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THE PLACEBO EFFECT IN MEDICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPIES

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INTRODUCTION

Placebo effect research provides both an historic and methodological perspective of psychotherapy and behavior change. Psychotherapy is commonly believed to be a modern treatment based on scientific principles while the placebo effect is believed to be a superstitious response to a sugar pill. Yet, the placebo effect may have greater implications for psychotherapy than any other form of treatment because both psychotherapy and the placebo effect function primarily through psychological mechanisms.

The concept of the placebo effect is generally

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not popular among therapists and researchers. Physicians tend to deny their own use of placebos and assume that other physicians use placebos more often than themselves (Hofling, 1955; Shapiro & Struening, 1974). In research, placebo effects are viewed as experimental artifacts (McGuire, 1969). These artifacts are ignored or are sought to be controlled or eliminated from ongoing research. Very rarely does the placebo effect undergo empirical scrutiny as a research topic in its own right.

However, the placebo effect is an important component and perhaps the entire basis for the existence, popularity, and effectiveness of numerous methods of psychotherapy. The thesis of this chapter is that much can be learned about psychotherapy from study of the placebo effect. Attention to the placebo effect may help differentiate the meaningful specific influences from the