

Connecting Your Mind and Body for Better Health

Your body responds to the way you think, feel and act: emotional stress can weaken your body's immune system, making you more likely to get colds and infections, and an event such as the death of a loved one might trigger high blood pressure or a stomach ulcer. Also, when you are feeling stressed, anxious or upset, you may not exercise, eat nutritious foods or take medicine that your doctor prescribes. Some people abuse alcohol, tobacco or other drugs to try to make themselves feel better.

The connection between mind and body may seem obvious. And, in fact, for thousands of years, healers in many societies relied upon the natural capacity of the body to heal itself through its interaction with the patient's state of mind.

However, by the 16th and 17th centuries, the Western world separated the mind and physical body, seeing the first as the concern of organized religion, and the body as the concern of physicians. Curing an illness became a matter of science and took precedence over, not a place beside, healing of the soul.

Today science has a new understanding of the connection between mind and body, and the relationship with heredity and environment. Moreover, evidence continues to confirm there is a spiritual dimension to this connection that benefits a person's health.

Duke University was one of the first to show an association between spiritual activities and longevity (Helm, Hays, Flint, Koenig & Blazer, 2000). Scientists studied the effects of spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer on survival for a group of almost 4,000 adults, ages 64 to 101. The study -- controlled for demographics, health status, depression and related factors -- discovered that seniors with little or no spiritual activity were 63 percent more likely to die during a period of six years.

Mind-body medicine focuses on the powerful ways that emotional, mental, social, spiritual and behavioral factors directly affect physical health. Evidence shows that this approach positively affects psychological function and quality of life, and may be particularly helpful for patients with chronic illness and in need of palliative care.

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In another Duke University study, patients who have or had blocked coronary arteries received a combination of traditional medical treatment with spiritual-related therapies, including guided imagery, breath control, touch therapy and offsite prayer (Krucoff et al., 2003). These patients had 30 percent fewer medical complications overall; and those who were treated with offsite prayers from eight prayer groups around the world had 50 percent fewer minor complications and 100 percent fewer major complications.

The mind-body approach respects and enhances each person's capacity for self-knowledge and self-care. Typically, it promotes health through intervention strategies such as relaxation, visual imagery, meditation, yoga, biofeedback, tai chi, group support, spirituality, and prayer. These strategies are used to manage chronic pain, control the symptoms of chronic diseases, and prevent stress-related health problems. The physical and emotional risks of using these interventions are minimal, and most of them can be taught easily.

Additional information:

<http://www.rochester.edu/pr/Review/V59N3/feature2.html>

Type into browser:

<http://familydoctor.org/782.xml>

<http://www.thewellnesscommunity.org>

<http://journals.apa.org/prevention/volume3/pre0030001a.html>