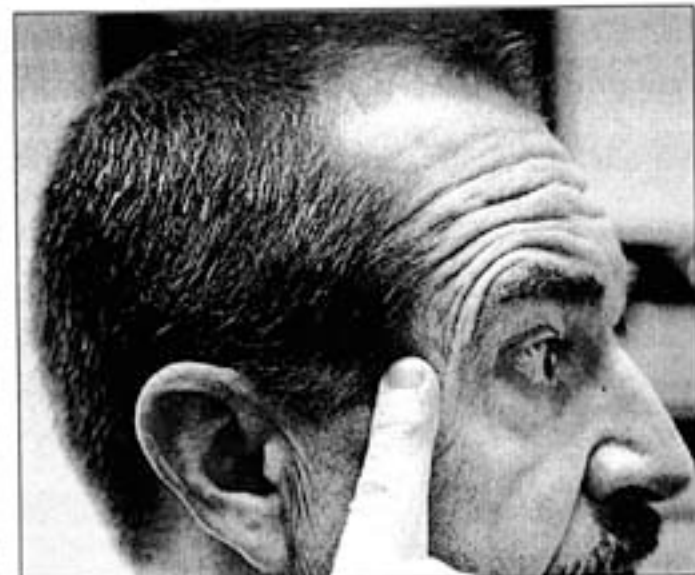




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Counselor uses relaxation
to help patients with fears

By Donna De Marco
 THE WASHINGTON TIMES



Mr. Deninger says he uses hypnosis "only when I know it's going to be helpful. You have to convince the person that change is going to happen."

Michael Deninger has a knack for relaxing people. The hypnotherapist and licensed professional counselor doesn't swing a pocket watch to put people in a trance or snap his fingers to conk a client out.

Instead, the 57-year-old counselor, known as "Dr. Mike," hypnotizes his patients with his soothing voice and deep-breathing exercises. He uses hypnosis and counseling to help them overcome everything from serious mental health problems to phobias and habits.

"A lot of this is intuitive for me," he said. "Some of it has to do with being with someone and connecting — understanding their journey."

Mr. Deninger sees up to 25 clients per week. He uses counseling or a combination of counseling and hypnosis in working with his patients.

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About 20 percent of his clients see him only for hypnotherapy.

"[Hypnosis is] something I use only when I know it's going to be helpful," he said. "You have to convince the person that change is going to happen."

On this day Mr. Deninger greets Patti Cleary, a 38-year-old Alexandria resident who has a fear of heights. Mr. Deninger's practice, Phoenix Counseling & Hypnotherapy, is tucked away on the sixth floor of an office building in Alexandria.

Ms. Cleary explains that her fear of heights has intensified as she's gotten older. She had her worst panic attack at the MCI Center just about a year

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ago. Her seats were two rows from the top of the stadium.

Mr. Deninger sits across from her and listens intently. He explains a procedure called "eye movement integration," which will get Ms. Cleary to think differently about her phobia just by stimulating parts of her brain through eye movement.

Mr. Deninger takes his willing patient into another room, where he tells her to go as close to the sixth-floor window as comfortably possible. She stops about 4 feet away. Looking straight ahead, her body is tense and her hands are sweating. She won't go any closer.

Mr. Deninger brings her back to his office and begins the exercise. He has her envision what she saw through the window and the fear associated with it. Then he instructs her to follow a red pen only with her eyes. He moves it around in different directions for nearly 30 seconds.

When he's done, he has her look ahead onto a blank wall to envision the fear again. This time the image is "fuzzy" and "not so strong," she said.

"This is so cool," Mr. Deninger said, adding that that was the response he hoped to get from her.

After two more eye exercises, Ms. Cleary goes back to the window. She takes one step closer than before. She is less tense and more confident but won't go any farther. Mr. Deninger reassures her this is good progress.

The next exercise is hypnosis — something Ms. Cleary has never successfully done before.

Mr. Deninger is a hypnotherapist — not a hypnotist. Hypnotists are not licensed professionals. He became a board-

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certified hypnotherapist in 1999 and received his mental health counseling degree two years earlier. He began his practice in 2001.

Ms. Cleary puts headphones on, reclines in the couch and focuses straight ahead.

"You will be in control the whole time," Mr. Deninger tells her, speaking softly into a microphone that connects to the headphones. "You'll be aware throughout the whole process."

Ms. Cleary closes her eyes after just minutes of listening to his soothing voice. He begins reciting the alphabet backward. In between letters, he tells her to continue to take deep breaths, reinforcing the idea that she is completely relaxed.

As the minutes pass, Ms. Cleary's face muscles drop and her head slightly slants to the side. Those are signs that she has reached the "alpha" stage — a level between consciousness and sleep where people are more open and receptive to suggestions, Mr. Deninger said.

"I'm so amazed every time it happens," Mr. Deninger added.

Hypnotic healer



Michael Deninger uses eye movement integration in this session with Patti Cleary, of Alexandria, at his Phoenix Counseling and Hypnotherapy office. Mr. Deninger is a licensed professional counselor and board-certified hypnotherapist.

Mr. Deninger is patient. He continues the session with a series of exercises. He brings her back to a time in her life when she was confident and at the "top of her game," he said.

Anytime she finds herself in a place where she is fearful of heights she can immediately think about that place.

"Some things you can put behind you like the automatic fear of... heights," he told her. After the 30-minute hypnosis session, Mr. Deninger counts backward from 10 to bring Ms. Cleary back.

"That was interesting," she said when she opened her eyes. "My body felt detached almost."

The biggest test comes minutes later when Mr. Deninger brings her back into the room that overlooks Alexandria. This time — with no hesitation — she walks over to the window and looks down, clearly confident.

"Now that's amazing," she said.

Photos by Liz O. Bayler/The Washington Times