



Matt Lucas

The Placebo Effect

Does *The Secret* offer winning advice ... or snake oil? Maybe a bit of both.

BY CHRISTINE CARTER MCLAUGHLIN

EVERYWHERE I GO, PEOPLE ARE STILL talking about *The Secret*, the latest in a long line of self-help empires built on the promise of health, wealth, and happiness. I'm not surprised that my favorite Oprah-watching neighbor has been giving *Secret*-like parenting advice to her daughter, but I am still nothing short of shocked when I hear my *New Yorker*-reading friends recommending it. Even my vehemently anti-New-Age mother keeps talking about how much sense *The Secret* makes.

In case you've been under a rock for the past couple of years, *The Secret* is a best-selling book and DVD created by Rhonda Byrne, who claims to have dug up the "Great Secret—The Secret to Life" that has been "hidden for centuries." In the past, this Great Secret "utterly transformed the lives" of "leading scientists, authors, and philosophers"—Plato, Newton, Beethoven, Shakespeare, Lincoln, daVinci, Einstein.

What is this Great Secret of Life? The law of attraction: "When you think a thought, you are also attracting like thoughts to you. Your thoughts become things." This law, according to Secret experts like Joe Vitale, described in the book as a "metaphysician and marketing specialist," is a natural law "as impartial as the law of gravity." All one needs to do is *ask* the universe for what you want, *believe* that it will come, and *receive* it when it does.

Puh-leez. As attractive as these claims are, plenty of research shows that people who consistently reach their goals employ a lot more than the positive intention to do so. Moreover, as a sociologist I'm painfully aware that many opportunities in this American life are simply not available to all. More than ever, a child's family income—in addition to a host of other important social factors—dictates whether she'll get a decent education, serve in a war, or get the basic health care she needs. But we Americans are steeped in the belief that all we'll need to succeed resides within ourselves, that social hierarchies and other external circumstances have nothing to do with it.

This doesn't mean *The Secret* is completely off base. While I can't speak to whether or not it will make you rich, my own research has taught me a thing or two about what is likely to make you lastingly happy. And here is where I think *The Secret's* practical tips are interesting: I believe they would, in fact, make just about anyone happier. For example, *The Secret* experts recommend you find yourself a "gratitude pebble"; when you get dressed in the morning, put it in your pocket and think of a dozen or so things you are thankful for. Sure enough, there are a lot of good scientific studies that suggest a link between happiness and regularly counting your blessings.

And believe me, many of *The Secret's* strategies are even simpler than putting a rock in your pocket. One Secret expert emphasizes that happiness starts with *just feeling good*. *Now.* Meaning: Smile, even if you don't feel like it. As horribly forced as that sounds, there is also solid science to back up the notion that this will, in fact, make you feel happier. Facial expression alone, without first feeling the corresponding emotion, is enough to create discernible changes in your autonomic nervous system. Force yourself to smile, or even just hold a pencil between your teeth—thereby activating your smile muscles—and you will likely find that your heart rate goes down and you start to feel calmer, happier. (I've found the pencil clenching trick works, but it makes me drool.)

There is even some scientific evidence that the secret to *The Secret*—you will attract whatever you are thinking about—works, especially if you are an athlete. For example, research has shown us that if you simply *imagine* yourself lifting weights you can reliably increase your muscle strength by 16 percent. Visualization—or more precisely, "mental rehearsal"—has been studied exhaustively and is decidedly effective. When athletes mentally rehearse their sport, for example, researchers find that the electrical impulses in their brains are the same as when they are actually playing it.

In short, *The Secret* is a placebo effect for your life. If your doctor gives you a sugar pill and tells you it is going to make you feel better—and you believe her—it might create physiological effects similar to an actual drug. That's because our bodies don't distinguish much between an actual biochemical reaction and the *thought* of a biochemical reaction. Byrne has elevated this from an individual process to a Universal Law: To Secret believers, simply believing that your thoughts will make your dreams come true is the same as first taking actions to make your dreams come true. But it is no Great Secret of Life that optimism is associated with lots of desirable outcomes, not the least of which is happiness. For many people, however, optimism can only do so much. If social inequality has stacked the deck against you, chances are you'll need more than smiles, pebbles, and placebos to succeed.

Christine Carter McLaughlin, Ph.D., is the executive director of the Greater Good Science Center.