

# The Placebo Effect

A placebo is defined in the O.E.D. as ‘a medicine that is given, more to please than to benefit the patient’ and gives the first reference as far back as 1811. More recently it has been seen as a ‘dummy’ medication that can help people with ‘imaginary’ symptoms. Regarded as ‘quackery’, that probably worked by the power of suggestion, the dishonesty was a problem for many doctors.

The growth of the pharmaceutical industry and the necessity to test new drugs, led to randomised and double blind trials, and the use of placebos play a major part in evaluating a trial drug’s or treatment’s effectiveness. They have also been used to try and test the therapeutic claims of complimentary medicine. However, it has been realised that placebos are not as inert as had been supposed, and can also enhance ‘real’ treatment.

In more recent years there have been many studies that attempt to identify the nature of the ‘placebo effect’ and research has shown that there are some biochemical changes in the brain when placebos are given.

On the internet there are a growing number of references to research studies relating to the placebo effect, and there is growing recognition that it is a universal phenomenon, that it operates in many situations, and that there are neurochemical responses that can be identified with modern technologies.

It is here that I can explain how the placebo effect is intrinsic to the Bonding Process.

The Bonding Process is explained in the Overview page, and describes how it ensures sociability in humans, by setting up ‘needs’ that give pleasure when they are met, and distress when they are not.

The default state of human beings is to be altruistic, cooperative and contented in social settings, which ensures the safety and well-being of all the members. In addition, there are within each individual various ‘self-healing’ defences that actively protect against injury and infection and maintain homeostasis. However there are many physical and psychological factors that can lead to raised levels of anxiety and reduce the feelings of well-being, and lead to people seeking help.

When help is given in a way that stimulates the bonding pathways, by being kind, engaging the person’s trust and by giving hope, the care and treatment will reduce levels of anxiety and put the body in the best state for treatment – or suggestion - to be effective. Doctors (and medicine men) have always know that a good ‘bedside manner’ that communicates trust and hope is a necessary support for any treatment, and mothers know that a kiss and a cuddle help a grazed knee better than the sticky plaster they apply.

The Placebo Effect – which should be called, more accurately the Placebo Response, can be observed in many, many situations. An encouraging pep talk, given when people are not functioning well, will improve behaviour and morale much better than

a dressing down. It explains why 'carrots' are better than 'sticks' in changing behaviour for the better.