

The McCarthy Teapot Test

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An expectancy enhancement procedure masquerading as a
hypnotisability test.

Before we use hypnosis with a patient we usually have an intake session. This intake session often involves taking a history of the presenting problem and planning what variety of hypnotic approaches to take with the patient.

I like an intake session to achieve far more than just that. People come to therapy to change. They do not come to therapy to stay the same. In the stages of change model identified by Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross my patients present to me as a Medical Hypnotist at the intake session in what they have termed the Contemplation State. They are thinking about making

change and wanting change to happen but have not yet committed to change. That is why my signature opening question is not the common "What is your problem?" but invariably "What do you want to change?" This simple and short powerful opening question makes the intake session about change rather than about problems. I insist on talking about the future when their problems are no longer bothersome. I ask the patient to then tell me what they would want to be like at the end of therapy using positive terms only. This signature opening question is thus analogous to the Magic Question often used by Solution Focused Brief Therapists, (Gingerich & Eisengart) "If during your sleep a miracle happened and you woke up cured what would you notice?" For me the intake session is mostly about rapidly moving the patient

from Contemplation to Preparation State.

Patients approach and process each session that we have with some degree of expectancy. In The Handbook of Ericksonian Psychotherapy edited by Geary and Zeig as early in the book as just page 4 they write the following - 'Expectancy is a tremendously powerful factor in the manner in which patients respond to treatment and this especially true of hypnosis. However, patient's expectations regarding hypnosis present a double-edged sword. On the positive side, favorable impressions regarding the possibilities that hypnosis can reveal in one's life add tremendous leverage to a patient's responsiveness to hypnotic interventions. On the other hand, unrealistic expectations are the worst enemies of hypnosis.'

Well if expectancy is so all important for success in hypnosis then surely we would want to enhance patient expectancy if possible. We can and must if we want our therapy to be optimal.

We can certainly reduce patient expectancy by saying the following, "Let's try some hypnosis."

'Try' of course means 'fail' to the subconscious mind.

Compare "The woman went to the shop and tried to buy some bread" with "The woman went to the shop and bought some bread."

"The player tried to score the goal" versus "The player scored the goal."

The following clinical technique that I have used with many thousands of patients only takes a few minutes and is best used near the end of the intake session. Let's

assume that the patient is female to avoid the he/she awkwardness

Ask the patient to sit back in the chair, make herself comfortable, close her eyes and then ask her to imagine that she is in her very own kitchen.

"I want you to imagine that you are picking up the kettle or jug.... and taking it to the faucet (tap). Turn on the faucet. SEE the water pouring from the faucet, into the kettle.

As the water pours into the kettle, LISTEN to two distinct sounds. The sound that the water makes as it leaves the faucet, and also the sound that the water makes as it fills the kettle. Then notice the kettle

getting heavier with the weight of the water as you FEEL the weight of the kettle filling.

When there's enough water in the kettle then turn off the faucet. Notice if the faucet makes a noise or a squeak as you turn it off, or if it is silent.

Then put the kettle on to boil.

Then CHOOSE a cup. Any cup. It can be any size of cup, any shape, any weight and texture. It might be your favorite cup. Or your least favorite cup. NOTICE the shape of the handle. It might be semi-circular shaped or shaped like the letter D or it might be more like a question mark.

HEAR the sound the cup makes as you put it down on the bench-top.

Then open the fridge and take out the milk container.

NOTICE the kind of milk container. It might be cardboard or plastic, and how full it is. It might be full, half-full or almost empty.

Then HEAR the sound of the warming noises coming from the kettle.

Then get out a teapot, and into the teapot, put tea leaves or tea bags, whichever you prefer.

HEAR the sound of the kettle boiling now and SEE the steam coming out of the spout. Then, carefully, pick up the kettle and pour the hot water into the teapot.

FEEL the way the wrist moves as you tip the water in.

SEE the steam rising from the teapot. Then put the kettle back down and put the lid on the teapot and wait for it to infuse and become ready.

Then off to the RIGHT.....SEE a bowl of fruit. At

the front of the bowl there are two oranges and a banana. And at the back there is a lemon.

Pick up the lemon and NOTICE if the lemon is completely yellow or still has some green color. FEEL the lemon and notice if it is a smooth shiny skinned lemon or whether the variety you have chosen is more crinkly in texture.

NOTICE the shape of the end of the lemon. Some lemons are rounded at the end, others have a little pointed bit at the end.

Then SMELL the lemon. Notice the tangy, citrusy, lemony smell. Then take the lemon over to a chopping board and CUT the lemon in half.

SEE the spray of juice in the air.

And SMELL the lemon more clearly more.

Pick up half of the lemon and SEE the cut, wet, glistening

surface, of this juicy, juicy lemon.

Bring the lemon up to your nose and SMELL that lemon smell more clearly. Then BITE into the lemon and TASTE the lemon juice.

Then pour some tea into the cup. You can add milk or sugar to taste if you want. Take a sip of the tea and wash away the TASTE of the lemon.

Notice the TASTE of the tea and FEEL the WARMTH of the tea. Take another sip of the tea. Then OPEN your eyes and lets talk about your experiences.

Post-test questions

This is the crucial part of the exercise. This requires

enthusiasm and excitement from the therapist and lots of smiling and non verbal communication of pleasure.

Every reply should generate excitement no matter what the patient replies. The Tea Pot Test is perceived by the patient as a hypnotizability assessment. It is not.

Hypnotizability tests have passes and fails. This test has no fails.

Could you SEE the things that I described?

(When they say 'yes' then smile and say something along the lines of 'visualization excellent. Well done.' Most people find that easy.)

If they say that they could not visualize this simple household scene all is not lost. Do not consider this to be resistance and a sign that hypnosis cannot work. It is so simple a visualization that complete failure has to be the

patient's choice. I however simply do not allow failure. No one ever fails the Teapot Test. I have had just two people make such a claim and in each case I have still managed to be successful by then stating. "Wow. That's impressive! A very simple and basic memory and imagination assessment and yet your subconscious and conscious mind chose not to see those common items. Obviously your conscious mind knows what a cup and a lemon looks like of course but for some powerful reason your subconscious mind chose today to not visualize them. Amazing. That must have been really frustrating for you. It usually means that your subconscious for some reason has a powerful and strong need to be in control and not to be told by someone what to think. I'm so glad I found that out today. It protected you even though I'm sure

that you wanted to see the cup and the lemon. That's really impressive defense. Your subconscious now knows that I understand and appreciate and respect that.

When I teach you the type of non controlling hypnosis that I now know will help you just raise your right hand if for any reason you ever feel that you are starting to not feel or be in control. I'll stop. (No hand has ever risen!)

Could you HEAR the sounds? The sound of the running water or the kettle boiling for instance. Did you imagine in your mind those very familiar sounds?

(If they say yes then smile and say auditory excellent.

Well done.)

Could you get a sense of the FEEL of the cup or the lemon, it's texture or perhaps the weight of the kettle?

(If they say yes then smile and say kinesthetic awareness excellent. Well done)

Could you SMELL the lemon?

(If they say yes then smile and say olfactory awareness excellent. Well done.)

Some people will not be able to recreate smell. I ask them if they have any nasal allergies or smell problems.

If they say yes then I smile and tell them that explains why they did not get the smell easily. If they say no then I smile and state that this is the least important skill and not one that we will need to treat their problem.

Did you get the TASTE of the lemon or the tea?

(If they say yes then smile and say gustatory awareness excellent. Well done.)

Some people will not get the taste of the lemon but will get the tea. I then smile and say "Wonderful, you were able to choose to experience the pleasant suggestion of tea and choose to discard the unpleasant one of lemon.

Fabulous control!"

No matter what response they give to the modalities of visualization, auditory, , kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory I smile and explain that their answer makes them very suitable for hypnosis.

The next part of the assessment deals with dissociation proneness.

I then ask them if they experienced the visualization in the first person or third person. That is, did you see your hands holding the kettle and cup or were you detached and seeing your whole body carrying out the instructions.

If they indicate first person then I smile and say "Good, you were associated. Fully engaged." I then explain how some other people give a different answer and how their response is the best one for hypnosis.

If they say third person detached then I smile and say "Good, dissociated, highly skilled. You automatically and cautiously used this as a defense mechanism. You saw yourself carrying out these tasks whilst you observed from a distance. **She** picked up the kettle and the cup

and lemon and did the pouring, smelling and biting. So only **she** could feel these things. It's good to know that you can choose to do that because when we do the hypnosis I don't want to teach just her the really helpful skills and end up not treating you.

The next assessment is about compliance and concordance.

I then smile and ask, using a presupposition, "How did you handle the mistakes that I hoped that I made?" (note the assumption of 'handled' and the implication that mistakes were 'deliberate'.)

Examples of 'mistakes' might be that they normally only ever put a teabag in a cup and may not even own a teapot.

The position of the fruitbowl is different from that suggested

There may not be the fruit that I suggested.

They can show concordance by, for instance, inventing a teapot, or having the teapot hover over their stove, or have a lemon in the bowl when they normally only have lemons in the fridge.

I smile and explain that even when I get it wrong they can instantly use their creativity to cope with my story being different from their own kitchen.

If they insist on using just a teabag or resolutely have the fruit bowl in the other direction then I point out that this is non-concordance and shows that they have control and autonomy. If they don't like my suggestion for whatever reason they are free to choose their own. I then point out that if this happens in the therapy then it

would be helpful to point it out to me as I would not want there to be too much divergence of shared imagery.

Hopefully after this "assessment I can then state something along the lines of.

So YOU are great at visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory imagination. YOU are associated which is good and you are partially non concordant for the taste of lemon. This gives me a great insight into how to deliver the best type of hypnosis that will work for YOU."

The North American version of this test is called the Coffee Pot Test. I assume that you can imagine that script!

The Teapot Test is thus an expectancy enhancement

procedure masquerading as a hypnotizability test. It improves the success of the subsequent hypnosis sessions. It takes approximately 5 minutes to administer and if carried out with theatrical gusto it adds to rapport and teamwork.

References

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