

Stress: The Mind-Body Connection

By Helen Edler, M.A., M.F.T. Intern

There is no doubt that every day life can be stressful. Little irritations such as - catching every red light on your way home from work, the kids bickering, or not being able to find your cell phone when you hear it ringing, can all add up. For many of us, stress is at an all-time high level. Life's little annoyances combined with larger concerns such as job security, marital conflicts, and major life transitions (even good changes can be stressful) can take a toll on the quality of our life as well as our health.

The idea that thoughts and feelings can affect our health is hardly new. For centuries, healers in all cultures have believed that our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors have an impact on our health. It was not until the 1970's that research confirmed what our grandmothers knew, there is a link between the mind and the body.

Our bodies respond to the way we think, feel and act. We feel our emotions in our bodies when we "burn" with anger, get "choked up" with sadness, or "tremble with fear". There is a growing body of evidence that illustrates the important link between our physical and mental health. Good mental health is essential to our physical health, as well as to our ability to lead healthy, balanced, and productive lives.

Most of us have felt stressed out from time to time. When this feeling persists for a period of time, stress becomes chronic and can take a toll on our quality of life and our bodies. Stress can make you feel run down, nervous, angry, irritable, or sad. It can cause headaches, nausea, dizziness or feelings of despair, and it can affect your eating patterns.

Stress has been linked to the six leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide. Chronic stress can cause premature aging and can double a person's risk of having a heart attack. People who have depression are more likely than others to develop diabetes. We now know that chronic stress can disrupt the digestive system, worsen the symptoms of menopause, interfere with fertility, and suppress the immune system.

The good news is that caring for your mind, as well as your body, will keep you healthier, happier and more productive. Most mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, are as treatable as physical illness. Finding healthy ways to manage life's challenges can lower the risk of mental health and other health problems, as well as help you feel better overall.

Here are some ways to mind your health. Relax your mind by listening to music, reading a book or doing a quiet activity. Consider the healthy benefits of yoga, tai chi, or deep breathing. Remember that exercise relieves tense muscles, improves mood and sleep, and increases your energy. Next time you feel stressed or depressed try taking a brisk walk or hike. Be sure to get enough sleep to help you recover from the stresses of the day.

Remember you don't have to cope with life's challenges on your own. Talking to a trusted friend, family member, or counselor can make you feel better. Spending time with positive, loving people can improve your mood too. Volunteer work can help you build social networks, improve self-esteem, and provide a sense of purpose.

Research has shown that getting involved in spiritual activities is associated with better health outcomes, such as greater coping abilities, less anxiety, and a lower risk of depression. Spirituality may provide a sense of hope, meaning and purpose in life, and may evoke positive emotions that can lead to better health.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by persistent signs of stress, it may be time to get professional help. Caring for your mind as well as your body can keep you healthier, happier and more productive in all aspects of your life. May is the time to mind your health.

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