Placebo and Play

It has been well documented that we can change our biology simply by what we believe to be true. The placebo effect is defined as the measurable, observable or felt improvement in health or behavior not attributed to medication or invasive treatment. This suggests that we can treat various ailments as well as highly disruptive mood swings by using the mind to heal.

A placebo is a fake treatment, an inactive substance like sugar, distilled water or a saline solution that can sometimes improve a patient’s condition simply because the person has the expectation that it will be helpful. Expectation plays a potent role in the placebo effect. The more a person believes they are going to benefit from a treatment or the relaxation of a holiday period, the more likely it is that it will come to be.

Is there any reason why the word “play” and “placebo” begin in the same *pla*ce? They both relate to the *place* of play as well as the activity itself. We all know play means play as in playful and also its noun form referring to the written description of a dramatic piece and/or its theatrical production. Broken down, the placebo effect has two distinct parts: its compelling story rendition *and* those theatrical trappings that serve as the “backdrop” to set the right tone and mood for the ensuing *magic* to happen. Placebo is Latin for “I shall please.”

Placebo and spiritual practice both involve these dual levels of “play.” Sick or not we are constantly, consistently and unconsciously under the spell of the placebo effect. One of the main reasons that any holiday or special occasion can be rife with stress is the pressure we may feel to safeguard our enjoyment of it. During this festive time, the exuberant expression of our “play” at the heart of our creativity could easily swing from our main intention of comedy to that other end of theatrical experience: tragedy! At those moments we sincerely wonder what ever happened to those carefree moments of devotion to “play.”

The question then arises of how can we become our own “master of suggestion” in full command to affect the “placebo” upon demand. Consider the *playful path* traditionally and historically peopled by the Court Jester, the Fool, Coyote, Nasrudin, St. Francis, Taoist Sages, Zen Masters, Hasidic Storytellers and Performance Artists prepared to lighten those dark brooding moments by presenting comic counterpoint to an unfolding tragedy. Laugh for no reason, as if you’ve gotten absurd good news, play pointless games—indulge in this art and science of *fun.* While intellectual scholars have been debating the key to happiness, research studies have found that certain neurotransmitters such as dopamine and norepinephrine affect the brain positively. Dopamine not only impacts the “rewards center” but when you walk and talk provides you with proper balance.

Just show up and be present for that joyful moment to find you! In the very midst of global madness public frolic is our invitation to the holiday, to sanity. In some very odd and profound way this could in fact be our most sincere and effective political act. It is our truthful declaration that terror is the real error and joy is adult play, not just a child’s toy. To certain degree it has been shown by well-being researchers that happiness can be synthesized. After one year those who have recently won millions with a lottery ticket and a group who had the misfortune to become a paraplegic ended up with nearly the exact same level of happiness.

To consistently increase our levels of those exciting neurotransmitters of norepinephrine and dopamine we will still need to provide our necessary level of confident anticipation along with our own personal storyline and backdrop setting to ensure that any potentially stressful holiday moments can be combated with our brain’s own natural pharmacy stock full ready to trigger the “Placebo Effect” in full force.