

Op-Ed

# Preying on the Desperate, Part 2

## The Trouble with Testimonials

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Last month in Part I, *Miracle Cures Hold False Promise*<sup>1</sup>, the ten warning signs of a potential medical scam were introduced with an illustration of a popular treatment for which cure claims have been made. Since that publication, at least one of the websites promoting the example treatment has discontinued the use of the word cure in favor of more pertinent terminology. A product has more credibility when unsubstantiated cure claims are avoided.

It is crucial that people with chronic illnesses are able to make rational judgments on treatment possibilities which protect their financial interests, health, and overall well-being. With that in mind, we will examine the ways emotion can be used to manipulate thinking and provide tips to ensure rational decision making.

### Emotional Appeals

According to San Jose State University<sup>2</sup>, emotional appeals all have two things in common:

1. They attempt to elicit an emotional response that will serve as the basis of any decision made, instead of presenting an argument and relying on its soundness.
2. As a result, they are never acceptable in an argument, though they can be quite effective in suppressing rational responses.

A *fallacy* is a mistake, misstep, or deliberate deceit.<sup>3</sup> Hence, *logical fallacies* are false beliefs caused by errors in reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Finally, *emotional fallacies* are arguments designed to appeal to feelings and override rational thinking and logical judgment.<sup>3</sup>

San Jose State University asserts, “Fallacious appeals to emotions are effective because it's easier for most people not to think critically, but to rely on their gut reaction; and it's easier for the person making the appeal to excite his listeners' emotions than to construct a persuasive argument. As a result, those who try to persuade us most often--politicians and advertisers-- tend to rely on emotional appeals in order to motivate us to do things that we might not for purely rational reasons.”<sup>2</sup>



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There are seven common emotional fallacies according to Southern Utah University:<sup>3</sup>

**Argumentum ad Hominem:** An argument irrationally attacking a person’s character through personal assaults in the form of name-calling, mudslinging, and smear tactics instead of presenting a counter-argument and relying on soundness and validity of position.

**Bandwagon:** An argument of common practice in which a person is urged to do something because “everyone else is doing it” and, hence, the reader should jump on the bandwagon.

**Ad Populum/Plain Folk:** The argument stressing of a bond between the arguer and the average citizen; a claim that relies on the false notion of sincerity.

**Status Appeal:** An argument that emphasizes the cause and effect relationship between adopting a position and bettering oneself because of it.

**Scare Tactics:** An argument that a position must be taken in order to avoid problems, often threats and exaggerations.

**Testimonial/Appeal to Authority:** An argument that a claim is superior because a well-known person without any expertise on the topics says so.

**Glittering Generality:** An argument involving vague generalizations that sound good, but actually lack evidence and substance.

This month we will take an in-depth look at the trouble with testimonials, which are commonly used by advertisers of health products making cure claims.

### **The Trouble with Testimonials**

The testimonial technique uses a famous person or someone who looks like a normal, average person and tries to connect the advertiser’s product or service to the reader’s feeling about this person.<sup>3</sup> In the chronic illness community, this technique often utilizes a person who claims to have suffered and been cured from a medical condition. They often have a financial interest in selling a cure, rather than sharing helpful knowledge or techniques for free.

Testimonials rely on emotional appeals and persuasive writing to entice readers to agree and buy in. The use of testimonials, and any logical fallacy for that matter, could be inadvertent or intended.



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One of the ten warning signs covered last month is the propagation of unconfirmed patient testimonials & emotional appeals. At first glance, testimonials seem to be valid and come from real people just like us. And they may. However, validity is not guaranteed and there is some trouble with testimonials.

First, testimonials are rarely verifiable. At most, they list a name and city/state for the supposed writer. There is no easy way to verify if the testimonial is truthful or whether it was fabricated by the seller. A seller could easily scan through national phone listings to find a name and location to sign on a fabricated promotional blurb.

Testimonials are usually one sided. Let’s face it, the seller wants to sell their products, so they only publish the positive comments about their products and likely withhold neutral and negative comments.

By reading nothing but positive testimonials one is given the false impression of recovery prevalence... everyone who buys in has been cured! You can do it too! In reality, the testimonials only represent a portion of the true numbers who have tried the treatment. It could be entirely possible that only 1% of people who have tried the treatment had any success. And, those are the 1% whose testimonials would appear giving the false impression of 100% success instead of 1%.

Testimonials are often vague and circular. Since the reader cannot contact the writer of the testimonial directly to ask for additional details and clarification, important details may be left out.

Testimonial claims are often irrelevant to the condition which they claim to cure. For example, a testimonial may acclaim improved sleep, lessen depression, and create a feeling of well being. But, those may not be symptoms of the medical condition which the product claims to cure. In fact, they may be symptoms of another comorbid medical or mental health condition, or simply a feel-good therapy. Further given the time frame of the treatment, it could simply be that time alone allows for natural healing which would have occurred with or without the treatment.

Testimonials are unproven. Because the writer was not engaged in a controlled experiment, there may be extraneous variables, such as concurrent treatments and comorbid conditions, which may be partially or fully credited for any recovery experienced. In as much, it is not even verifiable whether the writer truly had the condition from which they claim to be cured. Nor do testimonials provide before and after lab or test results which conclusively prove the medical condition has been improved.



**“If we focus on the facts instead of the feelings, we will make a better decision about the advertiser’s product.”**

Testimonials do not take into account the various stages of a medically disabling condition. Multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), for example, can range from mild to completely disabling. Because the ability to withstand adversity varies greatly from person to person, individuals may describe their condition as more or less disabling than an objective scale. This may skew individual results.

Testimonials do not provide solid evidence in terms of comparing experimental and control groups. The placebo effect is a measurable, observable, or perceived improvement not attributable to a treatment. In experiments, one group might be given the real treatment while another is given a sham treatment. If both improve at similar rates, then the treatment cannot be said to be behind the improvement. The placebo effect may comprise the entire improvement. The only way to rule out the placebo effect is to conduct experiments. Even experiments which cannot be published in industry-funded journals can provide some evidence on which to make verifiable claims.

Finally, by their very nature, testimonials are a line or two in a very short paragraph lauding a product. It is highly unusual for someone who has been cured of a chronic medical condition to sum up their success in a couple of sentences. Most people, as evidenced in support communities, write on and on in great detail about any success or failure. A seller could summarize a long testimonial; however in doing so, it could easily be taken out of context from its original form.

### **How to Protect Yourself**

If we focus on the facts instead of the feelings, we will make a better decision about the advertiser’s product.<sup>4</sup> Facts are things that have been demonstrated to exist or known to have existed. Merriam Webster defines a fact as a piece of information presented as having objective reality.<sup>4</sup>

Objective facts are perceptible to persons other than the affected individual, therefore provide more validity.<sup>5</sup> Objective facts include such things as visible changes and measurable changes. For example, before and after lab results is factual evidence which can be relied upon.

Subjective facts arise out of one's own perception of his/her state and process. Subjective facts are not independently observable by an examiner, therefore cannot be relied upon as factual evidence.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that subjective facts are not real. They are simply not verifiable.



Great Job!

**“The best decisions are the ones made carefully and logically after thoroughly investigating the treatment.”**

There are numerous things one can do to make decisions based on rational thinking and logical judgment instead of emotion. By doing so, one may be protected from potential scams, make better judgment calls, and yet still be open to exploring the many possibilities which hold promise. A few tips:

1. Be skeptical. Take all claims with “a grain of salt.”<sup>3</sup>
2. Check facts and source documentation carefully.<sup>3</sup>
3. Research all claims to verify validity.<sup>3</sup>
4. Never take a sellers word for it. Verify, verify, verify!
5. Learn to identify and understand fallacies and their terminology.<sup>3</sup>
6. Never act quickly. Wait awhile for facts and emotions to settle.
7. Ask around the community to see what others’ experiences have been.
8. Ask questions regarding average improvements and prevalence.
9. Explore both sides of the coin, both that which acclaim and defame it.
10. Report abuse or fraud promptly to your state regulatory agency.<sup>7</sup>

Other Considerations:

1. Are you seeking a cure or treatment to manage your condition? Does the treatment that you are looking at provide that?
2. Are you seeking a sole treatment or a complementary treatment to others?
3. Are the potential benefits of the treatment worth the cost?
4. Does the treatment provide benefits for other unrelated medical and/or mental health conditions which may improve your overall health?
5. Have you researched the treatment’s mechanism of action through other channels to see if the theory behind it makes sense?

The best decisions are the ones made carefully and logically after thoroughly investigating the treatment. It’s still possible to make a mistake, but at least you won’t feel duped because you investigated carefully and made a fully informed decision whether to take a risk on it. Don’t forget to report your successes and failures so others can benefit from them.

It never hurts to remember:

### **No Toxic Chemicals = No Chemical Injuries**

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