

The mind-body connection

While your mother undergoes a major operation, you can feel the knot in your stomach. When your partner forgets (for the tenth time!) to take out the garbage, your blood boils. You have to make the speech at your best friend's wedding and, not only does your heart pound, but you also get a lump in your throat. These catch phrases express a natural, almost intuitive need to link the mind, or emotions, with the effect that they have on the body.

For thousands of years, cultures have not only understood the link between mental and physical health, they've honoured and cultivated this relationship. Practices such as yoga, tai chi and meditation are all founded on the notion that the health of the mind is fundamentally connected with the health of the body. Though modern medicine has taken a little longer to acknowledge this relationship, more and more scientific studies are drawing the same conclusion as their ancient counterparts: mental health can have a significant impact on physical health.

This recognition signifies a turning point in the way that both the medical world and the population at large approach and cope with mental and physical illness. Rather than dealing with the mind and body as two separate and distinct worlds, more and more people, including doctors, realize that these two spheres depend on each other.

And as this interest in the mind-body correlation grows, so too does the field of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI)—or the brand of science, which explores the link between the mind and the immune system.

While science of the past believed the immune system operated independently from brain function, more and more studies are uncovering a built-in connection. Chemicals released in the brain in reaction to elevated stress levels, for instance, can influence the immune cells' response. Though PNI was met with scepticism when first introduced, a number of in-depth programs and studies offered by reputable universities have helped it gain acceptance within mainstream medicine including Harvard's Mind Body Medical Institute. Its website, <http://www.mbmi.org/> offers a detailed explanation of this science and plenty of tips on maintaining mind-body balance.

The Physical Impact of Mental Strain and Illness

Signs of Depression

Emotional Signs

- Feelings of despair or deep sadness
- Lack of emotion or interest in once enjoyable activities
- Crying more easily than usual
- Overwhelmed by negative thoughts
- Thinking or talking about suicide or death
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness

Physical Signs

- Noticeable change in appetite or weight
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Trouble falling asleep or sleeping too much

When your mental or emotional well-being is compromised, you're likely to feel its negative effects on your body. This may create a complex vicious cycle that can strain you mentally and physically. Because depression is a very prevalent condition, much of the research on the mind-body connection centres on the physical influence depression has on the body and the immune system.

Several studies suggest that if you suffer from depression, it can increase your risk for physical conditions. However, because the physical symptoms of depression—including ulcers, fatigue and back pain—are more obvious and easier to read, they often camouflage the underlying source of the physical ailment: the depression itself. The result is that the symptoms are treated while the true cause is ignored.

People who suffer from conditions, such as depression or anxiety, are more likely to develop:

- hypertension;
- type 2 adult onset diabetes;
- certain types of cancer;
- heart disease; or
- more frequent asthma attacks (if asthmatic).

Although the exact cause for these links is not always clear, their meaning is: neglecting the importance of mental well-being can threaten your physical health and undermine the balance between the two.

Making the Connection: Tactics for a Healthy Mind and Body

While it's impossible to have total control over your body and mind, there are several techniques and tactics that can help you nourish this vital relationship, maintain its delicate balance, and live at your mental and physical best.

Physical Activity

Whether you're feeling anxious about the projects piling up at work or down in the dumps after a relationship has ended, exercise is one of the most effective ways to improve your mood, enhance your immune system and of course, keep your body in optimal condition.

Countless studies show that physical activity releases natural endorphins in the brain, not only increasing your physical energy but also boosting your spirits, concentration and memory. Exercise allows you to work off excess stress—which reduces strain on the heart and the immune system—and helps you cope better with life's daily challenges. It also encourages you to keep the lines of mind-body communication open, giving you the chance to not only 'clear your mind,' but also to 'listen' to your body, its strengths, limitations and needs. Harvard's Mind Body Medical Institute recommends a varied exercise plan that incorporates a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity (which can be broken down into three 10-minute blocks) almost every day.

Physical activity doesn't have to be gruelling. Gardening, going for a stroll around the block and housework can all be put towards your daily tally. The added benefits of participating in team and social sporting activities are twofold: they help you stay active and connected with your community—an important ingredient in keeping the mind and the body balanced.

Food Supporters*

- Vegetables
- Oil rich fish
- Fruit
- Whole grains
- Water
- Fibre
- Nuts and seeds
- Protein

Food 'Stressors'*

- Alcohol
- Additives
- Caffeine
- Saturated Fats
- Sugar

- Chocolate

* From the Food and Mood Project, MIND, 2000

Eat Supportive Foods

Most people know that a well-balanced diet, plenty of water and sufficient rest are important ingredients for good physical health. Fewer realize, however, the significant impact these elements can also have on mental health.

A recent group study and survey conducted by British mental health group MIND found that 88 per cent of participants who were asked to eat a diet that avoided 'food stressors' (such as sugar and caffeine) and was rich in 'food supporters,' (including water, fruits and vegetables) believed that the new eating regime had greatly improved their mental health.

Avoid Alcohol

While alcohol, in small amounts, has been shown to have some physical benefits to the heart, using it as a tool to mask physical and/or emotional pain is a dangerous, slippery slope.

In the short term, people who drink heavily may suffer more minor effects including fatigue, headaches and poor concentration.

Over longer periods of time, though, the physical complications can be much more serious: the risk of liver damage, high blood pressure, certain cancers and stroke all significantly increase in heavy drinkers.

The effects of alcohol overuse on the mind are equally as damaging. Though many people drink to 'lift their spirits,' or 'feel happy,' alcohol actually works as a depressant. So while you may 'drink to forget' your problems and anxieties, the sober reality is that you're left feeling more down or more anxious the next day. Limit alcohol consumption and, if you're being treated for depression, leave it out entirely.

Stock Up on Sleep

Sleep can also play a significant role in the mind-body balance. Try to get a minimum of seven hours of sleep every night. If this isn't possible, recharge your body and your mind with a brief afternoon nap (20 minutes is considered ideal). Getting a good night's sleep regularly helps keep moodiness at bay, mental focus in check, and allows the body (and its immune system) to rejuvenate.

Sometimes, You Just Have to Laugh

Building a healthy lifestyle means taking every opportunity to laugh off your stress. Laughter is some of the best and most enjoyable medicine around for maintaining the health of the mind and the body.

When you laugh, it triggers a series of positive physiological responses: your heart rate goes up, blood circulation to the brain and body improves and muscles become more relaxed. It also signals your brain to release more endorphins—chemicals which boost your mood and act as natural painkillers—into your body, helping you feel more positive and calm.

Build a Support System

Taking a proactive approach to mind-body health is one of the best ways to ensure you maintain balance. Building and communicating regularly with a trusted network of people—whether a close family member, friend, doctor, counsellor, support group or all of the above—helps you maintain an essential and emotionally 'nutritious' social circle.

This group can act as a sounding board during troubled times, provide an objective perspective, and encourage you to remain socially connected—an integral factor of good mental and physical health.

Remember, if you suspect you or a loved one is suffering from a mental illness, it's vital to seek out the advice of a medical doctor and/or counsellor as soon as possible.

Explore Spiritual Balance

Whether it's attending a traditional place of worship or getting involved at your local food bank; people who connect with a 'greater' purpose or a higher meaning in their lives report better physical and mental health

than their less spiritual counterparts. You don't have to be religious to explore your spirituality: it's more of a personal journey to clarify your own thoughts, opinions and beliefs and understand how they connect to the world around you.

Tapping into your spiritual side can be as simple as reading poetry, attending a religious service or going for a hike in the woods. Mind-body activities like meditation and yoga are excellent starting points for this journey as they allow you to slow down, breathe and 'take the world in.'

Meditation

Though Eastern cultures have used meditation as a tool to clear the mind and rid the body of stress since ancient times, modern medicine is just beginning to understand its positive effects on these two spheres. While there are a variety of relaxation and meditation techniques, the most common involves the repetition of a single word or thought, such as "peace" or "balance."

In a quiet space, and in a comfortable position, the meditator closes his or her eyes and focuses on the word, saying it over and over again in his or her mind. When other thoughts float in, they're passively pushed aside as the meditator continues repeating the word for 10 to 30 minutes. By focusing on a single idea the mind achieves calm and rids itself of unimportant details.

Various studies have revealed that this simple action performed daily can lower blood cortisol (the chemical released as a response to stress) and blood pressure levels, reduce chronic pain and ease anxiety. Other mind-body focused activities like yoga and tai chi—which concentrate on synchronizing breathing exercises with movement—as well as imagery have also produced similar health benefits.

Achieving Mind-Body Balance

Most people are not surprised to discover that science is finally uncovering concrete evidence that suggests mental health impacts physical well-being and vice versa. And yet many continue to ignore the signals the body and mind send when they're over-stressed, over-tired or overwhelmed.

Instead of recognizing these as signs to slow down and take a mental break, they instead shut out the nagging voice of the knot in their shoulder and appease that overbearing tension headache with a couple of aspirin. Neglecting these signs as they arise, however, could come at a high cost further down the line: your mental and physical well-being.

Take the time to really listen to your body and mind. Learn to recognize their distinct voices and work to find long-term solutions rather than quick band-aid fixes that don't really address or appreciate the delicate balance between mental health and physical health. Though it may be impossible to be the 'master' of your body and mind, with education, support and a concerted effort, you may actually learn to become best friends.