



Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

August 2016

Positive thinking could make you healthier. Imagine that!

“Think happy thoughts and you’ll be happy.” How many times have you heard that and gone “Yeah right?” Well, in some cases, it’s true. Psychoneuroimmunology, 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, is trying to prove it. Findings are linking stress directly to a variety of diseases, including infections, skin disorders, and in some instances, even tumors. Stress like just about anything we create for ourselves, such as a piece of music, a building, or the Internet — starts off as a thought, a reaction. As human

beings we’re not only capable of creating tangible things; were 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 very far to find stressors: Losses, finances, relationships and work can all cause worry and sorrow. However, how we perceive and deal with these stressors, how we “think” about them, can have serious physical consequences. 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. Separately, the immune system dispatches white blood cells, or immune cells — the ones that kill bacteria — when it registers an injury or inflammation. If you are injured and also under stress, stress hormones can directly influence not only how the white blood cells are distributed to the affected area, but also how they will act when they get there.²

Let’s say you slip and fall and break your arm. Immediately, the

brain’s hormones will sense they have to protect your limb from invading infection and will send a troop of immune cells to the affected area. 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. In response, an army of stress hormones will also be dispatched. The stress hormones can do two things:

1. 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. 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.

Simple tips for cultivating a positive mindset

1. Surround yourself with positive people. Interaction with positive people 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 view life challenges as opportunities for personal growth, not as burdens.
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 to alleviate stress and add some fun and levity to your life.³

SEAP

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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 mole hill" 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, but 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 in scenario³. 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 impact 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 on 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 autonomic nervous system are cautiously optimistic that they do. They

are seeing more and more proof of the relationship between thoughts and their effects on the physical body, both positive and negative⁶. 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. To support this idea, 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, school, or just being in public. Having a good support system to help increase your self-esteem and provide encouragement may help to protect your immune system and may actually prevent you from catching something as basic as the common cold.⁷

Resources

www.liveandworkwell.com

Click on BeWell and under the "Living Healthy" section you will find access to articles, links to resources, news, forums and guides on stress, brain health and fitness, aging well, socializing, relaxation and hobbies, and much more .

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