EFFECTIVE PLACEBO CONTROL CONDITIONS FOR PTSD EFFICACY RESEARCH: A Brief Communication

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The first two studies to test the efficacy of a new single session (5 to 6 hours) manualized procedure to treat posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) appeared in the January–March 2013, Volume 61, Number 1, issue of the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* (IJCEH; Barabasz, Barabasz, Christensen, French, & Watkins, 2013; Christensen, Barabasz, & Barabasz, 2013). Both were placebo-controlled investigations of abreactive hypnosis conceptualized within Ego State Therapy and both met evidence-based criteria to demonstrate efficacy (Chambless & Hollon, 1998).

The length of the Barabasz et al. (2013) article was reduced due to space considerations, which were recognized in the prepublication phase. This was accomplished by essentially deleting the entire explanation of the placebo control group condition because it would be described in two subsequent invited articles appearing in other journals (Barabasz, 2013; Barabasz & Barabasz, 2013). The subsequent large number of requests for the description of the important placebo condition indicated this strategy was inadequate. Because the IJCEH is the only journal in the field that is available in more than 1,750 institutions, a number that exceeds all other worldwide hypnosis media combined, many readers did not have access to the description appearing in other journals. Thus, a description of that condition follows.

Placebo Control group patients (Pts) were exposed to information about PTSD from the U.S. Veterans Administration’s online “About Face” app (http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/about_face.html). In the presence of the empathic experimenter/therapist, Pts obtained information about PTSD by clicking on a photograph from the dozens provided, which represented a wide range of diversity (gender, race, ethnicity, age, etc.). This included “How I knew I had PTSD,” “How PTSD affects the
people you love,” “Why I didn’t ask for help right away, when I knew I needed help,” “My advice to you,” etc. Pts chose photographs of people with whom they could identify.

The significant interaction effect analysis of variance result revealed that the control group produced a significant difference decrease from pretest to posttest ($p < .01$) on the PTSD Checklist (PCL; see Barabasz et al., 2013), a 17-item self-report paper-and-pencil measure of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed. [DSM–IV–TR]; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) symptoms. However, this significant difference was not maintained over time. The scores at follow-up were not significantly lower as compared to pretest, $p > .05$. In fact, there was a significant increase between posttest and the 16- to 18-week follow-up, suggesting a trend toward a return to beginning status. In contrast, the treatment group had a significant decrease between pretest and each postassessment, $p < .01$. There were no statistically significant declines in scores after the posttest assessment, yet there were no statistically significant increases in scores, as was seen in the control condition.

The major finding of the study shows that a 5- to 6-hour single session of manualized abreactive ego state therapy (EST) is an effective treatment that holds up over time, as seen posttreatment and over repeated follow-ups according to the most widely used measure of PTSD symptoms. The placebo group appeared to show a significant posttreatment effect indicating that the placebo condition functioned as a believable treatment condition. Yet, the apparent placebo effects (a reduction in PCL scores of 17.34 points) are clinically meaningless when contrasted with the posttreatment effects produced by the abreactive hypnosis group (a reduction in PCL scores of 53.11 points).

Furthermore, the immediate posttreatment significant placebo effects completely disappeared at the first and subsequent follow-ups whereas the remarkable clinically meaningful ego state treatment effect was entirely maintained over time. The U.S. Veterans Administration’s online “About Face” app remains in continued use in the Laboratory of Hypnosis Research at Washington State University and remains perceived by volunteers as an effective treatment in our PTSD and Combat Stress Injury studies.

References


