

Placebo - Belief and Healing: What you may not know.

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John Matzke was told he had only 18 months to live. His oncologist insisted he immediately begin aggressive treatment for the melanoma that had metastasized to his lung. But John **instead took a month off to strengthen his body before the grueling treatment began. He hiked, meditated, exercised and ate organic food. A month later, his lung tumor had completely disappeared on its own.** Though melanoma is one of the deadliest cancers, John never started treatment and thrived another 18 years.

Have you ever heard stories of “spontaneous remission?” You know, someone has a terrible, even life threatening disease—only to have it disappear for completely unknown reasons?

The scientific and medical communities have struggled for decades to uncover and **understand the mechanisms behind the body's natural ability to heal.** Indeed, the mystery of healing—whether from disease, injury, trauma, or myriad other afflictions—has been at or near the heart of mysticism, philosophy, science, religion, and medicine since the beginning of human civilization. And yet, **it seems the more we learn about the miracle, the less we understand. But one thing is certain:**

The mind is important, and perhaps even the MOST important factor in healing and recovery.



And yet this “mind effect” is most often spoken of in extremely negative terms. Ever heard of the *placebo effect*?

As you likely know, a *placebo* is a chemically or physically ineffective treatment, such as a sugar pill, given to patients who believe it works. The patient's belief itself becomes the healing agent. **Interestingly, red sugar pills seem to have a greater effect than blue sugar pills (colors have meanings), and two sugar pills work better than one. In fact, packaging even has a role—with fake name-brand drugs in fancy packaging working better than fake generic brand drugs in generic packaging.**

Placebos don't even have to be pills to be effective. **Studies have shown that fake injections are more effective than fake pills, and that some phony surgeries are just as effective as their real counterparts. In some studies, sham acupuncture works just as well as real acupuncture. It's all rooted in the patient's belief.**

Controlled studies of the placebo effect have shown it to improve chest pain, warts, asthma, arthritis, cancer, and side effects of medication. Clearly the patient's belief is strong medicine.

And speaking of medicine, the placebo effect is often the bane of medical care. New drugs must beat the placebo effect in clinical trials, which is becoming increasingly hard to do. Ubiquitous drug advertising, and more powerful marketing have ironically increased public belief that a pill, *any pill*, is the cure for every ill. New drugs in clinical trials often have a difficult time showing any greater effect than the fake pill they must beat.

For ill or for good, the placebo effect is the manifestation of the first mental process the patient must possess before the healing process can have its full effect: Namely, the patient must believe s/he is receiving effective treatment.

Patients will form this belief based on evidence, and will seek evidence to support this belief until they find it.

In acupuncture, as in any other branch of medicine, patient's belief **MUST** be engaged properly to bring about the maximum belief and healing.

Consider also these questions:

1. Is acupuncture merely an elaborate placebo?
2. Should we be encouraging patient belief, or trying to remain neutral to minimize the placebo effect?
3. In what ways does the atmosphere of your office encourage healing?
4. In what ways do your demeanor and bedside manner encourage healing?
5. What inadvertent messages, positive and negative, are you giving to your patients? How do those messages affect outcomes?