

Harnessing the placebo effects

using imaginary pills to transform emotional pain



Panel: Trauma & Emotion

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Virtual, On-Demand Panel



Treatment Outcome



Comparison psychotherapy and pharmacological treatment of anxiety and depression

No significant difference in effect

Drugs and psychotherapy are equally effective

(Cuijpers et al., 2013; Sugarman, 2016)

Placebo Effects



The placebo effects are generally large for problems like pain, anxiety, depression, sleeping problems and many psychosomatic problems (Bendetti, 2014; Kirsch, 2011; Brown, 2013).

Harnessing Placebo Effects



Harnessing the placebo effects in medicine and psychotherapy could enhance the therapeutic effect.

Efforts has been made to harness the placebo effects in psychotherapy through integrating the mechanisms of the placebo effects like expectancy, relationship, learning, context etc.

(Swift & Greenberg, 2015; Norcross & Lambert, 2018).

Hidden Placebo



The placebo effects has usually been associated with the activity of “taking pills”, that involves complex psychological, social and biological processes.

The hidden inert physical placebo pills was the primary vehicle for the activation of the complex psychological, social and biological change mechanisms involved in the placebo effects

(Bendetti, 2014; Wager & Atlas, 2015).

Open Label Placebo



With the promising results from open label placebo studies, it seems possible to harness the placebo effects in a non-deceptive way by offering physical placebo pills openly for placebo sensitive problems (Carvalho et.al, 2015)

The Placebo Cure



- Open Label Placebo Therapy
- Physical placebo pills
- Administered openly
- Harnessing the placebo effects in clinical practice

Uwe Heiss, 2017



<http://zeeboeffect.com/>

Imagery in Psychotherapy



- Guided imagery
- Meditation
- Hypnosis
- Chairwork (EFT)
- Imagery with eyes open



Imaginary Placebo Pill



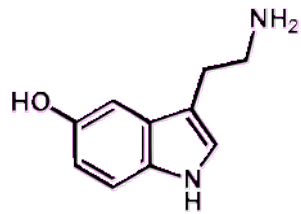
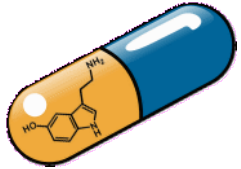
What would happen
if you just imagined
taking a placebo pill?
Would that work?



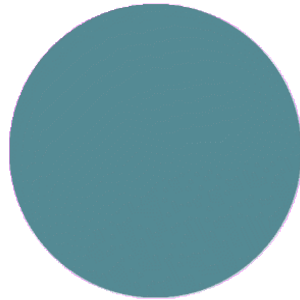
Dismantling components



Pill with chemical



Hidden placebo pill



Open placebo pill



Imaginary pill



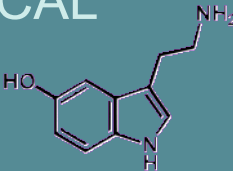
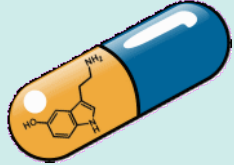

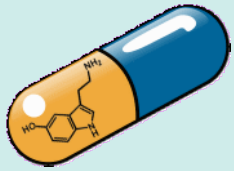




Experience of taking a pill

REMOVED



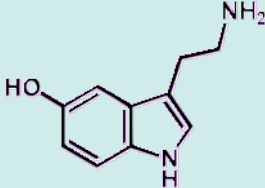

Pill type and ingredient matrix



		TREATMENT "CARRIER"	
		PHYSICAL PILL 	IMAGINARY PILL 
ACTIVE	CHEMICAL 		
	PLACEBO EFFECT FACTORS 	 	

Dimensions of pills



	PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL
TREATMENT "CARRIER"	Physical pill 	Imaginary pill 
ACTIVE COMPONENT	Chemical 	Placebo effect factors 

Placebo effect factors



- Expectation
- Conditioning
- Observational learning
- Mindset
- Emotion
- Therapeutic relationship
 - Empathy, alliance, positive regard
- Context - physical and social
- Ritual



Placebo pill factors



- Color
- Size
- Number
- Frequency
- Type (pill, capsule, etc.)
- Brand name
- Price
- Administered by
- Side effects



What is the imaginary pill?



The imaginary pill is the experience of a pill created collaboratively from the therapist suggestions and the client's imagination and memory. It is perceived by the client with a sense of reality both externally and internally. It can be a carrier of placebo effects.

Method / Procedure



- Build alliance
- Identify placebo sensitive problem
- Build trust in placebo effect and imagination
- Find personalized desired effect
- Collaborative internal search for imaginary pill with expectation of effect
- Guide administration of imaginary placebo pill
- Instructions for self administration

Case: Anxiety



- Young woman with general anxiety with worry and self doubts, but improved through therapy
- Client is still anxious and sad when waking up. Rated distress: 8 (0-10)
- Imaginary pill procedure suggested, explained and accepted
- Desired experiential effect are found in collaboration with client: Bodily felt warm, cozy, safe, happy feeling
- Experiential search for imaginary pill: Hot Liquorice tea
- Experiential enhancement: Made by buddist monks, special herbs, her friend has great beenfit from it
- She drinks the imaginary tea and feels the effects as expected
- She decides to "drink the tea" every morning (as a homework)
- After 2 weeks her level of distress is 4 (0-10)

Placebo sensitive problems



- Pain
- Immune system disorder
(Allergies, etc.)
- Gastrointestinal disorders
(Irritable bowel syndrome, etc.)
- Cardiovascular disorders
(Hypertension, etc.)
- Respiratory disorders
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Addiction
- Sleep disorder
-

Imaginary Pill & Trauma



- Anti-depressants (& MDMA) used with PTSD
- Experience effect of pill's useful with PTSD
 - ▶ Relaxation, calming,
 - ▶ Softening emotions, dampning emotional arousal to optimal level
- Imaginary pill procedure with psychotherapy like progressive relaxation, imagery etc.

How emotions are affected by IP



- Emotions are bodily felt
- Pills are related to the body
 - Absorbed in the body
 - Affects the body
- Pills & emotions operate both involuntary
- Pills affect
 - Sensations, arousal, awareness
 - Emotions: soothing & activating



Imaginary Pill Study



Taking Open Label Placebo Further: Trial of Imaginary Pills in Test Anxiety

University Hospital, Basel, Switzerland

Comparison of IP, OLP and no treatment

165 participants

Delay due to corona, no results yet

<https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT04250571>

Conclusion



The imaginary placebo pill is a promising way to harness the placebo effects

- Effect on placebo sensitive problems: pain, sleeping, anxiety, depression, psycho somatic problems, trauma related problems
- Effective - probably as much as physical placebos & drugs
- Easy to administer for clinicians and clients
- Flexible adjustment of treatment characteristics (color, size, etc.)
- Cost efficient
- Personalized and empowering
- Ethical to use
- No sideeffects, addictions and withdrawal problems

Thanks to



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Thank You



***“LOGIC WILL GET YOU FROM A TO Z;
IMAGINATION WILL GET YOU EVERYWHERE.”***

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