



Healthy Mind, Healthy Body

It sounds obvious, but it's actually quite amazing how much your state of mind can affect your physical health. There have been books written on the mind-emotion-body connection, on thinking positively and beating illness through the power of the mind. Louise Hay, for example, has written an entire series of books, starting with the classic self help book, "You can heal your life" based around her stories about how she believes that using positive thinking and visualisation techniques helped her defeat cancer.

Even though that kind of claim is unproven, some people believe that by working on your state of mind, you can improve your health too. It's easily seen in the case of negative emotions such as stress, that our mind affects our body.

Stress

The most obvious way in which negative thoughts can affect our bodies is through stress. When we suffer from stress, to begin with we're activating a fight or flight mechanism that was designed to give us a surge of extra energy to help us run away from a predator. We don't have many sabre-toothed tigers to run away from in the UK in the 21st century, but our bodies haven't evolved past that, and we still produce the same stress hormones.

When you're stressed, your heart rate also speeds up, increasing the blood flow to your brain and muscles by up to 400 percent. Your digestive system stops working, in order to conserve energy that could be needed elsewhere. At the same time, your muscle tension increases, and you start to breathe more rapidly, to bring more oxygen to your muscles, ready for action.

The negative effects of stress

Being stressed feels unpleasant, so it's quite obvious that if the effects build up over a long period of time, they will have an effect on our physical as well as our mental wellbeing. Some people have suggested that stress can lead to cancer, although there's not much reliable evidence for this.

Some of the documented effects of stress include:

- Fatigue, digestive problems, headaches, and back pain.
- Lowered resistance to infection, by reducing the number of blood cells that help fight infection, leaving you more open to getting colds and other bugs.

- Increased blood pressure and risk of stroke, in some people
- Increased risk of heart attack in some people
- A likelihood of unhealthy lifestyle choices such as smoking, drinking excessively, drug abuse, and overeating.

Slowing down

If you have noticed your stress levels creeping up and you think you need some time out, there are ways to try and break the mind/body connection before the stress starts to take a negative effect on your body.

The first rule of dealing with stress is to become aware of it. If you feel the familiar symptoms – racing heart, tense muscles....stop and quite literally take a deep breath. This counteracts one of the first signs of stress – the shallow, rapid breathing. Calming your breathing down can help to stop the physical stress, by also slowing your heart rate down. Once you're aware that you're experiencing stress, you can take action.

Using your imagination can be very useful if you're in a situation that's causing you to feel stressed. Try stopping for a few minutes, and thinking of a place, either real or imaginary, where you feel calm, happy and relaxed. Slowing your breathing down and visualising a soothing image can help you to feel relaxed...and the more you practice, the easier it will become to relax when a situation starts to become stressful.

This type of visualisation technique is a simple form of meditation, which can be used to manage stress longer term.

Meditation techniques vary from simple guided and non-guided visualisation (going to your 'happy place'...) to learning Transcendental Meditation or even taking up a T'ai Chi class which incorporates meditative techniques alongside specific controlled movements, designed to calm the mind.

Getting physical

The natural endorphins released when you exercise can act as an effective mood-booster, although nobody knows exactly how it works, it can really boost our self-esteem and lift a grouchy mood. Exercise is also good for stress, as the physical effort and movement helps get a bad mood out of your system. Getting physical can also cause chemical changes in the brain by increasing serotonin and endorphin levels, which make us feel good physically and mentally.

Some studies have suggested exercise as a way of managing depression¹ and that it can be as effective as antidepressants or other psychological interventions at dealing with the symptoms of mild depression.

So, in the same way as your state of mind can negatively or positively affect your body, you can use your body and physical exercise to positively affect your mind and help get a grip on stress.

Talking it out

Sometimes things just get 'too much' and it can be a real help to talk to somebody impartial if you're feeling stressed, run down, overwhelmed or you're experiencing any other negative emotions that can lead to physical problems.

If you think this would be useful, ask your GP for further advice. You can also look up counsellors online or in the Yellow Pages, but a GP referral may get you the help you need faster, and cheaper.

Stress management counsellors can help you to work out the underlying causes of your stress and will help you to see more clearly how it could be affecting you. The counsellor will help you to recognise the warning signs of stress, and show you ways of dealing with it – which could include relaxation methods and time management.

Life coaching

Sometimes, you already know what you need to do in order to sort your life out - but you just need a helping hand to see it. Life coaching is one method of getting your mind in order so that you can feel calmer and more focussed on the way forward.

A life coach can teach you techniques that will help you to boost your self esteem and look at the problems you experience in a more positive light. They can also help you to reach your goals by teaching you ways of breaking down a larger, seemingly unachievable goal into smaller, component parts. A good life coach doesn't tell you what to do – but helps you find the answers yourself and gives you mental tools to help you work things out for yourself.

This kind of coaching can be really helpful for people who feel overwhelmed, and can't see a way forward.

Summary

- Negative emotions such as stress can affect our body as well as our mind
- To deal with stress you need to recognise the symptoms
- Visualisation and meditation can help when you're stressed
- Exercise is a proven mood booster
- Counselling or life coaching can give you the tools to help deal with negative feelings

References:

1. Depression: management of depression in primary and secondary care - NICE guidance - <http://www.nice.org.uk/CG023>

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

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