Chronic Illness and the Mind-Body Connection

From managing stress to reducing the physical symptoms of chronic disease, the mind and body are more closely interconnected than many may think.

By Trudie Mitschang

PEOPLE DIAGNOSED with a chronic illness often suffer in silence, especially when their condition is “invisible,” as is the case for many with primary immune deficiencies. The resulting feelings of isolation and loneliness for patients can take both a mental and physical toll, leading to further health complications.

“The changes of life and the deficits that come from those illnesses very frequently can wear down somebody’s coping abilities and increase their risk for becoming depressed as well,” says Sam Sears, MD, director of physician services for OSF Behavioral Health. According to Dr. Sears, chronic disease often makes people confront their mortality and chips away at the denial defense mechanism that allows most of us not to think about death on a regular basis, which can be extremely disturbing, leading to sleeping difficulty and other issues that worsen overall health and wellness. All the more reason, he asserts, to better understand the mind-body connection; mental health issues can lead to stress, which in turn can aggravate physical symptoms.

The good news is a growing body of research highlights the positive impact mind-body techniques
can have on physical health, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, meditation, breath work and physical activity. In some cases, a combination of approaches helps provide significant improvement in a person’s outlook and coping skills when battling chronic disease.\(^1\)

**Understanding Mind-Body Medicine**

Mind-body medicine is an increasingly popular approach to healthcare that includes a wide range of behavioral and lifestyle interventions, typically utilized in combination with traditional medical interventions. The patient in mind-body medicine is uniquely defined by his or her whole “body, mind and spirit,” and interventions are directed at each of these aspects of the individual. The assumption is that many physical conditions are caused as much by lifestyle, dietary habits, activity level and life stress as they are by traditional causes of disease such as infection, virus, bacteria and physical trauma.

The mind-body medicine approach also creates a partnership among specialists in the medical and mental specialties, including physicians, nurse practitioners and psychologists, as well as mind-body specialists such as biofeedback practitioners, chiropractors, nutritionists, spiritual counselors and yoga teachers. The result is an integrated team of caregivers who address mind, body and spirit as part of the healthcare regimen.

Another unique aspect of mind-body medicine is that the patient plays an active role in developing and maintaining the treatment plan. And mind-body medicine emphasizes patient education and patient self-management as integral parts of clinical practice.\(^2\)

Of course, awareness of the mind-body connection is hardly a new concept. Until approximately 300 years ago, nearly every system of medicine throughout the world treated the mind and body as a whole. It was during the 17th century that the Western world started to see the mind and body as two distinct entities. In this view, the body was considered more of a machine, complete with replaceable, independent parts that were completely disconnected from the mind. While this Western viewpoint led to medical advances in surgery, trauma care, pharmaceuticals and other areas of allopathic medicine, it also greatly reduced scientific inquiry into the emotional and spiritual life of human beings and tended to downplay our innate ability to heal.

In the 20th century, this view gradually started to change. Researchers developed renewed interest in the mind-body connection, and subsequent studies began to demonstrate the complex links between the body and mind. Integrative psychiatrist James Lake, MD, of Stanford University, writes that “extensive research has confirmed the medical and mental benefits of meditation, mindfulness training, yoga and other mind-body practices.” And, James Gordon, MD, founder of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine agrees: “The brain and peripheral nervous system, the endocrine and immune systems and, indeed, all the organs of our body and all the emotional responses we have share a common chemical language and are constantly communicating with one another.”\(^3\)

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**The Role of the Mind in Chronic Illness Management**

It is a misperception that references to the mind-body connection imply an illness or symptom is psychosomatic or “all in a person’s head.” This is an especially harmful presumption when it comes to invisible illnesses. That’s why when referring to mind and body therapies, it’s important to note the word “mind” is not synonymous with the word “brain.” In fact, when referring to mind-body connections, the term “mind” includes various mental states such as thoughts, emotions, beliefs, attitudes and images. The brain itself is the hardware that allows us to experience these mental states.

Mental states can be fully conscious or unconscious. For example, we can have emotional reactions to situations without being aware of why we are reacting. Each mental state has a physiology associated with it — a positive or negative effect felt in the physical body. For example, the mental state of anxiety causes us to produce stress hormones. When we are under stress, our bodies release two hormones:
adrenaline and cortisol. These stress hormones are designed to trigger an adrenaline rush to help us get out of dangerous situations quickly. However, we often experience stress in situations in which no actual physical danger exists, and over time, the release of these hormones can have negative long-term effects on the body, including:

- Weakened immune response
- Digestive problems
- Diminished ability to heal

In addition to stress, our actual thought patterns and what we believe can also affect our health, especially when living with a chronic illness. Negative thinking patterns — assuming the worst, jumping to conclusions and self-criticism — can make it more difficult to cope with ongoing health problems. For instance, a patient diagnosed with prediabetes may think, “Everyone in my family has diabetes, so there’s nothing I can do to prevent it,” despite being advised by his or her healthcare provider that the condition is reversible with proper diet and exercise. For that reason, many mind-body therapies focus on helping us become more conscious of our mental states and using this increased awareness to guide our minds in a less destructive direction. For example, patients who deal with negative thought patterns can benefit greatly from cognitive behavioral therapy, and those who struggle with managing stress may find relief from a combination of yoga, meditation and breathwork.

**Examining the Research**

From pain relief and diabetes treatment to decreased symptoms of depression, numerous studies demonstrate an effective link between mind-body practices and improved health outcomes.

Jon Kabat-Zinn’s 1987 research on mindfulness meditation for 90 patients with chronic pain showed dramatically decreased levels of pain, as well as lessened anxiety and depression following a 10-week course in mindfulness meditation. Statistically significant reductions were observed in measures of present-moment pain, negative body image, inhibition of activity by pain, symptoms, mood disturbance and psychological symptomatology, including anxiety and depression. Pain-related drug utilization also decreased, and activity levels and feelings of self-esteem increased.

In a 2000 study, diabetic patients attained dramatically improved glycemic levels by employing the HeartMath emotional shifting technique that consists of relaxing and recreating a positive experience. Participants experienced significant reductions in psychological symptomatology and negative emotions, including anxiety, depression, anger and distress following the intervention. Significant increases in peacefulness, social support and vitality were also measured, as well as reductions in somatization, sleeplessness and fatigue. Participants showed reduced sensitivity to daily life stressors after the intervention, and quality of life significantly improved.

And, a study at Johns Hopkins looked at the relationship between mindfulness meditation and reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety and pain. Researcher Madhav Goyal, MD, MPH, and his team found the positive effect of meditation equal to that of antidepressants. “A lot of people have this idea that meditation means sitting down and doing nothing,” says Dr. Goyal. “But that’s not true. Meditation is an active training.
of the mind to increase awareness, and different meditation programs approach this in different ways.\(^8\)

While these and other studies are encouraging, it’s also true that obtaining reliable data when it comes to mind-body medicine and its effect on chronic illness can be challenging. For example, mind-body therapies and practices:

- Often employ more than one approach, making it hard to link outcomes to specific alternative modalities (e.g., yoga practices are often combined with breath work and meditation).
- Are frequently used in conjunction with traditional interventions, making it difficult to define cause-and-effect relationships between the therapy and the results.
- May provide only gradual and subtle improvements compared to a specific intervention like surgery.
- Can offer numerous outcomes that are hard to quantify. For example, studies on meditation have measured everything from objective elements such as decreased heart rate and body temperature to subjective results like overall well-being or anxiety levels.

Choosing a Mind-Body Therapy

For those who want to explore mind-body therapy techniques, it’s a good idea to begin with an honest self-assessment. For instance, it’s helpful to ask:

- What do I want from the therapy? Do I want to better cope with chronic illness? If so, potential dosage changes should be discussed with a healthcare provider before beginning a practice of meditation, clinical hypnosis or guided imagery. And, if using medication, it should be determined whether a mind-body practice will reduce the need for medication.

- What appeals to me? Do I enjoy creative activities or prefer those that involve some degree of physical engagement? Choosing a mind-body therapy that is enjoyable increases chances of sustaining the practice and reaping long-term benefits.

- What’s realistic? How much time can I devote to a mind-body practice? Are there/financial constraints? A commitment to a particular practice may evolve over time, but it’s important to base the initial choice on what’s realistic now.

- What physical, intellectual and/or spiritual characteristics should I consider? Can I comfortably get into a sitting position for certain yoga poses? Am I comfortable with spiritual practices? Preferences should be considered when choosing a mind-body therapy that aligns with physical and mental capabilities.

Learning more about the mind-body connection and incorporating some physical or mental techniques into lifestyle can positively impact an individual’s ability to cope with chronic illness. If selecting a mind-body therapy with a physical component (such as yoga or Tai Chi), approval should be sought from a healthcare provider first. If suffering from depression or anxiety, a primary mental health professional should be consulted before beginning a practice of meditation, clinical hypnosis or guided imagery. And, if using medication, it should be determined whether a mind-body practice will reduce the need for medication. If so, potential dosage changes should be discussed with a doctor.  

Mind-Body National Organizations

- American Psychological Association: This site has a number of articles and resources on stress and its impact on health.
- Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM): A free online government database of scientific studies on the use of mind-body therapies for various conditions.
- Center for Mind-Body Medicine: This center offers a professional training program in mind/body/spirit medicine. It also offers mind-body exercises.
- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health: This federal government site gives an overview of mind-body therapies and addresses some specific applications.

References


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