

# David Copperfield conjures therapeutic magic

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With medical adviser Stephen A. Shoop, M.D.

David Copperfield has made the Statue of Liberty vanish, walked through the Great Wall of China, and flown through the air. But some of his best magic is in hospitals and rehabilitation centers with those who are disabled and going through rehabilitation.

"Learning magic can help them learn a variety of skills," says Copperfield. "It's fun and challenging."

The gratifying results of Copperfield's Project Magic (PM) certainly testify to that. Kids struck by cars or cancer, grandfathers felled by strokes, and addicts knocked out of the mainstream acquire or relearn skills through magic that they may have thought left them forever.

"Physical rehab is often very, very hard work," says Copperfield. "But as they learn magic people can get through tasks that may otherwise seem painful, intimidating, or in which they've simply lost interest."

The program has been so successful that AFLAC Insurance recently introduced PM to Children's Healthcare Hospital of Atlanta after evaluating its results. The hospital is the latest in over 1000 centers worldwide to include PM as part of a comprehensive rehabilitation program.

And now is the time to conjure some magic. April is National Occupational Therapy Month. To help create further awareness of the PM program, AFLAC is a presenting sponsor for Copperfield's current Portal tour.

## Sleight of hand

PM is disarmingly simple. "The program helps children and adults regain their manual dexterity and builds confidence and self-esteem through sleight of hand," says Copperfield.

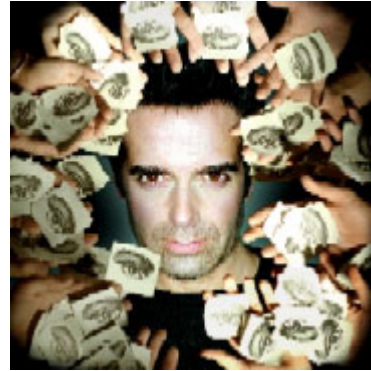
Local programs involve a volunteer professional magician near a participating center who demonstrates and teaches magical principles to patients and rehabilitation specialists.

"A magic show alone is thoroughly entertaining and fun for an entire ward or floor," says Julie DeJean, administrative director of Stormont-Vail West, a behavioral medicine hospital in Topeka, Kansas.

"When they actually participate in learning the variety of skills involved in magic tricks, however, there can be great therapeutic value," says DeJean, who was Copperfield's first contact in the rehab world and has headed up PM since its inception 20 years ago.

But getting the medical establishment to accept PM wasn't as easy as pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

"When David first presented the possibilities to a group of therapists and doctors some people were entertained — although they were not convinced," says DeJean. "But another occupational therapist and I just sat there amazed at the viable techniques and possibilities he had in his hands."



David Copperfield's Project Magic has been a surprising success.

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Like one of Copperfield's multi-layered illusions, PM builds its successes through an involved series of small careful steps. In that sense PM is similar to well-proven rehab techniques that start with simple movements and then hopefully progress into complex motor skills.

Occupational therapy uses a variety of activities to help the patient achieve competency in traditional daily and self-care needs. They range from relearning how to brush teeth and dress to lifting weights to recover strength.

"There are a number of challenges in rehabilitation, however," says DeJean, who is a licensed occupational therapist. "And Project Magic addresses some very well that continue to be stumbling blocks in other settings."

Engagement and motivation for rehab patients of all sorts is one of the biggest challenges in rehabilitation therapy. "They may realize that they need to learn how to dress themselves and that the process starts with small steps such as zipping a zipper or getting a button to go through a buttonhole," says DeJean.

"But there is only so much satisfaction they get from that," she notes. "It's a routine daily task that they used to be able to perform without thought or effort, so it's not very interesting. They lose interest and just don't want to practice it anymore."

That translates into less satisfactory results.

### **Magic motivation**

Magic tricks, on the other hand, both engage and motivate continually. "There's always another trick that builds on the motor skills they've acquired in an earlier and easier illusion," says DeJean. "For kids, that's a real motivator because they are continually amazed and delighted, and they can share these effects with their friends and parents."

It also works for older patients. "They want to entertain their children and grandkids too," adds DeJean.

As a result patients spend far more time voluntarily on acquiring complex and sequential series of motor skills than they might otherwise tolerate.

"There are a limited number of times you can get a child to muster the effort it takes to do routine tasks," says DeJean. "But it takes many repetitions until the skill is mastered. When they learn magic they often practice endlessly and that translates into better results more quickly accomplished."

And it's not only physical. Some of PM's greatest successes are mental, including:

- **Cognitive function** — "Project Magic is perfect for people with brain injuries where cognitive issues have to be addressed," says DeJean. "Performing magic requires a lot of planning and sequencing — putting things in the correct order so they work."
- **Speech** — "To perform a magic trick the magician needs to learn patter," says DeJean. Effective magician's patter is not just talking to an audience, but using language and physical skills entwined to misdirect viewers' attention away from the sleights of hand as well. "For a lot of our patients with language deficits it's great practice."
- **Self-esteem** — "When someone with a disability does something that another with full physical functions cannot it can help build morale and self-esteem," says DeJean. She notes that many mind reading tricks such as guessing a number involve series of complex mental mathematical calculations.
- **Depression** — The achievement, functioning, and social give-and-take that come from practicing and performing magic often help those who are depressed.

- Social skills — Magicians have to learn skills by interacting with a teacher, share questions and answers with an audience, and then teach what they've learned to others. These necessary promptings can work wonders. "Sometimes therapists have told David about a patient he has made a breakthrough with that they were not able to reach in any other way," says DeJean.

Even many of the most severely disabled can learn magic. DeJean notes that "mind reading" tricks are popular with quadriplegics. "Here's something they can do that astounds their fully mobile friends."

But not everybody can learn the tricks of the trade from Copperfield and DeJean. Their magic is for patients and hospital staffs only. "And we absolutely do not tell how it's done," says DeJean.

Just about anyone can see the results, however. A number of PM graduates now share their magic professionally.