said, and athletes "who want to better focus on the game."

Audrey Krapf, the center's director,

described Ms. Denicker's program as "very professional." "She's very careful and observes her interns with their first clients and stays if someone needs extra advice or observance, and that only happened once," she said.

Gemel Perez, a 20-year-old sophomore at Farmingdale State from Wyandanch, said he made an appointment to undergo hypnosis at the health center before his finals in mid-December.

He admitted having an "almost scary feeling" when the hypnotherapist told him to open his eyes at the count of three, and it took him what seemed like 60 seconds to do that because "my body was numb from relaxing so much."

"After that," he said, "I tried to stand but felt lightheaded. Some of the cartoons of hypnotists tell you that you will squawk like a chicken forever. But the feeling for me was kind of euphoric,

feeling free. If you want to get your mind off anything personal and focus on work, it's a fascinating tool."

Photo: Carol Denicker, standing, and students, from left, Lori Doughty, Linda Statam and Audrey Struber. (Photo by Phil Marino for The New York Times)

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