

Alternative Medicine and the Placebo Effect

When I was young and naïve, I believed that other than prescription medicine or surgery, there was no other way to treat diseases or extend life.

Then I graduated from college, where I lost what little wisdom I had, acquired a large debt, and learned nothing in those four years that I would ever use in the workplace. As I secured employment, paid off my college loans, and faced reality, I learned that life's answers are seldom simple.

Through the years, I observed patterns that seemed more than coincidental. I noticed relatively healthy people become ill after the death of a loved one, or when struggling through a personal ordeal. Sometimes their illness appeared out of nowhere, and sometimes it led to their quick, unexpected death. I discovered that people in unhappy marriages were often depressed and sick, and that people I knew with healthy marriages possessed the vitality unmatched by others much younger their age.

I always assumed that it was the fortune of good health that allowed outgoing people to be socially active at work, in their neighborhoods, and their community. I wondered how they found the time to be so active with a spouse, and a family to raise. However, the more people I met, and the more I observed, I grew to believe that it was their families, friends, and community involvement that gave them energy and good health.

I also learned about alternatives to treat diseases. There are many types of Alternative Medicines today. Acupuncture, Chinese medicine, Homeopathic medicine, meditation, Chiropractic medicine, Herbal medicine, and even Humor Therapy are just a few.

From a strictly scientific perspective, I am skeptical that these techniques can do what their advocates claim. However, I know people who swear that their health and their lives improved noticeably through daily yoga, meditation, acupuncture, or Chiropractic medicine. In fact, they even SEEM happier.

Are all these healings merely the Placebo Effect at work? Are people so convinced that their health will improve, that some are in fact healed? Perhaps the healing element in these techniques has less to do with the technique itself, and more to do with the healer, the healing environment, and the power of the recipient's mind.

I never personally witnessed a faith healing, but when I observe these miracles on television, I am not surprised by their initial effect. We witness a paralyzed man, or a woman dying of disease in horrific pain. They are desperate for a miracle. Their heart races. Tears stream down their face. And they believe. They believe that God can cure them. The choir sings. The congregation encourages them. Large men support them, and sometimes carry them to the front of the church or the stage, where they are the center of attention. The charismatic preacher hovers over them, praising God. The focus of the entire congregation is on that single person and the miracle that is about to happen. And then the miracle.

I still believe that many Faith Healers stage these miracles for television. But considering the incredible, powerful, surge of positive emotions that the desperate person experienced in those life-changing moments, there is little wonder that some are in fact healed.

And if they believe that Alternative Medicine – any Alternative Medicine – healed them or improved their lives, who am I to contradict them?

Today, many patients spend much of the appointment staring at the back of a doctor's head, while the doctor types information into a computer. I always wondered if the doctor is secretly looking up a diagnosis, or after seeing someone with their pants down just quickly turned away to conceal their disgust. Let's be honest. Go to any working class mall and ask yourself if you would like to give some of those shoppers a thorough examination. The doctors might have a point.

While I trust that the doctor is entering important information into a computer, their behavior certainly affects the doctor/patient relationship. People still admire and respect medical doctors. Their positive words of comfort, encouragement, and kindness can improve a patient's outlook and attitude.

Life is what you believe it is. Giving hope to the chronically ill or a patient facing their mortality can be powerful medicine – regardless if it is just the Placebo Effect. If Alternative Medicine cures just ten percent of the people who seek its powers, doesn't that count for something? It does if you or a loved one is among that ten percent.

In the final analysis, whether or not science can determine if Alternative Medicine actually heals might be irrelevant. Giving a desperate patient a ray of hope, and the will to fight and continue to live, might be the most effective prescription we have to offer.

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