

How Do You Know That? Beliefs and Your Health

If you don't stand for something you will fall for anything.

-Gordon A. Eadie

Do my beliefs affect my health?

Absolutely! Beliefs affect your health in many ways. Here are some examples.

- Believing you have a life purpose makes a difference. A study of over 7100 people asked them a number of questions and then followed their health over 14 years.¹ The people who had a strong sense of purpose—a reason for getting up each day—lived longer. This was true for people of all ages, for both men and women, and even when they accounted for depression or other mental health issues.
- What you expect to happen will affect health. In one study, patients with pain were either told by a doctor they were getting pain medication, or the medicine was just added to their IV line behind a curtain, so they would not know.² The people who knew had a much faster drop in their pain. The reverse was also true. If they were told the pain medicine was turned off, their pain came back much faster than if the medication was stopped without their being told. This tells us that the mind has a lot of power when it comes to what we believe about pain.
- Your beliefs guide your health choices. People may become very attached to their treatments. Some people rely on “complementary approaches.” Some people have more confidence in medications than in other treatments, while others prefer to manage their health more with diet and exercise.
- Having healthy spiritual beliefs seems to make you healthier. For example, we know that people who attend weekly spiritual gatherings or say they are ‘highly religious’ live longer.³ This does not just seem to be tied just to healthier habits, like less smoking or drinking, or to the health benefits of being around other people.
- Placebos have power. Placebos are treatments that do not have any actual ability to heal. Examples are sugar pills with no way to change the body's chemistry, or a procedure that should not help cure a disease. Some recent studies have featured open placebos. In these studies, people are given a placebo pill. They know what a placebo is, and they are told about how research shows that placebos can be helpful if people believe in them. Even knowing all this, the placebo helps people feel better. This was found in a recent study on chronic back pain,⁴ as well as in a study on irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).⁵ Of course, that does not mean you just take placebos instead of getting the care you need. It just shows that your belief in something can increase its chance of helping you heal.

How do values fit in?

Values and beliefs are related. Both center on what matters to you, and how you live your life based on what is important. If it is not clear to you what your most important values are, there are different activities you can do to figure that out more. For example, some exercises can be found in the handout, "[What Matters Most? Exploring Your Values](#)."

What are some different ways I can decide what is true for me?

Different people decide what is true for them in different ways. Here are some examples of where people get information to guide their beliefs.

- Research findings—facts and figures
- Personal experience and observation
- Experience of friends and family
- The media—the internet, TV commercials, news, books, magazines
- Expert opinion, including a health care team
- Faith
- Your culture and family traditions
- Intuition (gut feelings)

Not everyone gets their information from the same place. Different people also feel some sources are better than others. For examples, doctors often like to look at research findings. Patients may as well, but they might place more importance on their personal experience or what they read online or saw on TV. Everyone is different. The quality of information is different too. Some sources may give you good information, while others do not.

Where do my beliefs fit in with my health care?

The key is to know what you believe when you are talking about your health and, at the same time, to be able to understand if someone else believes differently. Your health care team may suggest something that is confusing or you disagree with. The key is to work through those differences. There are a few ways to do that.

- Be very open about what you believe. Some people feel like it is hard to talk about their beliefs with their care providers, but letting them know what you are thinking is important.
- Try to understand where other people are coming from. The more you can understand other ways of looking at what is going on, the better you will be able to make the best choices you can about your health.
- Notice emotions. Sometimes discussions about beliefs become very emotional. If that is happening, it helps to pause and ask what you are feeling, and why. Some people feel fear if their beliefs are being questioned, or anger. That is worth exploring.
- You make the calls. You are the one who is in charge of your health. Get all the information you can. Then it is up to you to decide what is best for you.

How Do I Decide if a Treatment or Procedure is Right for Me?

One tool you can use to help you decide whether or not to try something to prevent or help with

health problems is the ECHO tool. This tool was created to help people decide if a treatment is right for them. The letters in ECHO stand for four important things that you need to think about when you are making health care choices:

- **Effect.** How effective is the treatment? Your care team can help you understand what research shows.
- **Cost.** Would you have to pay for this yourself? Is it covered? How much time and energy would it cost you to get this treatment?
- **Harms.** How safe is it? If something is dangerous, is it worth the risk?
- **Opinions.** What do you believe about the treatment? You may feel very attached to something you are doing, because you feel like it has been useful, or because it has helped someone you know. How will you know something has worked, and how long will you try it for?

Thinking about ECHO can help you as you make health care choices. If something meets all four, that is great. The challenge is what to do if it does not.

For You to Consider:

- What are your core values? What is most important to you?
- What sources of information do you use to decide if something is true for you? Where do you get information to make health care decisions?
- Is there anything you can do, after reading this, to use the power of belief to affect your health?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of handouts on spirituality	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/re-sources/modules/#self-care
Medline Plus	General websites to gather additional health information	http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/
Centers for Disease Control	General websites to gather additional health information	http://www.cdc.gov/
The National Institutes of Health website	General websites to gather additional health information	http://health.nih.gov/

Mayo Clinic Health tools	General websites to gather additional health information	http://www.mayoclinic.org/
Drugs.com	General websites to gather additional health information	http://www.drugs.com/
Cleveland Clinic	General websites to gather additional health information	http://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/default.aspx
Family Doctor.org	General websites to gather additional health information	http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en.html
National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH)	Complementary and Integrative Health Site	https://nccih.nih.gov
University of Minnesota, Taking Charge of Your Health and Wellbeing	Complementary and Integrative Health Site	http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/
University of Arizona, Free Integrative Medicine Tools	Complementary and Integrative Health Site	http://integrativemedicine.arizona.edu/resources.html

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