

SPEAKING OF RESEARCH

Editor's Note: For this edition of the Newsletter, we have selected a stimulating article that appeared in a recent edition of American Psychologist. We have asked Peter Bloom, M.D., to comment on one portion of this article and present his comments, along with a response from one of the authors. The article has been summarized for the benefit of the reader by Roxanna Erickson-Klien, R.N., Ph.D.

Automaticity in Clinical Psychology

by Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn
American Psychologist, July 1999,
Vol. 54, pp. 504-515

Article Summary

This article provides an overview of constructs related to expectancy, automaticity and nonvolitional responses. It involves an overview of three areas of investigation: the placebo effect, the effect of false biofeedback on sexual arousal, and the alteration of perceptual and cognitive function by hypnotic and non-hypnotic suggestion. The authors also discussed the idea that all behavior, including novel and intentional behavior, is initiated automatically and therefore, not an act of will. They then present a summary of how an understanding of response expectancy and automatic processes can enhance clinical practice.

The discussion of the placebo effect is illustrated with an impressive study in which exposure to a skin irritant was mitigated and dramatically altered by suggestions that accompanied the exposure. The authors went on to present a meta-analysis of the efficacy of antidepressants. The authors found that the positive therapeutic effects attributed to antidepressants are not significantly different from placebo effects. For example, when examining the use of active drugs, which were not antidepressants, as a treatment for depression, the effect size ($D=1.69$) was as great as that of the antidepressants. Furthermore, inactive placebo duplicated 76% of this effect. The authors raise the question whether much of the therapeutic effects may be attributed to expectancy rather than to

pharmacological effects.

Whereas the authors drew no conclusions, they used this forum to encourage therapists to question the role and efficacy of medications involved while simultaneously learning to better understand the importance of other factors that accompany the administration of medication.