

people with bad vibes (useful on that long weekend with Silvio Berlusconi).

We used to have a gardener who was mad about crystals. My mother would ask him what he'd like to drink, and he'd get a crystal pendulum out of his pocket and not answer until it had swung about a bit and told him. Admittedly, this all coincided with when he started to smoke some hallucinogenic plants. He would tell us about when we'd all lived together on the lost continent of Atlantis and that I'd beheaded my Latin teacher in a past life and needed to atone, when really he should have been focusing on the out-of-control clematis. Which is probably what my mother said when she fired him.

Crystals have been around for a long time – as long as the world itself. Naturally formed beneath the earth from cooled molten rock, they range in age from thousands to millions of years old. Their colour is the result of different chemicals being present in their formation – iron can produce a yellow or purple crystal, like citrine or amethyst. Lead can give a red colour, magnesium makes pink and chromium green. Larger crystals tend to come from deeper within the earth, where it's hotter, whereas smaller crystals are usually found nearer the earth's surface. They're different from gemstones because of their \*puts on a lab coat\* repeated crystalline molecular structure. Gemstones are mineral crystals – a diamond, for example, is made purely of carbon and is the strongest natural mineral of them all. Some believe these also have healing properties (overcoming fear, improving relationships and, if they're big enough, increasing women's libido). Rubies are said to energise and motivate, emeralds to help deepen spiritual awareness. Perhaps there's more going on in your jewellery box than you realised...

Humans have been finding crystals mesmerising for as long as they've known about them. The ancient Sumerians used them in their 'magic' formulas in 4,000 BC, the Chinese in their medicines around 3,000 BC. The ancient Egyptians wore lapis lazuli, carnelians and turquoise in jewellery for protection, as well as prettiness, and to encourage good health. They also ground them up for cosmetics (apparently galena and malachite make a mean eyeshadow – just ask Cleopatra). As for the Brits, amber beads discovered in the UK date back a whopping 10,000 years, to the end of the last Ice Age. Today they remain popular as necklaces and bracelets on glamorous teething babies – the theory is that apart from amber's supposed soothing energy, the heat from a baby's body releases the succinic acid found in it, which is then absorbed through the skin and works as

an analgesic. The evidence to support this is a bit vague – but there are a LOT of mothers who will tell you they have worked miracles on sore gums. Even animals get a look-in – agate is meant to help communication between owner and pet. Blue calcite will help them settle into a new home. Sodalite calms nervous travellers. Worth trying if your dog becomes hysterical on the way to the vet?

There is no problem that crystals cannot address, apparently. Lapis lazuli is said to bring awareness and intuition; aventurine to attract success and protect the heart. Malachite releases negative experiences and smoky quartz is good for pain, emotional support and releasing anger. No one knows who decided which stone did what, but a lot of the names come courtesy of the ancient Greeks, who used crystals in everyday life. Amethyst means 'not drunken' and was worn as an amulet to help relieve hangovers. Hematite means 'blood' and contains iron, which they associated with Ares, their god of war, and rubbed over their bodies before battle to keep them safe. In fact, the word 'crystal' itself comes from the Greek word for ice, as they believed clear quartz was water so profoundly frozen that it would always remain solid.

Crystals are mentioned in the Bible, the Koran and Hindu mythology, and in folklore all over the world, from Native Americans to Maoris. But towards the Age of Enlightenment, people grew dubious about their supposed healing properties. This was due to a combination of things like Rudolf II of Germany's court physician freaking everyone out by declaring that crystals contained good and bad angels, with the latter tricking people into thinking it was the stone and not God's gift bestowed upon it that was doing the healing. And, later in the 17th century, a fellow called Thomas Nicols wrote a book saying there was no evidence that these inanimate objects had any special powers and we should all calm down.

It wasn't until the early 19th century that crystals started to become popular again. And their use in healing and cosmetic procedures with a bit of added wizardry is everywhere today. Yvonne Ferrell, a healer who has been working with crystals for over 20 years, believes they are high-frequency tools and finds them particularly useful when diagnosing children: 'Whatever [crystal] they pick, I know what's wrong with them. Like agate – that means the child is looking for peace. The crystal tells you what the body is lacking.'

*Even animals get a look-in – agate is meant to help communication between owner and pet*

This is all very cheering, but is there any significant evidence that crystals *are* able to transmit energy of any kind to the human body? Christopher French, a professor of psychology at Goldsmiths university, would say there isn't. He conducted a study where people were given a mixture of crystals, half of which were secretly fake, plus information on what they might expect to feel. Professor French found that the participants who already believed in the power of crystals were twice as likely to experience sensations like tingling, warmer hands or feeling relaxed. He concluded that only a placebo effect could explain people describing the same sensations with real and fake crystals: 'The power of suggestion, either explicit or implicit, seems to be the not-so-mysterious power that may convince many that crystals have the potential to work miracles. The data presented is consistent with the idea that believers in the paranormal are more susceptible to this power.'

Crystal lovers and users don't seem remotely bothered by this. In fact, Ziggy Bergman, who performs 'Zone Face Lift' facials, where she uses clear quartz to help with things like lymphatic drainage and to 'absorb negative emotion', is one of many to have noticed a surge in their popularity over the

past year. 'I can only judge by how clients react and if they say they felt something lovely. The anecdotal evidence speaks for itself.'

Jayne Wallace of the Psychic Sisters, at Selfridges, who uses crystals in her readings, agrees. 'There are sceptical people out there in life, but it just comes down to what you feel,' says Jayne, who has experienced a growing interest in her work, particularly amongst men, with clients now including businessmen and billionaires.

Maybe lots of us are just extremely superstitious and always have been. Maybe crystals are a triumph of belief over rational thought. Maybe having beautiful sparkling hunks of natural mineral in your house is fair enough, regardless of what you may or may not believe. But if, in the end, you feel it keeps you healthier, safer, calmer (and possibly a bit nicer), well, that's a bonus. As I write this, I've got a piece of rose quartz in my bra that Jayne gave me, and in some small way, it feels like something good is keeping an eye on me. As Jacques Arpels of Van Cleef & Arpels once said (possibly while holding a diamond to help manifest abundance): '*Pour avoir de la chance, il faut croire à la chance*' – 'To be lucky, you must believe in luck.' □