

The Dark Arts of Belief

Old-School Protection, New Science · Dr. Sara Hazel · Barefoot Sage Center

"What we expect to occur is what we really mean by the power of belief. And we expect things subconsciously."

The light side and the dark side of belief

- **Placebo is the light side.** If we believe something is going to help us, then it very likely will, changing our biochemistry, our immune system, our neurotransmitters, our emotional state, and our experience of pain or inflammation.
- **Nocebo is the dark side.** If you believe something is going to harm you, then you might, in fact, experience harm. It doesn't mean for sure that it will happen, but the expectation can very likely increase the chance.

What the research shows

- Describing an epidural's numbing shot as a sting, rather than in reassuring words, raised pain from 3 to 5 out of 10. [1]
- Knowing how it works helps: a short explanation of the nocebo effect reduced chemotherapy side effects at 12 weeks. [2]

Who is most affected

- **Empathy.** People who score high on empathy are more likely, both positive and negative, to be affected by witnessing someone having an experience: in a ceremony, a prayer group, on TV, in a church, or in a family.
- **Love and compassion,** probably the most powerful lever of connectedness.
- **Identification:** "I see myself in them," or "I see them in me."
- One can be both highly empathetic and also sovereign, and invulnerable to certain kinds of threat or nocebo effects.

What the research shows

- We learn pain and relief by watching. People who watched someone else get relief felt about as much relief as people who experienced it themselves. [3]
- Stress spreads most between people who love each other: 40% of people watching their partner under stress had a cortisol rise, compared with 10% watching a stranger. [4]

Words, rhythm, and expectation

- The Ave Maria and certain Indian mantras entrain the body: deeper and slower breathing, deep autonomic nervous system states, and theta states in the brain.
- When you slow your breath down to about six breaths per minute, you can affect your own beliefs and your expectations more powerfully.
- When we are chanting, doing prayers, or doing mantras together, we entrain as a group, with our breaths, our heart rates, and our brain states.

What the research shows

- Reciting the rosary and a yoga mantra both slowed breathing to about six breaths a minute and strengthened the heart's rhythms. [5]

The subconscious outweighs words

- Our subconscious beliefs are often more powerful than our conscious beliefs.
- Think of a Pavlovian response: hear the bell, give the food. Our bodies can be trained the same way to expect pain relief, or pain.
- Just saying words sets an expectation, but it's not necessarily enough to counteract deep subconscious belief patterns. We can train ourselves to feel in command of our own experiences.

What the research shows

- Pain relief trained over four days held up even after people learned there had never been a drug. One day of training didn't. [6]
- Repeating a positive self-statement made people with low self-esteem feel worse. [7]

Where the power lives

- **Agency.** Believe that your power to determine your fate lies within you, or in some power you can call upon. These are not incompatible. You can have both.
- **Not a victim.** The key is that you are not a victim. (*Victim comes from the Latin victima, a sacrificial offering.*)
- **Decision.** You have made a decision; you have an expectation of only one outcome. (*Decide comes from the Latin decidere, "to cut off."*)
- **Command.** The response to negative will is a statement of command: a declaration of what you are deciding will be and will not be.

What the research shows

- When people controlled a painful stimulus themselves, it hurt less and caused less anxiety than the identical stimulus controlled by someone else. [8]

Street cred with yourself

- You make a commitment to do a thing, and then you do the thing.
- If you keep saying you'll go for a walk every day and never go, you are training your subconscious not to believe your words. Instead, go for the walk. Maybe a ten-minute walk.
- Over weeks, over months, you build an expectation in your subconscious mind-to-body connection that your word is law.

What the research shows

- Confidence grows most from lived success, ahead of encouraging self-talk. [9]
- A new daily habit takes a median of about two months to feel automatic. [10]

This week

1. **Keep one small promise to yourself, every day.** A ten-minute walk, say. Keep it for weeks.
2. **Resolve one dissonance.** Find one place you're not being true to something you hold core, and start there.

Research links

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4. Engert V, et al. *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 2014. PubMed 24845190
5. Bernardi L, et al. *BMJ* 2001. PubMed 11751348
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7. Wood JV, et al. *Psychol Sci* 2009. PubMed 19493324
8. Wiech K, et al. *J Neurosci* 2006. PubMed 17079679
9. Egele VS, et al. *Health Psychol Behav Med* 2025. PubMed 41064471
10. Singh B, et al. *Healthcare (Basel)* 2024. PubMed 39685110

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Barefoot Sage Center · 14 E. Birch Ave, Flagstaff · (928) 444-9411

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