

Reiki and the Placebo Effect

by Louisa Booth



Recently a provocative comment appeared on my website: 'Other than putting money into your pocket, and supplying placebo effects, Reiki does nothing.' Firstly I had to decide whether to accept the comment, or to trash it. Being of an indecisive nature, I did nothing. So it sat, waiting moderation. The comment made me feel hot inside because it attacks Reiki, but it also made me laugh. Doesn't the writer have any idea just how powerful the placebo effect can be? Time and again the placebo effect has confounded the drugs industry, forcing the latest concoction of chemicals off the market because they prove no stronger than a simple sugar pill. In some conditions, such as depression, placebos regularly induce an improvement of over 80% in symptoms.¹ If Reiki can have that effect, I'm all for it!

The 'placebo effect' has been proven in trials where a patient is given either a 'real' treatment, maybe a pill stuffed full of powerful chemicals, or a 'fake' treatment, a look-alike pill containing benign substances like sugar. In study after study, clinicians have found that the 'fake' treatment provides an improvement in symptoms in an average of 35% of cases. The 'average' is a tricky beast, because it's variable depending on what sort of trial is involved. Placebos work better for some conditions than for others, succeeding as low as 10% and as high as 100%. Some doctors are better at administering them, with their own belief in the efficacy of treatment influencing their patients.² It has also been scientifically proven that taking four placebos a day works better than taking two...³

In his inspiring book, 'How Your Mind Can Heal Your Body', David Hamilton suggests that what doctors are doing here is harvesting the power of the mind to heal the body. The mind is a mighty tool, and if doctors are sufficiently enthusiastic about a proposed new treatment, then the patient's mind starts working wonders too.

Does Reiki work on that mind-body link too? I think so. Reiki is energy medicine, and a Reiki initiation creates a dynamic link to universal life-force energy, to the power that flows through trees and streams and sky, to the power that Mrs Takata called 'God-power'. Once we've called in that energy, it can work on the mind-body connection, changing the way we think and allowing us to heal ourselves. But unlike a placebo, that's not all there is to it. Reiki also works directly on the physical body, and on emotional and spiritual planes too. As Reiki practitioners

and students we've felt it. Describing the feeling is difficult, because we all have different experiences. We may feel it as tingling. We may feel it as warmth. We may simply feel relaxed – and what a gift that is. One of my infinitely calm students describes having a Reiki treatment as a process of being 'combed out' so that by the end of a treatment, all knots and tangles have been smoothed away.

The cynical will argue that these effects are a figment of our imaginations, but fortunately, unlike placebos, Reiki doesn't need the patient to believe in the treatment. I've held a tiny, premature baby, whose twin died in the womb, and my hands blazed with heat until they sweated, and felt super-glued to her body, although she, of course, knew nothing of Reiki. I've treated sceptics, who all at once fell into a profound sleep. Sometimes the most healing thing you can do for someone is let them sleep.

I was once a sceptic too. I had my first treatment to humour someone I liked, and within moments was flicking around on the table, while my mind was still protesting that the whole thing was hokum. Those of us who use Reiki everyday know that it is powerful. It can shift big problems. One of my students recently used an esoteric mix of Reiki, rest and visualisation to heal his broken leg, depriving the local hospital, to their surprise, of the chance to stick metal rods in him.

Reiki can be a major force for change. It can match the best placebos with efficacy, but it has to be said Reiki isn't 'just a placebo'. It's a form of treatment in its own right, awaiting scientific validation. So far our evidence is mainly anecdotal, and through the power of the word Reiki is beginning to be accepted in hospital wards and oncology departments. A little scepticism from the general public is to be expected, even a few aggressive comments on a website. And that's fine. The general public took a while to accept the magic of electricity, or the notion of evolution, but those who had grasped the new ideas went on playing with them, furthering their own understanding, until others caught on. It's our role right now to carry on playing with Reiki, deepening our understanding, learning through doing, until the whole world notices and says, "Oh Reiki, yeah that works and it's easy too. You just put your hands on." □

Louisa Booth is a Reiki Master and Writer based in Devon.
clb@reikiandwriting.co.uk

Opposite page:
Illustration by Marie Sakai

1. Kirsch et al, 'Initial severity and antidepressant benefits: a meta-analysis of data submitted to the food and drug administration', PLoS Medicine, February 2008, 5(2), e45, 0260-68 cited in Hamilton, 2008.

2. David R. Hamilton, PhD, 'How your mind can heal your body', Hay House, 2008

3. A.J.de Craen et al, 'Placebo effect in the treatment of duodenal ulcer' British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology, 1999, 48(6), 853-60 cited in Hamilton, 2008