

Compassion and its possible role during acupuncture treatment - influence on pain, anxiety and depression

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The effects of acupuncture are likely based on a combination of specific and different non-specific mechanisms. Among the non-specific effects the therapist-patient has been implicated as important but do appear not to be related to empathic consultations. This would suggest that other mechanisms, including compassion, may account for the non-specific effects of acupuncture in pain, anxiety and depression.

Compassion can be defined as the feeling that can be present when witnessing another individual's suffering and that also motivates a desire to alleviate a patient's suffering. The experience of compassion is associated with increased care and concern for others, less focus on own needs, and a desire to help others. Likely, compassion is mediated by distinct physiological mechanisms that are linked to the interoceptive system. In conveying compassion, one stimulation modality that can play a key role is mechanical sensory stimulation that includes parts of the practising of needle stimulation used in sham and acupuncture stimulation. A brain area with a possible key role is the midbrain periaqueductal gray (PAG). Also, the anti-correlated functional networks of the brain and the brain's reward systems are likely contributing.

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