

Non-deceptive placebos can reduce stress, anxiety and depression, study finds

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A study by Michigan State University found that non-deceptive placebos, or placebos given to people fully knowing they are placebos, effectively manage stress—even when the placebos are administered

remotely.

Researchers recruited participants experiencing prolonged [stress](#) from the COVID-19 pandemic for a two-week randomized controlled trial. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to a non-deceptive [placebo](#) group and the other half to the [control group](#) that took no pills.

The participants interacted with a researcher online through four virtual sessions on Zoom. Those in the non-deceptive placebo group received information on the [placebo effect](#) and were sent placebo pills in the mail along with instructions on taking the pills.

The study, [published](#) in *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, found that the non-deceptive group showed a significant decrease in stress, anxiety and depression in just two weeks compared to the no-treatment control group. Participants also reported that the non-deceptive placebos were easy to use, not burdensome and appropriate for the situation.

"Exposure to [long-term stress](#) can impair a person's ability to manage emotions and cause significant mental health problems, so we're excited to see that an intervention that takes minimal effort can still lead to significant benefits," said Jason Moser, co-author of the study and professor in MSU's Department of Psychology.

"This minimal burden makes non-deceptive placebos an attractive intervention for those with significant stress, anxiety and depression."

The researchers are particularly hopeful in the ability to remotely administer the non-deceptive placebos by [health care providers](#).

"This ability to administer non-deceptive placebos remotely increases scalability potential dramatically," said Darwin Guevarra, co-author of

the study and postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Francisco.

"Remotely administered non-deceptive placebos have the potential to help individuals struggling with mental health concerns who otherwise would not have access to traditional mental health services."

More information: Darwin A. Guevarra et al, Remotely administered non-deceptive placebos reduce COVID-related stress, anxiety, and depression, *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/aphw.12583](https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12583)

Provided by Michigan State University

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