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HYPNOSIS: TOOL TO CHANGE LIFESTYLES

Quitting smoking decreases your risk of life-threatening cancer and heart disease, as well as conditions like heartburn that affect quality of life. But quitting isn't easy. An increasing number of smokers are turning to hypnosis to achieve their goals.

"Hypnosis is an excellent method because it creates a state of deep relaxation," says Susan Gayle, CH, founder of the New Behavior Institute in Manhattan. "The conscious mind is quieted, enabling the subconscious to become more open than usual to suggestions to refrain from smoking."

Gayle has helped people who've smoked three packs a day for 20 years, as well as occasional smokers. At the first session she explains how hypnosis works. "Hypnosis is a totally natural state that we all move in and out of several times a day," she explains. "Whenever you've been totally absorbed while reading a book, painting a picture or watching a movie, you've been in a state of self-induced hypnosis. This state of focused attention is similar to what happens to you during hypnosis."

Gayle also answers clients' questions during the first session. Some people are fearful of losing control when hypnotized. "That's a myth, because the hypnotist acts as a facilitator to help the person reach a deep, relaxed state that allows his or her subconscious mind to be more actively engaged. The hypnotist never – at any time – controls the person. In fact, the focus of hypnosis is to help the person be more in control of his or her mind, feelings and body, to make the desired changes."

To help clients achieve their goals, clinical hypnotists must be experienced and well trained. Gayle, who is certified by two national and two international organizations, has been practicing for seven years.

Gayle asks clients about what they consider to be the positive side of smoking. "People often say smoking helps them cope with stress or keeps their weight under control," she says. "This is important information for coming up with a plan that enables the person to meet these challenges in healthy ways, such as going to a gym or joining the company softball team."

A variety of hypnotic techniques are used to help the smoker quit and implement a tobacco-free lifestyle. One technique involves creating vivid mental pictures of successfully completing a stressful project at work without smoking. Then when the client must actually begin the project, those images can be used to help complete it, because the stress is gone.

Gayle will also put the smoker into a relaxed state, allowing the subconscious to accept new choices the person wants to make, such as taking a glass of water, walking around the block or calling a friend, instead of lighting a cigarette. "These suggestions make positive changes instead of exchanging one bad habit, smoking, for another, like overeating," she says.

Most smokers require four 90-minute sessions to become tobacco-free. "The technique has been extremely successful," says Gayle. "Clients find that their desire to smoke is gone because it's been replaced by positive changes."

In addition to smokers, Gayle has worked with clients who want to control or moderate their drinking or stop their drug use. "I also work with clients who want to improve their performance in business, school, sports or the arts," she explains.

In addition to individual sessions, Gayle has developed CDs on topics such as taking control of your eating, removing limiting beliefs and letting stress go. "Many clients who have used hypnosis to quit smoking find that the techniques enable them to make other changes to improve their minds and bodies," Gayle says. "They have more energy, feel better and have a more positive outlook on life."