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## Recession

# Repeat after me...

After years of helping people quit smoking, hypnotists are now helping us deal with a recession.

By Rob Gerlsbeck



As the owner of a chocolate shop, Donna Young is surrounded by sweets. But this past fall, as the economy tumbled, the 61-year-old Torontonionian fell into a sour mood. “All anybody talked about was the economy. I started to feel so down.” She couldn’t sleep; chatting with customers turned into a chore.

Just before Christmas, Young decided to seek help — not from a doctor, but from a hypnotist. Now, she says, “nothing negative affects me.”

Hypnosis has long been used to help people quit smoking or lose weight. But lately more of us are seeking treatment to deal with anxiety over the recession, according to the U.S.-based National Guild of Hypnotists (NGH). “People are saying ‘I’ve worked for so many years, and now I’ve lost so much money in the stock market. What’s going to happen?’ ” says Debbie Papadakis, a Toronto hypnotist and president of the guild’s Ontario chapter.

Hypnotists say they’re able to help by tapping into a client’s subconscious. They encourage hypnotized subjects to recall happier events from the past and suppress fears by picturing ourselves enjoying those same blissful moments in the future. “You’re basically changing the tapes in your head,” says Dave Large, a hypnotist on Vancouver Island.

Hypnotists try to “lock” good feelings into the subconscious permanently. One way they do that is through post-hypnotic suggestion. A person who has trouble saving money, for instance, will be told that each time their phone rings, it’s a reminder to deposit \$100 in a savings account every Friday.

It sounds kind of kooky but Young and other people who’ve gone through hypnosis swear by it. “I’m way more upbeat,” she says. Still, Young has a hard time explaining why. The best she comes up with is bad thoughts don’t seem to nag at her anymore.

Despite its association with stage magicians and the like, hypnosis is a bona fide field of medicine that goes back to the early 1800s when a Scottish surgeon named James Braid found he could put people into a trance by having them stare at a shiny object like a swinging pocket watch. These days it's rare to find a doctor who uses hypnosis, but a U.S. medical study two years ago found that breast cancer patients hypnotized before surgery recover much faster and have fewer painful side effects.

What is it like to be hypnotized? To find out, I make an appointment with Donald Currie, a Toronto hypnotist who has been practicing for eight years. Currie used to work in an investment brokerage but gave it up after he was hypnotized. "It worked for me, so I decided this is something I wanted to do myself."

The first thing Currie tells me is that almost everyone who's hypnotized remembers the experience. The second is that hypnotists cannot control a person. "If you were under hypnosis and the fire alarm rang, you'd get up and walk out of the building, just like everyone else. You're in full control." He adds that one out of every nine people cannot be hypnotized.

Currie's office doesn't look hypnotic. The walls are green and the window shades are open, so it's bright. But a scented candle and new-age music in the background sets a tranquil mood. He invites me to sit in a comfortable chair facing a wall.

Currie tells me to focus on any point on the wall. No hypnotist, it seems, uses a swinging watch any more. "In a few minutes," he says after a while, "I'm going to start counting to 20, and sometime, maybe at 15 seconds, maybe at 10, you'll close your eyes." I don't make it that far. By the time he counts one, my eyes are shut. For the next 30 minutes or so Currie talks to me, and I respond with nods and one- and two-word answers.

He's right about hypnosis not being a form of mind control. I'm aware of everything. But I'm also so relaxed, I don't want to move. When Currie finally tells me to open my eyes, I feel remarkably refreshed, and this feeling stays with me for several days — though, like Young, I'm not sure why I feel so good.

People who seek treatment are usually hypnotized more than once. Most clients require three to six visits, no matter whether they're trying to quit that two-pack-a-day habit or hoping to forget how badly their stock portfolio has been decimated. A course of treatment is not cheap. Hypnotists charge anywhere from \$75 to \$200 per hour and each visit lasts an hour and a half to two hours. The cost isn't covered by government health insurance or most private plans.

Finding a good hypnotist can be tricky since anyone can open up a practice. You should make sure that any hypnotist you use has completed a minimum of 100 to 150 hours of classroom training through an association such as the NGH or the Canadian Association of Hypnotherapy. Ask, too, if a hypnotist has taken more intensive training courses. Generally, a hypnotist is able to charge more depending on their level of education and experience. Dwight Damon, NGH president, says the best way to find a good hypnotist is to talk to previous clients, then chat to the hypnotist about what you can expect. "If you feel comfortable talking to this person on the phone, you'll probably have a good experience."