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The Mind-Body Connection: How Your Attitude Affects Your Health

by Patty Carrosicia, R.N.

Recent studies show that severe prolonged stress and chronic negative thinking can compromise the immune system. By the same token, studies have also revealed that individuals with a positive attitude toward life tend to become sick less often than those with a negative attitude.

It is also believed that a healthy upbeat attitude can in itself mobilize and stimulate the body's defenders. For example, in a study of women with

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breast cancer. Dr. Sandra Levy at the University of Pittsburgh's Cancer Institute found that women who were more depressed had lower natural killer cell activity than those with a hopeful, positive outlook. It was also noted that the women who had experienced a great deal of joy and happiness in

their lives also had a higher survival rate.

Even though this concept may be difficult to believe, these studies in the mind-body connection are showing us that our minds play a major role in influencing our level of wellness.

The mind-body concept is defined as the interaction that takes place between our thoughts, our body and our external world. A new science that studies this link is called psychoneuroimmunology (PNI). PNI describes ways in which our emotions and attitude, both positive and negative, can affect our health and also the outcome of medical treatment.

Emotions and Stress

PNI research is concerned with the subtle interactions between our nervous, endocrine and immune systems and disease. The interaction between the different systems are complex but can be explained in a simplified manner.

For example, if you are experiencing fear, anger or other emotions that may increase your stress level, then these unsettling thoughts are picked up by the brain. The brain then stimulates the endocrine system of release hormones that have an adverse effect on the immune cell's ability to divide. This causes a decline in immune function which may result in your becoming more susceptible to illness.

In a series of studies, Drs. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Ron Glaser of Ohio State University College of Medicine, compared blood tests for immune function of medical students during exams to baseline blood tests done one month prior to finals. A decline was noted in: (1) natural killer T-cells which are responsible for fighting viruses and even attacking different kinds of tumors, including cancer (2) immune cells called T-lymphocytes (3) interferon, a component which supports and boosts immune function. This explains why college students suffering from "exam stress" often become ill.

Safe Stress

Researchers are not only defining the intricacies of the mind-body connection, but also the effective “inner healing” methods such as relaxation techniques, mental imagery or visualization, and attitude adjustment exercises. These methods will help keep the stress hormones in check so the immune system can function properly.

The main strategy in dealing with stress is to identify and remove or reduce its source. Identification may be relatively easy, but elimination could be a challenge especially when the source is your job. So, it is important to find ways to reduce the level of stress. Relaxation, including deep breathing, muscle stretching and meditation, will help you practice safer stress.

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An acute or prolonged tense state may cause the heart rate and blood pressure to increase, a dry mouth, enlarged pupils, sweaty palms, and fast shallow “chest” breathing. However, slow, deep “abdominal” breathing helps break the ten-

sion cycle which enables body functions to return to normal. Allowing yourself to take ten slow deep breaths at tense times, as well as throughout the day, will help you to stay loose and relaxed.

Muscle stretching is another component necessary in breaking the tension cycle. Major areas where we store tension include the back, face, neck, shoulders and chest. Learning and practicing stretch techniques in concert with deep breathing will help you release muscle tightness and tension.

Visualization

Another effective mind-body technique is mental imagery or visualization. Basically, it involves the power of your imagination using sights, sounds, feelings and smell to create a desired state in your mind. According to several scientists, the mind doesn’t differentiate between fears, fantasies and physical reality as we define it. Therefore, as you continuously visualize a positive healing image, you may significantly contribute to your own well-being. Dr. Carl Simonton and Stephanie Matthews-Simonton, authors of *Getting Well Again*, encourage their cancer patients to visualize their cancer as broken up hamburger meat and their white

blood cells as dogs devouring the hamburger. The patients who practiced this in conjunction with their medical treatment lived twice as long as patients who only received conventional treatment.

Meditation

A stress releaser called meditation is described as restful alertness; integration of mind, body and spirit; focused silence; and a form of prayer. Deepak Chopra, M.D., author of *Quantum Healing and Perfect Health*, emphasizes that it is not possible to clear the mind of negative beliefs or thoughts at one’s intellectual

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level. An angry mind can’t conquer its own anger, fear can’t squelch its own fear, and so on.

However, meditation is a powerful technique that guides you beyond the negative thoughts and agitations of the busy mind. It allows you to become “unstuck” from your fear and other disturbing emotions.

From a medical point of view, the effectiveness of meditation was studied by Herbert Benson, M.D., author of several wellness-oriented books. One of the studies involved the practice of Transcendental Meditation in patients with hypertension. These patients sat quietly for 20 minutes twice a day, before breakfast and dinner and repeated a special word, or mantra, silently to themselves, allowing their thoughts to come and go. Dr. Benson observed a significant drop in their blood pressure from borderline high to normal range.

Other studies have shown that practicing meditation on a regular basis helps relieve general fatigue, and the stress that can lead to heart attacks, strokes and hardening of the arteries.

Attitude Adjustment

Attitude adjustment means the release of the negative and the embracement of the positive. It is very important to em-

phasize that it is normal and natural to feel fear, anger and stress in life. When we remain in this frame of mind, we experience lack of control, hopelessness and helplessness. The question is how do we shift back into positive feelings, hope and being in charge again?

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The first step is the awareness that you are stuck in a pattern of worry, fear and tension – "How do I feel and why?" It is essential to be honest about what you are feeling because feelings, including the negative ones, are just feelings – they are not right or wrong or good or bad.

Next, these emotions need to be validated and expressed in healthy responsible ways.

Talking or writing them out may help you release the unwanted emotions. Letting go allows more space for uplifting, loving feelings. Affirming powerful positive statements of a desired state will fill up that space inside of you. Say, sing and write your affirmations regularly until they become a part of you. For example, if you believe you heal slowly, then your affirmation would be "I heal rapidly". When we emphasize our good, we get more of it. Use your words to your best advantage. It's your choice.

Ongoing research will continue to unravel the dynamics of the mind-body connection. In the meantime, learning and practicing these methods will help you actively participate in your own healing process.

Source:

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