

### **The Placebo Effect: Persuasive Suggestions**

One form that expectations can take is in the shape of a placebo. A placebo is a non-medicinal substance that is given to patients so they believe they are receiving medicine. Placebos were used during the Korean War when MASH units ran out of Morphine. Medical workers gave wounded soldiers placebos, and 25% of them reported a reduction in pain. The placebo works because the expectation that the “medicine” will help is so strong that our brains actually translate it into reality. In some studies, placebos worked 25% to 40% of the time!

Not only can our expectations make us well, but they can also make us sick. You may think, “I feel the flu coming on,” and you will probably get one. Or if one of your co-workers says, “You look terrible. Are you coming down with something?” you probably will. Expectations have also been related to the occurrence and timing of death. Most elderly people view retirement homes as the end of the line, the last step in life. Mortality rates, for both men and women, double after admission to the retirement home.

The Nazi concentration camps fed off of the psychological expectation of death. Prison guards instilled hopelessness in prisoners. They created a psychological environment whereby the prisoners came to expect no chance at survival. Prisoners exhibited powerlessness, an inability to cope, and a diminished will to live – in a sense, a self-imposed death sentence.

One amazing example of the placebo effect occurred in Israel in 1991. Israeli citizens were seen wearing gas masks during scud bombings. Shortly thereafter, hospitals reported dozens of people complaining of symptoms of chemical weapons that were never used. The gas masks were just a form of protection in case of biological warfare, but just seeing others wearing one caused people to become ill!

I have even used the placebo effect on my daughter. At times, she has trouble sleeping at night and needs a little nudge. I tell her I have a special pill (vitamin) that will put her right to sleep in five minutes. Without fail, she is happily sleeping before the five minutes are up.