

HEALTHY LIVING

Think thin

Hypnosis seminar says obstacles to weight loss in subconscious mind

BY LORETTA GRANTHAM
Cox News Service

It sounds too good to be true, the idea that you can brainwash yourself into a bikini. But can a two-hour hypnosis seminar with a take-home cassette tape really lead to long-term weight loss?

There's no swinging pocket watch, by the way, to make you "sleepy, very sleepy." Nor are you asked to do anything goofy, like pat your head while rubbing your stomach, as you may have seen in a hypnosis show at the fair.

Instead, Rena Greenberg, speaking in the buttery, measured tones of a golf announcer, gently guides you into a relaxed state by asking you to focus on your breath and hands.

Imagine the space between your thumb and index finger, she instructs. Feel your chest as it rises and falls.

Next, she tells you to envision yourself at your ideal weight. Really picture it.

And then, when you're in that chilled-out place where you're almost asleep but not quite, she makes suggestions: Choose healthy foods and exercise to reach your goal weight. Avoid fattening foods and negative beliefs that hold you back.

"Tell yourself, 'I am absolutely determined to succeed,'" Greenberg recites. "I am succeeding."

Jane Zinkhan of Tampa, Fla., succeeded. She lost 50 pounds after doing hypnosis eight years ago and has kept it off ever since.

Veronica Douglas of Detroit has lost nearly 75 pounds since a session last year.

And although Lisa Hoesche of Manchester, N.J., hasn't attended a seminar, she dropped 10 pounds this summer using the relaxation techniques and other tools in Greenberg's latest book, "The Craving Cure."

"I'm 5-foot-10 and didn't need to lose much, but I couldn't seem to do it," said Hoesche, 43, a marketing manager. "I would try all these things, like South Beach, but there was something missing, an 'X factor' that was very internal. That's the missing link I found

Janice Holden of Boca Raton, lost 140 lbs. — and kept it off — after attending a hypnosis seminar.

through Rena."

That link is to the subconscious mind, Greenberg said during a recent session in Boca Raton, Fla. And for many people, that's the key to unraveling old patterns that fuel bad habits.

"The greatest discovery I've made is that there's a deeper power inside of us that's available to help us make the changes we want. Because on a conscious level, we all already know exactly how to lose weight, right? What do you have to do? Eat less and exercise more," Greenberg said.

"Imagine a mist fogging over the mirror, and as it clears, see your reflection in the mirror again, this time at your ideal weight — slender, healthy, happy and attractive. This is the real you."

RENA GREENBERG,
Weight-loss hypnotherapist

"But the issue is, how do we get motivated to do that without feeling deprived? Hypnosis is such a powerful tool to help us change on the inside. When we change on the inside, the outer changes naturally happen."

Greenberg's approach is similar to the "run the victory lap" visualization that some athletes use to ramp up before an event. Or the imagery that an actor might draw on to get into character.

She asks hypnotized participants to see themselves as they are now, with compassion and without judgment, then envision their bodies at goal weight. Find a word, she says, such as freedom or health that reflects motivation. Then see that word written on your heart ("not the heart that beats, but the heart that loves — the metaphorical heart"). Pretend that you're a gardener planting seeds in your mind.

"The obstacles to success have nothing to do with the rational, logical part of the mind," she told a group at a recent gathering. "The obstacles are in the subconscious, which is nothing more than a computer that's running on programming."

"It doesn't stop to evaluate whether the programming makes sense. It's just operating automatically."

Greenberg, who founded Wellness Seminars in 1990, was forced to re-evaluate in her late 20s while living in New York City. She worked and played hard, gobbled junk food and sweets and relied on excessive jogging to offset calories. Eventually, she was 20 pounds overweight and bedridden with a roster of health problems.

"I was really facing death, so I began to study health and nutrition," said Greenberg, now 46 and living in Bradenton, Fla. "But there was so much information out there. What came to me was balance."

"It's not about deprivation or denial or eating food that tastes horrible. What we're going to do is change the way we think about food. And when we change the way we think about food, our behavior naturally changes, and it doesn't have to be a struggle."

It goes without saying, of course, that eating less and moving more are essential. But isn't that where the struggle comes in?

"No hypnosis is going to work if you walk into it saying, 'I don't believe in this,' or you leave and go overeat," said psychologist Joann Hendelman who works in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla. "It can be amazing — in fact, there are cases in Europe where it's used in place of anesthesia — but you have to be suggestible."



PHOTOS BY BRUCE R. BENNETT / COX NEWS SERVICE

Rena Greenberg, author of "The Craving Cure," leads weight-loss hypnosis seminars around the country.

A Stanford University study showed that about 15 percent of the nation's population is highly hypnotizable, while 10 percent to 15 percent can't be hypnotized at all. The bottom line, experts say, is willingness.

Psychologist Carol Fishbein, who, like Hendelman, specializes in eating disorders, says a person has to be ready to drop pounds — really ready — for meditation and imagery to help.

"Your motivation needs to be high," she said. "The real issue is keeping the weight off, and if you're motivated and receptive, hypnosis could be a way to help you utilize your subconscious."

Jane Zinkhan, 73, says she was game for anything when she attended a seminar in 1999 at the Tampa hospital where she worked as a nurse. She had tried everything.

"I sat there thinking, 'This isn't working for me' because I knew everything around me that was going on," she recalled. "In fact, a man behind me was snoring, and it was getting on my nerves."

Doubts aside, she began to notice changes right away.

"From that night on, I haven't wanted a snack, and I'd had a bad problem with snacking, especially with sweets. I was always able to take the weight off, but I couldn't keep it off."

Zinkhan, who now weighs 120 pounds, swears by the 20-minute cassette tape that's part of the \$69 seminar fee (\$59 if you register in advance). Greenberg urges participants to listen to the hypnotic session, similar to a guided meditation, every day for the first 30 days.

"The secret is listening to that tape," Zinkhan said. "I got to where I would walk past a display of cakes or pies or cookies at the grocery store, and I'd literally shudder. Those things had become repulsive."

Greenberg begins the recording by inviting listeners to get comfortable ("this is your special time to relax and let go") and pretend that you're "floating on a fluffy white cloud ... float and drift ... slowly, gently ... you are feeling very content."

After counting backward from 10, she says: "In the past, you've identified with eating fattening foods and being overweight. You now change your thinking and identify with a slimmer, more confident you."

She makes more statements ("you remember to eat only when your body is physically hungry") and, among other visualizations, urges that you picture yourself as you are now in front of a full-length mirror.

"Imagine a mist fogging over the mirror, and as it clears, see your reflection in the mirror again, this time at your ideal weight — slender, healthy, happy and attractive," Greenberg says. "This is the real you."

There are no guarantees, of course, that everyone will have stellar results. And skeptics say hypnosis is little more than telling you what you already know.

Dr. David Katz, a preventative medicine expert and public health professor at Yale University, has said that hypnosis isn't the "be-all, end-all" for weight loss but a potential tool, along with a gym membership and a nutritionist.

"It's not magic," he said. "It's a form of psychotherapy."

And not a quick fix.

It took 911 dispatcher Veronica Douglas of Detroit, for example, a year and a half to lose 72 pounds.

Like Zinkhan, she wasn't sure at first whether she'd gotten anything out of the session she attended in the Motor City early last year.

She noticed that she wasn't eating as much hard candy anymore. And then chili dogs — she used to down four in one sitting — lost their appeal.

"I didn't really think I would lose the weight," said Douglas, 33. "But some of the things I did regularly started to make me feel sick. I'd tell people I wasn't on a diet because I wasn't depriving myself of anything. I was making choices I wanted to make."

Greenberg, a City University of New York graduate who's certified in hypnotherapy, biofeedback and other specialties, insists that she's merely a messenger.

"It's not about a big powerful hypnotist brainwashing you," said Greenberg, who ended her Boca Raton session by having participants tear up index cards on which they'd listed their obstacles to success.

"I want people to get in touch with the fact that we all have the ability to hypnotize ourselves, and we are hypnotizing ourselves all day long with the images and the voices in our heads. What I want to teach people is how we can use that power to change our lives through what we believe to be true."

But come on, making someone want to give up chili dogs after a four-frank-a-day habit?

"I don't consider it a miracle," said Douglas, who dropped from a size 24 to a 14 and started exercising during breaks at work.

"This is going to sound funny, but all Rena does is talk you into talking to yourself." ■