



Life Balance

January 2014

Positive thinking could make you healthier. Imagine that!

“Think happy thoughts and you’ll be happy.” How many times have you heard that and said “Yeah, right”? Well, in some cases, it’s true. Psychoneuroimmunology is a relatively new branch of medicine that studies the connection between the nervous and immune systems, and the relationship between the mind and a person’s overall health. Findings are linking stress directly to a variety of diseases such as infections, skin disorders, and in some instances, even tumors. Stress, like anything we create for ourselves — a poem, a snowman, or a new way of preparing meatloaf — starts off as a thought or an idea. As

human beings we’re not only capable of creating tangible things; we’re also capable of creating our own moods, feelings, illness and wellness. How does this happen?

Stress can alter healing

We don’t have to go far to find stressors: losses, finances, relationships and work can all cause worry and sorrow. What researchers are finding now, though, is that how we perceive and deal with these stressors, how we “think” about them, can have serious physical consequences. You see, stress registers in the brain and is then transmitted to the body.¹ In response, the brain releases hormones, including stress hormones, to the body’s nervous system. In turn, the immune system dispatches white blood cells, or immune cells — the ones that kill bacteria — when it registers an injury or inflammation. If you’re injured or hurt and also

under stress, stress hormones can have a direct influence not only on how the white blood cells are distributed to the affected area, but also on how they will act (what effect they will have) once they get to where they end up going.²

Let’s say you slip and fall and break your arm. Immediately, the brain’s hormones will help to sense it has to protect your limb from invading infection and will send a troop of immune cells to the affected area. Like rabbits, these cells will divide and proliferate to create an army big enough to combat the invaders. If, however, while in the process of taking care of your arm, you’re thinking you won’t be able to perform in next week’s piano recital, or pick up your baby when she cries, the brain will register this as fear and in response, will also dispatch an army of stress hormones. The stress hormones can do two things:

Simple tips for cultivating a positive mindset

1. Surround yourself with positive people. Interaction with others with a positive disposition, on a regular basis, is contagious and will further encourage you to view life from an optimistic perspective.
2. Make a daily conscientious choice to look at situations from a constructive viewpoint and life challenges as an opportunity for personal growth, not as a burden.
3. Take the time to enjoy a good laugh. As the old adage goes, “laughter is the best medicine.” Sharing a good joke with a friend will help you to alleviate stress and add some fun and levity to your life.⁸

SEAP

Call toll-free

(800) 692-7459

(800) 824-4306 (TDD)

or log on to

www.liveandworkwell.com

access code: Pennsylvania

Continued on [Page 2](#) »

1) they can get in the way of the proliferation of the white cells, thereby suppressing or decreasing the number of combatants that can assist in fighting infection, and 2) they can change the way white cells act, or how they perform. In both cases, the stress hormones can weaken the healing power of the immune (white) cells, and increase the length of time the arm will take to heal.

This has been proven by studying individuals under chronic stress, such as caregivers of Alzheimer's patients. The results have shown that this group of individuals can experience delays in healing of wounds as well as a reduction in the effectiveness of vaccines.³

The thought of having control gives you control

The good news is that just like "making a mountain out of a molehill" can affect the ability of your body to effectively deal with wounds, how much control you have or "think" you have over a situation also plays a role in the suppression of your immune system. As an example, a controlled test was carried out with a group of college students. Each student, seated in a small room, experienced one of four scenarios:

1. Loud intermittent noise
2. No noise
3. Loud intermittent noise but had a lever to turn it off at will
4. Loud intermittent noise but had a lever to turn it off at will, however, the lever was not connected to anything⁴

The remarkable findings from this experiment showed that the immune system of those in scenario 4 reacted much like that of those in scenario 3. In other words, those who had no control — their lever was not connected — still had the illusion of control. That was enough to limit the response of the stressful noise on their immune systems.⁵

Placebo effect

The placebo effect (where those receiving placebos believe they're getting medication) has also been shown to have some effect in the recovery of patients. In one control group, the placebo actually improved a person's health twice as much as those who received nothing. In essence, the thought of the medication having an effect could have been enough to have an actual effect.

Think happy thoughts

So, do thoughts matter? Psychoneuroimmunologists who continue to uncover connections between the brain and the immune and the autonomic nervous systems are cautiously optimistic that they do. They are seeing more and more proof of the relationship between thoughts and the effects of these on the physical body, both positive and negative.⁶ In summary, while there will be events in your life that you cannot control, you can control how you think about them. And this may make a difference in how your body reacts to the event. Just something to think about.



And socialize to stay healthy

There's no better antidote to stress than sharing a few good laughs with old friends. Here again, psychoneuroimmunologists have found a strong correlation between socializing and good health. They've found that cortisol increases in people who find themselves in situations where they're being judged such as at work, in school or just walking in public. Having a good support system that you can rely on to help increase your self-esteem and provide encouragement may protect you from bringing down your immune system and may actually prevent you from catching something as basic as the common cold.⁷

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Visit the BeWell section for more information, tools, articles, self-help programs and resources on health and well-being.

1. Kemeny, Margaret, PHD, CSF Psychiatry Dept. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R9mD-IJZlg> Information used with the permission of Dr. Margaret E. Kemeny, Ph.D.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1713648>
8. Ronald Roberts, LCSW, SAP, Optum Behavioral Solutions