



Hormesis vs Homeopathy

Real church & connexional theory

What is hormesis?

It comes from a Greek word that means rapid motion or eagerness. It is a very useful concept when applied to daily exercise, eg, going for a brisk walk. Doing it puts an extra stress on the bones in the feet and legs, as well as the muscles and sinews. That stress builds denser bones, and strengthens muscles enabling the body to do tasks beyond normal activity or resting.

All exercise is like that, obviously. The extra stress we place upon the body now actually helps it repair itself and equip it for the future. Experiencing the temporary discomfort of this extra stress builds up as a kind of redundancy. We do these apparently unnecessary exercises to add reserves to our natural body defences.

Virtually every exercise study confirms this. HIT, High Intensity Training, ie, very short bursts of extreme activity, followed by longer rest or low intensity training, yields long term benefits. The key learning? Doing a lot of HIT, to the point of it being redundant, usually leads to the best possible health outcomes. Nassim Taleb, a professor of risk-engineering, notes that hormesis got a bad name in the 1930s when it was confused with homeopathy.

What is homeopathy?

A 19th century German physician coined the word from the Greek, meaning similar or alike emotions.

This was then further applied to the treatment of disease. Homeopathy was widely touted as a method of curing disease by adding miniscule quantities of a stress substance that potentially could trigger the disease effects. But the dosage of the stressor had to be extremely small. The smaller the better: ie, vanishingly small. The principle was that this miniscule stress sympathetically induced the body's resistance.

Homeopathy attracted much interest. Queen Elizabeth II was a supporter, which naturally generated a small army of supporters. King Charles is the current patron of the Homeopathic Medicine Society.

Unlike hormesis, the alternative medicine of homeopathy has no evidence to back it, unless one takes into account the placebo effect. And, significantly, that can't be easily dismissed, according to the science.

What is the placebo effect?

The placebo effect is when a patient takes "medicine" that is either water, or a small sugar or starch pill, which can be considered as an inactive substance. The patient, however, believes it to be an active medicine. This psychological state of belief can cause either positive or negative effects on the person's body. Sometimes the placebo is alleviating symptoms, other times causing undesirable side effects.

Not all patients demonstrate the placebo effect but sufficient numbers do. This latter group alerts researchers once again to the fact that the mind can profoundly influence the body.

The placebo effect isn't the same as homeopathic treatments, but what we believe plays a significant role in both of them. Not so hormesis, where physical stress induces a reservoir of body resilience which can be measured, eg, oxygen saturations and heart rate variability. One realm is psychological and spiritual—an inscape. The other is scientific: measurable, repeatable, coherent—the instress, as poet G M Hopkins put it. The significant stressor for hormesis? Yes.

Connexional leadership and strategies

So what has any of this to do with the state of our Methodist Connexion 2023, and our Auckland Ministerial Synod today, right now? Everything, I think. Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard's recent paper gives permission for us to rebuild a deep Connexion, which has nothing to do with current Connexional structures or leaders, but everything to do with the individuals who sit in this room, gathered in space and in time. Let's do that now.

Every presbyter can choose what he or she thinks is their strength, which he or she brings to this gathering point. Everyone can decide according to their own intuition whether the external Connexion operates out of a hormesis mode, a homeopathic mode or a placebo mode. Every presbyter can also choose which modality they want to operate in and from and by, in a personal sense. It's your call.

Then, finding just one other person in this room, each can share that one major strength he/she believes they bring, or their congregation or parish brings. Finally, be willing to negotiate a time and opportunity to share that strength, parish to parish or congregation to congregation. Whether it is via a pulpit swap, a Saturday workshop or a zoom meeting doesn't really matter. The important thing: communication koinonia begins. This, I love.