A NOTE ON
SPONTANEOUS IMPROVEMENT AND PLACEBOS
IN THE EVALUATION OF THERAPY

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It is probably true that most of man's ailments, with exception of the most severe organically based conditions, are self-healing and probably do not come to the attention of recorders of health and illness. For this reason, the greatest stumbling block in the evaluation of the effectiveness of a given treatment is spontaneous improvement.

The fact that spontaneous improvement occurs has forced researchers in therapy to utilize control groups in order to demonstrate that the outcome of therapy exceeded spontaneous improvement. In other words, that the therapy was indeed an efficacious agent and could not be attributed to chance. Strictly speaking, spontaneous improvement rates can be determined only on groups of patients who are receiving no treatment at all. Since patients in need of treatment, the population we deal with, cannot be retained as subjects unless they are offered some type of treatment, placebos are used.

But is spontaneous improvement due to chance? A little reflection would indicate that what probably goes under the name of spontaneous improvement is not chance at all, but man's intrinsic ability at self-cure - the natural healing tendency that probably accounts for most improvements in health.

If this be true, what then is the function of treatment modality? We must assume that the patient comes for help because there are some obstacles to the natural healing process which he cannot overcome and hopes to get help in overcoming them. There are few therapists who would claim that the drug they use actually 'cures' the patient or that the therapeutic maneuver they apply cures. A more tenable view is that these agents remove the obstacles for natural self-healing. In the case of the placebo there is the additional factor of the belief in the efficacy of medicine.
If it is true that the primary purpose of therapy is to remove the obstacle from the path of the natural healing tendency, it becomes necessary to try to find out what the strategies of natural healing consists of, what are the factors that operate in the case of spontaneous improvement and in the case of placebo improvement. If we could determine these factors, we could take the next step and inquire why these factors are not operative in the cases that come for help and try to eliminate the obstacles to natural healing.

It would also become possible to find out just how the therapeutic agents such as drugs or other agents operate, and how they remove the obstacles to the course of natural healing.

Is it possible that in the case of drugs, the stress induced by the disorder is mitigated and this makes it possible for the natural healing processes to proceed? And in the case of say, cognitive therapy, does the reduction of such factors as self-denigration, or guilt permit the natural healing forces to proceed?

If the above thesis holds, it becomes easier to understand why drugs, psychotherapies and even placebos bring about their effects. If their chief function is to release the natural healing tendencies in man, it becomes understandable why the results of the different therapies are comparable. It has been pointed out that one of the common elements in all the psychotherapies is trust and faith in the therapist. But how does this trust and faith release the natural healing tendencies, and how do the drugs accomplish this end?

Furthermore, what role does vulnerability to a given disorder play in the consideration of spontaneous improvement or natural healing tendency? We have studied the role of the natural history of illness but there is very little if any study of the natural history of "wellness" or tendency to remain well despite vulnerability. It would seem that from the point of view of the natural healing tendency, vulnerability indicates a propensity for the development of obstacles to the natural healing process. Thus the role of moderating variables in protecting the individual against his vulnerability or in containing the stress which may trigger an episode becomes the link which connects vulnerability with natural healing.