

**PENSACOLA** — Halfway through a lengthy conversation, Pensacola psychologist Dan Overlade stops to inject a disclaimer. "Now, remember," he says, "this is making the assumption that all this is real."

His words hint of professional objectivity. But even this neatly dressed, roundish man cautiously admits, "I'm finding it more and more difficult to be skeptical. These people are having reactions that I've watched in patients for years and those (reactions) had nothing to do with aliens."

Overlade is one of a growing community of therapists who are being asked questions they weren't trained to answer — or more precisely, they are listening to stories they weren't prepared to hear.

Reports of alien abduction — bizarre, gut-wrenching accounts of people plucked from their beds and subjected to humiliating physical examinations — are no longer sufficient cause for committal.

Overlade, past president of the Florida Psychological Association, is counseling several "contactees." So is psychiatrist Berthold Schwarz, author and international expert on parapsychology who lives in Vero Beach.

And Ron DeVasto, a state-certified clinical hypnotist living in Winter Park, has worked with 20 contactees in the last year, including a physician, teacher, attorney and accountant who exhibit "tremendous displays of emotion."

DeVasto says hypnotized patients have recounted tales so terrifying he's been forced to cut sessions short "when they start to ... hyperventilate, scream and cry."

Some dismiss these stories as psychological fodder. The country's most-quoted skeptic, Philip Klass, says a lot of people who report alien abductions are looking "for an opportunity to become a celebrity overnight." The rest, he says begrudgingly, "are mentally disturbed."

## Fantasies

Even scientists who endorse UFO research say the reports cast long shadows of doubt.

"Abduction stories are not proof that people are being abducted," says scientist and teacher Phil Imbrogno. He co-authored "Night Siege: The Hudson Valley UFO Sightings" with renowned astronomer J. Allen Hynek.

"There is no doubt that these people have had a UFO encounter," Imbrogno says. "What is real after that is a matter of opinion ... they may fantasize everything else."

Academic explanations for such behavior is myriad: repressed physical abuse, culturally-induced dreams, mass hysteria. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung theorized UFOs and aliens were actually archetypal memories stored in the collective unconscious — what some might call fancy folklore.

Yet clinicians intensively studying this phenomenon report the majority of contactees are not mentally deficient.

Many are "salty, eager, outspoken" people, says psychiatrist Schwarz. And, he says, some have spent their whole lives surrounded by un-

## Psychologists baffled by stories

Overlade examined several contactees including Ed, the Gulf Breeze resident who has taken dozens of UFO photographs and told of several face-to-face encounters with aliens.

All of these psychological evaluations revealed Ed and the others were "within normal limits," Overlade says.

Likewise, New York psychologist Elizabeth Slater has found no particular abnormalities among the many contactees she's evaluated.

Working in tandem with Budd Hopkins, the country's foremost researcher on alien abductions, Slater writes: "I won't say I believe these people were abducted, but I do believe they aren't crazy. I have no explanation for this group."

"Psychologists, moreover, can't demonstrate facts," she writes. "They can only try to understand what people experience and perceive."

## 'Eerie credence'

These experiences are nightmarish revelations. Contactees say they are often led to shipboard examining rooms, where aliens remove small samples of skin or implant "devices" in their brain, apparently to tag them, like deer.

Others report being paralyzed in their beds, and subjected to a mechanical "harvesting" procedure where the aliens retrieve egg and sperm. These accounts of genetic manipulation are so strangely redundant, Hopkins writes, "It adds an eerie credence to the abductees' claims."

What motivates these people to seek help is overwhelming anxiety, usually linked to recurring dreams or unexplained fears, Overlade says. Victims rarely remember the abductions on a conscious level, but they are plagued by periods of "missing time" — hours they can't account for.

These events often begin in childhood and "lead them to question not only their sanity but their whole self-esteem," Overlade says.

"Typically, there is no great terror except in the physical experience," Overlade says, and communication between the aliens and humans is largely telepathic.

"Most contactees get assurance of safety and well-being ... but others think they have been threatened. Even if they remember something, they feel something bad will happen to them, like their heart will explode."

Suspicious such as these drove 10 residents of Gulf Breeze and Pensacola — a highway patrolman, a banker and a teacher among them — to form an abductee support group.

The coordinator, Vicki Lyons, is a rosy-cheeked, vibrant sort who seems especially suited to her job as a piano teacher. She volunteered for her role as leader, confidante and all-around mother confessor, and she has grown so accustomed to the fantastic "that I have to be careful I don't talk about aliens in the grocery line," Lyons says.

At meetings, she says, members reassure each other without revealing intimate details of their abductions. Most have been through a battery of psychological exams and come up credible — no mental illness here, Lyons says.

"These people have a lot of credibility ... and

## 'contactees'

of reason. In their eyes, they can see the distress and helplessness.

"They don't seem to be people who are looking to fill a void. They have something better to do than this."

## Under hypnosis

Several members of the group describe classic missing time episodes, others reveal strange and recurring dreams. One woman's three-year-old son has demonstrated behavior she can only explain as an "obsession with authority," Lyons says.

Some group members have had their worst fears confirmed through hypnosis regression. This technique, Overlade says, is a common treatment for emotional and physical disorders and allows the patient to deal with hidden fears or forgotten ordeals on a conscious level.

Under hypnosis, the person is put into a trance and encouraged to talk about experiences stored in subconscious memory. Because they are so terrifying, abduction experiences often are fled away and forgotten.

"The first time I listened to one of these stories, I must admit, I felt a lot of excitement welling up inside me," says DeVasto, the hypnotist from Winter Park. "But the (contactees) greatest fear is that it will continue to happen to them."

Nevertheless, DeVasto says, "Many of these people think they are being prepared for something. They have a feeling ... when the time is right, they will be able to divulge information."

The aliens, on the other hand, seem to be gleaning their own information, Overlade says.

"It seems one of the primary purposes of abductions is to prompt a display of a variety of emotions ...," he says. "Somehow (the aliens) have lost the ability to be compassionate. The implication between the lines is that unless they regain some compassion ... they may die off because they are not any good at parenting."

Skeptics explain such theories are ridiculous and dismiss abduction stories as nothing more than elaborate lies.

Overlade acknowledges hypnosis is not infallible — a patient can repeat a "fabrication" in a trance, he says — but a trained hypnotist is not going to lead a person into a lie.

"Without formal regression a person might fabricate something and come to believe it," Overlade says. "I don't believe these people are fabricating what they are telling me."

DeVasto agrees. "If someone truly believes a lie, they don't distribute that lie with such tremendous emotion," he says.

Under any circumstances, the alien abduction phenomenon has the most learned researchers scratching their collective heads.

Bruce Maccabee, a Naval physicist and chairman of the Fund for UFO Research, says even he would have been skeptical 10 years ago. But recently, he's changed his mind.

"What is it?" he asks. "A psycho-pathology unknown to psychologists which can also produce pictures? And have people hallucinating the same hallucination?"

"It's just too bizarre to imagine."