

Hypnosis + Healing

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A former attorney helps clients harness the power of the mind.

Susan Johnston had made it through chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery for her breast cancer. Her treatments complete, she had developed a new problem: Johnston could not sleep. She had recurring nightmares in which she was arguing with a figure who represented Death. “It was the typical tall figure in a dark robe with a hood standing by the door,” says Johnston. “We were debating. I was saying, ‘No. No, you can’t have me.’ Then my daughter came down with breast cancer and I said, ‘You can’t have her.’”

After one hypnosis session with Maggie Clement, Johnston returned home and slept for ten hours. After two sessions, she was able to put insomnia behind her for good. “I think she could help a lot of people,” says 70-year-old Johnston about Clement.

A former attorney, Clement has been practicing hypnosis for seven years, tackling tough physical and emotional concerns such as anxiety, insomnia, athletic performance, and addiction at Atlantic Hypnotherapy and Wellness Associates in Portland. She works with people to understand how the mind can create obstacles to wellness—and gives them tools for circumventing these obstacles.

“We are such prisoners of our thoughts,” says Clement. “And we are also incredibly powerful. My job is to put people back in touch with their power.”

Clement has always been good at finding her way around seemingly impossible situations, and connecting with her own power. The youngest of four children (and the only girl), Clement enjoyed swimming, playing tennis, and soccer throughout her childhood. When she reached high school, Clement learned that her hometown of Falmouth did not yet have a girls’ soccer team. One of the coaches for the boys’ team suggested that even if she tried out and made the boys’ team, he would not put her in any games. She instead chose to become a manager for the boys’ team.

For two years, Clement watched from the sidelines as the boys who had once been her teammates took to the field. Then she heard of an opening on the soccer team representing the Governor Baxter School for the Deaf on nearby Mackworth Island. For her final two years of

high school, she played soccer with students who had hearing and language impairments. “When we wanted someone to pass the ball, we couldn’t use words, the way that other players could,” says Clement. “Instead we would make gestures, and find different ways of communicating.”

As an undergraduate, Clement enrolled in the physical therapy program at the University of Delaware before transferring to the University of Maine at Orono, where she focused on international relations. A few years out of college, she decided to go to law school and earned her degree at the University of Maine School of Law in Portland. She practiced as an attorney in Portland for nearly eight years, working for herself as well as with firms such as Drummond and Drummond and Curtis Thaxter.

Over time, Clement realized that she wanted to do something different. “There are those out there who really need to love what they do, and those for whom it doesn’t matter quite as much,” says Clement, who now lives in South Portland. “I am the former. I enjoyed a lot about practicing law, but it really wasn’t where my heart was.” Clement looked for something that would enable her to combine her interests in the mind and the body. “You can experience discomfort in your body, and it’s not necessarily organic,” says Clement. “It’s not necessarily physical. Oftentimes, thoughts and experiences can harbor themselves in your body.” She considered Reiki and massage, but ultimately was drawn to hypnosis after a friend mentioned that he had seen a hypnotherapist. “It really was like a light bulb went on,” said Clement. “It made perfect sense.”

Clement attended an intensive program with the Academy for Professional Hypnosis Training in Wisconsin in 2009. She has been practicing ever since. “Most of us have four or five, or more, things that we’d like to change about ourselves,” says Clement. “Sometimes people come in with a certain idea of how they’d like to change, when the real issue is actually something else. It takes just digging in to find out.”

The process usually requires several sessions, the first of which includes an interview where Clement gets to know the individual and what he hopes to achieve. “So much of hypnosis happens before the session starts,” says Clement. She asks about the client’s family, her past and present. Although Clement does not provide therapy, she is able to reflect on what she has been told. “I basically consider myself a coach or a facilitator,” says Clement. “Hypnosis is sort of like stepping back outside of yourself and taking a few paces to the right or the left,” says Clement. “Just changing your perspective and seeing what it looks like from a different point of view, and sometimes that’s enough.”

Once she has gained the information she needs, Clement invites her client to get comfortable in the soft brown recliner that she has positioned in one corner of her office. She turns down the lights and asks the client to close his eyes and focus on his breathing. Then Clement leads the client through a relaxation exercise, which is also known as the induction phase of hypnosis. “When your body relaxes, your mind relaxes a little bit, and vice versa,” says Clement. She asks the client to imagine a new way of understanding the situation that he needs assistance with. She describes visual images that he can use—like protecting himself with a cloak, which prevents painful things from harming him. “That’s really what hypnosis is,” says Clement. “It’s a focused

state of attention coupled with a greater receptivity to suggestions and imagery.” At the end of the exercise, Clement gently brings the client back into the present moment.

Clement has helped people with diverse issues, from smoking cessation and weight loss to athletic performance and meeting specific goals. She has dealt with common phobias such as a fear of flying, and less common ones, like a fear of fish.

“For most people, it’s a practice,” says Clement. “You’ve got nerve pathways in your brain that correspond to whatever behavior is happening, and in order to establish a different one, you’ve got to practice. You’ve got to repeat and reinforce. That’s a really important part of it.”

Dr. Ingrid Martin, a family physician who trained in integrative medicine at Maine Medical Center in Portland, says that she has seen how effective hypnosis can be. She gives the example of a patient who had smoked for decades, and tried to quit multiple times using standard methods such as the nicotine patch. Then Martin referred her to Clement. The patient was thrilled to report that she was no longer smoking. Her session had completely changed her view of herself. “I asked her, ‘How did the hypnotherapy session go?’” says Martin, who now practices at Maine Medical Partners in Falmouth. “She said, ‘I walked out and no longer had the impression of myself as a smoker. I thought of myself as a nonsmoker.’”

Molly Stewart is the Mission Services Director at the Cancer Community Center in South Portland, where Clement has held group sessions in meditative hypnosis for the past six years. Stewart, who also has a master’s degree in social work, says she participates in these sessions whenever she can. “Maggie’s class helps people affected by cancer relax their bodies and minds in order to promote healing,” says Stewart. “It is very impactful for the clients we serve.” Clement’s group sessions include people who are in active treatment for cancer, cancer survivors, and family members. “Everyone’s needs are different,” says Stewart. “We strive to offer the support people need in a way they can access it.” Stewart says that some of the common concerns people share are fear, sleeplessness, anxiety, and pain. “Maggie’s course helps with these both in class and through practices they can bring home,” says Stewart.

Susan and Jim Johnston of Cape Elizabeth learned about Clement through their daughter and son-in-law. Their daughter, Tracy Johnston Zager, was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 41—only four months after her mother had been diagnosed. Their son-in-law, Dr. Sam Zager, is a family physician at Martin’s Point Health Care in Portland. While Susan and Tracy dealt with breast cancer, Jim Johnston began having his own health issues. A practitioner of yoga, tennis player, and active member of the Downeasters Chorus, 80-year-old Jim was surprised when he went in for eye surgery and was noted to have an abnormally high heart rate. The surgery was postponed and diagnostic tests revealed an abnormal rhythm of the heart called atrial fibrillation. “Nobody could tell me why this was happening,” says Jim. He was placed on medication, which kept the condition under control, but he wanted to find the underlying issue. He started wearing a heart rate monitor, and his wife noticed that he would experience an elevated heart rate even when he wasn’t physically stressed. He met with Clement, who suggested that his heart might be responding to what she calls “psychic stress.” “I had formed a habit of suppressing my feelings,” said Jim. “I had created constructs to deal with them, which led to increased pressure on my heart.”

“Now I admit when I’m afraid, angry, vulnerable, or having an intense loving feeling for my wife,” says Jim. “This wasn’t easy, but somehow Maggie made it possible. She enabled me to change my patterns with hypnosis and her clarity.” A year later, Jim says his heart rhythm has remained normal, and he rarely experiences the increases in heart rate that he once did. “I have a better understanding about how I work,” he says. It also helps that Jim’s daughter and wife are healthy again. “Everybody has her hair back,” he says, referencing the side effects of cancer treatment. “We made it through.”

Susan Johnston continues to sleep well at night—relatively free of the nightmares that once plagued her. If she does have a nightmare, she remembers Clement’s words of advice. “One of the things that she said to me was, ‘It’s only ten minutes. You can have a bad dream; it’s ten minutes long and then it’s done,’” says Susan. “Then I thought, ‘Yeah, right; having been through everything I’ve been through, ten minutes is nothing.’” “She’s a very good listener, which I think is a big part of what she does,” says Susan about Clement. “She was able to listen to me and use my strengths really, which I had lost touch with.”

After eight years of practicing hypnosis in Portland, Clement has earned a loyal following among those who have benefited from her guidance on using the power of the mind to reconnect with wellness. “Whether it’s cancer or a broken bone, you really have to channel your own resources, whatever they may be,” says Susan Johnston. “Hypnosis can help.”

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