

Medical Hypnosis: Where Cancer & Hypnotherapy Meet

BY MARY B. BATTAGLIA



Medical hypnosis can help support people diagnosed with cancer. As a clinical hypnosis practitioner, I have used hypnosis techniques to alleviate pain, remove fears, stay calm, and help prepare for surgery during my own cancer journey.

I have been practicing clinical hypnosis for 10 years, working with clients to address many different issues like anxiety and stress. I have supported individuals with different medical issues, including brain, breast, lung, prostate, and skin cancers. Some patients with cancer came to me because of their fear of needles or for preparation before chemotherapy and blood work. Others need support pre-surgery, with relaxation techniques, or for healing purposes. I have found that with hypnosis I am able to help people in a way that creates a wholeness in their healing.

Hypnosis is a relaxed state like a meditative state; it is like a daydream but deeper. Many of us can experience hypnosis on our own, usually while getting lost in our thoughts. I guide people through hypnosis to let go of thoughts by entering the subconscious where your memories and imagination exist. People usually remember these sessions, and we will have conversations while they are in that state. In deeper states of hypnosis, we can look within to see if there is information about one's illness. An individual can hold on to traumas, pain, or emotions from their past, and we can release these via hypnosis, helping in the healing process.

There are many different techniques to help people through hypnosis, including

visualizing the healing of one's body or using processes to reduce pain or discomfort. For people with a deep faith, they can find comfort in the hypnotic space. For example, I had one client who was getting ready for a lumpectomy for breast cancer, and—through hypnosis—she saw all these angels surround her in the treatment room and felt comforted. It removed all her fears, and she knew she would be okay. She left her procedure feeling elated and called me after to share how calm she felt and how everything went well. You never know what someone will experience in hypnosis because it truly is unique to the individual.

Last year, I learned firsthand just how valuable and supportive hypnotherapy can be for those with a cancer diagnosis.

My Story

In November 2021, I was diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia. For me, that year was challenging and not just because of my diagnosis, but because my mom's health also declined. She passed from congestive heart failure in May. After she passed, my sister and I had to clean out our family home, filled with years of memories and personal belongings to review. So, when I saw that my body was bruising more than usual, I wrote it off as a side effect of the packing and moving.

Once the house sold, I went on a five-hour drive to Maine to decompress. I was amazed at how tired I was and how much time I spent in bed. I thought that between the moving and grief I was just exhausted. But then I noticed that I was

starting to have shortness of breath when walking up hill. Putting the pieces together, I decided that it was time for me to get a physical, which I scheduled in November. A few days before the appointment, I noticed that my stomach was tight and that I was experiencing some discomfort.

Two nights after my check up, my doctor called and provided me my blood work results: my liver panel was off, I was very anemic, my white blood cells were elevated, and my spleen was very enlarged. I asked how high my white blood cell count was, and she told me the normal range was from 4,000 to 10,000; mine was at 90,000. She proceeded to tell me that I needed to go see a hematologist because I could have leukemia.

I remember hanging up the phone and wondering if I really had leukemia. It took a few days for me to get an appointment scheduled with a hematologist for the following week. I also did some research and saw that I had many of the symptoms for leukemia. It took about two days for all of this to sink in and for me to accept that leukemia was a possibility. In that moment, I also remembered the advice I would give to the patients with cancer I would see. I told them how important it is to keep an optimistic mind set and not let the fear of cancer take control. This is a mindset I knew I needed to keep as well.

Hypnotherapy

After the initial shock, I decided to create a hypnosis script about my body's ability to produce healthy white blood cells. I wrote a script about my blood cells being healthy

and read it into my phone recorder, along with visualizing of all my white blood cells as being healthy. I also created a night-time ritual of listening to the recording for daily relaxation and positive reinforcement. I would repeat parts of it, as well, to reinforce the idea within that I am healthy.

I also did self-hypnosis during the day if I needed to feel calmer. This is similar to a meditative process. I would focus on one spot, taking a few breaths in and closing my eyes. I would then let go of my thoughts to clear my mind and stay in that quiet space for as long as I needed. My whole body would relax, and all the mindless chatter would dissipate, creating calm. I did this before my appointments or if I felt my stress or anxiety level increasing, and it really helped me. It made me feel like I had some control, even before I went to see the hematologist. Taking action to help myself was empowering and removed some of the helplessness I was experiencing.

Over the next few days, I felt deep sadness. It felt like I had been on the highway of life and that this looming threat of leukemia had sideswiped me and put me on the shoulder of the road. I was in shock. The thought of a cancer diagnosis created fear and uncertainty in me. I did not fear death, but I feared the treatment and how I would respond to it.

Ten years before (in 2011), I watched my sister, who was diagnosed with breast cancer, go through chemotherapy for a year and a half until she passed. And the memories of that experience came flooding back to me. I had not yet realized how my sister's cancer journey impacted me. I always told myself that "I would never do chemotherapy." Lesson learned; never say never.

Powerful Tools to Build Strength

As I entered the cancer center for my appointment, I paused and said a little prayer to give me strength and help me heal. This is a routine I continue to this day any time I go back to the cancer center for lab work or a medical appointment. Pausing and saying a blessing is how I create a positive intention, which gives me strength and peace as I walk into my appointment.

During challenging times in life, having tools to help comfort and support you are empowering.

They needed to do blood work to determine if I had leukemia, as my white blood count increased to 130,000. The hematologist wanted me to take an oral chemotherapy medication to lower my

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white blood count. I told him that I did not know if I could take the pill, stating that I would get the prescription filled, but I was not sure I would take it. It all felt like it was happening so quickly.

In the days leading up to my lab results appointment, I used hypnotherapy to do inner work on myself—to release and let go of the fear I had toward chemotherapy. By releasing the blocks and fears I had, I freed myself to welcome the healing component of the medicine.

I went back to the doctors and found out I had Philadelphia chromosome-positive chronic myeloid leukemia—a disease that occurs due to an abnormal fusion gene called BCR-ABL1, which results from a change in chromosomes in the body. I felt relief knowing that my disease was a more manageable cancer.

I then went to a new hematologist to get a second opinion. I appreciated that

this hematologist could give me some suggestions when I asked how I could visualize combatting the cancer. Throughout my career, I have created many pre-surgery recordings for my clients, allowing them to feel love and support. I acted and did this for myself before my bone marrow biopsy. The nurse practitioner let me listen to the recording during the procedure. The verbiage I used—being calm, relaxed, safe, and secure—is what gave me comfort. After the procedure I was stiff but did not feel any pain or have any swelling the next day.

Taking Back Control

When I started sharing my diagnosis with friends, I was careful with how I communicated it. I did not want the leukemia to take over my life. I used the phrase, "I have been diagnosed with leukemia," versus, "I have leukemia." To me, being diagnosed creates a barrier between me and the disease. Being mindful of our words and how we say something creates a shift in the mind in how we receive information in the brain. Our mindset and how we absorb the information being shared makes a difference in how we respond to it. My goal was to have my mind be strong, in control, and positive, so I could support myself on my healing journey.

It just so happened that I received a new oral chemotherapy on a day that my friends were over for lunch. I opened the packaging and said a blessing (or sent positive thoughts) over the medication. I expressed my gratitude for the medicine to enter my body and help me heal, removing the bad white blood cells. I said out loud, "I am open and ready to receive your healing." I then asked the medicine to leave my body quickly after it does its job. I visualize this happening as I speak. My friends also said positive things to me about the medicine and how it would help me. It was moving to feel such love and support from them. It also felt empowering and supportive to take action and control over what I was putting into my body. Every night when I take the pill, I express gratitude for it helping me heal.

Everyone experiences side effects differently. I get swelling in my face, and my skin is more sensitive to lotions.



Left: For some patients with cancer, meditation has been shown to help relieve anxiety, stress, fatigue, and improve sleep and mood.

Right: Mary poses with singing bowls (also known as sound bowls) that are used to promote relaxation and offer healing properties.

My stomach often feels tight and sometimes nauseous. I have lost weight, and I eat smaller meals. Because of the leukemia, I changed my diet to eat more vegetables and small amounts of protein, while trying to avoid sugars, processed foods, and white flour products. When the tightness in my stomach gets too uncomfortable, I use hypnosis to visualize the tightness and unwinding the knots, so it feels more relaxed.


Besides listening to my hypnosis recording, I create my own personal hypnotherapy sessions where I visualize a hand scooping the bad white blood cells out of my bone marrow. I then envision a healing light coming into the bone marrow and spreading throughout my body. I feel calm, I feel the healing, and I believe that I am getting additional benefits from this work.

Going Forward

When a cancer diagnosis occurs, I believe that it is a wake-up call that we should make changes in how we approach life. I have made dietary changes and rebalanced my work and life. I experienced a lot of fatigue in the first few months, and I have honored my time by slowing down to heal and doing more of my hypnosis sessions via

Zoom. I am grateful for my arsenal of tools (e.g., practicing hypnotherapy, positive affirmations, mindfulness, etc.) that help me heal in conjunction with the medical treatment. Now that my energy is back, I am focusing on creating a new addition to my work: hypnosis tools for people with cancer to have the same support that I had.

As we journey through life and face its challenges, we need to create a good mind space for ourselves.

Hypnosis helped me take back control over the cancer, instead of the disease making me feel as if I had no other options. It helped me keep an optimistic mindset, even during sad times; stay motivated to make the right nutritional choices; and create positive thoughts so I can feel like I am truly supporting my healing. Today, my body is barely making any more of the bad white blood cells, and I have two years of treatment left. I believe that I will heal quicker in that time and that is what I tell my body every day. In the meantime, I focus on living a full and complete life. 

Mary B. Battaglia is a certified clinical hypnosis and sound practitioner, speaker, and the author of Transformation Through Hypnosis: Relax, Clear Your Mind & Step Into Your Power. Mary helps people reduce stress, heal, remove fears, clear blocks, and tap into their unlimited potential. She is trained in medical hypnosis and helps people with illnesses, pain-reduction techniques, side effects of medicine, reduce anxiety, insomnia, and other health-related issues.