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Self-Hypnosis is Pain Fighting Tool

Breast cancer patients use self-hypnosis to control their pain levels.

Charity Vogel

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Women living with breast cancer—and others dealing with pain caused by serious illness—may find a fresh pathway to feeling better, thanks to new research by a social worker at the University at Buffalo.

The path is an alternative, but promising, one: hypnosis.

Combined with group psychotherapy sessions, self-hypnosis in breast cancer patients dealing with pain helped the women control their pain levels much better over time, the research showed. Their pain increased "significantly less," in fact.

The study, led in part by Lisa D. Butler, an associate professor in UB's School of Social Work, showed that self-hypnosis sessions by women with metastatic breast cancer—a serious form of the illness, in which the cancer has spread beyond its original site—combined with the group psychotherapy helped the cancer patients control pain over a period of time, compared with women who did not use the technique. Self-hypnosis means a state of focused alertness, awareness and concentration, combined with relaxation.

That result offers intriguing insights into the ways that cancer pain and pain from other illnesses might be handled in the future, said Butler, who came to UB in 2009 from Stanford University.

"Cancer, particularly that's metastatic, can be extremely painful," Butler said. "A good part of pain is not just experiencing it, but anticipating it. Fear makes it worse. This is giving women a tool to manage it."

The 125 women who participated in the long-term study organized by Stanford researchers learned simple techniques, such as visualization, for self-hypnosis, Butler said. Some women were then asked to use the technique to treat themselves in brief sessions, and to report on pain.

The results of the treatments, which were coupled with group therapy and compared with the experiences of women who did not use the techniques, was that the hypnosis and therapy allowed the women to be able to control their pain level—meaning it did not increase over time.

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The recurrence of pain episodes, and their duration, did not appear to be changed by the tools, the study showed.

The techniques of hypnosis might work for women in Western New York with cancer, or men or women dealing with pain and suffering related to health, Butler said.

Interested residents can ask their doctors for referrals to pain clinics, where the techniques can be taught, she said.

"You learn the techniques, and then you can do it yourself," Butler said.

Women with cancer and others with painful illness should also consider the benefits of group psychotherapy sessions, Butler said.

"Getting into a group counseling setting is one of the most powerful tools for dealing with cancer," she said. "When you're dealing with cancer, it has a huge impact on your life. It's very, very worrisome. It's this outlet to process what you are going through."

Groups may be found by asking at your doctor's office, as well as at local cancer organizations and Gilda's Club, Butler said.

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