EDITORIAL

Special Issue on Placebo, Hypnosis, and Antidepressants

Stephen Lankton
Editor-in-Chief

This is a special issue of the American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis (AJCH). Ed Frischholz and I decided to obtain some expert opinions regarding the work of Irving Kirsch. We invited a number of authors who we hoped would be both pro and con on the issues that have been proposed by Dr. Kirsch. In addition, since there is a reasonable likelihood of a relationship between hypnosis and placebo factor, we wanted to extend the discussion originally raised by Kirsch into the arena of psychotherapy using hypnosis. I have long believed that if treatment outcomes are enhanced by placebo effects, it is important to examine how to best use these in the most clinically advantageous manner.

Understandably, many of the critics of Kirsch’s work were unwilling to participate as invited authors, and others were not affiliated with the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis and were not comfortable with addressing the concept of hypnosis. Nevertheless, we brought together a group of authors who are knowledgeable and capable. These authors have been able to comment with objectivity that includes both support and opposition to the position championed by Kirsch and the relevant ramification of the issues he introduced. In addition, some of these authors have been able to firmly ground their positions to research clinical practice in the area of hypnosis.

“Suggestion in the Treatment of Depression” by Irving Kirsch and Carol B. Low is the lead article that frames the issues originally authored by Kirsch (and others) and recasts them into the arena of psychotherapy utilizing hypnosis. Specifically, they illustrate the similarities of placebo and hypnosis, hypnosis’ non-deceptive placebo, and conclude that “hypnosis is the most effective and best-elaborated set of procedures for administering suggestions effectively and without deception” (this issue, p. 227). And, they add, to do so without the potential dangers of antidepressants.

Address correspondence to Stephen Lankton, PO Box 34177, Phoenix, AZ 85067, USA. E-mail: steve@lankton.com
Harriet E. Hollander’s commentary on Kirsch and Low’s article is titled, “Antidepressants in the Treatment of Depression: The Clinician and the Controversy.” Here Hollander warns against overstating the clinical efficacy of antidepressants and summarizes selected research and a meta-analysis that reach a different conclusion and surveys some studies of comparative effects.

Jim Sliwinski and Gary R. Elkins’ article, “Enhancing Placebo Effects: Insights From Social Psychology,” provides an excellent overview of some of the research from social psychology regarding, especially, three factors that seem to enhance placebo effects. These are important factors for clinicians to implement when creating therapeutic benefits of expectancy in any clinical setting as well as the practice of clinical hypnosis.

Assen Alladin has provided an article of sweeping scope with “The Power of Belief and Expectancy in Understanding and Management of Depression.” Here Alladin leads readers comprehensively from the problems he sees with both the descriptive and functional definition of clinical depression to strategies to maximize the expectancy effects for treatment using cognitive hypnosis.

“Treating Depression With Antidepressants: Drug-Placebo Efficacy Debates Limit Broader Considerations,” Michael D. Yapko told me, would be the last thing he will author. We all hope that is a promise he won’t keep and that we read more of his work in years to come. For now, he provides AJCH readers with a high level analysis of a handful of additional concerns involved in the controversy raised by Kirsch that goes beyond the issue of drug efficacy.

In “When the Bough Breaks: Rethinking Treatment Strategies for Perinatal Depression,” Sara E. Rosenquist brings readers to the reality of childbirth and flesh and blood consequences of these issues. Among her documented concerns are the exaggerate effectiveness and scope of antidepressants and discounting of the importance and effectiveness of psychotherapy and its use of hypnosis. She proceeds to elaborate and illustrate several situations and therapeutic tasks wherein therapy using hypnosis can be crucial interventions surrounding pre- and post-childbirth experiences.

Preceding all these topical articles, and in response to my call for comments about the potential limitations of CBT (AJCH, Vol. 53, No. 3), William J. Matthews has written a commentary titled “Empirical Validation and the Importance of Testable Theory: A Paradigm Shift in Psychotherapy?” Matthews makes the enduring point that empirically supported practice techniques must be wedded with informed theoretical roots. He goes farther to suggest newly emerging approaches he believes will, for that very reason, come to replace CBT. Of course, the approaches he describes, and the research supporting them, are a new direction for therapeutic uses of hypnosis and a promising area we have yet to investigate.

Reference