

Illusion of control: Why the world is full of buttons that don't work

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Have you ever pressed the pedestrian button at a crosswalk and wondered if it really worked? Or bashed the “close door” button in an elevator, while suspecting that it may, in fact, have no effect whatsoever?

You’re not alone, and you may be right. The world is full of buttons that don’t actually do anything.

They’re sometimes called “placebo buttons” — buttons that are mechanically sound and can be pushed, but provide no functionality. Like placebo pills, however, these buttons may still serve a purpose, according to Ellen Langer, a Harvard psychologist who pioneered a concept known as the “illusion of control.”

“They do have a psychological effect,” she said in a phone interview. “Taking some action leads people to feel a sense of control over a situation, and that feels good, rather than just being a passive bystander.

“Doing something typically feels better than doing nothing.”