

## Does God Heal Those Who Pray or Do We Heal Ourselves?

We have all heard stories of how people who were afflicted with serious diseases prayed to God and were healed. Despite the fact that many times prayer does not help, in those cases where it was effective this strengthens the faith of those who prayed and further seals their belief that God exists. This is especially the case where faith healers treat hundreds of people at a time, seemingly producing miraculous cures. While some of these "cures" are not valid, at other times real healing has taken place. Does this prove God exists and is doing the healing, or are there other explanations?

Knowledge that the body can heal itself in a fashion that is above and beyond the normal reparative mechanisms has been gaining greater appreciation in the past half century. This process is called "the placebo effect." For years doctors associated placebo effect with being "all in your mind." However, a number of remarkable studies have now shown that the placebo effect is a classical example of a mind-body interaction and that the effect has a biological and physiological basis.

The placebo effect is so powerful that the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) requires that all new drugs be evaluated using double blind studies where the active drug and a placebo are compared. Before pharmaceutical companies can market a new drug it has to be shown to be significantly more effective than the placebo. This requirement has resulted in the rejection of hundreds of drugs. Double blind studies have also shown that some surgical treatments are also ineffective. Two of the most notable are tying off an artery in the chest wall (internal mammary artery) to treat coronary artery disease, and debridement of the cartilage in the treatment of osteoarthritis of the knee.

How does the placebo effect work? A major part of the puzzle was solved by a 1978 study of dental anesthesia in patients undergoing treatment of impacted molars. They were given the usual anesthesia for the procedure but this wore off after 2 hours. They were then told that they would receive an injection of a powerful pain-killer. Some were given the opioid drug, morphine, while others were given a placebo. A significant proportion of those given a placebo had the same relief of pain as those given the opioid drug morphine. The placebo-responders were then given Naloxone, a drug that eliminates the action of narcotic drugs like morphine by blocking the opioid receptors. Remarkably, the placebo-responders reported an increase in their pain. These studies indicated that the placebo effect was due to the release of the body's natural opioids, called endorphins. These studies have been replicated many times.

Studies using functional MRI were undertaken to further identify the mechanism of the placebo effect. These studies showed that an additional part of the placebo effect is derived from the activation of the prefrontal cognitive or thought centers. This in turn produced a decrease in activation of the pain matrix involved in the processing of pain signals throughout the brain.

If the blinded placebo studies were carried out in a way that the subjects were unaware that the placebo was being given, it did not work. This showed that a critical aspect of the placebo effect is the "expectation of relief" of pain or of illness. This is why the setting is so critical for an effective placebo effect. For physicians, this setting consists of a white coat, a stethoscope, diplomas on the wall, and the expected clinical setting. For witch doctors it consists of an ominous mask, rattles, dances, fire and smoke. For the faith healer it consists of large enthusiastic crowds, the presence of hundreds of others who seem to be healed, dramatic gestures such as pushing and falling backward, and loud calls for the helping hand of God.

A further testimony to the power of the placebo effect is that doctors, shamans, witch doctors and related individuals have been perceived as effective healers for thousands of years despite the fact that truly effective drugs such as antibiotics, antidepressants, anti-psychotics and others have been available only in the past 70 years.

If a person truly believes they will be healed – they very often are. It is not God but our own bodies that are doing the healing.

### About the Author

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