

French firemen test hypnosis to help victims

June 20 2013, by Arnaud Bouvier

"Look me straight in the eye. Your mind is emptying, your body is relaxing," says the fireman, using the calming words of hypnosis to help a trauma victim—a technique being pioneered by fire crews in the eastern French region of Alsace.

At the Haguenau fire station, 120 firemen have been trained in basic medical [hypnosis](#) which they can use to soothe someone trapped under rubble or in a car following an accident, or even a person suffering an [asthma attack](#).

The idea is that hypnotherapy can complement traditional [first aid](#) assistance.

"These are verbal, gesticular and respiratory techniques that aim to ease pain and anxiety, but that obviously don't replace traditional first aid," explains Cecile Colas-Nguyen, a nurse and member of the fire brigade, and a trainer in hypnosis.

While firefighters arriving on the scene of an accident get to work tending to the injured or cutting a victim free, staff trained in hypnosis establish a more personal link with the person and divert his attention away from the trauma of the scene.

Typically the firefighters speak in a calm and measured voice and are careful to avoid any negative words. Instead of focusing on the person's pain, the emphasis is on his wellbeing.

"While my colleagues take care of your safety, your mind will take off to the ski slopes and your body is going to stay here," a young fireman at a training exercise tells a pretend victim who has confided a love of [winter sports](#).

— 'When we hold someone's hand, things go better' —

Haguenau station manager David Ernenwein says he is "convinced" that the method is useful.

"We have all noticed that when we hold someone's hand, things go better, even if we did not label it as 'hypnosis'. The first thing that we can do to help people is to calm them down, and this technique has given us the tools to be able to do that, to help people suffer less," he says.

For the moment this use of hypnosis is unique to Alsace but Yves Durrmann, the brigade's chief doctor, says he believes firemen all over France should use it.

But first, the usefulness of the technique has to be proved.

For at least the next six months, the Haguenau brigade are keeping a record of the heart rate, pain levels or emotions of victims they help. These results will be compared with stats of victims treated by firemen who have not used hypnosis with them.

"Our first evaluation seems to show benefits: in 100 percent of cases people said that they felt time was distorted, in other words that the time the firemen took to tend to them seemed shorter than it actually was," says Colas-Nguyen.

Officials at the interior ministry are cautiously optimistic about the Alsace experiment.

"We have known for a while that hypnosis works, it is not a placebo," says Stephane Donnadieu, a medically trained fireman and advisor to France's rescue operations directorate.

"But you need properly trained people: That is the challenge, as crews only receive short training."

It is not really pure hypnosis that is used, he says, but "more like certain hypnotic techniques". But "if that can bring greater calm, empathy and support that is already not bad", he says.

The real test will be seeing if [firefighters](#) can successfully use their new skills in particularly noisy and traumatic circumstances, he adds.

No problem, says Colas-Nguyen. "We can help victims to disconnect from what is happening around them. And even the beep beep of medical equipment can focus a person's attention so we can help transport them to another place," she says.

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