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PLAcebo

In a past edition of **e-quilibrium** (April 2005), I reviewed the multiple benefits of physical activity and suggested that it is perhaps the closest thing we have to a panacea. If the benefits of exercise could be put into a pill, it likely would become the best-selling drug.

No such drug is available, but perhaps there is something akin to an exercise "placebo." The placebo effect refers to the benefit that comes from some type of treatment or action that cannot be attributed to the direct effect of the treatment itself. The placebo effect is rather due to one's expectations or mind-set. Numerous physiological changes have been documented to occur as a result of the placebo effect, ranging from the effects of real or inert pills to "white coat hypertension."

Harvard University psychologist Ellen Langer and her student Alia Crum have reported that perceptions of exercise affect the actual physical benefits that accrue from physical activity. Hotel housekeepers who were told that their work was good exercise (i.e., that it met current recommendations for at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day) were physically healthier four weeks later, compared to those housekeepers who were not so informed. The physical changes in the informed group included approximately 2 pounds of weight loss, a 0.4 reduction in body mass index, a 0.5% decrease in body-fat percentage, and 10 mm/HG and 5 mm/HG decreases in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, respectively. There were no differences in exercise outside of work for the two groups. The informed group, however, did perceive that

they were getting more exercise than the uninformed group, when questioned at the four-week interval. In fact, over the course of the study, the percentage of informed housekeepers who perceived that they were exercising regularly (in the absence of any actual behavior change either at work or outside of work) increased from 39% to 79%.

The results of this study need to be replicated in more research before we conclude that a reliable effect has indeed been uncovered, but they do address an important matter in the area of physical activity. Many people do not perceive their lifestyle activity (i.e., taking the stairs, housecleaning, walking as part of one's workday) as meaningful exercise, when in fact it is very useful physical activity. Numerous studies point to the importance of lifestyle activity in weight management.

Perceptions of Lifestyle Activity as exercise may come with a placebo benefit. The mind-set that lifestyle activity is exercise possibly results in even greater benefits from the very same physical activity, according to the research described above. This is yet another example of how the manner in which we think can affect our health.

Paul J. Hershberger, Ph.D.

... is a clinical health psychologist. He is an Associate Professor of Family Medicine, and Director of Behavioral Science for the Dayton Community Family Medicine Residency Program, Wright State University Boonshoft School of Medicine. His clinical practice includes psychotherapy, consultation, and coaching.

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To contact Dr. Hershberger:
e-mail: paul.hershberger@wright.edu
phone: (937) 278-6251, ext 2021