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3 Nov 2004

Hypnotism demonstrations at high school graduation parties, on television talk shows and at comedy clubs are said to be humorous as people act like strange animals, fictional characters and a variety of other strange things.

But leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints aren't laughing.

For years, the practice of hypnotism has been questioned by members of the Church, who believe in the principle of free agency. Church leaders have continually counseled church membership to avoid the practice of hypnotism for entertainment purposes.

LDS Church spokeswoman Kim Farah provided an official statement on the church's position on the controversial subject.

"Members of the church should not participate in hypnosis demonstrations," Farah said. "The use of hypnosis under competent, professional, medical supervision for the treatment of disease or mental disorder is a medical question to be determined by a competent medical authority."

Farah's statement contains no new information for priesthood leaders who, in past years, have received counsel through priesthood bulletins. After some church organizations arranged hypnotism demonstrations as a means of entertainment for church members, a directive in a 1972 bulletin from church leaders in Salt Lake City instructed local leaders to "advise members of the church against participating in such activities" and that demonstrations "should not be sponsored or encouraged by leaders of the church."

While the LDS Church is clear on its stance toward hypnosis demonstrations, the medical use of hypnosis is left to be decided by church members and medical experts.

Aaron Aldridge, who operates a local hypnotherapy practice in Orem, explained there are no degrees or official licenses for hypnotism practices. Aldridge received his training to become a hypnotherapist from two credible psychologists.

While Aldridge believes strongly in the positive effects of hypnotism as a medical practice, he doesn't approve of hypnotism as a form of entertainment.

"I don't care for the fact that something that is used as a therapeutic technique is also taken and turned into a parlor trick," Aldridge said. "Entertainment shows make it look like someone that's in hypnosis is out of control and doing things that they normally wouldn't do."

Aldridge explained that when people are hypnotized, they will not do anything they normally wouldn't do—they cannot be forced to do something against their will.

"All that hypnosis does is lower the conscious mind and give greater access to the subconscious, which allows for a suggestion to go to a deeper level," Aldridge said. "But when people hear the word suggestion in association with hypnosis, they change the meaning from suggestion to command even though it still is just a suggestion."

Aldridge explained that when a person is hypnotized, they allow the hypnotist to suggest certain emotions, feelings or mindsets contrary to negative thoughts and conditions. Regardless of whether the suggestions are positive or not, the person being treated must still consent and accept the conditions on their own.

While most people often think hypnotists are the only ones who hypnotize, Aldridge suggested other ways in which people are "hypnotized" every day.

"The best 'hypnotists' in the world are television advertisers," he said. "They draw us in with changes in volume, bright colors, music-all those kind of things that suck our attention into the advertisement and then pound the suggestion away again and again."

Thomas Wayment, a BYU professor of religion, offered a religious perspective based on the prophet Nephi's teachings in the Book of Mormon.

"Man is to be free and not acted upon," Wayment said. "Man should not be brought into subjection, but man grows through overcoming the opposites presented to him."