

AT THE EDGE OF AN ABYSS

By Robert H. Jordan, Jr., Ph.D.

When the sad news comes – it is often like an unexpected bolt of lightening. Upon learning that the diagnosis reveals a terminal illness, many patients are devastated by the surprise. Almost immediately, their thoughts turn to, “What can I do – what can I do.” Yet, thanks to tremendous advances in modern medicine, there are things that can be done. Hundreds of new and promising drugs and procedures are waiting to be given the “Green Light,” or approval for use by the general population. But first these unproven treatments must pass grueling and arduous testing: with the final, most serious, round involving human subjects. Frightened and sick, these newly diagnosed, disease-ravished individuals are, in many cases, eager – out of desperation - to become guinea pigs,

willing to allow doctors and clinical technicians to poke, prod and inject them in any manner the scientists see fit. They are even willing to gamble that if they agree to participate in one of the “blind studies” – they will get the purported miracle drug and not a placebo. This is the ultimate wager – a risky bet using one’s life instead of poker chips.

Yet standing **at the edge of an abyss**, and contemplating the alternatives, this 50 – 50 shot is only a flip of a coin away from being right or wrong – drug or placebo – life or death. Facing such a frightening assortment of unknowns is just as bewildering as floating **at the edge of an abyss** – even more disconcerting.

That was the thinking only a few short years ago. But now, new evidence indicates that the uncertain decision to sign-up for the drug trial is not as dangerous and far less risky than previously thought – *in some cases*. This is because of something called the placebo effect. It has been known for millennia

that the mind can fake-out the body to make it feel better. "They (Placebos) have been shown to be most effective for conditions like pain management, stress-related insomnia, and cancer treatment side effects like fatigue and nausea, says Professor Ted Kaptchuk of Harvard-affiliated Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, whose research focuses on the placebo effect."¹

How placebos work is still not completely understood, but it involves a complex neurobiological reaction that includes everything from increases in feel-good neurotransmitters, like endorphins and dopamine, to greater activity in certain brain regions linked to moods, emotional reactions, and self-awareness.² But placebos do more than release brain power and tricking your mind. You must also have the ceremony of treatment, itself.

To illustrate the importance of ritual, there is a well-known story about a young doctor who set out to prove that witch doctors and Shamans were fakes:

In the late 19th century a doctor named Kesila went into British Columbia to disprove the healing powers of the shaman priests. He allowed them to gain his trust and became an apprentice. He was taken out into the woods and taught the spiritual dances, then after a few months was taught the shaman priests greatest trick. The trick involved placing bird feathers or down into the shaman's mouth and then sucking on the sick patient's stomach. The shaman then would bite his own lip and cough out bloody feathers, which would be explained as the disease infesting the body. Once told, Kesila finally had proof that the shamans were charlatans. But his apprenticeship agreement stipulated that he was obligated to treat any patient for free. He was asked by a family to

treat their very ill daughter. He sang the shaman songs and performed the feather trick, and to his surprise the girl was healed. Not convinced by the result he tried the trick on many more patients, and every time his patient was healed. Dr. Kesila ended up believing in the lie that he originally set out to disprove.³

While the placebo effect is barely understood, it demonstrates the degree to which the mind can control the body. And standing **At the edge of an Abyss** can cause the mind to do unbelievable things. The placebo effect is really like a magical phenomenon. In some cases, these sham cures can exert an influence powerful enough to mimic the effects of real medical treatments. Hypnosis or, more surprisingly, self-hypnosis is another mysterious curiosity. People trained in Self-hypnosis, who want to stop taking drugs can use the power of the mind to adjust their heart beats and even control blood pressure.

The modern incarnation of hypnosis can be traced to the 18th-century German priest and exorcist Johann Joseph Gassner, who believed he had the power to channel God's word through his own voice. By speaking in a calm and commanding tone to his patients, he could reportedly rid them of all sorts of demons that today we might call epilepsy or muscle spasm. In one case, he is said to have commanded a patient to slow down his pulse in one arm while speeding it up in the other.

Gassner's work was spotted by Franz Mesmer, a German gentleman scientist who theorized that magnetism controlled the tides (it doesn't), planetary movement (it doesn't) and even health (it really doesn't). He wore a striking silk coat with a silk liner to keep his magnetic power in, and would often carry an iron rod to wave over people, or treat them using small magnets.

When Mesmer saw Gassner, a light went off. The priest wasn't channelling God, he was channelling

the magnet juice that permeated the Universe (which Mesmer attributed more to Gassner's metal cross than to his voice).

Soon, Mesmer was doing hypnosis, too. In Paris, he had a salon where he would 'mesmerise' people for hours at a time until they were either cured or had foaming-at-the-mouth fits.

Through most of the 19th century, hypnosis bloomed right alongside the related field of 'psychical research', which examined the supernatural. Séances, ghosts and extra-sensory perception were deemed vital areas for psychologists, and their primary tool was hypnosis. At the same time, stage hypnosis spread across Europe and the US, with magicians and con-artists working mind control into their acts. The best of these, the charismatic Scottish magician Walford Bodie, made outlandish claims and performed even more outlandish feats, such as making unsuspecting victims (often in his employ) walk like chickens.

Bodie was an unabashed rascal and an inspiration to Charlie Chaplin and Harry Houdini, but he wasn't great for hypnosis.

Ultimately, the taint of pseudoscience plus fears of mind control spelled doom for hypnosis research. It all boiled over in September 1894, in a hypnosis performance in Hungary during which a doctor (reportedly, with the stereotypical Rasputin beard and piercing eyes) induced a woman named, Ella Salamon to travel with her mind to a faraway city. But the young noblewoman had a fit or seizure and inexplicably died. It's not clear what happened, but it was the last straw for hypnosis – it had become dangerous and taboo.

Today, hypnosis is recognized as a valid research tool. Dr. Gerard Sunnan, writes in a paper titled, "Can the Mind Talk to the Heart? Hypnosis, Self-Hypnosis, Autogenic Training, and Cardiovascular Health," saying, the hypnotic state of mind and

body is a special form of consciousness that anyone can reach with openness of mind and some determination. While it is experienced differently by everyone, it embodies certain principles that are universal.⁴

One unifying principle of the hypnotic state is that awareness becomes more fluid. Given direction, awareness can flow into the body's neural networks to positively influence organ systems. One of these systems is the heart and its connected vasculature.

But before the actual practice can begin, there are usually established steps that include finding a peaceful space, and a comfortable body position. A decision is then made to banish all irrelevant thoughts, to delete all emotional surges, and to slow down the body's activities. This decision is a willful act conveying the intent to develop one's self-hypnotic abilities. Bodily awareness is then shifted to the area of the heart and lung spaces.

Once the feeling connections are sufficiently established, mental messages can be sent.

Some people prefer verbal messages. Always positive in their formulation, the personal nature of the wording is most important. One example: "I wish/want my heart to be strong, regular, and relaxed. My blood pressure eases off with each and every breath."

Real hypnotism is not mind control in the way Mesmer envisioned it or as Hollywood depicts. It's a collaboration between hypnotist and patient. If a patient wants to resist, the whole process is broken. You can't hypnotize a person against his or her will, and you can't make them do something against their morals.

Do you remember this phrase.....Look Into my eyes? That haunting slogan uttered by Bella Lugosi in the 1931 movie Dracula sent chills through movie audiences for decades. Fearing that the famous bloodsucker might ultimately control their minds

and make them helpless drones, moviegoers shivered in their seats fearing – to look into the eyes of Dracula. The frightening Vampire was more scary to some than standing **at the edge of an abyss** and gazing into the unknown.

And therein lies the answer: it is not the abyss that is so frightening. Rather, it is the mysterious, unseen realm that might exist on the other side. Not knowing if the chasm is bottomless or breaks-through into a lovely wonderland of splendid dreams-come-true, makes the deep, dark void so alarming.

Thank goodness our minds, which are primarily concerned with protecting us, are able to construct useful tools like hypnosis or the placebo effect to sustain us and prevent our lives from becoming abysmally foreboding.

Thank you.....

¹ Harvard Health Publishing, The power of the placebo effect. Harvard Men's Health Watch. Published: May, 2017
<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mental-health/the-power-of-the-placebo-effect>

² Ibid

³ NPR Radio Lab and

The Placebo Effect and the Power of the Mind, <https://rileygravatt.wordpress.com/2011/04/24/53/>

⁴ Aeon, "Mesmerising: Look into my eyes: the fantastical history, mysterious healing power and emergent neuroscience of hypnosis." <https://aeon.co/essays/look-into-my-eyes-how-hypnosis-works-is-a-partnership>