

the Power of the Mind

Modern Mesmers
succeed with
hypnotherapy to
change behaviors

By PATTY SANDOVAL SRALLA
Of The Oakland Press

For the past few years, Arthur Shufflebarger has tried just about every diet — all to no avail.

When all his efforts failed, the father of two decided to try something different, evoking the power of mind over matter. He called Nicol Merline, owner of MTU Hypnosis in Milford, and made an appointment.

"It's been like meditation, relaxation," said the 49-year-old Milford resident. "Nicol hit hard upon the dietary suggestions, increasing exercise as well. It's nothing magic, but it works."

Since the fall, Shufflebarger has lost and kept off 30 pounds and says he's still using the hypnotherapy techniques to control his eating.

Merline said she's not surprised at his success.

To know more

For more information, call International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy Association in Royal Oak at (800) 257-5467. Or call Nicol Merline at (248) 568-0831. Sessions with Merline cost \$180 each or \$360 for three-session packages and are covered by some health insurances. To find a certified hypnotherapist in your area, call the Infinity Institute at (248) 549-5594 or (800) 257-5467. For more information go online to www.infinityinst.com.

From her office in the historic Old Stone Church building in Milford, the former high school science, math and biology teacher has helped people through the years with weight loss, smoking cessation, test anxiety, nail-biting, stress management and even bed-wetting. She also helps them with cancer and other chronic illnesses and used it to heal her own lifelong problem with eczema, as well.

"You don't have to be in a trance to make great changes in your life," she said, sitting in her small, comfortable office. "Most people ask, 'Are you going to make me quack like a

duck?' " She jokes that she would have to charge more for that. "The fact is that you don't do anything under hypnosis you wouldn't normally do anyway."

Merline, who became interested in hypnotherapy in the 1970s after taking a weekend workshop, said the modern version of the practice is nothing like the popular stereotype.

In fact, hypnosis dates back to the rituals of ancient people.

Cave paintings illustrate humans using



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Hypnotherapist Nicol Merline talks with a client about weight control in her Milford office

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Practitioners of ancient technique get great results

trances 5,000 years ago while ancient Egyptian priests used "sleep temples" and ritualistic gestures to cure illness.

But it wasn't until Anton Mesmer began "curing" people in the mid-1700s that the modern idea of hypnosis began to take root, according to the Web site www.infinityinst.com, the Web site of a local certifying school. Mesmer used magnets and iron rods to manipulate electrical waves in the body. Later, practitioners discovered the importance of the power of suggestion and the role of the person's receptiveness to the technique.

As entertainment and stage hypnosis was becoming more popular in the 1800s, scientific research continued behind the scenes. Leading the work was Dr. James Braid, who coined the term "hypnosis," from the Greek word "hypnos" meaning sleep. Braid developed the idea of using a bright, shiny object and suggestion to induce the sleep state, allowing patients to undergo surgery without anesthesia.

Meanwhile, a Scottish surgeon, Dr. John Esdaile, was said to have performed thousands of painless surgeries and amputations using hypnosis in the mid-1800s. His specialty was removal of scrotal tumors.

From there, the idea evolved into the modern view that hypnosis was not a healing device in itself, but rather a technique to get in touch with those centers that control the body, according to the book "A Brief History of Hypnosis" by Steven A. LaVelle.

Unfortunately, the sideshow history continued to negatively affect the way people view modern hypnotherapy, Merline said.

"It's not your Hollywood brand of hypnosis," she said.

Trained and certified therapists, who often market themselves as "mental trainers," use guided imagery and relaxation techniques to guide clients through normal levels of consciousness.

Athletes such as Tiger Woods use hypnotherapy to help them focus on their game, visualizing the entire event from start to finish, rehearsing the desired outcome.



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Merline said there is nothing outrageous or scary that happens during the hour-and-a-half-long session. In fact, the process involves delving into the normal hypnotic states people experience every day.

She explained there are four mental levels that are relevant to the hypnotherapist. The beta stage is the fully conscious stage, where the rational mind rules. It is also the critical and judgmental mind. The alpha stage is described as the period between wakefulness and sleep, where creativity, hunches and intuition are at their peak. The theta and delta levels are the dream and deep sleep state.

"Depending on how deeply a person can relax, we may work within the alpha or theta stages," said Merline, who also conducts group and corporate sessions. "We don't want them to fall asleep. ... It's as normal as anything to go there (stages of relaxation). You don't need a hypnotherapist to go there."

During her sessions, Merline helps clients address mental blocks that keep people locked in unhealthy lifestyle patterns.

"You are your most predominant thought. What you think about, you get," she said. "The subconscious mind is like dirt. The 'seeds' we plant in the subconscious mind are

what we tell ourselves. We have mental tapes we keep rewinding in our heads, whether we're aware of it or not. We may be listening to negative programs all day. Examples may include: 'I'm not good enough.' 'I'm a failure.' 'It's going to hurt' ... 'All I have to do is look at food and I get fat.' You can get what you don't want because you're constantly thinking about it.

"In short, by 'seeding' the mind with negative thought ... we pay the price."

So the hypnotherapist tries to reprogram negative thoughts, linked to the idea that energy follows thought.

Instead of carrying "I can't" attitudes, clients are asked to repeat positive suggestions relative to the problem they're trying to address.

Clients are given a cassette tape of the sessions to listen to daily between visits.

Merline has a book full of testimonials and would like to see every medical facility include hypnotherapy.

Fredena Riegel, mentor chairwoman for the International Medical and Dental Hypnotherapy Association in Royal Oak, a state-licensed instructional facility established in 1981, said the American Medical Association and the American Psychiatric Association approved hypnosis as a therapeutic modality in the 1950s.

"It's becoming more and more popular," she said, referring to a week-long feature about hypnotherapy on "Good Morning America" a few weeks ago.

Riegel said to become certified, people must successfully complete basic, advanced and hypnoanalysis courses and take a certification test and pass with 80 percent or better. To maintain their certification, they must continue their education, as well.

Spokesman David Fox of the Michigan State Medical Society, the state branch of the American Medical Association, said although the AMA has no policy on hypnosis, it is used in the psychiatric realm to help people recall repressed memories.

On a personal note, though, Fox said he's a believer.

"I quit smoking through a hypnotherapist," he said.

"I was a real heavy smoker ... three packs a day. ... It was in a group; there were about 40 of us and we underwent group hypnosis. She brought us in and out (of hypnosis) three different times. She said, 'You probably didn't think you were hypnotized.' I quit that day and never had a desire to do it again. ... I was impressed."

Not everyone can be hypnotized, though.

People who can't concentrate don't make good subjects. Also, subjects have to have a general belief that they can be helped.

They also have to want to be hypnotized.

Otherwise, Merline quips, raising her two sons, 16 and 10, with her husband, would be a piece of cake.

"They'd be cleaning their rooms every day."