



Hypnosis

By Lily Nguyen
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As the instructor speaks, her students slump down in their seats, slack-jawed and droopy-eyed. The woman continues to drone on in a soft, soothing voice. Her sympathetic, sea-green eyes slide from student to student as their eyes close and their heads loll.

Occasionally, she stops beside someone still showing some sign of alertness - stiff shoulders, straight back, clenched hands. Lifting the student's arm at the wrist, she gently shakes until it becomes slack. "Let it go, let it go," she repeats softly, until the tension seeps away like water from a wet sponge and she steps away, satisfied.

The woman, Georgina Cannon, is the instructor of a course on hypnosis, a nine-day seminar over three weeks offered by the Ontario Hypnosis Centre in Toronto. For \$1,600 each, her students will learn how to induce trance, what it can be used for and how to turn hypnosis into a career. They also will learn how to hypnotize themselves and each other, going into as many as two dozen trances a day.

At the front of the room, Cannon has ceased her strolling. It's time for the class to wake up. Her soothing voice becomes louder and more commanding.

"In a moment, I will count from one to five," she says. "You will find yourself becoming alert, refreshed, feeling better than you have in a long, long time."

As she counts, the students gradually come back into their bodies. Their heads begin to lift back on their necks. They wiggle their fingers, wriggle their toes, take deep breaths. Finally, their eyes open and they look around, shrugging off the trance, curious, wide awake.

The course isn't what you'd expect if your only brush with the power of suggestion came watching tuxedoed men in white gloves weaving trances from a stage. There's nothing mysterious or exotic about this seminar. Bright fluorescent lights banish shadows in the basement room of the Princess Margaret Lodge, a patients' residence associated with the Princess Margaret Hospital. On a sideboard, hot coffee and pamphlets are placed out for the 13 students and visiting reporter.

Cannon looks like she could sit comfortably in a boardroom on Bay St., with her fashionably coiffed red hair and well-cut suit. This is clinical hypnosis, she says - hypnotism as a professional tool for healing, not entertainment.

Hypnosis can be a powerful tool, but it's not magic. If you really don't want to be hypnotized, you can't be. And you can't be made to do anything you don't want to do.

“This is not a woo-woo business. If you begin to think you're a guru with hypnosis, you're not going to be effective.”

She explains that students will be certified by the National Guild of Hypnotists if they pass, and most do. That will allow them to use hypnotism to help people lose weight, quit smoking or deal with other unwelcome habits.

Hypnosis also works on allergies and multiple sclerosis, she says. And health-care workers - dentists, paramedics, midwives - can use it for pain management. And if you're properly licensed, you can use hypnosis for therapy, says Cannon, a hypnotherapist with a thriving practice.

“The power of the mind is incredible.”

Most of the students - eight women and five men - have career-related reasons for being here. Besides several therapists and counsellors, the class includes a paramedic, a yoga instructor and a few people hoping to make the training part of a career change. Only one student, a housewife who wants to lose weight, says she has no professional agenda.

Going Under

They gather for the first time on a sunny Friday morning. After introducing themselves and being introduced to the basic theory of hypnosis, they're ready to make their first pass at inducing trance. Everyone (including the reporter) is paired off and given a “script” to read aloud to their partners to put them into trance.

You are about to participate in an interactive experience. I will ask you to participate by using your vivid imagination in a very active way to help achieve the results you desire.

Now, close your eyes and relax. Just for a moment, imagine all the muscle groups in your body letting go. Take a deep breath. Good. Exhale now. And take another deep breath . . .

The monotonous, repetitive phrases flow on for three pages, asking the subject to relax various muscle groups, one by one.

It seems absurdly simple. Despite a struggle to find the right voice - a rhythmic, even tone - nearly all the students succeed in putting their partners into trance.

My first try is so effective it alarms me. My partner is lolling in her chair and it's time to wake her. Telling her I will count from one to five, at which she will wake feeling refreshed, I instead count from five to one. She continues to loll. I stare dumbfounded.

After a minute or so, I succeed in flagging down Cannon. Suppressing a chuckle, she repeats the process for waking the subject, counting from one to five and telling her to become gradually aware of the room, the chair, the ground beneath her feet.

The woman wakes.

Later, she tells me she was frightened. She heard me counting and knew I wanted her to wake up, but she felt herself sinking deeper with each backward count. She tried to open her mouth to tell me to count again, the right way, but found she couldn't.

The episode brings up a point Cannon wants to share with the class.

“You can't get stuck in hypnosis,” she says. If the hypnotist stops speaking, the trance will gradually wear off, so it's impossible to become trapped.

Another common misconception is that hypnosis is about mind-control. It's not, Cannon says.

It's completely voluntarily, allowing you to let go. But if you really don't want to be hypnotized, you can't be. And you can't be made to do anything you don't want to do under hypnosis.

Cannon's intern, 25-year-old Asad Mecci, a former entertainer making the jump to clinical hypnotism, backs her up. Even in stage hypnotism, he says, there's no mind-control. The point is making people think there is.

Does that mean people want to quack like a duck? I ask.

Most people are willing to do crazy things if they think someone else is in control - and thus responsible for their actions, Mecci replies.

“Do you think the kind of people who get up on stage to be hypnotized are the shy and reluctant type?” he asks with a grin.

That doesn't mean people who go into hypnosis are weak-minded, Cannon says. In fact, those who fall into trance easily are the ones who can focus, with good powers of concentration.

Children under 6 and people with low IQs can't be hypnotized because they can't concentrate enough. Psychotics and extremely distrustful people are also difficult to induce into trance.

Analytical people are sometimes hard to hypnotize, too, because they have difficulty quieting their conscious mind, Cannon says. But there are special techniques of “distraction” used to induce hypnosis for them.

Now, it's my turn to be hypnotized. A little to my relief, the energy flows out of my body easily with the simple words. It's how I imagine drowning to be - no pain or sensation, only a blissful sense of drift. I can hear and smell everything and understand what's going on, but what's interesting is that I just don't care.

Cannon defines hypnosis as moving aside the conscious mind to speak directly to the subconscious. While the conscious mind analyzes and judges, the subconscious is like a sponge, absorbing everything without interpretation. Our experiences and the things others have said or done to us are stored there.

If we are told we're "stupid" or "ugly," we could end up behaving as though we are stupid or ugly. But by speaking directly to the subconscious, those suggestions can be uprooted and replaced by more positive ones.

Hypnosis is like the cumulative effect of a lifetime of positive suggestions, Cannon says. It can wipe the slate clean of deep-rooted negative beliefs and replace them with positive ones to build new, desirable behaviour.

Or so the theory goes.

Sinking Deeper

Not all trances are equal. Cannon explains that there are levels of hypnosis, and the deeper the level, the more one can do with a subject. Hypnotists use "depth tests" to determine whether their subjects have reached the stage they need to be in. Cannon teaches six depth tests, one for each of the levels.

To help her demonstrate, she calls on Amber Valentyne, a yoga instructor in her early 30s whose black hair and glowing pale skin radiate a relaxed energy.

Valentyne excels at achieving the needed relaxation for hypnosis, Cannon says. In her black leotard and carmine-coloured shawl, Valentyne spends her coffee breaks twirling her limbs into strange yogic postures.

Now, she sits facing the class. Cannon sits beside her at a right angle - a more comfortable position for subjects than facing them head-on, she tells the class.

"Look at the wall in front of you as if you are looking through it," Cannon says gently, and Valentyne's gaze becomes vague and unfocused. Cannon says she will count to 20 and asks Valentyne to open her eyes on each count until she wants to close them. By the count of three, her lids begin flickering. At five, her eyes have rolled up into her head, with only the whites exposed. At eight, her eyes are closed and she is slumped, mouth open, chin floating, in trance.

Cannon touches her shoulders, telling her to go deeper. She lifts Valentyne's arm at the wrist, shaking it until it's loose and completely relaxed. She then performs the first depth test, called "eye catalepsy," in which the subject cannot open her eyes.

As I count to three, you will try to open your eyes but find you cannot. Your eyes will be stuck, stuck like glue.

As Cannon counts, "one . . . two . . . three," Valentyne's lids flicker and strain but remain closed.

Cannon proceeds to the next stage, "arm catalepsy."

Your arm will become like a rod of steel.

She lifts Valentyne's arm until it's thrust out at a right angle directly in front of her, tugs on the wrist to lock the elbow straight, then lets go. Valentyne's arm remains rigid. Cannon pushes it down. It bounces back up.

Now, unlock your elbow, unlock your shoulder.

Cannon gently places the arm back in Valentyne's lap.

In the third stage, "number block," Valentyne is asked to speak while in her trance. Cannon tells her to count to 10, then to count again, leaving out "six."

Valentyne, her eyes still closed, counts in a quiet, faraway voice.

"One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five" - everyone holds their breath - "seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . 10."

The fourth stage is "glove analgesia," in which the hand is numbed to pain.

Cannon later explains that this is the level that must be achieved for using hypnosis for pain management, as in hypno-birthing or emergency medicine.

Valentyne's arm is stretched out in front of her and her open hand is pointed palm downward. Cannon touches various spots on her wrist and hands.

You will feel touch but no pain, touch but no pain.

Using her nails, Cannon picks up a fold of skin on the back of Valentyne's hand, lifts it up, then twists and pinches viciously.

"Do you feel touch but no pain?" she asks.

"Yes." Valentyne barely breathes.

Cannon continues to the fifth stage. It's called "positive hallucination," which refers to the subject's ability to see things that don't actually exist.

When I ask you to, you will open your eyes but remain in hypnosis. You will see a clock.

When requested, Valentyne's eyes open. They are bleary, focused on a spot in the air in front of her.

"Tell me about the clock," says Cannon.

"Its numbers are big and black," says Valentyne.

Cannon tells her to close her eyes and sink deeper into trance. Her eyes immediately shut and her body relaxes, slumping once again.

The final stage of "negative hallucination" is the one frequently seen in stage shows and on TV.

You will appear to emerge from hypnosis but remain under. When I ask the class to write something down, you will try to find your pen, but you will not be able to.

As Cannon guides her from trance, Valentyne's eyes open. She gets up from the chair, apparently fully awake, and walks back to her usual seat.

"Okay, let's continue with the lesson," Cannon says. "Everybody write this down."

Valentyne begins rifling through her papers, looking very disturbed. We sneak peeks at her, pretending to be listening to the lecture.

"What's wrong, Amber?" Cannon asks.

"I can't find my pen," Valentyne gasps, clutching her papers anxiously. The pen is right in front of her.

"Don't worry about it. Come back and sit down," Cannon says, gesturing to the chair at the front. Like a somnambulist, Valentyne obeys. As soon as she sits down, she falls into a deep trance.

Cannon brings her out, using the now-familiar count to five.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

Valentyne, her face split wide with a grin, says, "I feel amazing. I feel like I just spent a day at the spa, lost 20 pounds and fell in love." The class, tense and quiet through the

demonstration, bursts into laughter. But later that day, Valentyne breaks down and cries during class.

Cannon is telling the students about a turning point in her life. As a public-relations executive, she attended a leadership retreat for high-powered CEOs, she says. It was intimidating being among all the three-piece suits and testosterone. But when she was voted the best leader, she realized how much she, like many women, are dogged by a needless sense of insecurity.

As Cannon tells her story, tears trickle down Valentyne's face. Mecci brings her a box of tissues and she takes one and weeps into it. The two leave the room.

The Power of Suggestion

Going into the little-explored areas of your mind is not without side effects, Cannon warned on the first day. Expect strange sleeping patterns for a while, she said. Those with long-buried issues might find them surfacing.

“If you need help dealing with them, I'm here,” she told the class.

The students accepted this without question. They'd been seeing the power of hypnosis and something was changing. A door was opening in their minds.

Cannon's warning came true the next day. Several students reported unusually deep slumber. One said she couldn't sleep at all. As for Valentyne, she knew something was going to happen hours before she broke down. “It was like a sign: ‘Amber, you have something to deal with here today.’”

Cannon's story was the trigger. As a single mother, Valentyne juggles many things successfully but often feels pressured to be perfect.

“I'm strong and I'm independent. I support myself and my daughter quite well teaching yoga, which not many people do in this city. But sometimes, there's this feeling of being overwhelmed.”

After breaking down in class, she and Mecci had a private hypnosis session at her request. He put her into trance and took her back to the first time she felt overwhelmed. It was her first day of school. She was 6, standing at the bus stop dressed in suede platform shoes and a trenchcoat. She was alone because her mother was in hospital giving birth to her sister.

Mecci took her back a little further. She was still a cocky, confident kid. Her mother was at home and Amber was a brilliant, independent girl who played chess and liked math. Mecci got her to hold on to that feeling of confidence, then apply it to her feeling of being overwhelmed.

“The feeling changed to, ‘Hey, I’m a pretty strong, cool kid standing here in my suede platform shoes and trenchcoat,’” Valentyne says later. “That’s what it was about, not needing my mother to see me off to school.”

On another day, Jim Strome, 38, a quiet man who could be met five times and not remembered, tells the class he has made a breakthrough. On the way to the class one foggy, drizzly morning, he broke down and cried for 40 minutes over a long-buried issue that resurfaced. But after a private session with Cannon, he confronted it and finally dealt with it, he says.

“I used to walk with my head down. Now, I find it hard to walk with my head down.”

The change stays with Strome through the rest of the seminar. His diffident manner is replaced by a warm, positive energy. His face becomes brighter, his voice compelling.

“The process of taking a client to the best they can be is so exciting,” Cannon says. In fact, that’s why she entered the profession. As a public-relations manager, she liked her job and made ‘unbelievable’ amounts of money, but she left to devote her time to teaching and promoting hypnosis.

Even with clinical fees of \$120 an hour, she says she earns only a fraction of what she used to make. But for Cannon, it’s worth the pay cut.

“Understand the power of this stuff,” she says. “It’s beautiful.”

Still, she warns, hypnosis has definite limits.

“The client has to do the work. It’s not magic.”

But many people come to her hoping it is - like the smokers who go through hypnosis sessions and immediately run out to buy a pack of cigarettes to ‘test’ if it worked. It won’t, says Cannon. If people don’t really want to let go of their habits, they won’t.

She offers herself as an example. She has a weakness for cookies, she explains. She has tried hypnosis in an effort to stop scarfing them down, but to no avail. That’s not because hypnosis doesn’t work, she says. It’s because, deep down, she doesn’t want to let go of her cookies. She enjoys them too much.

Some people won’t admit that, she says. They want to get rid of their bad habit and enjoy it, too. Those are the people she refuses to treat - whiners and blamers.

“When I hear, ‘I’ve tried everything else and it didn’t work, so I thought I’d try this,’ I know I can’t do anything,” Cannon says.

“For most people, taking charge of their lives is a big leap.”

The seminar is drawing to a close and the students - tight-knit over nine days of sharing their lunches, experiences and personal lives - are preparing to disband. They seem subdued yet elated. Nobody knows if they will get what they came here for. The ones looking for new careers may not find them. The woman who wanted to lose weight may not lose it. Amber Valentyne likely will feel overwhelmed again. Jim Strome's new-found assertiveness may fade over time.

For the time being, it doesn't matter. For nine days, the 13 students changed their lives with the power of their minds, and it's something they all will remember.