Why Are We Becoming So Entranced by Hypnotherapy?

Once considered a fringe practice, hypnotherapy is now praised by celebrities, offered at spas and even administered to treat depression and addiction. Does it work?

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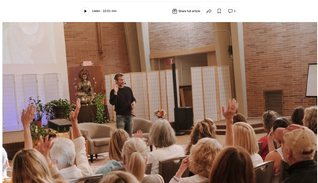

Jim Curtis, a transformational coach and the author of "The Book of Possibility," is part of a new wave of wellness practitioners using hypnotherapy to help clients rewire their brains. Lorien Suarez for The New York Times.

By Lauren Mechling
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When Pamela Lopez retired last year, she had a difficult time adjusting to the quiet after the chime of Slack notifications had ceased. She was finally able to travel and spend more time with her aging parents, her adult son and her friends. "But I kept thinking, I don't know what my purpose is if I'm not working for someone else," said Lopez, 62, who lives in Seattle.

So Lopez found a new hobby: self-hypnosis, a practice of using breath work and visualization exercises to induce a state of deep relaxation intended to make the mind more receptive to insights and change.

She signed up for a six-month course with Jim Curtis, a transformational coach and best-selling author whose new book, "The Book of Possibility" was published by Simon & Schuster this month.

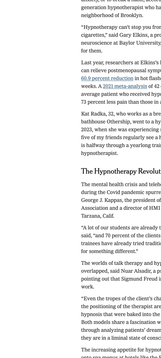
Curtis belongs to a new wave of wellness practitioners incorporating hypnotherapy into their practices to help clients rewire their brains. Curtis's method involves a mixture of radical acceptance, inventory-taking and neuroscience, as well as several forms of behavioral therapy.

Despite what 1960s cartoons of Svengali-like hypnotists might imply, hypnosis cannot be administered on a person who is unwilling. It works only on those who are open to it, as any practitioner will tell you.

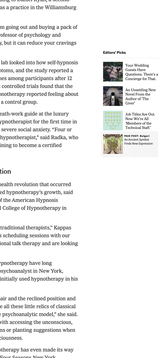
In a session, practitioners often start with a conversation exploring the patient's primary issue, and a discussion of what an alternate reality could look and feel like. They guide patients into a trancelike state so that they are more suggestible to messaging, which can help them manage their pain or change their habits and perceptions.

The military has used hypnosis since World War I to treat trauma. The cultural fascination with hypnosis, which a Life magazine headline in 1956 referred to as a "hypnotizing," took hold in the mid-20th century, and many doctors began using it as an alternative to anesthetic drugs. In recent years, hypnotherapy has been emerging from the fringes.

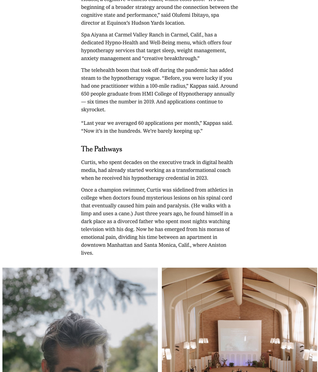
John Mulaney, who has grappled with addiction, interviewed Kerry Gaynor, "the hypnotherapist who got me to stop smoking," for his Netflix special "Everybody's in L.A." On the "Las Culturistas" podcast, Reese Witherspoon told Bowen Yang and Matt Rogers that she learned self-soothing tools from hypnotherapy that "changed my whole life." Curtis's current girlfriend, Jennifer Aniston, has spoken publicly about using hypnosis to manage her fear of flying. Hypnotherapy is also featured in the new novel "Swing," by Emma Cline, about a 70-something businessman with dementia.



A Wave Table, at the Spa by Equinox Hotels, used in hypnotherapy sessions. Equinox Hotels.



Anika Hudson, a cognitive wellness coach at the Spa at Equinox Hotel New York. Equinox Hotels.



Spa Alyssa at Carmel Valley Ranch has a dedicated Hypno-Health and Well-Being menu, offering hypnotherapy services for sleep, weight management, anxiety management and "creative breakthroughs." Carmel Valley Ranch

People typically seek hypnotherapy to manage depression or anxiety, or to break a habit, according to Daniel Ryan, a second-generation hypnotherapist who has a practice in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn.

"Hypnotherapy can't stop you from going out and buying a pack of cigarettes," said Gary Elkins, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University, but it can reduce your cravings for them.

Last year, researchers at Elkins's lab looked into how self-hypnosis can relieve postmenopausal symptoms, and the study reported a 60.9 percent reduction in hot flashes among participants after 12 weeks. A 2021 meta-analysis of 42 controlled trials found that the average patient who received hypnotherapy reported feeling about 73 percent less pain than those in a control group.

Kat Radka, 32, who works as a breath-work guide at the luxury bathhouse Othership, went to a hypnotherapist for the first time in 2021, when she was experiencing severe social anxiety. "Four or five of my friends regularly see a hypnotherapist," said Radka, who is halfway through a yearlong training to become a certified hypnotherapist.

The Hypnotherapy Revolution

The mental health crisis and telehealth revolution that occurred during the Covid pandemic spurred hypnotherapy's growth, said George J. Kappas, the president of the American Hypnosis Association and a director of RMI College of Hypnotherapy in Tarzana, Calif.

"A lot of our students are already traditional therapists," Kappas said, "and 70 percent of the clients scheduling sessions with our trainees have already tried traditional talk therapy and are looking for something different."

The worlds of talk therapy and hypnotherapy have long overlapped, said Nuar Alsadir, a psychoanalyst in New York, pointing out that Sigmund Freud initially used hypnotherapy in his work.

"Even the tropes of the client's chair and the reclined position and the positioning of the therapist are all these little relics of classical hypnosis that were baked into the psychoanalytic model," she said. Both models share a fascination with accessing the unconscious, through analyzing patients' dreams or planting suggestions when they are in a liminal state of consciousness.

The increasing appetite for hypnotherapy has even made its way onto spa menus at hotels like the Four Seasons New York Downtown and the Spa by Equinox Hotels, which just rolled out Hypnotherapy for High Performers, a 60-minute session with Anita Hoskot, a cognitive wellness coach, which costs $350. "It's the beginning of a broader strategy around the connection between the cognitive state and performance," said Ghalemi Ibtaya, spa director at Equinox's Hudson Yards location.

Spa Alyssa at Carmel Valley Ranch in Carmel, Calif., has a dedicated Hypno-Health and Well-Being menu, which offers four hypnotherapy services that target sleep, weight management, anxiety management and "creative breakthrough."

The telehealth boom that took off during the pandemic has added steam to the hypnotherapy vogue. "Before, you were lucky if you had one practitioner within a 100-mile radius," Kappas said. Around 650 people graduate from RMI College of Hypnotherapy annually — six times the number in 2019. And applications continue to skyrocket.

"Last year we averaged 60 applications per month," Kappas said. "Now it's in the hundreds. We're barely keeping up."

The Pathways

Curtis, who spent decades on the executive track in digital health media, had already started working as a transformational coach when he received his hypnotherapy credential in 2021.

Once a champion swimmer, Curtis was sidelined from athletics in college when doctors found mysterious lesions on his spinal cord that eventually caused him pain and paralysis. (He walks with a limp and uses a cane.) Just three years ago, he found himself in a dark place as a divorced father who spent most nights watching television with his dog. Now he has emerged from his morass of emotional pain, dividing his time between an apartment in downtown Manhattan and Santa Monica, Calif., where Aniston lives.

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Curtis recently held a three-day weekend retreat at Kripalu, a yoga center in Stockbridge, Mass. Lorien Suarez for The New York Times.

Melissa Tiers has cultivated an Instagram following of 151,000 as a tough-talking, punk-rocking hypnotherapist who blends journeys into the subconscious with consciousness raising. A former member of Poisonous Punk, a band formed in the 1990s, she talks like a sailor and leads free workshops for groups such as immigration lawyers and aid workers.

Tiers came to hypnotherapy by way of an early interest in psychedelic drugs. She developed a technique called hypno-psychedelic, whereby a trained guide uses the hypnosis to lead a client through a drug-free psychedelic experience. "A lot of people are fascinated by psychedelics," she said; however, many are too scared to take them.

When she isn't leading tele-hypnotherapy sessions from her plant-filled Bronx apartment, she is traveling to medical conferences, and has trained groups of doctors on medical applications of hypnotherapy in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and Australia. "Nowadays, the hypnotists are doing a lot of the research — they're a bit ouer," Tiers said of the shrinking gap between the hypnotherapy and medical communities.

The Possibilities

Curtis, 53, who said he was trying not to overextend himself, held a three-day weekend retreat at Kripalu, a sprawling yoga center in Stockbridge, Mass. The Berkshires weekend destination capped the head count at 200 (another 100 people joined on livestream). A welcome event with a meditation session and book signing for "The Book of Possibility" drew 53 people.

People familiar with his work often approach him at live events and say things like, "I just want you to know, I love your books and also my sister died, and I can't stop thinking about her, and also I just broke up with my boyfriend and I'm in so much grief and pain," he said.

People share their pain with him in part so that he can bear witness and validate it for them. "Sometimes I can give strategies depending on what they're saying, and sometimes I can just say, 'I'm here — let's do this,'" he said. Then his tone shifted, and he began to cry. "It makes me emotional sometimes, in a beautiful way," he added.

"When I think about all the things I have accomplished since I started working with Jim, I get a little overwhelmed," said Lopez, the recent retiree. Her group course with Curtis wrapped up in April, and now she books private coaching sessions with him and regularly listens to his guided meditations. "It's changing the way I'm thinking," she said. "It's not that weird."

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