



HEALTH
MEANS®



8 Surprising Ways
**BELIEFS IMPACT
OUR HEALTH**

by HEALTHMEANS

CONTENTS

4	Create a Healthful Identity
6	Make use of the Placebo Effect
8	Expect the Best
9	Boost Your Self-Efficacy
11	Explore Self-Esteem Challenges
13	Examine Negative Self-Talk
15	Cultivate a Growth Mindset
16	Try to Avoid Confirmation Bias
17	Summary
19	References



There's a common saying that goes, "If you believe it, it will happen." Maybe this is a statement that you are highly skeptical of or maybe it is a statement that you agree with. The truth lies somewhere in between. Although it's difficult to "believe something specific into existence" there is a surprising amount of evidence that supports the fact that our beliefs can and do impact our emotional and physical health.

So which beliefs affect our health and well-being? How exactly do these beliefs affect us? And how do we shift these beliefs in ways that can potentially help us optimize our health and well-being? A number of psychological theories and studies can answer these questions.

1. CREATE A HEALTHFUL IDENTITY

Self-verification theory tells us that as human beings, we want others to see us as we see ourselves. So we engage in behaviors that help people see us in the same ways we see ourselves. We do this automatically and unconsciously as it helps us feel stable and reduces anxiety—when people treat us the way we think we should be treated, we're generally happier in our social relationships [1].

Self-verification is a process that is generally good for us. It can also be good for our health so long as part of our identity involves being healthy. However, when our self-views are inconsistent with the health outcomes we desire, self-verification can be problematic for our health.



For example, those who see themselves as fit might exercise regularly, wear workout clothes and work harder to maintain muscle mass. They do this in part because they want to portray themselves as someone who is fit—so that other people see them the same way they see themselves. On the other hand, if we don't see ourselves as someone who is fit, we're likely to be less motivated to do things that show other people that we are fit.

Or, maybe you believe you're just not a "health person." Maybe doing things like yoga, mindfulness or eating organic food just doesn't feel like you. It doesn't fit your identity. If so, self-verification theory suggests you would then unconsciously engage in behaviors that communicate those beliefs to others. So you might avoid engaging in these healthy habits or joke about how silly people are who do these things.

If that sounds like you, it's okay. But it is worth exploring how your identity and the beliefs that go along with it may be sabotaging your health goals. The thing to ask yourself is why you're not engaging in healthy behaviors. Is it because you really don't want to? Or is it actually because of an identity conflict—because engaging in specific healthy behaviors is just not who you are? If it's your identity that is preventing your success, you would likely benefit from shifting your beliefs about who you are to be consistent with the positive health outcomes you seek.



If you hold self-beliefs that are getting in the way of your health goals, try creating a new part of your identity, no matter how small, that is healthful in some way. You don't have to be like anyone you don't want to be like. Instead, focus on creating an identity you feel comfortable with. For example, if the typical "yoga identity" just isn't a good fit for you, consider trying on a weightlifting identity, a paleo identity or a mountain climber identity. Your "healthy identity" doesn't have to be like anyone else's. So just keep trying on different identities until you find one that resonates with you. When you do, self-verification will kick in and help you engage in behaviors that reinforce this new healthful identity.

2. MAKE USE OF THE PLACEBO EFFECT

Another way that beliefs can help us improve our health is with the placebo effect. A placebo is a non-active treatment or pill that is given to people in a control group of a study. The placebo effect is the finding that these non-active treatments generally result in positive change even though it's not designed to [2]. In other words, the placebo effect is evidence that believing in something makes it more likely to be so.



Many studies have explored the placebo effect. For example, if you are told that a blue pill makes you calm and a red pill gives you energy (even though neither pill does anything), you'll be more likely to experience calm when you take a blue pill and experience energy when you take a red pill. The simple belief that something causes a specific effect makes it more likely to cause that effect [3].

Another similar effect is the "brand-name effect." If you are given one pill of aspirin from a trusted brand name and one pill of aspirin from an unbranded bottle (even though neither pills do anything), you'll experience more benefit from the branded pill [3]. Although this is slightly different from a placebo, it provides further support that our beliefs are a powerful tool that can be used to improve our health.

Other related research has shown that among a sample of more than 1000 patients, 70% of symptom complaints were related to psychological factors [4]. For example, common health issues like headaches, digestive troubles and insomnia are all symptoms of anxiety. If the cause of our health issues is anxiety (a psychological issue) rather than a disease (a physical health issue), it makes sense that a psychological phenomenon, like the placebo effect, would be more beneficial than a drug. And indeed, people with anxiety appear to experience greater placebo effects [4].

Placebo effects have even been shown to affect our biology. For example, research has shown that the placebo effect, at least when it involves pain, can initiate the release of endogenous opioids (our body's natural pain killer). This research further showed that brain changes in response to a placebo were similar to brain changes in response to opioids [5]. This just provides further evidence that our beliefs can be quite powerful.

Given this evidence, it's hard to understand why the placebo effect gets such a bad rap. Scientists generally view it as this pesky phenomenon that results in people getting better without having to take any drugs or undergo any treatments. But that's exactly what many of us want! If we want to use the power of belief to heal, we love the placebo effect. And there is reason to believe we can because the placebo effect has been shown to be beneficial in 60-90% of diseases [4].

So why does the belief that we will get better make it more likely that we will? One hypothesis is that we no longer have to worry about whatever health issues we are experiencing. Because stress in itself can cause and exacerbate all sorts of health issues, simply reducing our stress about a health issue may help resolve it [4].

To make the most use of the placebo effect, all we need is to believe in whatever treatment, habit or intervention we are using to optimize our health. Regardless of how effective it is, our belief in its effectiveness can improve its effectiveness. And the more faith we can have, the less lingering anxiety we are likely to have about our current health issues.

3. EXPECT THE BEST




Even if we are not undergoing treatment or a new health regimen, we can benefit from optimism, or expecting positive outcomes. By simply expecting that things will end up well, they are more likely to. In fact, studies have shown that optimism is linked to more positive health outcomes for cardiovascular disease, immune function, cancer, and more [6]. All this is to say that having positive expectations can help contribute to positive health outcomes.

Just as positive expectations can contribute to more positive outcomes, negative expectations can contribute to negative outcomes [4]. For example, if we expect something to be more painful, it actually is. And the more confident we are that it will be painful, the more we will be right [7]. This is how our expectancies can crucially affect our experiences.

These are just some of the reasons why it can be helpful to stay positive when dealing with a health issue. Try to be optimistic and think about the potential positive outcomes while focusing less on the potential negative outcomes. If you're having trouble, it may be helpful to use guided meditations or other exercises that cultivate positivity.

4. BOOST YOUR SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy refers to our beliefs about our own capabilities [8]. For example, we may have a high level of self-efficacy for parts of life that we've been successful in—we know what we're doing. We may have lower self-efficacy in other parts of life with which we have less or no experience—maybe we've never rebuilt an engine and have zero belief in our capabilities to do so. Even though we tend to have more self-efficacy for things we have experience with, we can also choose to have self-efficacy for whatever we want.



**EXPERIENCING
“SMALL WINS”
CAN GIVE
US MORE
CONFIDENCE IN
OUR ABILITY TO
KEEP SUCCEEDING**

Self-efficacy has been shown to have powerful effects on our motivation, achievement and behavior [8]. If we believe in our ability to do something, we work harder, persist longer and achieve more. So how might we boost self-efficacy for health related goals?

The research shows a number of factors can contribute to greater self-efficacy. For example, experiencing “small wins” can give us more confidence in our ability to keep succeeding [8]. For this reason, setting small health goals may be an effective strategy. For example, let's say your long-term goal is to eat a completely clean diet. You might start by removing one unhealthy food or adding one healthy food per week. Small achievements like this can give you more confidence in taking additional small, or even large, steps.

Our environment also influences the amount of self-efficacy we have. If we have people around us who support us and have confidence in us, we're more likely to also have confidence in ourselves [8]. For this reason, it can be helpful to solicit the support of close family members and friends. Making health changes is not always easy so having loved ones there to cheer you on can be one way to shift your beliefs in ways that help you succeed.



Another way that our environment can increase self-efficacy is by modeling success for us [8]. If there are others around us doing what we aspire to do, we'll see that success is possible, and this may increase our self-efficacy. On the flip side, if the people around us are not engaging in the health habits we hope to develop, or if they're failing at developing these habits, we might have less confidence in our ability to succeed. So we can aim to surround ourselves with other people who share our goals and have been successful in achieving them. We can do this by joining a gym, going to paleo meetups or joining a vegan online group, whatever helps us find people who set a good example for us.

5. EXPLORE SELF-ESTEEM CHALLENGES

Self-esteem, or our feelings about self-competence and self-liking [9], may affect our beliefs in ways slightly different from self-efficacy. While self-efficacy focuses on beliefs related to action—**COULD I SUCCEED IN DOING X?** Self-esteem focuses more on beliefs about our own value—**AM I A GOOD PERSON? AM I DESERVING OF SUCCEEDING IN X?** [8]. Self-esteem, or our beliefs about our own value, also have important implications for our health.



Many studies have explored the placebo effect. For example, if you are told that a blue pill makes you calm and a red pill gives you energy (even though neither pill does anything), you'll be more likely to experience calm when you take a blue pill and experience energy when you take a red pill. The simple belief that something causes a specific effect makes it more likely to cause that effect [3].

Another similar effect is the "brand-name effect." If you are given one pill of aspirin from a trusted brand name and one pill of aspirin from an unbranded bottle (even though neither pills do anything), you'll experience more benefit from the branded pill [3]. Although this is slightly different from a placebo, it provides further support that our beliefs are a powerful tool that can be used to improve our health.

SELF-COMPETENCE may seem a lot like self-efficacy, but it's more about our belief in the outcomes of our efforts [9]. For example, I might have complete confidence in my ability to eat healthy and exercise, but if I am lacking self-confidence, I might worry that my efforts won't result in the meaningful changes to my health that I'm seeking. These beliefs have to do with how we feel about ourselves and they can affect whether or not we think our actions will lead to the outcomes we desire.

SELF-LIKING is about self-worth, or whether we think of ourselves as a good or bad person [9]. Are we a valuable human being? Are we deserving of good health? Are we worth the time and effort it might take to heal? If we have poor self-liking, these are the types of questions that can get us stuck. If we don't believe we are deserving of good health, we aren't likely to take the actions required to optimize our health. And this is why working to boost self-esteem can help us improve our health.

Shifting how much we value ourselves may not be an easy task, but there are some strategies you can try that may be helpful. For example, consider using positive affirmations. These are words we say to ourselves that are kind or congratulatory. For example, you might tell yourself each morning, **"YOU ARE AN AMAZING HUMAN BEING, WORTHY OF HEALTH AND HAPPINESS."** Affirmations like these can help you begin to shift your beliefs.

Another strategy is to cultivate self-compassion. Self-compassion involves extending kindness to oneself rather than being self-critical [10]. You can cultivate self-compassion by engaging in self-compassion meditation or by writing a self-compassion letter, for example on websites like *Greater Good In Action*. Each of these exercises involves learning to treat ourselves as we would treat a child or stranger, in a kind supportive way. As a result, you start to think about yourself in ways that are more understanding and compassionate.

6. EXAMINE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK

Self-talk is thought to be the portion of our thoughts that involve saying something to ourselves [11]. Self-talk can be anywhere from very positive to very negative. For example, negative self-talk might be excessively critical—*Why did you do that, you idiot!* Or it can be quite encouraging—*You're kicking butt. Keep going!* We may or may not currently be aware of our self-talk but we can become more aware of it by paying attention.



Crucially, our self-talk is influenced by our beliefs—beliefs about ourselves, others and the world. If we believe that things should be done perfectly, we may be more likely to judge ourselves negatively for any missteps. The opposite is also true. If we believe that we should be able to do whatever we want, our self-talk may be overly congratulatory or egotistical. Ideally, we'd like to be somewhere in the middle.

These beliefs and the related self-talk can crucially affect how we go about developing and maintaining good health habits. For example, if I tell myself that *I am a hopeless loser for eating one cookie*, I might lose faith in my ability to stick with healthy habits that can improve my life. If, on the other hand, I tell myself that *eating one cookie every now and then actually helps me stick to my health goals longer-term*, I may be less harsh on myself and make greater progress. This is how our self-talk can impact our health.

Given we often don't think about or even notice our self-talk, it can be useful to take a closer look at self-talk when trying to shift our beliefs to optimize our health. To start, consider keeping a journal to note down when you notice any negative self-talk. Or, you could set a timer for every hour or so for a week to remind yourself to pause and reflect on the chatter in your head.

WHEN DOING EXERCISES LIKE THESE, ASK YOURSELF:

- Was your self-talk overly negative?
- Was your self-talk helpful or harmful to your health goals?
- How would you rephrase your self-talk to help you stick to your health goals in the long-term?

By shifting negative self-talk to be more positive, you can shift your beliefs to be more supportive, which can help you reach your health goals more easily.



7. CULTIVATE A GROWTH MINDSET

Growth mindset is the belief that our attributes are changeable—that we have the power to get better at the things we're not so good at. This is in contrast to a fixed mindset, or a belief that our attributes 'are what they are' and are largely unchangeable. Across a series of studies, growth mindset has been shown to contribute to positive outcomes. Specifically, when we believe we can improve, we are more likely to adapt after failure and are less likely to feel helpless. As a result of these beliefs, a growth mindset can buffer us from the negative effects that go along with challenging situations [12].

Initial evidence suggests that a growth mindset can also be beneficial for our health. For example, if we have a growth mindset for anxiety—or we believe that we can improve our anxiety—we are more likely to engage in therapy [12]. This suggests that by believing that we can improve our health, we are more likely to take the actions required to actually improve our health.



To cultivate a growth mindset, it may be helpful to repeat the message, **“YOU CAN CHANGE YOUR HEALTH”** or place it somewhere you'll see it regularly [13]. Other research suggests a growth mindset can be cultivated by learning about neuroplasticity, or the potential for the brain to continue to grow and change. Another strategy is to think about how you might apply this concept in your real-life [14]. For example, if your attributes are changeable, what might you do differently? Might you work on improving self-discipline to make sure you take your pills each day? Or might you work on cultivating more optimism to help you make better use of the power of belief? By promoting a growth mindset, we shift our beliefs in ways that can have benefits across multiple domains of life, including our health.

8. TRY TO AVOID CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias refers to our tendency to seek out or interpret evidence that reinforces our existing beliefs and expectations [15]. We all do this and we do so unconsciously, or without awareness. In day-to-day life this can mean we use our existing health-beliefs to make decisions and determine our next steps. For example, if I'm a vegetarian and I have strong beliefs about the benefits of vegetarianism, I might ignore evidence that shows the benefits of eating a paleo or ketogenic diet and I might ignore evidence that shows the downsides of being vegetarian. Or the exact opposite can be true. I might be really passionate about ketogenic diets and then choose to ignore the evidence that shows the benefits of a vegan or vegetarian diet and the downsides of keto.



If you're trying to be healthier, confirmation bias can also come in and keep you from taking actions that can help you. For example, maybe you're a coffee drinker. So you look for any evidence showing the benefits of drinking coffee while you ignore any evidence that coffee is bad for you. Again, you're only seeing one perspective.

Our beliefs in themselves aren't the problem here. What's potentially problematic is that confirmation bias leads us to only consider health solutions that are consistent with our existing beliefs. This can prevent us from learning about and trying out other health-boosting habits that might benefit us or be an even better fit for our bodies. In this way, our beliefs may stop us from improving our health or healing as quickly or easily as we could.

To overcome confirmation biases that might affect our health behaviors, get in the habit of questioning your existing health habits. Pretend you're in a debate class and it's your job to argue the opposite of whatever you believe. Learn as much as you can about approaches you don't currently believe in. This opens you up to learning new, potentially beneficial health strategies. Then you can make more informed decisions about your health.

SUMMARY

Although modifying our beliefs is rarely thought of as a health strategy in itself, the evidence suggests this approach may be just as helpful as traditional or alternative medicines. The most benefit seems to come from combining effective treatments and health habits with a powerful confident belief that they will work.





**HERE'S
TO HEALTH.**

REFERENCES

1. Swann Jr, W.B., *Self-verification theory*. Handbook of theories of social psychology, 2011. 2: p. 23-42.
2. Moerman, D.E., *Meaning, Medicine, and the "placebo Effect"*. Vol. 28. 2002: Cambridge University Press Cambridge.
3. Moerman, D.E. and W.B. Jonas, *Deconstructing the placebo effect and finding the meaning response*. 2002, American College of Physicians.
4. Benson, H. and R. Friedman, *Harnessing the power of the placebo effect and renaming it remembered wellness*. Annual Review of Medicine-Selected Topics in the Clinical Sciences, 1996. 47: p. 193-200.
5. Finniss, D. G., Kaptchuk, T. J., Miller, F., & Benedetti, F. (2010). Biological, clinical, and ethical advances of placebo effects. *The Lancet*, 375(9715), 686-695.
6. Rasmussen, H. N., Scheier, M. F., & Greenhouse, J. B. (2009). Optimism and physical health: A meta-analytic review. *Annals of behavioral medicine*, 37(3), 239-256.
7. Shih, Y.-W., et al., *Effects of positive and negative expectations on human pain perception engage separate but interrelated and dependently regulated cerebral mechanisms*. Journal of Neuroscience, 2019. 39(7): p. 1261-1274.
8. Schunk, D.H. and F. Pajares, *Self-efficacy theory*. Handbook of motivation at school, 2009: p. 35-53.
9. Tafarodi, R.W. and W.B. Swann Jr, *Two-dimensional self-esteem: Theory and measurement*. Personality and Individual Differences, 2001. 31(5): p. 653-673.
10. Neff, K.D., *The development and validation of a scale to measure self-compassion*. Self and identity, 2003. 2(3): p. 223-250.
11. Hardy, J., *Speaking clearly: A critical review of the self-talk literature*. Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 2006. 7(1): p. 81-97.
12. Schroder, H.S., et al., *Growth mindset of anxiety buffers the link between stressful life events and psychological distress and coping strategies*. Personality and Individual Differences, 2017. 110: p. 23-26.
13. Burnette, J.L., et al., *An online growth mindset intervention in a sample of rural adolescent girls*. British journal of educational psychology, 2018. 88(3): p. 428-445.
14. Schleider, J. and J. Weisz, *A single-session growth mindset intervention for adolescent anxiety and depression: 90-month outcomes of a randomized trial*. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2018. 59(2): p. 160-170.
15. Nickerson, R.S., *Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises*. Review of general psychology, 1998. 2(2): p. 175-220.



If you like what you've read here, be sure to [explore HealthMeans](#) for 1000s of additional health talks, eBooks and programs!

© 2020 HealthMeans. The contents of this document are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

This document does not provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.