

Lifestyle

DAYTON DAILY NEWS TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 1998

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5B
 Ann Landers, 18
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Kathy Platoni (right) works with patient Dee Bucher, who is in a hypnotic trance for the treatment of chronic pain.

DEE WITTMER
 DAYTON DAILY NEWS

Power of hypnosis

By Kevin Lamb
 DAYTON DAILY NEWS

The first time someone urged Dee Bucher to undergo hypnosis for her chronic pain, she says, the psychologist "seemed like such a nice lady, I didn't want to laugh in her face."

For three years, she had suffered relentlessly because of damaged muscles and nerves from her lower back to her neck. She was a store detective in 1989 when she caught a shoplifter who threw her up against a stone wall. Since then, she had seen more doctors and tried more medications than she could count.

Now she was spending 30 days at the Pain Center in Miami Valley Hospital. And this cheery stranger was going to make her feel better by telling her she felt verry sleepy? "I know I had a little smirk on my face," Bucher says.

But Kathy Platoni was persistent. A few days later, the hypnotherapist visited Bucher soon after she lost a job for being unable to work. After working 22 years at the security job she loved, Bucher says, "I was just devastated."

As she lay down on her hospital bed, Bucher "just kept thinking 'She's going to pull a watch out any minute and wave it in front of my eyes.'" But she was about to learn how little resemblance there was between the glinty-eyed hypnotists of Hollywood and the medical hypnotherapists with advanced training in psychology.

"The next thing I knew, it was the deepest relaxation I have ever felt," Bucher says. She still knew what was going on around her, but she felt a therapeutic inner peace as Platoni "just took me back to

pleasant thoughts of different things. I was just absolutely amazed."

More than six years later, Bucher has made a habit of hypnotizing herself at home in Kettering whenever she feels those periodic episodes of agony that take her breath away. Platoni still helps her into a trance once or twice a month at her regular therapy sessions for the depression that accompanies her chronic pain.

Done properly by a behavioral health professional, hypnosis has proven to be so safe and effective for chronic pain treatment that even the orthodox *Journal of the American Medical Association* has endorsed it. About 85 percent of the population is sufficiently susceptible to hypnosis to benefit from it, says Platoni. Hypnotic trances not only can divert people's minds from their pain, but also trigger physiological responses that actually blunt the pain.

JAMA also approves hypnosis for treating insomnia, and it has some success in behavior modification and treating psychological disorders. But it works best for pain because "pain is an extraordinary motivator," says John Baren, Platoni's psychology practice partner in Centerville and a clinical social worker who has treated patients with hypnosis for more than 25 years.

Baren has guided Platoni through surgical procedures in which hypnosis was her only anesthesia. Her trance was so deep during full facial laser surgery a few weeks ago that the procedure was more extensive than usual and she needed no painkilling medications afterward.

Pain is a constant companion for Bucher that makes it hard for her to bend or stretch, sit or

What to look for in a hypnotherapist

By Kevin Lamb
 DAYTON DAILY NEWS

The new patient wanted Kathy Platoni to relieve her irritable bowel pain through hypnosis, so the Centerville psychologist did what she always does when people ask for hypnotherapy.

She looked for reasons not to do it. She interviewed the patient for full medical and psychological histories. She found an anxiety disorder that likely was the root of the abdominal pain.

"If I had treated the symptom rather than the anxiety that was causing it, the anxiety would have had to find a new way to manifest itself," Platoni said. Immobilizing pain or heart palpitations would not be good alternatives.

Hypnosis often makes psychological disorders worse, says John Baren, a clinical social worker who is Platoni's partner and also a hypnotherapist. Besides complicating psychosis, paranoia and manic depression, it can uncover painful memories that a post-traumatic stress patient has repressed.

"Repression's not all bad," Baren says. "It can be very healthy. Hypnosis in a sense is psycho-surgery with words. If you're going to open these things up, you better know what you're doing."

Hypnosis is a virtually unregulated field to the dismay of Platoni, Baren and the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis in suburban Chicago, one of two national credentialing organizations that require advanced training in behavioral health. The other is the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis in Pullman, Wash. For chronic pain treatment, Baren recommends looking for membership in the American Pain Society or the American Academy of Pain Management.

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HYPNOSIS: Relaxation technique helps pain

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stand. But as migraines and muscle spasms come and go, the pain varies in intensity. Hypnosis gets her through those excruciating 20 minutes it takes for her medications to kick in, and it helps her tolerate the normal pain without so many painkilling and muscle-relaxing drugs.

"I don't want to live my life as a zombie," says Bucher, who is on full disability at age 45.

Hypnosis is only an adjunct to the medication for chronic pain, says Platoni, just as it should only be used with psychotherapy to treat anxiety, panic, addictive and post-traumatic stress disorders.

Between them, she and Baren have used hypnotherapy to treat chronic pain from industrial accidents; migraines, irritable bowels, burns, multiple sclerosis, cancer, fibromyalgia, facial neuralgia and back or neck injuries. They have used it before and after surgery, where research shows it can help lower the blood pressure and heart rate to reduce blood loss, and enhance breathing to increase oxygen levels.

Platoni compares hypnosis to the focused concentration of a person so engrossed in reading a book that the car chase on television for the bickering children underfoot aren't even distracting. The deeper the focused



JIM WITMER/DAYTON DAILY NEWS

Kathy Platoni promotes hypnosis.

trance, the more easily a hypnotic suggestion can become engraved in a person's subconscious.

She can't eliminate the pain because she can't remove its cause, but she can help a patient change the sensation to something more tolerable. She can urge a patient to perceive a searing, burning pain as a warming, pulsating feeling. Or to feel throbbing as pulling or tugging instead.

But even self-hypnosis can alle-

viate the anxiety and tension that Platoni says "makes pain more severe than it has to be." Bucher calms herself by going into her dark and quiet bedroom, lying down and focusing on one pleasant thing. It might be the memory of a friend she hasn't seen for a while, or moments and conversations she remembers with her grandchildren.

"And I try to relive that," she says. "It's a distraction from the pain. The pain doesn't go away. But when you're in a lot of discomfort, you'll do just about anything to bring it down even a little bit at a time."

The image has to be specific, she says. It's not enough just to picture a loved one's face. Once with Platoni's help, Bucher experienced herself as a child with her father. "And I could smell my dad's cologne, it was so vivid."

More than distracting someone from pain, Platoni says the pleasant focus actually competes with the pain, occupying nerve centers of the brain so pain signals can't reach them.

"If you drop a hammer on your toe, your toe doesn't know that hurts," Baren says. The toe has to send a signal to the brain saying what happened, and the brain sends the pain signal back in response. Hypnosis, anesthesia and other drugs reduce the number of signals.

At the same time, Baren says,

the deep relaxation of a hypnotic trance increases the levels of endorphins and enkephalins, natural painkillers the body produces itself. "Hypnosis doesn't just alter your state of consciousness, it also alters the production of these neurochemicals."

Even simple relaxation diminishes pain, Bucher and the therapists believe, by breaking the cycle in which pain creates tension, which amplifies pain. Platoni says stress is especially instrumental in chronic pain because those patients naturally fear their ebbing and flowing agony, their incapacity from working, their inability to have fun.

Bucher has focused so deeply a few times with Platoni, her mind so thoroughly committed to one track, that she felt like she was somewhere else watching the two of them. She had completely "dissociated," in Platoni's word, something fewer than 10 percent of people are capable of doing.

Dissociating to some degree is the goal of all hypnosis, Baren says. "You take yourself away from the event at hand. When people studied POWs who survived torture, they found out they were the ones who had learned to dissociate."

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THERAPIST: Take care when picking specialist

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There are schools of hypnosis, warns ASCH, that award trumped-up advanced degrees for completing curricula that meet no standards.

"There's no such thing as a doctorate in hypnosis," Platoni says. "If someone says they're certified, find out who certified them. If it's anyone other than those two groups, I would have big questions about them."

A hypnotherapist also should be a licensed professional counselor with a graduate degree in nursing, social work, psychology or medicine, Platoni says.

"If you want brain surgery, either a butcher or a neurosur-

'If you want brain surgery, either a butcher or a neurosurgeon can cut you open, but the butcher might not be able to put you back together.'

KATHY PLATONI, psychologist

geon can cut you open, but the butcher might not be able to put you back together," she says.

Platoni and Baren say prospective clients also should avoid hypnotherapists who don't explain what they intend to do or who appear to be controlling. They should ask hypnotherapists how long they've been practicing,

where they trained (preferably at a med school) and which physicians they've worked with. "You should feel safe and comfortable," Baren says.

A patient's first priority should be to find someone who can treat the illness or injury, says Michael Nash, a hypnosis researcher and professor at the

University of Tennessee, who edits SCEH's *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*. Then narrow the list down to hypnotherapists.

Both societies give referrals. The Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis is at (509) 332-7555; 2201 Haeder Road, Pullman, Wash. 99163, and sunsite.utk.edu/IJCEH/scehframe.htm on the Web. The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis is at (847) 297-3317; 2200 E. Devon Ave., Suite 291, Des Plaines, Ill. 60018, and www.asch.net on the Web.

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