

**From:** [Llew Mills](#)  
**To:** [Nancy Schimelpfening](#)  
**Subject:** RE: Interview Request  
**Date:** Thursday, 16 February 2023 8:46:37 AM  
**Attachments:** [image001.png](#)  
[image002.png](#)

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Hi Nancy

Thanks for taking an interest in my research. Here are my responses to your questions.

1. What did you learn in your study?

We learned that decaf can temporarily reduce caffeine withdrawal symptoms even when you know you are drinking decaf. This is a special type of placebo effect known as an open-label placebo effect.

2. How might these findings help people?

Withdrawal symptoms come in waves. If you are trying to stop drinking coffee and are finding the withdrawals – headache, fatigue, irritability, cravings – tough to handle, a cup of good quality decaf drunk when your symptoms are at their peak might help you ride out the worst of the cravings and not give in to temptation.

3. What is open-label placebo effect?

Placebo effects happen when people believe (mistakenly) that they have taken a pharmacologically active substance and expect an improvement in their symptoms. The belief is key here. For a placebo effect to occur the person usually has to believe they will improve. Open-label placebo effects are an interesting exception to this rule, because they happen even when people *know* the substance they have been given has no active drug in it.

4. Why might people experience an improvement in their symptoms even though they know they aren't getting the real thing?

Well what we think is happening is *conditioning*. Daily coffee drinkers drink thousands of cups of coffee over the course of their life. Every cup (especially the first one in the morning) reduces their withdrawal, so over time they come to associate coffee and all the stimuli surrounding it – the taste, the smell, the warmth of the cup, the heat of the liquid – both consciously *and unconsciously*, with caffeine withdrawal reduction. Over time that association means that those stimuli acquire the power to evoke the withdrawal reduction effect *without* the caffeine. Decaf, especially a really good one, has many of the same properties as caffeinated coffee, it tastes, looks and feels the same. So when you drink a cup of decaf you are evoking an conditioned withdrawal-reduction response, and it looks like that can happen even when you don't consciously expect it to. Sound like voodoo I know but we've observed it in three separate studies now so we're pretty confident it's a real thing.

Any further questions just let me know

All the best

Llew

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**From:** Nancy Schimelpfening <nancy@schimelpfening.net>

**Sent:** Thursday, February 16, 2023 1:17 AM

**To:** Llew Mills <llew.mills@sydney.edu.au>

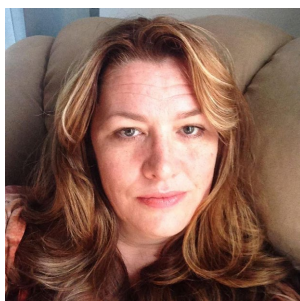
**Subject:** Interview Request

Good morning!

My name is Nancy Schimelpfening and I'm a reporter with Healthline. I'm hoping you have some time today to complete an email interview related to your study published in the Journal of Psychopharmacology. My deadline is 9 a.m. Central time tomorrow. Thank you!

**Questions:**

- (1) What did you learn in your study?
- (2) How might these findings help people?
- (3) What is open-label placebo effect?
- (4) Why might people experience an improvement in their symptoms even though they know they aren't getting the real thing?



**Nancy Schimelpfening, MS**

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