

The Mind-Body Connection

How your mind and body works intimately together to help you function in the most optimal way.



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The Mind Body Connection

For centuries people have contemplated the connection between your thoughts, emotions, and mindset and your health. Philosophers and early scientists assumed that there was a connection.

After all, the brain is the control center for all activity in your body. It simply made sense to them that emotions, which are also controlled in the brain, would impact your health and wellbeing.

As science progressed, doctors and researchers moved away from this concept. They focused more on the inner workings of the body's tissues, organs, cells and systems. The mind was all but forgotten.

Today, there's an increasing awareness of how your mind and body work intimately together to help you function in the most optimal way. Doctors have realized that by helping their patients change their thoughts, they can in fact also change their health.

What Is The Mind Body Connection?

The mind body connection is the impact of your mindset, thoughts, and reactions to your environment and the effect it has on your health.

For example, if you are stuck in traffic and late for an appointment, you may begin to feel rushed, irritated, and angry. Later in the day you may find that you're completely exhausted. If this type of experience occurs on a chronic basis your immune system will suffer, you may gain weight, sleep poorly, and feel like you're on a roller coaster of emotions.

Another example, a positive example, of the mind body connection are therapy animals. Petting a dog releases oxytocin into the bloodstream. This is a hormone that makes you feel calm and relaxed. When oxytocin is coursing through your body you're better able to manage both physical and emotional stress. Patients in the hospital who participate in pet therapy experience faster recovery times. Simply petting a dog can boost your mood and improve your health.

Acceptance into Western Medicine

Today most doctors are aware of the effects that stress has on health. They know that stress is the leading cause of disease and death. Doctors, nurses, and medical researchers also know that lifestyle changes can make a huge difference in the health of their patients and have begun recommending various approaches to their patients.

The simple fact that many hospitals and long term care facilities have pet therapy programs goes to show how far medicine has come in the past few decades.

There's a term for the mind body connection in practice – it's called Mind Body Medicine and according to the National Institute of Health, "it focuses on treatments that may promote health, including relaxation, hypnosis, visual imagery, meditation, yoga, and biofeedback."
(Source: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/winter08/articles/winter08pg4.html>)

In an upcoming section we'll take a look at some of those treatments in detail. First, we explore how emotions affect your health and the role stress plays in your life.

How Can Your Emotions Affect Your Health?

Nothing in your body can function without the interaction of other systems. Your heart cannot beat by itself. Your lungs do not breathe by themselves. Your body is a complex system of signals, partnerships, and production.

One hormone in your body can trigger the release of other hormones, incite some organs to stop receiving signals and others to begin receiving signals. It makes excellent sense to realize that emotions can and do have an impact on your body. The impact that emotions have can be positive or negative depending on the emotion and what it triggers.

Take fear for example. Fear is a very natural emotion and in some instances it can save your life. If you notice that the roads are slippery, for example, then the fear of crashing your car causes you to drive differently. If you're being stalked by a mountain lion, then the fear you experience causes a release of adrenaline that focuses your body's systems on muscle energy so you can fight or run.

It's called the "Fight or Flight" response and it can play an important role in human survival.

This fight or flight type stress can occur whether you're actually in danger or not. One great example of this is public speaking. If you're afraid to talk in public you'll experience sweaty palms, a rapid heart rate, an increase in respiration and much more. Your body will react as if you're running from that mountain lion when in fact your life is not in danger.

Unfortunately, your body doesn't know the difference between real stress and perceived stress. This is why it's up to you to learn to control your emotions. When a body is exposed to this type of stress on a regular basis, terrible things happen to your health.

Let's imagine you are being chased by a mountain lion. You need to funnel all of your energy to your muscles, right? Whether you decide to run or to stick around and fight that cat your muscles need to be the focus. Your body will essentially stop the digestion process. It'll cease or slow down other processes as well so that the majority of your energy will be directed to your

muscles. Your heart will beat faster to get nutrients to your muscles and your breathing will increase to provide oxygen.

Over time this change can add up. Chronic stress causes your body to store fuel as fat, generally as abdominal fat which is the most dangerous type. It increases blood pressure, causes damage to arteries and your heart. It leads to obesity and heart disease just to name a few. Fortunately, the converse is true as well. If you're able to control your emotions and stay positive during times of stress, you can improve your health, lengthen your life, and even strengthen your immune system.

We know that emotions impact your body. If you hug someone that you like, then a release of feel good hormones begin coursing through your body. These hormones have a very different effect on your health than stress hormones.

The Positive Emotions

Scientists have identified a handful of positive emotions and mindsets that contribute to a healthier and happier life. These emotions and mindsets include:

Balance – While stress is part of life, it doesn't have to consume you. You can learn to control your stress through a variety of tactics. For example, some people practice deep breathing in moments of stress.

Others utilize biofeedback when they're feeling out of control of their emotions. Meditation, massage, and getting out in nature are other ways to find balance in your life – to find a happy medium between the hustle and bustle of the world and the inner peace necessary to stay positive.

Gratitude – Gratitude is a profound and powerful emotion. We often believe that joy makes us feel grateful and that you need to have a positive attitude to experience this emotion. However, studies have shown that the opposite is true. Gratitude actually makes people feel more joyful and positive.

In a study, people were divided into two groups. One group created a daily list of problems or hassles. The other created a gratitude list. Those who expressed their gratitude on a daily basis reported feeling happier. They also exercised more, felt better, experienced fewer physical complaints, and slept better than the people in the negative group.

Forgiveness – Forgiveness seems like such an abstract emotion. We don't think much about it until someone hurts us. Yet studies have shown that the simple act of forgiveness provides more benefit than you might imagine.

Stanford conducted what they called the Forgiveness Project. They trained 260 people how to forgive. They then tracked these people and discovered that in addition to feeling happier, 27%

experienced fewer physical complaints like pain and stomach upset. Forgiveness has also been shown to improve immune function, lower blood pressure and lead to better heart health.

Resiliency and an Optimistic Outlook – Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” to recover from life’s upsets, both major and minor, and to regain a positive outlook. Some people are naturally more resilient than others. However, it’s also a mindset that can be learned and improved. A good support system and positive self-esteem are both important elements of resiliency. The ability to be optimistic and to stay that way during times of struggle is essential.

Optimism has been shown in studies to boost your immune system and prevent disease. In one study subjects were evaluated based on their emotions and then exposed to a virus. The people who were more positive didn’t get the virus and those who scored low were three times more likely to get the virus and become ill.

Facts About Stress and Your Health

There are three different types of stress and each type has a negative impact on your health. The first and most common type is what the National Institute of Mental Health defines as Routine Stress or “stress related to the pressures of work, family and other daily responsibilities.” (Source: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml>)

There is also stress that is brought on by change like a divorce, move, or a new job. It’s important to point out that not all stress needs to be caused by a negative event. Having a new baby, getting married or a promotion at work can all cause stress even though they’re induced by a positive event.

The third type is called traumatic stress and is caused by a traumatic event like a natural disaster or an act of violence. As you might suspect, this type of event can cause both acute stress as well as post-traumatic stress, which can have lifelong implications and effects on both mindset and wellbeing.

According to statisticsbrain.com 77 % of people who regularly experience physical symptoms caused by stress. They complain of fatigue, headaches, stomach distress, muscle tension and a change in sex drive just to name a few.

Stress, or rather the physical ramifications of stress, has been linked to many deadly diseases including:

- Alzheimer’s
- Asthma
- Diabetes
- Obesity
- Heart Disease
- Depression and Anxiety

- Irritable Bowel Diseases
- Headaches

The good news is that while stress is a part of life, you can control your mind and how you respond to stress. You can use the mind body connection to your benefit and improve your health, wellbeing, and vitality.

Mind Body Medicine Approaches to Wellness

There are many approaches to finding mental and emotional balance, reducing stress, and changing your reaction to stress. Let's take a look at a few of the approaches to help you decide which treatments may be right for you.

Biofeedback –Biofeedback is an approach that teaches you how to control some of the bodily functions as they respond to stress. It's often recommended for people who have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, are dealing with post-traumatic stress, or who have a highly stressful life and are in poor health.

With biofeedback you learn to recognize and control elements like your pulse and heart rate, your breathing, your blood pressure and other physical stress related symptoms. You can purchase biofeedback devices to help you teach yourself or you can sign up for a program at many physician's offices and hospitals. Some insurances cover biofeedback treatment.

Relaxation/Deep Breathing Exercises – There are many different deep breathing or relaxation exercises. Depending on the exercise you choose, they can be performed during times of stress or as part of a daily routine. For example, you might conduct a progressive relaxation exercise at night before you go to bed. Or you might practice deep breathing when dealing with a difficult customer.

Guided Imagery – This approach has been utilized by everyone from Olympic athletes to survivors of trauma. It's about using your mind to create positive emotions. Athletes use guided imagery to envision themselves performing their sport successfully. They'll hear the audience, smell the paint on the new arena floor, feel their legs move and see themselves crossing the finish line.

You embrace your senses to create a visualization that suits your needs. If you want to relax you might close your eyes and envision a quiet beach with the waves lapping on the shore and the scent of salt water in the air. Guided imagery can be used by anyone to create a state of calm and wellbeing.

Meditation – Meditation is the practice of quieting your mind. It can be performed for minutes a day or hours a day. There are different approaches to meditation depending on your goals and purpose for meditating. For example, there's a practice called "walking meditation," where

the experience of walking is your focus. You can also meditate by paying attention to your breath or by using imagery or guided meditations.

Meditation has been shown to lower stress, improve health and happiness, and to reduce the risk of disease. Studies are beginning to show that people who meditate not only live longer but live a better quality of life than those who don't.

Bottom Line –You're Have More Control than You Imagine

While we often feel a victim of life and circumstance, you have control over how you react to the challenges that come your way. Whether you're dealing with an angry customer or a major life event, how you handle stress impacts your health and wellbeing.

Learning to be grateful, to forgive, to relax, and to embrace a positive outlook isn't just about improving your mental wellness but also your physical wellness too.

To your health and happiness,

Jennifer Johnson

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