



Summary article

The divine placebo Is the thesis that religion has direct psychological benefits completely true?

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Abstract. *A comparison between the positive effect of religion in psychiatry and the positive effect of placebo is proposed and provocative reflections are made by the author.*

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There is a large and quite uneven literature on religion and mental health. One of the primary texts in the field is Huguelet and Koenig's edited volume "Religion and Spirituality in Psychiatry" (2009). Most of the chapters are by Western psychologists and psychiatrists and deal with studies involving Christian subjects. Many of the clinical chapters appear to be editorials with some numbers added. For the purposes of my presentation I present here some of the major summary statements from material in the book.

Box 1 Positive implications of religion in psychiatry

1. Religion helps many patients with anxiety disorders to cope with their symptoms, and religious therapies are effective in reducing anxiety.
2. Religion's anti-narcissistic and social aspects helps patients with borderline, narcissistic, anti-social and schizotypal personalities.
3. Church attendance may be associated with decreased rates of depression and anxiety.
4. A positive God image is associated with decreased rates of substance abuse and anti-social behavior.
5. Religion helps to decrease existential anxiety.
6. High religiosity is associated with decreased suicidal ideation and attempts.
7. AA, which I consider to be "a religion in denial," is based on Christian teachings and is a primary treatment for alcoholism.

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Box 2 Mechanisms

1. In religious people, religious Coping provides increased Hope, a Purpose in Life, Self-development, Self-efficacy, Closeness and Connectedness to a like-minded community, and Restraint in keeping Emotions and Behavior Under Control.
2. Religion cultivates an apocalyptic sensibility in that Suffering is regarded as the penultimate rather than the ultimate word in life, offers a possible means by which God may further his purposes in history, and becomes an opportunity for the people of God to care for each other analogous to God's care for the creation.
3. People who offer intercessory prayers for healing are buoyed by the uplifting belief that God or his intermediaries such as the Virgin Mary and the company of saints will provide a supernatural intervention of their behalf.

The Placebo Effect, I contend, plays a major role in any possible positive effects on health/mental health.

Box 3 Characteristics of Placebo Effect (PE)

1. Placebo was originally described as a sham or simulated medical intervention.
2. Until 20th century most prescribed medications and treatments were placebos.
3. The Placebo construct evolved beyond sham medications to include a patient's expectations of relief from symptoms and healing of illness based on a positive doctor-patient relationship and trust in the efficacy of treatments offered by the doctor.
4. The Placebo effect as described in Henry Beecher's acclaimed article "The Powerful Placebo" (1955) is now deemed to be clinically important in multiple disorders and symptoms ranging from hypertension, asthma, intestinal disorders, headache, food allergy, erectile dysfunction, pain arthritis, epilepsy and chronic fatigue to psychiatric conditions such as anxiety disorders, panic, depression, and bipolar disorders.
5. The Placebo effect is evident in controlled studies of psychoactive medications e.g., response to anti-depressants, atypical antipsychotics, and pain medications.
6. The Placebo effect has a physiological basis: imaging studies on analgesia show increased functional activation in various brain cortical areas as well as the amygdala, nucleus accumbens, brainstem periductal grey matter, and spinal cord. Also, PE correlated with release of endogenous opioids, increased dopamine, and inhibition of spinal pain reflexes.
7. The Placebo effect is mediated by frontal cortical areas that generate and maintain cognitive expectancies and by dopaminergic rewards pathways that underlie these expectancies.
8. The Expectancy effect plays a major role: people who trust the doctor who treats them with warmth, affection, and confidence will demonstrate an enhanced Placebo effect.
9. If persons who have faith in their physician demonstrate a Placebo effect then, I contend, faith in an all-powerful God may result in an enhanced effect. This is not true for persons who are demented with decreased cognitive function: they are unable to experience expectancy and to demonstrate a Placebo effect.

Box 4 God as Healer in the Christian Tradition

1. In the biblical book of Deuteronomy, God says: “I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal.”
2. In Exodus: “If you heed the voices of the Lord and do what is right in his sight, follow his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on to the Egyptians. For I am the Lord who heals you.”
3. 20% of the Gospels are devoted to Jesus’s 41 healing encounters. Healing was central to Jesus’s ministry and self-identity. When John the Baptist sent 2 disciples to ask Jesus if he was the *messiah*, he told them to tell John that “The blind see again and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them.”
4. The Christian cult of relics with healing powers was prevalent from the fourth to fourteenth centuries. In addition specific saints who can intercede with God were linked to specific disorders e.g., St Lucy (eye disorders), St Vitus (chorea), St Giles (cripples), St Dymphna (mental disorders), and even St Fiacre (haemorrhoids).
5. Pilgrimage sites for religious healing were once widespread but today only the shrine in Lourdes (France) remains as a major site.

Belief in God’s ability to heal is more powerful than trust in a doctor. This expectancy can be a powerful placebo that may account for many of the positive mental health effects of religion. The stronger the belief, the greater the hope and expectancy of a positive effect.

In Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John the message is similar: “Whatever you ask the Father in my name, He will give you.” However, there is a failsafe mechanism when prayers and hopes are not answered: When Jesus asked his Father to spare him from the crucifixion the Father refused, and Jesus said “Thy will, not mine be done.” In other words, when hopes and prayers are not answered, it is God’s will. God never lets you down, even when he lets you down, because it is all part of God’s greater plan. This is a brilliant notion that perpetuates hope and expectancy, the foundation stones of the Placebo effect.

It is interesting that we never speak of Christian curers but rather of Christian healers. “Healing” is a far broader concept than curing, and relief from symptoms may be perceived by a patient to reflect God’s power to make things better even if the relief is barely perceptible or short lived.

The proposition that a belief in God may in some cases result in mental health benefits via a Placebo effect may rankle some but it does not challenge the concept of God itself. That is a discussion for another day.

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