Therapeutic Ritual Healing, Placebo and Biofield: Human biofield activation via therapeutic ritual as the mechanism of action for the placebo response  

By Marie Grace Brook


with special acknowledgment to Glenn Hartelius

Placebo: intervention with no active drug ingredients; used for control treatments in medical research

- sugar pill
- sham surgery

Nexus: Harvard Medical School Program in Placebo Studies (PiPS) and Therapeutic Encounter

Empirical studies demonstrating efficacy of placebo treatment in comparison to conventional medicine:

- Chertok et al. (2009) carried out a randomized trial that compared standard acupuncture (phlebotomy) and conventional care for chronic low back pain. At one year follow-up, 50% of patients receiving conventional care showed meaningful improvements, 58% in the placebo group.
- Simpson et al. (2008) evaluated all placebo-controlled drug treatment studies found in eight medical data bases, including more than 40,000 patients treated for heart disease, HIV, diabetes, and other conditions. High compliance in either conventional treatment or placebo treatment produced 50% less chance of mortality. Morbidity rates were slightly less for placebo-participants than conventionally treated participants.
- Holmström & Ketterholm (2010) published a meta-analysis in the Cochrane Database of Systemic Reviews which showed evidence to support use of placebos as effective treatment for pain.

Even when people know they are given placebos, their health improves (Kaptchuk et al., 2010).

Biofield (biophysics and neuroscience): electromagnetic field that permeates and surrounds living organisms; biologically produced subtle energy field that provides regulatory and communication functions within the human organism

- aura energy
- chi ki prana
- subtle energy
- magnetic field

Nexus: Samueli Institute in Alexandria, VA.

We are now in the process of revising the past century’s biochemical concept, under which all major life processes are chemical in nature, to one that proposes that such processes are electromagnetic in nature” (Becker, 2004, p. 17).

Therapeutic Ritual Healing: (psychology and anthropology) therapeutic ritual leading to healing of illness or recovery from pain with no scientifically understood reason for clinical effectiveness

- Hands-on-healing • Reiki
- Therapeutic Touch • Guided imagery
- Traditional indigenous healing
- Mindfulness • Yoga
- Prayer 
- Mind • Body • Soul

Nexus: National Institute of Health (NIH) National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH)

Empirical studies demonstrating efficacy of therapeutic ritual healing in comparison to conventional medicine treatment:

- Chertok et al. (2009) carried out a randomized trial that compared standard acupuncture (phlebotomy) and conventional care for chronic low back pain. At one year follow-up, 50% of patients receiving conventional care showed meaningful improvements, 58% in the placebo group.
- Hróbjartsson & Gøtzsche (2010) published a meta-analysis of 50 controlled trials comparing various non-pharmacological therapies to conventional care for treatment of pain. The rate of remission, defined as a 50% reduction of pain, was 50% less in patients receiving conventional care than placebo.
- Sackett & Henry (2001) published a study of 400 patients with chronic low back pain, randomized to either acupuncture, simulated acupuncture, or usual care. The rate of remission was significantly higher in the acupuncture group than in the control group.

Psychotherapeutic and psychiatric/medical rituals of practitioner/patient sessions are also therapeutic ritual healing (Kwan, 2007; Wampold et al., 2007) with 30% to 70% of outcome due to common factors such as collaboration, empathy, affirmation, and genuineness (Imal & Wampold, 2008).

Studies defending/describing existence of a human biofield: