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Mind-Over-Matter - Hypnosis Can Relieve the Pain of Tattooing

By Dana Herra - Staff Writer

CORTLAND - Nate Melvin looked like he was taking a nap Wednesday afternoon, except for an occasional glance at the tattoo being inked into his leg.

"I have to open my eyes once in awhile or I will fall asleep," he said.

Melvin, of DeKalb, was being tattooed while hypnotized at Proton Studios in Cortland. DeKalb hypnotherapist Randy Scott has been working with the studio for about a month, putting customers into a trance so they feel little or no pain while being inked.



Chris May of Proton Studio in Cortland (left) tattoos a pair of rabbits onto the calf of Storey Melvin of DeKalb on Wednesday afternoon while hypnotherapist Randy Scott puts Melvin into a hypnotic state to lessen the pain she feels during the procedure. Scott recently got the idea to hypnotize people during the tattooing process while watching the television show "Miami Ink." Chronicle photo CURTIS CLEGG

"I feel pressure," Melvin said. "I can just tell where's he's at. I know he's touching my skin, but I don't feel the needle."

Tattoo artist Chris May said Melvin's tattoo is not in a particularly painful spot, and Melvin rated the pain he was feeling before the trance around 5 on a scale of 1 to 10. But past hypnosis customers were able to relax while being tattooed in sensitive places like the ribs, lower back or stomach, where pain is usually a 10, May said. He said the relaxed customers are easier to tattoo than those feeling the full dose of pain.

"Usually the customer tenses up really bad to brace for it," he said. "Randy gets rid of all that tension so it's almost like tattooing a corpse. It's bizarre."

Scott said he was inspired to call the studio after watching a regular on the cable TV reality show "Miami Ink" squirm while getting a particularly painful tattoo. He went to May the next day to drop off his card.

“As I was walking out the door, he said, ‘Hey, we’ve got a guy in here right now who wants to try it,’” Scott recalled. He filmed his session with the man, who was getting a painful tattoo on his collarbone apparently pain-free. He said he sent a copy of the video to the producers of “Miami Ink.”

Scott said he can also relieve the pain of childbirth and of medical conditions like arthritis or cancer.

“This is a stepping stone,” he said. “I don’t just want to be ‘painless tattoo guy.’ Any kind of pain, especially chronic pain, I want to work with.”

American Pain Society spokesman Chuck Weber said hypnosis is “talked about” in medical circles. The APS is a professional organization for pain management physicians.

“Alternative therapies are becoming more and more accepted in pain management with the growing realization that there just is no magic bullet pharmaceutical,” he said.

Guy Montgomery, a doctor at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, has published research on using hypnosis to treat cancer pain.

“Does it work? Yes,” he said. “The most effective use of hypnosis is in pain control. ...Probably around 80 percent of people, roughly, can benefit from hypnosis for pain management.”

Montgomery said hypnosis works exactly as it appears to work in the tattoo studio - by helping people to relax and changing their expectations.

“It’s not to say it’s a trick or people are lying, but we tend to have self-fulfilling prophecies,” he said. “Things tend to be the way we expect them to be. ...And people who tend to be more anxious tend to feel more pain.”

Though pop culture images of hypnosis often portray people as robotic or having no memory, Melvin just seemed deeply relaxed. He remained aware of what was happening around him and was able to carry on a normal conversation while in the trance.

“It’s kind of cool, because you can open your eyes and come a little bit out of it and feel some of the pain, then you can close your eyes and go right back into it,” he said.

Melvin’s wife, Storey, paced nervously around the studio while awaiting her turn.

“I have a really low pain tolerance,” she said as she showed off her four other tattoos. “I know it hurts, but I don’t want it to hurt. If I can get away with it not hurting, I would definitely be into that.”

May, who has been tattooing for 10 years, said people with a lot of tattoos often develop their own brand of self-hypnosis.

“When I get tattooed, I can get myself to relax,” he said. “But it still hurts.”

He said one hypnosis customer actually asked to feel some pain.

“He was just freaked out,” May said. “He said, ‘It's a tattoo. I kind of expect it to hurt.’”

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P.S. By the way, Hypnotist BLAZE has hypnotized people getting tattoos successfully so they neither feel any pain or discomfort. If you are in the Richmond, VA area and want to experience the same benefits of hypnosis, please call BLAZE's office at **804.270.2913**. Thank you.