

APPENDIX E
DEBRIEFING PROTOCOL

The Debriefing Statement should be written **in non-technical language**, taking care to define technical terms when they must be used.

The Debriefing Statement should include the following:

1. The questions, hypotheses, and issues that motivated the research.
2. The background leading to the research question being studied.
3. The logic that underlies the study, including identification of experimental conditions and how they relate to the hypotheses.
4. An explanation of how the data gathered from that participant will be used to address the hypotheses.
5. An opportunity to withdraw their data from the study.
6. A opportunity to be informed of the results of the study. You can say, “If you would like to receive a report of this research when it is completed (or a summary of the findings), please contact (*name*) at (*e-mail*).”
7. Contact information for the IRB in case there are ethical concerns about the research.
8. An accessible reference for further reading. This reference must be found easily by students.
9. Thank subjects for their participation.

SAMPLE DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

This study is concerned with the control of unwanted thoughts. Previous studies have found that under some conditions people experience the return of the very thoughts they try not to think about. Although you may be able to control your thoughts for a brief time, thoughts that are intentionally suppressed often return by "popping" into mind or by influencing later perception and judgment.

In this study, you were asked to perform two tasks--thinking about a white bear, and trying not to think about a white bear. All participants performed these same tasks for 5 minutes each, and they each talked into a tape recorder during both tasks, reporting their ongoing stream of thoughts. One group performed the suppression task first, followed by the thinking task, whereas the other group performed the thinking task first, followed by suppression. We expect to find that suppression prompts lower rates of mentioning of the white bear than does directed thinking--but that suppression still does not eradicate such mentioning completely. When we examine the frequency and duration of mentions of white bears that appear in the tape-recorded protocols, we expect to find indications of thought return even during suppression.

We are also interested in the influence of the suppression task on the thinking task. We suspect that when people suppress a thought, an automatic mental process is introduced that searches for that thought--and this process increases the likelihood that the thought will come to mind later when it is being summoned intentionally. So, we expected more time would be spent talking about the thought during the "think period" for those participants whose think period followed suppression than for those whose think period preceded suppression. We were predicting a post-suppression "rebound" of unwanted thoughts.

The rebound of thoughts following suppression may be relevant to everyday difficulties in mental control. People who try to diet by suppressing thoughts of eating, for example, might find their minds far too actively interested in food when they later let down their guard. Other thoughts we suppress--secrets, embarrassments, fears, worries, or the like--could paradoxically become more prominent in mind as a result of our attempts at mental control. The questions of how and when mental control might have these unwanted effects are still very much open to psychological research.

If you would like to withdraw your data from the study at this time, please let us know. If you would like to receive a report of this research when it is completed (or a summary of the findings), please contact Prof. Daniel Wegner (wegner@wjh.harvard.edu). If you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact Jane Calhoun (617-495-5459, jcalhoun@fas.harvard.edu), Research Officer for the Committee on the Use of Human Subjects.

If you are interested in learning more about the problems people encounter in trying to control their thoughts, you may want to consult: Wegner, D. M. (1994). *White bears and other unwanted thoughts: Suppression, obsessions, and the psychology of mental control*. New York: Guilford Press.

Thank you for your participation.