SPEAKER NOTES

Finding Joy in Stressful Times

Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas

The holidays present us with a complex of new and old stressors along with memories of better times and expectations that may or may not be realized. The speaker at our November informational meeting shared some coping strategies.

Jessica Porter is a hypnotherapist who has been in private practice since 1999. She has specialized in smoking cessation, hypnosis for childbirth, and emotional trauma release, and created her workshop *Hypnosis for Actors,* in 2005. Since 2021 she has focused on insomnia and nervous system regulation through her podcasts *Sleep Magic* and *Unwind with Jessica Porter*. With her unique combination of humor, compassion, and hypnosis skills, she has helped millions of individuals release the stresses of the day and relax into slumber.

Podcast: Unwind with Jessica Porter

Website: Jessicaporterhypnotherapy.com

Porter said that she doesn't have a family member with serious mental illness, although some with addictions and personality disorders. She does care for her father, who is 93. She has great respect for caregivers, both in the family and in professional positions. She finds that the "weird and generous humanity" of such giving is inspiring. But it can also be depleting, like a switch that moves to "give" and is then hard to switch back to "receive" or self-care. "Caring for someone with mental illness can be a particular kind of drain," she said. "And we can feel guilty when we take care of ourselves." People need balance, she said. "It can be hard to find. And it requires courage to seek it out."

Caregivers need to find a "refractory period." This is some time when they can "zone out," like watching television or becoming engrossed in a book. That becomes nourishing.

Porter first encountered hypnotherapy when she was a teenager with a heavy-duty smoking habit, two packs a day. She tried quitting, wanted to quit, but was baffled because not only is nicotine addictive but the process of smoking becomes a habit. She went to a hypnotherapist, and the addiction disappeared. "It was the right tool at the right time," she said. She wanted to quit, and the therapy showed her how to be successful, to have self-esteem and poise, as a nonsmoker.

When she grew up, Porter became a macrobiotic chef and teacher. She learned that people adopted macrobiotics because they wanted to change their diets. She decided that hypnotherapy could help them do that. She became a therapist and learned to help people relax and overcome their addictions and fears. "The principles," she said, "are sound."

Hypnotherapy engages the power of relaxation. In the western mind, only exertion can make change happen: you have to push and push. But "interesting things begin with letting go," Porter said. She called this "undoing." This explores the fullness of the parasympathetic nervous system—the part of the autonomic nervous

system that manages bodily functions like rest and digestion. The mind slows from beta waves to alpha waves and becomes more suggestible.

Porter said that hypnotism suffers from many misconceptions, largely from movies and from stage acts. The hypnotist cannot make the patient do something he or she doesn't want to do. Hypnotism can be done without words or motions like the swinging watch. "Simple beauty is hypnotic," Porter said. And it doesn't require a keyword or snap of the fingers to bring the patient out. "Hypnosis is more mundane and so much more than that," she said.

Instead, the therapist works with the patient's desire for results and takes the struggle down to the level of feeling things are possible.

Technically, hypnotherapy bypasses the critical faculties of the person's conscious mind—all the things that tell you something can't be done or won't happen—and leads the patient to possibilities. It accesses the subconscious mind, akin to daydreaming, immersing yourself in a movie or novel, doing art, highway driving, or dancing. "Words are powerful," she said, "but hypnosis can be done without words."

Hypnosis is not one thing, she said. It's a lot of things. For example, music is hypnotic, going deeper than the conscious, rational mind.

The subconscious governs memory, imagination, and innate belief systems. Guided by a hypnotherapist, the patient can enter and edit those belief systems. When you buy a lottery ticket, she said, you engage the fantasy that everything is possible—then your critical faculty injects the reality that the odds are against you, and the fantasy dissolves. A hypnotherapist can lift that gate, let you navigate the other side, know that *somebody's* going to win the money, and again consider your possibilities.

Asked if hypnotherapy is like meditation, Porter acknowledged that there are similarities. But meditation is slower. Not being guided, you must lift the gate yourself. And even the best gurus will say that a state of deep meditation, true thoughtlessness, only lasts about six seconds. Similarly, at a bodily level, yoga can reach balance and relaxation, and a good teacher can deepen the trance.

Porter used the example of sleep therapy to illustrate the condition. If you can't sleep and try to put yourself to sleep, it becomes harder. You can't try to sleep; you need to relax and allow yourself to sleep. Relaxation is a process, and it's right next door to sleep. And you can learn to relax.

Relaxation slows down the brain. You become less judgmental, less problem-solving, less future planning and strategic. The conscious mind is dualistic, working one thing against another. The subconscious mind is holistic and expansive.

"Hypnotism," Porter concluded, "doesn't control. The hypnotherapist provides the tools to influence, but the patient needs to be willing. And if nothing else, it is profound relaxation."