

## Why do people use alternative medicine?

### An overview of why people use alternative medicine

By John Jackson © 2005

On the face of it, alternative medicine does not have a lot going for it. The treatments and remedies are often expensive, have various associated risk factors, have to rely on mystical and magical forces to explain how they are supposed to work, and the vast majority of them fail to show any effect in clinical trials. The bottom line is: they do not work.

When looked at logically, alternative remedies make no sense. Why then are so many people placing their faith in these treatments that, essentially, do nothing?

### What types of people are attracted to alternative medicine?

The first, and most obvious, answer that critics come up with is that those who use alternative remedies do so because they are stupid and gullible. This, however, is wrong.

The tendency is that people are more likely to use alternative treatments the more educated they are. The level of education a person has attained is probably the best indicator that a person is likely to use some form of alternative treatment. This apparent paradox may be explained by the fact that more educated people are more likely to be interested in and read up on things that they are exposed to, they are more likely to question the perceived authority of conventional medical practitioners, and if they have an illness, be more likely to learn about it and consider other forms of treatment for it. Of course, educated people are likely to have more money to spend on alternative medicine too.

Being intelligent or well educated does not mean that a person is going to think more logically; in fact, it often results in them becoming better at defending and justifying their irrational beliefs.

There is not a single answer to who will use alternative remedies but there are some generalised groups of people who will use it based on perceptions of their health or their world view:

#### 1. **Those in poor general health.**

Someone in poorer than average health has obviously had less success in dealing with it than someone in good general health. This could be the reason why they are more likely to try all kinds of remedies in the hope that they will find one that will work for them.

It is known that many people who use alternative remedies consider their health to be poorer than average. Many chronic (long term) conditions do not respond well to conventional treatments and this can lead to disillusionment in the sufferer, who may, understandably, seek out alternatives.

#### 2. **Somatizers.**

A somatizer is someone who experiences or reports physical symptoms yet there is no actual physical cause for their symptoms (this was originally called psychosomatic illness). Somatizers are often regarded as malingerers, and dismissed as such, which can leave them frustrated. They therefore turn, or may even be encouraged to turn by their doctor, to alternative remedies.

Somatizers have psychological problems but they are afraid of the (perceived) shame and stigma, so they strongly reject any psychological diagnosis or treatment. It is this unwillingness to even consider any



psychological explanation for their problems that is the reason why somatizers' psychological problems manifest themselves as physical symptoms.

Often, these people are after some sympathy, reassurance, and recognition; the emotional comfort of someone caring and taking them seriously. Alternative practitioners are very patient-focused, so they cater for this need better than conventional doctors do; however, the patient's underlying cause is never addressed.

There are two aspects to giving treatments: the remedy and the doctor/patient relationship. Conventional medicine is strong on effective remedies but a consultation may be very short and the doctor may spend more time looking at a computer screen than at the patient.

Alternative remedies on the other hand, offer little or nothing in the way of effective treatments, but a good practitioner will spend a lot of time focusing on the patient. People who have conditions which are not being successfully treated or which are psychosomatic are more likely to be attracted to the alternative practitioner who offers a patient-centred, sympathetic approach.

### 3. **Cultural beliefs and influences.**

Many new-age and eastern spiritual beliefs are based on an ideology called "pantheism". This is a world view where God does not exist as taught by the monotheistic religions, the concept is a one of God being the spiritual essence or life force of the universe rather than being a separate entity and its creator. Chi, Prana, Innate Intelligence, Mana, and Vital Energy are all examples of this proposed, but never detected, life force.

This is where the spirit-mind-body concept and the belief in a holistic approach to treatments originate. Reinforced by advertisers' hyperbole, a large proportion of people have been led to believe that everything deemed natural, green, herbal, organic, or 'in harmony with nature' is somehow better than manufactured or scientific alternatives. This concept is based on the [Naturalistic Fallacy](#): the false notion that there's inherent good in nature.

Alternative medicine is congruent with this world view. Those who see themselves as spiritual, environmentally friendly, in touch with nature etc. are the largest group of alternative medicine users.

### 4. **Uncritical believers.**

Most people believe that conventional medicine works because that is what they have been told. They are not inquisitive and do not worry about how or why orthodox medicine works, as long as it does. They place trust in their doctor and the system of medicine they practise.

The same is true for alternative medicine. People who use it, believe it works. They are not interested in the theory of how alternative remedies are meant to work or whether they have passed clinical trials, they place trust in the practitioners and the system in which they practise.

It is unlikely that people would use something if they did not believe it worked. The belief in medicine, whether conventional or alternative, is usually formed with the same unquestioning attitude.

## **Some reasons that people seek out alternative remedies:**

### 1. **They are unhappy with, or distrustful of, conventional medicine.**

Unfortunately, conventional medicine is not perfect; people do have bad experiences with it. This can lead people to distrust conventional medicine and sometimes shun it. This is only true of a small proportion of people, but the big danger for them is that they are more likely to use alternative remedies as their primary source of healthcare. These people often decide to take full control of their own, and possibly also their family's, health. The consequences of this may be damaging, even fatal.

### 2. **Alternative remedies give them more personal control of their situation.**

People in poor health and those who have chronic conditions often like taking charge of their own health.

Using alternative treatments gives them this autonomy. However, they do not shun conventional medicine; they are more likely to use alternative remedies in conjunction with conventional medicine.

### 3. **The idea of alternative medicine closely matches their culture or belief system.**

Alternative treatments are appealing to those who hold new-age ideas and philosophies. Treatments are claimed to be holistic, and healing is the result of achieving spiritual harmony.

There are probably not many people who would claim to be pantheistic new-agers; however, the advertising industry has embraced these philosophies and coupled them with a distorted view of the natural world to create the illusion that everything that is 'natural' and 'in harmony with nature' is somehow better for us.

This has resulted in a substantial subculture, or market sector, of people who believe in the spirit-mind-body concept. Therefore, words like: holistic; natural; herbal; organic; etc. appeal to them.

## **Conclusion**

People use alternative medicines because they accept the claims made for them at face value and believe that they work; the concept of alternative medicine matches their (often spiritual) world-view; or those in poor health are looking in hope for something that works for their condition.

Alternative remedies may not be capable of passing a clinical trial, or even of actually curing anything, but they do fulfil a need in many people. Fulfilling emotional needs and curing illnesses are two different aspects of treatment.

The big problem, of course, is that because alternative remedies do little or nothing with regard to curing illness, there is an inherent, major assumption (made clear by the lack of government regulation) that people who use alternative remedies will know when conventional treatment is needed in the case of serious illness: sadly, this is not always the case.

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