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PLACEBO'S POWER GOES BEYOND THE MIND

NINA BROWN

SCIENTISTS TAP INTO FAKE PILL'S EFFECTS TO HELP REAL PAINS reads a recent headline. The article notes, *"For years, scientists have looked at the placebo effect as a nuisance - just a figment of overactive patient imaginations. People who got a dummy medication as part of a clinical trial believed they were better, but really weren't. Sure, dummy medications seemed to curb epileptic seizures, lower blood pressure, soothe migraines and smooth out jerky movements in Parkinson's — but these people weren't really better. Or so scientists thought."*

Three years ago we reported the same thing in the April 2003 HAPS newsletter. Researchers had measured the amount of dopamine going into the brain of six Parkinsonians who anticipated a high chance of getting a beneficial drug, but were given placebos. The study showed that by thinking they were benefiting from treatment, i.e. the placebo effect, they actually physically created dopamine in their brains.

It was a small study and perhaps by now there is more evidence, but through the use of PET scanners and MRI's, researchers have discovered that the placebo effect is not "all in patients' heads" but rather, in their brains. This "new" research shows that our thoughts actually lead to changes in brain chemistry. So much for negative thinking about the theory of "positive thinking."

These insights into how placebos work will help scientists figure out how to harness the effect and teach people to train their own brains to help with healing. But why wait? If you can control nothing else in your life, you can exercise powerful and effective control over the thoughts that occupy your mind. So, if you didn't heed this advice before, do so now.

If our expectations affect our symptoms, isn't that a good reason to think positive, be optimistic and do as much as possible to have a better quality of life.