

Smooth Operation

Hypnosis can ease you through surgery by reducing side effects and speeding your recovery.

LAST FALL KATHY PLATONI was about to undergo her 50th operation to correct congenital bone deficiencies. This time she would be having laser surgery to remove scar tissue from her face. Some of the previous procedures had been difficult; the anesthetic drugs had disrupted her short-term memory, sometimes for as long as a year. They also caused mood swings so traumatic, she says, "it was like I was losing my mind."

Fearing she'd have an unpleasant time again, Platoni, a psychologist in Centerville, Ohio, told her plastic surgeon, James Apesos, M.D., she intended to forsake anesthesia altogether and use hypnosis instead, a practice called hypnoanesthesia. Platoni had used hypnosis with clients and had hypnotized herself during earlier operations. However, this would be the first time she'd relied solely on the mind-body technique to sedate herself during a major laser surgery.

Apesos was concerned. He didn't think hypnoanesthesia would work for this type of procedure. "The laser is white hot," he explains. "If you point it at paper, it will ignite." He says he was certain Platoni would require either the general anesthesia or the heavy sedation with local anesthesia he gives to all his laser surgery patients. But ultimately he gave in to her wish.

As Platoni lay on the operating room table, her business partner, psychotherapist John Baren, prompted her to breathe slowly and deeply. He told her to relax her muscles from her toes to her head. Then, speaking in a low, steady voice, he suggested that her left hand was getting cold and numb. By touching it to her forehead,

he said, she would spread an anesthetic feeling there. Finally, Baren asked Platoni to picture an ice blue Antarctic sky and imagine drifting on an iceberg.

Only 10 minutes after Baren had begun his instructions, Apesos turned on the laser and swept it over Platoni's forehead, burning through three layers of skin to erase her scars. The doctor watched warily as she lay motionless; her breathing was so shallow and quiet he could barely hear it. "I thought she was dead," Apesos remembers. He ordered the nurses to check her vital signs. Much to his shock and relief, they found that Platoni was fine.

Indeed, she was better than fine, and recovered from the two-hour operation almost immediately. "I hopped off the table, went home, and swept out my garage," she says. While most people take narcotic pain relievers like Percocet or Vicodin every three to four hours for up to a week after a similar procedure, Platoni didn't even take an aspirin.

Platoni's total reliance on hypnoanesthesia is dramatic, and it is also unusual. More commonly, people combine hypnosis with anesthetic drugs. According to Christel Bejenke, M.D., an anesthesiologist in Santa Barbara, Calif., who has used hypnosis with patients for three decades, almost anyone can use this technique to lower blood pressure and heart rate and relieve other symptoms of preoperative anxiety.

People who are good at focusing and have a good imagination are easily hypnotizable—up to 75 percent of the population, according to most experts—and children are especially good

candidates. If you use hypnosis as an adjunct, you will often need less chemical anesthesia—and will be much more likely to wake up feeling well, alert, and oriented. “[Hypnotized patients] can have practically no side effects and be practically pain-free [after surgery],” says Bejenke.

HOW HYPNOSIS WORKS The Egyptians used hypnosis as anesthesia six thousand years ago. The technique resurfaced in the 18th century, when Austrian physicist Franz

Mesmer gave popular public demonstrations. By the 1820s, doctors commonly operated on “magnetized” (as hypnotized patients were then called) subjects. The discoveries of anesthetics such as chloroform, ether, and nitrous oxide 20 years later, however, supplanted the practice. Interest picked up again after 1958—when the American Medical Association approved the clinical use of hypnosis—and continues to grow as scientists begin to better understand the phenomenon.

Experts believe hypnosis prepares you for surgery in three ways. First, it makes the

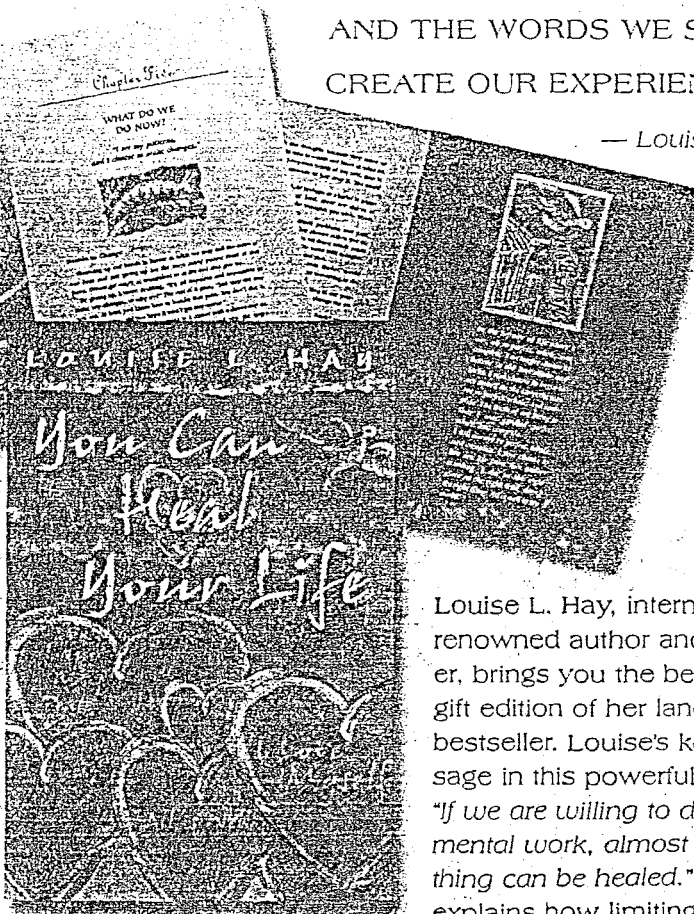
brain highly receptive to suggestion. Certain cue words or images, introduced before surgery, can actually recreate sensations patients have experienced in the past. For example, Baren knew Platoni had previously used local anesthesia, so he asked her to imagine her hand was full of Novocain.

Hypnosis also affects the body’s production of pain-relieving and pain-causing neurochemicals, says Baren. It increases the output of endorphins and enkephalin (natural, morphinelike substances). At the same time, it suppresses the circulation of prostaglandin, bradykinin, and substance P, pain transmitters that the body releases when in fear, anxiety, or shock.

Finally, hypnosis calms the fight-or-flight reaction of the central nervous system. Surgical patients who use hypnoanesthesia explains Alexander Levitan, M.D., an oncologist who teaches hypnosis at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, bleed as little as one-tenth as much as patients given chemical anesthesia because “less adrenaline output seems to reduce bleeding.” Hypnosis helps the patient recover more rapidly, says Levitan, because there’s less impairment of appetite or bowel and bladder function—which often occurs with sole reliance on chemical anesthesia.

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Resources

FINDING A HYPNOTHERAPIST qualified to help you prepare for surgery takes some research. “Anyone can hang out a shingle and say they’re a licensed or certified hypnoterapist, but there’s no such thing,” warns John Baren, a psychotherapist who practices hypnoanesthesia. Nor is there such a thing as a “hypnoanesthesiologist.” Instead, look for someone who has an M.D. or a psychology degree as well as training in and experience with hypnosis in a clinical setting.

According to Baren’s business partner, Kathy Platoni, Psy.D., the two most respected professional organizations for referrals are the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis in Des Plaines, Ill., and the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis in Pullman, Wash. Platoni advises asking a practitioner how many cases she has treated, what her professional degree is, and how many hours of clinical training she has had in hypnosis. Then, says Baren, follow your gut instinct, as you would when seeking out any health care professional.

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CLINICAL HYPNOSIS 312-645-9810

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PREOPERATIVE PREPARATION Some experts suggest you work with a professional hypnotist to learn how to use hypnosis as an adjunct. If you choose to do so, the groundwork generally takes only three to five sessions, and can be done weeks before the actual surgery (see Resources, page 82). However, you can glean many of the benefits on your own by learning self-hypnosis.

Several weeks before your surgery, set aside about 20 minutes for an initial learning session and follow the six steps below. Practice until you're confident you've mastered the technique, and be sure to rehearse once more on the night before your operation. Afterward, continue to use self-hypnosis to speed your recovery.

- **Get comfortable.** Find a quiet room where you won't be interrupted or distracted. Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- **Relax your body and mind.** Shut your eyes and take several deep breaths. Starting with your toes, contract and release individual muscle groups, progressing to your face and head. Focus on removing all the tension from your body.
- **Enter the hypnotic state.** Open your eyes and stare at a spot on the ceiling, focusing as

directly upward as possible without moving your head. Start counting backward from 200. Your eyes will soon tire and fall closed. Lie in this state of deep relaxation for a minute or two.

- **Picture yourself in a tranquil place.** Many people visualize garden or beach scenes. The

Stress-Free Surgery: A Case History

WALTER HALSEY DAVIS, a screenwriter in Santa Barbara, Calif., was nervous when he learned he required neck surgery to remove bone spurs in his spinal column. Two years earlier, after a knee operation, he had reacted to chemical anesthesia with "violent, wretched" vomiting. Davis also remembered feeling a lot of pain. But after undergoing one 90-minute hypnosis session with Christel Bejenke, M.D., an anesthesiologist who uses hypnosis on patients, Davis was much less anxious about his neck procedure. And on the morning of the surgery, his blood pressure reading was the lowest it had been in 15 years. Davis was alert upon awakening from the anesthesia and never became nauseous. Although the operation was more invasive than the knee surgery had been, he needed no medication afterward—"not even a Tylenol."

imagery you choose might depend on your upcoming operation. Platoni, for example, usually "goes" to the Bahamas during her surgeries. However, she didn't want to concentrate on anything hot before her laser procedure, so she went to Antarctica instead.

- **Introduce a healing suggestion.** Silently tell your mind how you want your body to feel before and after surgery. Be specific, but don't get too complicated or you'll lose your focus. For example, you might say to yourself: "When I enter the operating room, my mind will be still, my pulse and breathing will be low, and my heart will be calm. Afterward, I will heal rapidly without infection, I will notice little pain, and my appetite and bodily functions will quickly return to normal."

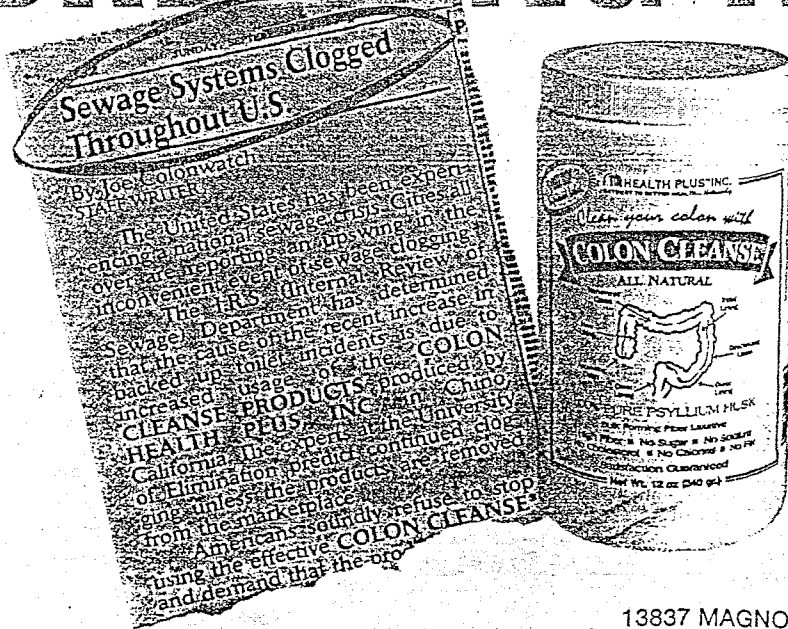
- **Wake yourself up.** Count backward from 10 to one. Tell yourself that when you finish counting you will be fully alert and will feel rested and refreshed.

As you enter the operating room on the day of your surgery, just conjure up the soothing scene you chose. Your mind will take care of the rest.

Betsy Block is a freelance writer in the Boston area. Her 3-year-old son Zack recently used hypnosis as an adjunct to anesthesia during his adenoid surgery.

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Circle #98: Page 161A