

Placebo

1. The passages below discuss the dual nature of man. Can a patient's thought processes be linked to the placebo aspect of medical intervention?

Man -- the true man -- is soul, not body; though physically man belongs to the animal kingdom, yet his soul lifts him above the rest of creation.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, p. 84)

The reality of man is his thought, not his material body. The thought force and the animal force are partners. Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, p. 17)

We see that cold, heat, suffering, etc, only concern the body, they do not touch the spirit.

How often do we see a man, poor, sick, miserably clad, and with no means of support, yet spiritually strong. Whatever his body has to suffer, his spirit is free and well! Again, how often do we see a rich man, physically strong and healthy, but with a soul sick unto death.

It is quite apparent to the seeing mind that a man's spirit is something very different from his physical body.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, p. 64)

2. The following excerpt states that physician's have two powers of healing. What is the second power and how does it relate to placebo?

O thou distinguished physician!... Praise be to God that thou hast two powers: one to undertake physical healing and the other spiritual healing. Matters related to man's spirit have a great effect on his bodily condition. For instance, thou shouldst impart gladness to thy patient, give him comfort and joy, and bring him to ecstasy and exultation. How often hath it occurred that this hath caused early recovery. Therefore, treat thou the sick with both powers. Spiritual feelings have a surprising effect on healing nervous ailments.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 150)

3. Placebo may be linked to faith. Placebo is likely to be more effective in which of the two following patients: 1) patient who has faith in science/medicine, or 2) patient who has faith in religion/God)? Can addressing “faith (irrespective of type of faith)” in the clinic increase effectiveness of medical treatments?

First diagnose the disease and identify the malady, then prescribe the remedy, for such is the perfect method of the skilful physician.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, no. 214, pp. 281-282)

Illness caused by physical accident should be treated with medical remedies; those which are due to spiritual causes disappear through spiritual means. Thus an illness caused by affliction, fear, nervous impressions, will be healed by spiritual rather than by physical treatment. Hence, both kinds of remedies should be considered. Moreover, they are not contradictory, and thou shouldst accept the physical remedies as coming from the mercy and favor of God, who hath revealed and made manifest medical science so that His servants may profit from this kind of treatment also. Thou shouldst give equal attention to spiritual treatments, for they produce marvelous effects.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'i World Faith - Abdu'l-Baha Section, p. 375)

"With regard to your question concerning spiritual healing. Such a healing constitutes, indeed, one of the most effective methods of relieving a person from either his mental or physical pains and sufferings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has in His "Paris Talks" emphasized its importance by stating that it should be used as an essential means for effecting a complete physical cure. Spiritual healing, however, is not and cannot be a substitute for material healing, but it is a most valuable adjunct to it. Both are, indeed, essential and complementary.

EXTRACT FROM LETTER WRITTEN ON BEHALF OF SHOGHI EFFENDI,

(Compilations, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 475)

4. Current medical understanding shows that placebo can be enhanced through environmental (ex. previous positive experiences, positive attitude of the care provider) and perceptual factors (ex. expectation, desire, faith). Furthermore, neuro-pharmacological studies implicate the nervous system as a mediator of the placebo effect. How does the passage below relate to the current understanding of placebo? Are there any other concepts in this passage you find interesting?

Know that there are four kinds of curing and healing without medicine. Two are due to material causes, and two to spiritual causes....

...Of the two ... kinds of healing which are spiritual ... one results from the entire concentration of the mind of a strong person upon a sick person, when the latter expects with all his concentrated faith that a cure will be effected from the spiritual power of the strong person, to such an extent that there will be a cordial connection between the strong person and the invalid. The strong person makes every effort to cure the sick patient, and the sick patient is then sure of receiving a cure. From the effect of these mental impressions an excitement of the nerves is produced, and this impression and this excitement of the nerves will become the cause of the recovery of the sick person. So when a sick person has a strong desire and intense hope for something and hears suddenly the tidings of its realization, a nervous excitement is produced which will make the malady entirely disappear. In the same way, if a cause of terror suddenly occurs, perhaps an excitement may be produced in the nerves of a strong person which will immediately cause a malady. The cause of the sickness will be no material thing, for that person has not eaten anything, and nothing harmful has touched him; the excitement of the nerves is then the only cause of the illness. In the same way the sudden realization of a chief desire will give such joy that the nerves will be excited by it, and this excitement may produce health....

But all this has effect only to a certain extent, and that not always. For if someone is afflicted with a very violent disease, or is wounded, these means will not remove the disease nor close and heal the wound -- that is to say, these means have no power in severe maladies, unless the constitution helps, because a strong constitution often overcomes disease. This is the third kind of healing.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, p. 254)

...if a doctor consoles a sick man by saying: "Thank God you are better, and there is hope of your recovery," though these words are contrary to the truth, yet they may become the consolation of the patient and the turning-point of the illness...

(Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'i World Faith - Abdu'l-Baha Section, p. 321)

5. The last few passages emphasize the importance of following a physician's advice. Can compliance enhance placebo?

It is incumbent upon everyone to seek medical treatment and to follow the doctor's instructions, for this is in compliance with the divine ordinance, but, in reality, He Who giveth healing is God.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 156)

Whatever competent physicians or surgeons prescribe for a patient should be accepted and complied with, provided that they are adorned with the ornament of justice. If they were to be endowed with divine understanding, that would certainly be preferable and more desirable.

(BAHÁ'U'LLÁH, Compilations, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 459)

From a Tablet - translated from the Persian