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Mind over platter: using hypnosis to lose weight

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Romane the hypnotist has come to town, not with a stage show of the usual humiliations, but with the unlikeliest of diet plans. Mind over platter. Can it work?

I have been entranced before, albeit unwillingly. I was accidentally hypnotized by Reveen "the Impossiblist," and it's not like I want to believe in that stuff again. But how else to explain Reveen? In my 20s, I worked at a theatre he played one week each year, eight shows straight. I would escape outside and sit within earshot. One evening, I wrapped my arms around my knees and dozed -- just when Reveen, inside, was telling people that their hands were glued together. That's what I heard later, anyway, when some kind soul found me stuck to myself and pulled me apart.

Romane (M. Vance Romane, the "Dean of the Power of the Mind") is nothing like Reveen. No sequins, no Liberace bouffant or bottled tan, no cheese or parlour tricks whatsoever. Romane hasn't done a stage show in 30 years. These days, hypnosis is therapy. Surgical patients choose hypnosedation. Trances manage chronic pain, hypertension, migraine, depression, anxiety -- and Romane's Stop Smoking seminar is heavily subscribed every time the price of cigarettes goes up.

He does his Lose Weight seminar less often, so we were lucky to get to one in Halifax. Off I went, along with soccer moms, querulous hopefuls, true believers and repeaters, a few men, and two alarmingly thin teenaged girls.

Men attending the seminar are rare, Romane says -- and smart.

"Even rarer," a woman cracks, and the room breaks up.

The tone's light, but the stakes are high. Beverley, to my left, stopped at her son's grave on the way in "to make sure the flowers are okay." He died last year at the age of 31. Genetically, the family's fate is half cardiac, half cancer. Under stress, Beverley can eat four five-by-12-inch trays of M&M Macaroon Madness Bars. Her son left five children. "I have a lot to live for," she says. The good Lord himself has led her to Romane. So she hopes, though on the face of things it seems unlikely.

Romane is from Winnipeg. Turned out in a smart charcoal suit, he's 57, greying, svelte. He has been down; he has been overweight himself; he has beaten cancer. He feels dependable, sounds reasonable ("we aim for health, not Twiggy. You aim for the best you"). He even gives out his phone number for follow-up.

When other boys were pulling the legs off flies, young Vance was practice-trancing his baby brother with a HypnoDisk he saw advertised in a comic and wrote away for. He's earnest, and so mild-mannered that under hypnosis it's easy not to pay attention to him, which is as it should be. The idea is to relax, so that your mind opens to suggestions that stick. If you wave a magnifying glass outside in the sun, Romane says, nothing happens. But hold it still, and "we absorb the power."

We get two trances, 20 and 40 minutes long, of Muzak and monotony. We "shall and will" adopt healthy habits. "I cannot do that for you, but *you* can," Romane sing-songs repeatedly, making perhaps 50 hypnotic suggestions once we're zonked: we'll eat less and feel fuller, hate grease and love bulgur, yearn to move. We'll sleep well, smell the roses, heed our doctors, be nice, be positive.

Doctors send patients to Romane, but one seminar is no panacea. While hypnosis can motivate dieters when the going gets tough, the hypnosis method is all in the follow-up, in the tapes Romane sells -- along with tongue cleaners (for smokers), even a flask of what I'd imagined was smelling salts but turned out to be an aromatherapy tincture.

If anyone's disappointed that this is going to be work, not magic, there's no sign of it. At the break there's a queue for tapes. Beverley and her friend Cavell each buy a set. "If I find I've wasted my money," Cavell says, "well, it wouldn't be the first time." She's probably safe. The hypnosis diet works, though not best in a group setting. Beverley isn't zoned in the first trance and neither am I. But "I was drooling," Cavell enthuses. "Didn't mind a bit when my bum went out."

A few pros have come for recharging. They've brought pillows, and they spread out on the floor with their feet on chairs. Beside me, someone snores, but I find the floor even harder than my chair. Worse, I'm hungry; I keep seeing jumbo bags of Day-Glo orange Cheezies float by. (Okay, I had missed dinner.) But there are moments, too, when I see myself reed-thin at 20, running through a meadow I used to know as a kid, even flying above it.

The next day, I'm not hungry at all. I'm also suspiciously energetic. Is that a hypnotic suggestion I didn't hear? Someone from Stop Smoking reported that while she didn't remember being told to, at the end of that seminar she tore up her cigarettes and threw them under her seat. Imagine how the Holiday Inn staff felt about that, and about the pastel streamers that fell on us from the ceiling as we left. But the rest of us are happy, shiny, chatty.

I come home with a CD of the proceedings. Listening to it, my husband the engineer rolls his eyes and falls asleep. But I hypnotize well on a good sofa, and this time no Cheezies taunt me.

Hypnosis may be a no-brainer, and that's just the point. These days, for the extreme makeover and even just to lighten up, we're willing to go under the knife. That's not crazier than the hypnosis diet? Perhaps we should all just quit being so smart. I cannot do that for you, but *you* can.