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### **A HUGE MAN MAKING BELLY-FLOPS IN THE WATER**

#### **A psychosynthesis approach to the assessment and treatment of a psychosomatic illness**

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#### Abstract

A conversion disorder, or psychosomatic illness, is described by the DSM IV-TR as a condition in which one or more symptoms or deficits affecting voluntary motor or sensory function occur that suggest a neurological or other general condition but one in which psychological factors are judged to be associated with the symptom or deficit because the initiation or exacerbation of the symptom or deficit is preceded by conflicts or other stressors (p. 498).

Psychosynthesis is an approach to the assessment and treatment of conversion disorders that utilizes an array of hypnotherapeutic techniques to help calm patients, focus their awareness on their specific issues of concern and explore these issues creatively and in-depth. Relaxation training, the use of mental imagery, the cognitive evaluation and interpretation of imagery and its documentation for reinforcement and further study through mandala art are some of the methods used in this approach.

## A HUGE MAN MAKING BELLY-FLOPS IN THE WATER

Mrs. A. called my office on February 23, 2006, to set up an appointment for hypnotherapy for her nine-and-a-half-year-old son, Mac (all names in these reports have been changed for confidentiality purposes). At the beginning of the month, the 13 year old daughter of a neighbor and friend of her son came down with a respiratory infection which caused her to miss two weeks of school. The rest of her family then contracted the illness and became sick. Mac had been quite worried about her. The week following her recovery he came down with the flu. As his flu symptoms got better, he began to exhibit a deep, rattling three-bark-cough with every breath. Mac's parents took him to several doctors who were unable to identify the cause of his cough. He became so weak they took him to the emergency room and he spent two days in the hospital. During that time, in order to sleep, he was given chloral hydrate and Ambien but the medication made him very sick to his stomach.

The hospital referred the family to Dr. Greg Elliott at the Medical College of Virginia Pediatric Pulmonary Clinic. He diagnosed the boy as suffering from a condition called psychogenic cough disorder or habit cough. This disorder is thought to be emotional in origin and excludes both tic disorders and organic or infectious causes. Both of Mac's parents were in computer information careers. After hearing an ABC radio news program about the treatment of asthma with hypnotherapy, they went on-line to look for a solution to Mac's problem. Their research found in the 2001 edition of Pediatrics, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, an article by Ran D. Anbar, M.D., "Self-hypnosis for management of chronic dyspnea in pediatric patients," dyspnea being shortness of breath or labored breathing.

Dr. Anbar practiced in Syracuse, New York, they discovered and Mac's parents immediately bought plane tickets to take their son to see him. On their second visit, they informed Dr. Elliott of this decision and, on February 23, he suggested there might be a more local resource for them to try. A member of his staff checked the yellow pages of the phone book for a referral. Many hypnotherapists were listed but, based on the fact that I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, and hold the status of Diplomate in Clinical Hypnotherapy, he suggested they call and give me a try.

I scheduled a one-hour session for Mac and his family for the following day. Unhappily, they arrived 20 minutes late having gotten lost trying to find my office. Because I only had 35 minutes left in the scheduled hour, I dispensed with the normal process of acquiring medical, biographical and family system information. I asked Mr. and Mrs. A. if it would be OK if I just went ahead and worked with their son. With some trepidation, they agreed. His parents asked if they should leave the room but I told them it might be quite instructive if they stayed and witnessed my work with their son which they did.

Mac came into the office repetitively coughing with every breath. He answered my questions thoughtfully but in a soft, raspy voice. I asked him if he liked art in school and he said he did. I asked him if he liked to draw and he answered yes to this question, too. I asked him if he was imaginative and he said yes. "Well, I'd like to work with your imagination for awhile if you're willing," I said. He said that would be fine.

I asked Mac if he'd be willing to close his eyes and take three deep breaths, which he did. Three barking coughs followed each breath. I asked him if he had a favorite place in nature and he told me he had been to Fenway Park in Massachusetts last summer to see the Red Sox play. I asked him to visualize the place and give me a description. He gave me a number of details: green fence, big field, a big dancing green mascot. I asked him to describe the mascot which he did in great detail. Each breath he took was followed by three barking coughs.

I then asked Mac to imagine being at the ocean which he did. "Describe the ocean," I requested. "There are big waves crashing upon the shore throwing sea shells all around," said he. "What's making all the waves," I inquired? "There is a huge man doing belly-flops in the water and making the waves that beat up the shore." "Why's he doing that, for heaven's sake," I asked? "It must hurt him," I reflected. "He's mad and he wants his stomach to hurt." Mac kept coughing with each breath. His father and mother were riveted by the imagery. They remained silent throughout this brief session.

"Mac, why does the man want his stomach to hurt," I asked? "So he doesn't have to go to school," he replied. "Why doesn't he want to go to school?" "Because he does badly in math and if he's sick he won't have to go." I asked Mac what that man wanted and he said he wanted someone he could talk to. "Well, isn't there anybody he *can* talk to about this?" "No," said Mac. "Why doesn't he talk to his parents," I inquired? "They're too busy. He tries to talk to his father but he has to go to meetings. His mother's too busy, too," Mac said. With each breath, 3 coughs. Concerned and knowing glances were exchanged between his quiet parents signaling regret, remorse, guilt.

I asked Mac to focus his awareness on the sea and describe in detail what he saw. He said he saw the giant waves, the dark color of the water, the stormy sky. He described how the waves knocked the sea shells all around and said the giant man was really mad. His coughing seemed to become stronger, more pressured. I asked the boy what needed to happen to make the man stop belly-flopping which then would stop the waves from crashing? Then Mac said the waves turned into 20 dancing penguins. "How big are they," I asked? "Really big. As big as the giant man," he said. "Why are they dancing," I asked? "Because the man's parents were dancers and won competitions," he said. "Does the man like to dance," I asked? "No, not at all but his parents make him dance."

Throughout this whole encounter, every two or three minutes, I asked Mac to take three deep breaths, which he did. At this point I asked him how he was feeling and he told me he was feeling a lot better, that he was feeling happy to talk about the imagery. Noting the shift in energy, I asked him what was happening with the ocean in the imagery?. He said the man was on the beach talking to his parents and the sea was beginning to calm down. I asked him personal questions about his relationship with his parents, to ground and integrate the imagery with genuine biographical information. Yes, he told me, his parents were really busy people and didn't have much time for him. He said he talked more to his father about stuff than to his mom, however. His parents were captured by the imagery and the metaphor, looked amazed at what was unfolding, and seemed to clearly understand the truth behind what their son was saying.

I asked Mac to take three deep breaths. 3 barking coughs accompanied each inhale. I asked

him to watch the waves of the ocean become smaller. I asked him to really concentrate on the imagery and describe it in detail. He told me the sky was blue, the sun was shining, the water was calming down. His body visually began to relax and he took a couple of automatic, naturally deep, sighing breaths. "Focus on the waters and watch them come completely still, Mac," I suggested. My instructions were given slowly allowing him time to see and enjoy the imagery. I asked Mac to feel the waves in his body, in his own chest, to feel them become completely still. There were long spaces between my suggestions. Mac coughed two times after one inhale. He coughed once after the next breath. "Really focus on the calm water. Feel it in your body," I repeated. Mac made one deep, heaving breath and stopped coughing all together. Silence.

Mr. and Mrs. A. were sitting wide eyed, open mouthed, incredulous. Mrs. A. was teary. I told Mac that I was going to remain silent for two whole minutes and would not give him any instructions during that time. I suggested that he just relax, visualize and enjoy the calm ocean. We all sat in the silence, moved by what had just transpired. Mac was grinning from ear to ear. Then I asked him to open his eyes.

A sense of relief, celebration and joy filled the room. I told Mac what a great job he had done following my suggestions and he began to tease his parents. "Hershey Park," he exclaimed. "Hershey Park!" Apparently his parents had promised him a few days back, thinking that his cough was voluntary, that if he stopped coughing they would take him wherever he wanted to go. He was ready to cash in and wanted them to take him to this exciting amusement park several hours away in Pennsylvania.

My time was up and I had another client in my waiting room. I asked Mr. and Mrs. A. if they understood everything that had gone on. They assured me they did. I had no time to further pursue the explicit information that underlay Mac's imagery. I asked them if they were willing to make another appointment. They were anxious to return as soon as possible. We booked another session for the family three days hence to check up on Mac's condition and reinforce the learning.

I asked Mr. and Mrs. A. if it was possible they might need to come in themselves for a little couples' counseling. Together they said, "yes!" I suggested to Mack that any time he began to cough that he should close his eyes, take three deep breaths, visualize the calm ocean waters in his chest and relax. I suggested to his parents that they, too, take three deep breaths whenever they felt stressed or upset as well. A pretty happy family left forty minutes after having entered my office.

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Two days later, Mrs. A. called to say that Mac was doing just fine. He was still a bit hoarse from all the coughing but the cough had not returned. She called the session a miracle and said she was singing my praises to Dr. Elliott and to all her family and friends.

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On February 27, Mac and his parents returned for a second session. I gave them each a piece of paper and a pen and asked them to write down five things they learned from our first encounter.

Mac wrote:

- That I can control a lot of things in my body with my mind.

- I learned how to do hypnosis.
- I learned what type of cough I had.
- I learned how to stop coughing.
- I learned about a big guy that people didn't understand.

Mr. A. wrote:

- Mac is very concerned about failing/not doing well in math.
- Mac associated the 'large man' making waves as not going to college. My wife and I have told all our children they will go to college (actually we insist they do).
- Mac is being impacted by the stress/pressure his parents are feeling. He indicated that his parents do not listen or spend enough time with him.

Mrs. A. wrote:

- How important it is to effectively communicate and discuss things that are bothering Mac.
- How relaxation is beneficial for allowing the release of tension and stress.
- To make sure that the attention I give is focused and that I am not multi-tasking.
- School is stressful for Mac.
- Trust my instincts.

During the first session, when asked about the dancing penguins, Mac said his parents liked to dance at parties and wedding. Mr. A. volunteered that that was true particularly if they had had a few drinks. Mac said his mother danced to music on TV and loved the program, "Dancing with the Stars." They tried to get him to dance in public, too, but he disliked people watching him. Mac admitted he had problems at school. Fractions and long division were hard for him but his parents tried to give him pointers. When I tried to get more information about his troubles at school, Mac coughed once. So as not to trigger further coughing, I discontinued this line of questioning.

At this point I explained that troublesome thoughts or emotional distress can lead to any number of physical symptoms and complaints one of which was habit cough. The challenge was to find some way to stop thinking and relax the body. I told the family I had developed a technique for achieving a state of deep relaxation and self-hypnosis in a short period of time called the 10-Minute Miracle. I explained how it worked. Focusing only on the breath and letting go of any thoughts or feelings, they were to inhale deeply through the nose and exhale deeply through the mouth three times in a row. They were to breathe normally and naturally for eight breaths and repeat the process over and over again for ten minutes. They closed their eyes and, with a little guidance, they did the 10-Minute Miracle.

When the exercise was over, I asked them how it was. Mr. A. said he felt great and was now not worried about a couple of important business meetings he had to attend later that evening. Mrs. A. found the process very relaxing: "in with the good, out with the bad," she said. Mac said it was relaxing and easy. I then asked Mac to visualize the ocean again and tell me what he saw. It was nice and calm, he said. The sea shells were no longer flying all around. The big guy was on the beach playing paddle-ball with his parents and they were having fun. Before they left, I suggested they each do the 10-Minute Miracle every day and together whenever possible.

On March 7, only Mac and his mother came for the third session. Mr. A. was too busy to attend. Mac had gotten his normal voice back he was happy to report. Responding to my questions, he was open and expressive about family dynamics during this session and his mother seemed quite uncomfortable with his candor. I asked him if they had done the 10-Minute-Miracle? Mac said he had to remind his mother her to do it and they had done it several times but not every day as was recommended. His father never did it as far as he knew. Mac was mad his parents had not yet planned the trip to Hershey Park because they had promised to do so two weeks ago. He said, however, that he understood both of them were very busy people. Mrs. A., a bit chagrined, promised to make a plan by the next session. I asked Mac to draw a mandala, a symbolic representation of the man on the beach and this is what he drew. He wrote,



“The water is getting calmer and the family is having a fun time just talking on the sand.”

A week later, at the beginning of the fourth session, Mac was very proud of the fact that he had done well on a math test at school. He was worried, however, about what people would think if he did poorly. He said his parents regularly told him that as long as he did well in school they would always be happy. Mrs. A. confessed that she often slept poorly and that her husband never got more than six hours sleep at night. His parents often yelled at one another, Mac said, which made him mad and scared. And tension between his 14 year old sister and 13 year old brother was also a problem in the home. Given the dynamics between the parents, it was not hard to imagine sibling rivalries. A long discussion ensued about the importance of getting adequate sleep and the ills that result from chronic sleep deprivation. Mac said his parents needed to come for couples counseling which surprised his mother greatly. At the end of this session Mrs. A. made an appointment for a couples session. She called the following day and cancelled it. Mr. A. never returned to counseling.

In our fifth and last session, Mac talked about trouble he had with boys at school who made fun of him. The mother of one of the boys had called Mrs. A. to report the problem. I asked Mac to close his eyes and complete the following open-ended sentence five times. “I didn’t tell mom about my troubles at school because...”

- I don’t express my feelings.
- Its hard to talk about something I don’t like.
- I don’t want mom to tell people at her work about my problems.
- My brother and sister might make fun of me.

Again I suggested they try to do the 10-Minute-Miracle daily, either individually or together, try to get dad involved, maybe teach it to his siblings. I said it might be valuable to have the whole family come in for a session sometime soon. Mac again grouched that nothing had happened about

the Hershey Park trip his parents had promised to take him on if he stopped coughing. He wanted to take a chocolate bath, to eat all the chocolate he could, to go to the amusement park and ride the train, to play in the indoor pool. Mrs. A. promised to take him during his upcoming spring break, April 10.

The family never came back for another session. They did not go to Hershey Park in April. In a follow-up phone call on July 26, Mrs. A. said they had gone to Hershey, Pennsylvania, during the kids' summer vacation the second week of July. Although the park was closed at the time, she said they had found plenty to do in the area and had a pretty good time.

After the first session, Mac's cough never returned.