

The Mind Body Connection

The relationship between the mind and body is such that how a patient may think or feel can affect their physical health in a positive or negative way. For example, a patient who is anxious, worried, or has stress may exhibit physical symptoms such as pain, headaches, muscle tension, palpitations, irritability, blurred vision, or have an existing physical condition worsen. Alternatively, if a patient is happy and relaxed, this may prevent tension, anxiety, headaches, or other physical symptoms.

Given this relationship, physical conditions like chronic pain, stroke, diabetes, coronary artery disease, or heart attacks can also affect mental health, and contribute to depression or anxiety. The resultant anxiety and/or depression can, in turn, worsen any existing medical conditions or how the patient may cope with them.

How It Works

Our body and mind communicate in very complex ways. Ultimately, our mind and body release various chemical substances (e.g., hormones, neurotransmitters) that can have different effects on the body. Some of these substances, such as adrenalin (epinephrine) and cortisol, can be helpful to the body in the short term but harmful if continually produced.

- Adrenalin is a hormone that increases your patient's heart rate, raises their blood pressure, dilates air passages, and can generally make them feel more energetic or more powerful.
- Cortisol is a hormone that helps to mobilize glucose, decrease pain response, and can suppress gamma globulins and immune cells (decreases immunity).

Both of these, in the right situation, can be helpful when your patient is presented with a dangerous situation that leads to the "fight-or-flight" stress response. Therefore, in that case, these substances are important for the short term or immediate needs of the body.

However, these substances can also be detrimental to the body or mind, as in situations where there is repeated or chronic production. Conditions that can contribute to the prolonged and unwanted production of adrenalin and cortisol include constant stress and anxiety.

Additionally, other chemicals and substances, such as endorphins and gamma globulins, can improve your patient's health and well being.

- Endorphins act as natural opiates or pain killers when your patient may be hurt. Endorphins are also released when they are feeling good or when doing things like exercising, laughing, listening to music, or meditating.
- Gamma globulins are another group of chemical substances important for your patient's immunity. Gamma globulins can be affected by the patient's emotions or feelings.

Please note, however, that these chemicals can be suppressed when a patient is stressed or depressed, or may increase when they are happy, relaxed, or in a positive frame of mind.

How to help improve the mind-body connection

Many things can be done to improve your patient's overall health and well being, including practicing or teaching mind-body therapies (sometimes referred to as mind-body medicine or mind-body techniques). Mind-body therapies are techniques designed to enhance the mind's positive impact on one's body and mental health. Some of these techniques require minimal training or supervision. These include:

- Listening to music
- Laughing
- Spending time with friends
- Exercising
- Spending time with a pets
- Spending time with friends and family
- Being affectionate

Conversely, other mind-body therapies or techniques require more assistance, training, or ongoing support. These include:

- Meditation
- Mindfulness
- Breath work and relaxation
- Mindful movement (e.g., Yoga, T'ai Chi, Pilates)
- Hypnosis
- Biofeedback
- Body scanning
- Guided imagery

Additionally, while psychotherapy is not usually placed in the category of mind-body therapies, it may be considered a mind-body therapy.

Which therapy or technique to choose?

When considering which mind-body therapy or therapies to choose, it is important to look at a patient's goals, preferences, and the feasibility of the technique. Health care professionals should help determine the best suited techniques and therapies for each individual by reviewing their mental and physical health, along with the time, cost, and amount of support needed for each technique or therapy.

For example, breath work usually requires less support than guided imagery or cognitive behavioral therapies, which require an ongoing therapist. Mind-body therapies like swimming or dancing may not be realistic therapies for someone with severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or who is wheelchair-bound.

You should also consider the out of pocket costs for your patients. If the individual is insured, will the chosen therapy be covered by the insurance plan, or will they need to pay the entire cost out of pocket?

Sleep and its relationship to mind and body health

Another important thing to remember is that individuals need the proper amount of sleep for their bodies to work at maximum capacity.

Appropriate sleep time is needed for recuperation, the regeneration of chemicals, cellular growth, rebuilding, learning, and memory enhancement, with maximum memory enhancement occurring in the deepest stages of sleep. All of these are important to mental health and well-being. In this way, the brain is like a rechargeable battery, in that a certain amount of charging time is needed in order for the battery to work at its optimum potential.

What you should remember

The mind and body work together in harmony. You can help improve your patient's overall well being by understanding this connection. Reducing stress and anxiety, along with positive thinking and using the various treatments or techniques described above, may promote a healthier body and mind.

Additionally, simple modifications or changes in an individual's actions can make a big difference, including learning to relax, listening to music, exercising and laughing. After all, there is a reason why for centuries laughter has been called one of the best medicines. Laughter is one of the best ways to decrease stress and anxiety (and is essentially free). So don't be afraid to laugh, tell jokes, or share a funny moment.