

Living

Hypnotherapy is a world away from a magician on stage swinging a gold watch, says *Rose Costello*. It's more about enabling your brain to calm down, putting you back in control of your own thoughts



A little bit of magic

If your only knowledge of hypnosis comes from films such as *Get Out* in which a creepy psychiatrist uses it to messle her daughter's boyfriend while simply stirring her tea, then any wariness is understandable. Under the pretence of helping him to stop smoking, she takes him to a dark place in his mind. Or perhaps you're old enough to remember stage shows in which a flamboyant hypnotist would call members of the audience up on stage, put them under and then made them prance about squawking like chickens.

Clinical hypnotherapy is nothing like that – unless you want it to be. It's really all about enabling the mind to calm down so that you feel in control of your thought processes, rather than letting them control you, according to Patsia Brennan, a clinical hypnotherapist and owner of the Positive Habit in Dublin.

"Stage hypnosis gives the impression that a person loses control over their mind, but that opposite is actually the case," says Brennan.

"It's all to do with expectations, and stage hypnosis is where the confusion comes from. They expected to lose consciousness but the reality is the opposite: you reach a heightened awareness... What was once vague is now sharp and you have the focus you need for positive change."

Brennan was aware of hypnosis from an early age as it had helped her father to give up smoking under the guidance of Jack Gibson, a surgeon and hypnotist who claimed to have treated thousands of patients without anaesthetic but with their approval to use hypnosis. He was a strong advocate of the power of the mind to help overcome ill health, according to the *British Medical Journal*. "I used to hear the tapes through the wall of my bedroom. One of the reasons my dad is still alive and well is thanks to hypnotherapy," Brennan says.

Brennan's early career was spent on stage and on camera as an actress. "I had some highs and many lows. It was hard to face a lot of rejection and it definitely took

a toll on my mental health, which was already fragile back then," she says. She switched track in 2007.

"I was in a play – ironically called *Look Back in Anger* – and I'll never forget the feeling: it was so certain that I wanted to do something that helped people. I hated to experience my character's suffering and knowing that I couldn't.

She has since completed training in clinical hypnosis, positive psychology and mindfulness, including a professional diploma in positive health from the Positive Psychology department at the Royal College of Surgeons. She also has trained in neuro-linguistic therapy, which is a form of positive thinking.

There is good evidence that hypnosis can help with certain problems, particularly smoking. A randomised trial of 286 smokers conducted at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Centre in 2008 found that, after 12 months, 20 per cent of those who received hypnosis had quit, while just 14 per cent

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of those who received behavioural counselling had. Those with a history of depression did even better. Other studies have shown that a combination of hypnosis and cognitive behavioural therapy is effective.

"I suffered from chronic anxiety for many years and hypnotherapy didn't just alleviate it; I now enjoy very positive mental health," says Brennan. "I genuinely feel joyful, powerful and calm most of the time. I practise hypnotherapy, meditation and yoga most days to help me to maintain calmness and to allow me to help others."

In a report published in the journal *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, which is published by the American Psychological Association, the authors say that hypnosis occupies "a unique niche among clinical interventions", and that "a substantial body of evidence supports its use across a range of psychological conditions".

According to the report, hypnotic techniques are ideally suited to offer



useful suggestions that can alter perspective, behavioural and physiological responses. It can be the continual flow of spontaneous mental activity: focus, attention, engage imagination, and facilitate self-regulation.

In other words, the right mindset can help you to control aspects of your health, as David Robson writes in *The Expectation Effect*, where he points out that even those who know that they are being given a placebo enjoy the boost commonly associated with the placebo effect. Wanting it to work can make all the difference – even for the sceptical.

The violinist Fionnuala Sherry, who forms half of the Secret Garden instrumental duo, sought help from Brennan when she found herself struggling to sleep in early 2021.

She had had a tough few years having been diagnosed with cancer just after her mother died in 2018. "I had dreadful sleep problems that were escalating and beginning to affect all aspects of my life," she says. "I felt foggy-brained and that wasn't functioning at my best."

"Like it has been for everyone, Covid has been a deeply stressful time – especially as an artist, where we lost two years of work – and in addition I lost another year because of my cancer treatment."

Sherry was sceptical about the process. "I had no expectations and didn't expect to see any improvement. I just thought, 'I'll give this a try. Sure I've nothing to lose,' she says. "But Patsia has managed to help me to reframe everything and to find positive ways to handle stressful moments."

The clinical hypnotherapist Patsia Brennan, for left and above right with the violinist Fionnuala Sherry, believes that hypnotherapy helped her father stop smoking and has had a transformative effect on her own life

Sherry responded quickly. "I didn't even realise I'd been hypnotised because I'm a hyper-alert person. I thought nobody will be able to hypnotise me," she says. "The amazing thing is you begin to see the results almost immediately and the benefits have been far more than I could have expected. My sleep issues improved overnight and my therapy has reached into all aspects of my life."

Since completing that first one-week programme she has continued to play an audio download each night for about 20 minutes before going to sleep. "Half the time I fall asleep before the end of it. It's like the mantras – you're just taking time out and letting go. It's super-relaxing," says Sherry.

It is important to be aware that hypnotherapy is not a medical intervention. The NHS warns those with psychosis or certain types of personality disorder against trying this, as it could make the condition worse. "In any doubt as to whether it is for you, check with your GP first."

Brennan's eight-week Light up Your World programme for reducing anxiety and encouraging better sleep costs €148. hypnosustainable.com