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Faith Healing

Other common name(s): spiritual healing, laying on of hands

Scientific/medical name(s): none

Description

Faith healing is founded on the belief that certain people or places have the ability to cure and heal—that someone or something can eliminate disease or heal injuries through a close connection to a higher power. Faith healing can involve prayer, a visit to a religious shrine, or simply a strong belief in a supreme being.

Overview

Available scientific evidence does not support claims that faith healing can cure cancer or any other disease. Some scientists suggest that the number of people who attribute their cure to faith healing is lower than the number predicted by calculations based on the historical percentage of spontaneous remissions seen among people with cancer. However, faith healing may promote peace of mind, reduce stress, relieve pain and anxiety, and strengthen the will to live.

How is it promoted for use?

According to proponents, there is little that faith healing cannot do. Many religious sects claim faith can cure blindness, deafness, cancer, AIDS, developmental disorders, anemia, arthritis, corns, defective speech, multiple sclerosis, skin rashes, total body paralysis, and various injuries. Certain religious groups, for instance, believe that illness is an illusion that can be healed through prayer, either for oneself or by trained practitioners.

What does it involve?

Faith healing can be practiced near the patient or at a distance from the patient. When practiced from afar, it can involve a single faith healer or a group of people praying for the patient. When near to the patient, as in revivalist tent meetings, the healer often touches, or “lays hands on,” the patient while calling on a supreme being. Faith healing can also involve a pilgrimage to a religious shrine, such as the French shrine at Lourdes, in search of a miracle. Some groups train and use their own practitioners to heal sick persons through prayer.

What is the history behind it?

Faith healing is believed to have begun even before the earliest recorded history. In the Bible, both God and holy people are said to have the power to heal. In Medieval times, the Divine Right of Kings was thought to give royalty the ability to heal through touch. Through the years, up to and including the twentieth century, there have been numerous reports of saints performing miracle cures. Today, a number of religious groups practice some form of faith healing.

What is the evidence?

Although it is known that a small percentage of people with cancer experience remissions of their disease that cannot be explained, available scientific evidence does not support claims that faith healing can actually cure physical ailments. When a person believes strongly that a healer can create a cure, a “placebo effect” can occur. The placebo effect can make the person feel better, but it has not been found to induce remission or improve chance of survival from cancer. The patient usually credits the improvement in how he or she feels to the healer, even though the perceived improvement occurs

because of the patient's belief in the treatment. Taking part in faith healing can evoke the power of suggestion and affirm one's faith in a higher power, which may help promote peace of mind. This may help some people cope more effectively with their illness.

One review published in 1998 looked at 172 cases of deaths among children treated by faith healing instead of conventional methods. These researchers estimated that if conventional treatment had been given, the survival rate for most of these children would have been more than 90 percent, with the remainder of the children also having a good chance of survival. A more recent study found that more than 200 children had died of treatable illnesses in the United States over the past thirty years because their parents relied on spiritual healing rather than conventional medical treatment.

Although there are few studies in adults, one study conducted in 1989 suggested that adult Christian Scientists, who generally use prayer rather than medical care, have a higher death rate than other people of the same age.

Are there any possible problems or complications?

People who seek help through faith healing and are not cured may have feelings of hopelessness, failure, guilt, worthlessness, and depression. In some groups, the person may be told that his or her faith was not strong enough. The healer and others may hold the person responsible for the failure of their healing. This can alienate and discourage the person who is still sick.

Relying on this type of treatment alone and avoiding or delaying conventional medical care for cancer may have serious health consequences. Death, disability, and other unwanted outcomes have occurred when faith healing was elected instead of medical care for serious injuries or illnesses.

While competent adults may choose faith healing over medical care, communities often become concerned when parents make such choices for their children. This concern has sparked organizations to work toward creating laws to protect children from inappropriate treatment by faith healers.

Finally, a few "faith healers" have been caught using fraud as a way to get others to believe in their methods. These people often solicited large donations or charged money for their healing sessions.

To learn more

More information from your American Cancer Society

The following information on complementary and alternative therapies may also be helpful to you. These materials may be found on our Web site (www.cancer.org) or ordered from our toll-free number (1-800-ACS-2345).

[Guidelines for Using Complementary and Alternative Therapies](#)

[Dietary Supplements: How to Know What Is Safe](#)

The ACS Operational Statement on Complementary and Alternative Methods of Cancer Management

[Complementary and Alternative Methods for Cancer Management](#)

[Placebo Effect](#)

[Learning About New Ways to Treat Cancer](#)

[Learning About New Ways to Prevent Cancer](#)

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Note: This information may not cover all possible claims, uses, actions, precautions, side effects or interactions. It is not intended as medical advice, and should not be relied upon as a substitute for consultation with your doctor, who is familiar with your medical situation.

Last Medical Review: 01/17/2013

Last Revised: 01/17/2013