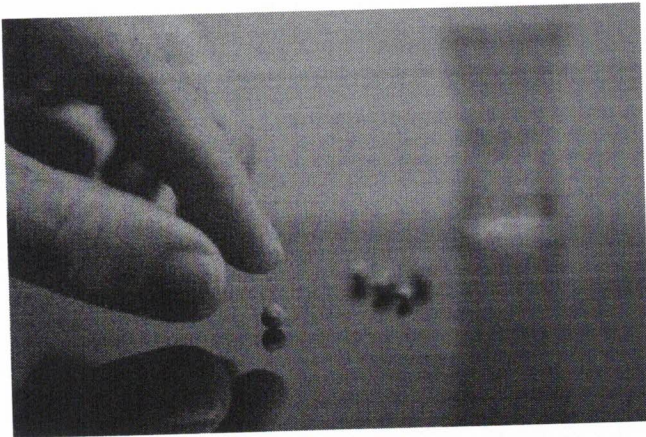


# The Power of Placebo

## Is the placebo effect self-healing or self-deception?

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Source: Patrick Nygren/Flickr

The placebo effect started to be investigated during the mid-20th century when it became standard practice for scientists to use double-blind, randomized trials in research. This meant that a procedure or treatment would be carried out with two groups: one group that would actually receive the treatment, and another, the so-called “control group,” who would receive inert substances, even though they believed that they were being treated. In medical trials, researchers began to find that, for some unknown reason, the control groups would report some effect. They would report that their symptoms had alleviated, or that pain had faded away, even though they had had no treatment. Since then, a vast array of different conditions have been reported as benefitting from placebos, including acne, Crohn’s disease, epilepsy, erectile dysfunction, ulcers, multiple sclerosis, osteoarthritis, rheumatism, and colitis.

At first, scientists believed that the placebo effect was just a subjective phenomenon—in other words, that people were just imagining that their symptoms had improved, without any real physiological changes taking place. But it eventually became apparent that this wasn’t the case. Even though patients were receiving inert substances with no physiological effects, real, measurable physiological changes were occurring.

This first became evident in a 1978 study in which 40 patients were given a placebo painkiller following dental treatment. Shortly afterward, they were divided into two groups, one of which received another placebo painkiller, while the other received naloxone, a substance that stops the release of endorphins in the brain. The second group reported significantly more pain than the first group, suggesting that the placebo had actually had a chemical effect in the brain, which was now being blocked by the naloxone. This seemed to show that placebos could bring about the same chemical changes as actual drugs.

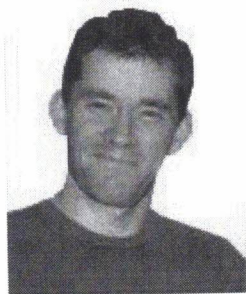
means that we have much more control of our own health and our own bodies than we normally assume.

Our bodies are not just machines that can become ill due to wear and tear or accidental or inherited mechanical problems, and that can only be fixed by medical interventions. We're not just ghostly entities that happen to be attached to our machine-like bodies (and that have emerged from their machinery) and can't alter their functioning, except by physical means. Our mind is intricately interconnected with the body, and unconsciously, with our beliefs and intentions, we influence our health. We have a great potential for self-regulation and self-healing that we are barely aware of.

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The second major implication is that the conventional view of the relationship between the mind and the brain may be wrong. In materialistic science, the mind is seen as a by-product of the brain, a kind of shadow that is cast by neurological processes. However, if this were the case, how would it be possible for mental processes to influence the brain and the body? This would be like saying that the images on a computer screen can affect the workings of the computer's hard drive. A shadow cannot influence the object that it is a shadow of. The placebo effect suggests the mind is more than just the product of matter, that it is, in some sense, primary rather than secondary to the brain.

## About the Author



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