

Relieving the effects of surgery with hypnosis

19 July 2011, By William Weir

When Don Gotler was undergoing two procedures preparing him for treatment for his esophageal cancer last year, his doctor asked if he wanted to take part in the hospital's new hypnotherapy program. Combined with anesthesia, he was told, the hypnosis would help alleviate anxiety and post-surgery pain.

"I thought, what the heck, why not give it a try?" Gotler said. The hypnotherapist met with him before the procedure and stayed with him in the [operating room](#), helping him with breathing and imagery techniques.

About 250 patients at the [hospital](#) have undergone hypnotherapy prior to surgery at New Milford since hypnotherapist Alexandra Chalif and Dr. Courtney Chambers, a surgeon, teamed up to provide it beginning in early 2010. Now the two are compiling data to quantify its effectiveness.

What's unusual about the use of hypnosis at New Milford Hospital, Chalif said, is that it's conducted in the operating room. When hospitals do offer hypnosis, she said, patients usually meet with the hypnotherapist before going into the operating room.

Hypnosis has been used for decades in combination with [anesthesia](#) to alleviate the physical and [psychological effects](#) of surgery for decades, said Dr. Ran D. Anbar, president of the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, but most hospitals still don't offer it, and there's a wide range of acceptance.

"It depends on the location," he said. "I think in pockets where hypnosis has been utilized by [health providers](#), the [physicians](#) are very accepting, because it works."

Anbar added that it's difficult to know how commonly hypnosis is used with anesthesia because there's no data.

Anbar agreed that hypnosis in the operating room is less common, but said studies have shown it can be effective. Researchers have found that hearing is the last sense to decline under anesthesia and that a patient can still be influenced by hypnotherapy while under anesthesia.

Although he and Chalif don't yet have statistics on specific effects, such as changes in a patient's blood pressure while under hypnosis, Chambers said other indicators point to the program's benefits.

"What I'm seeing is that more people are using less narcotics and using narcotics for shorter periods after surgery," he said. "To hear that people only stayed in bed for a day or two days as opposed to a week or 10 days moping around is very encouraging,"

Chalif said the word "hypnosis" often conjures images of swinging watch fobs, but the actual procedure is less exotic.

"Hypnosis is a way of convincing a mind that it's safe to screen out distractions and focus on one thing," she said. "It's a state natural to most human beings that allows you to screen out distractions, go inside and focus on what you need to focus on. The mind-body connection has amazing powers."

When a patient elects to have hypnotherapy as part of the procedure, she meets with the patient before surgery to explain what will happen. Once in the operating room, Chalif said it's a 10- to 15-minute process that uses various breathing and visualizing techniques to make them feel comfortable and in control.

Gotler, 51, who lives in Waterbury, recalled his experience.

"It was almost like a suggestion; it wasn't a pronounced, trance kind of thing, but almost a subtle sense of being more comfortable," he said.

"(Chalif) was helpful when they started to do the procedure. She distracted me. That was helpful, because it was, frankly, scary."

Mark Warner, president of the American Society of Anesthesiologists, said [hypnosis](#) is one of many alternative methods that can help calm a patient going into surgery. As for relieving post-surgery pain or shortening hospital stays, Warner said he hasn't seen any research yet that makes an air-tight case.

"It would be wonderful that they could prove that it makes a difference," he said. "It probably plays a role for some people in some situations, but not for all."

Chambers said that when Chalif approached him about creating a surgical [hypnotherapy](#) program, he was ambivalent at first. "I toyed with (the idea) for a while."

But he soon became convinced after they got started.

"Once we had a couple patients who really couldn't stop talking about it, we were really on a roll," he said.

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