

The following article on Emotions and Illness is by Pat Wyman (<http://www.patwyman3keys.com>), with whom Branka van Roon trained in the art of deep emotional work.

In my work as a psychotherapist, I try to deal with the body, mind and soul of my clients. I don't feel these three components can be separated from each other. When someone has an emotional response to a stimulus (person or situation), that response is registered in the body. The only way to know that an emotion is present is by *feeling* it in the body; hence the word "feel" is associated with both emotion and illness. We may say "I feel sad" or "I don't feel well."

The purpose of an upsetting emotion is to tell us something is wrong. In our culture, the answer is to take a pill to shut it up. In my experience, that simply makes the body scream louder! What I have observed over and over again is that people who ignore the somatic messages begin to develop disease. Often the diseases are some type of autoimmune disorder such as fibromyalgia, arthritis, lupus, multiple sclerosis, asthma, psoriasis and the like. I strongly suspect cancer falls into this category as well. By addressing the emotional issues I find that, although we may halt the progression of these diseases, we generally cannot reverse the damage.

Over the years, I have wondered how scientific findings correspond with what I have witnessed as a clinical psychotherapist. Interestingly, the language and the treatment may seem different but the findings are very similar. Many scientists believe that the underlying cause of most disease is stress. It can be emotional stress, fatigue, job pressure, relationship tensions and more. Setting aside environmental toxins, birth defects and physical trauma, illness generally begins with perception.

Sensory input is perceived via a Sensing or Intuitive modality. That information is then shuttled in the brain to the hippocampus where the information is compared subconsciously to stored material or memories in order to determine how to react. If the stimulus is paired with a positive memory, then the hypothalamus is stimulated to release endorphins which soothe and numb pain. For instance, if you should hear a piece of music, that stimulus is sent to the hippocampus for interpretation based on stored earlier information. Let's suppose this was a song your first love sang to you while walking on a beach under the stars. The hippocampus associates that melody with a positive experience and, while you are smiling in reverie, the hypothalamus and pituitary are releasing a plethora of soothing endorphins that make you feel good all over.

Sensory → hippocampus → Positive → hypothalamus and pituitary
input association (soothing endorphins)

However, not all sensory input is met with such a positive response. Early negative or traumatizing events, and the feelings associated with them, are more strongly encoded in the hippocampus than positive events and are the most difficult to eradicate. Therefore, when a stimulus is compared by the hippocampus to an early negative experience, it is dealt with much differently.

A stimulus causes a negative response when it is processed differently. A message is sent to the amygdala, a primitive part of the brain that controls the fear response. When the amygdala is stimulated, activity is shut down in the frontal lobe where rational thinking takes place. You are now on autopilot. The amygdala immediately notifies the hypothalamus which controls the sympathetic nervous system. Breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, perspiration, etc. are affected and a message is sent down the vagus nerve to the gut causing the gastrointestinal system to react. Your immune system becomes activated and you may easily move into fight or flight mode. Immune cells make serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine causing mood changes. The hypothalamus also releases corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) which stimulates the pituitary. The pituitary in turn sends a message, via adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), to the adrenal glands which provide adrenalin for a burst of energy and which also release corticosteroids that turn off the immune system. This last part is important because if the immune system is not turned off, it goes on overdrive attacking parts of the body and any number of autoimmune or inflammatory diseases could develop. If on the other hand, stress continues after the immune system is shut off, then you are subject to the first germ that comes your way.

Suppose, then, that you hear a song but this song is one that was playing on the radio in your room while your parents were having a violent argument in the next room. Throw in some loud crashes and crying for good measure. It may be 20 or 30 years later when you hear that song again but your hippocampus does not forget. It quickly sorts through its catalogue of subconscious memories and makes the connection. You feel something in the pit of your stomach, your heart beats a little faster. You may not have any idea why you are reacting. You may not even realize it is due to the song. If some unfortunate soul should come up behind you, you may jump a foot and overreact. Meanwhile, millions of things are going on in your body that

will involve your immune system and make you vulnerable to either disease or some autoimmune damage and all of it out of your conscious knowledge and control.

Sensory → hippocampus → negative → amygdala → hypothalamus → Pituitary →
input association (fear) (sympathetic (ACTH)
nervous system)
immune activation
CRH

→ adrenals → steroids
(adrenalin) (shut off
Immune system)

From the time of Descartes, we have been enculturated to separate mind, body and spirit. The field of medicine has dealt almost exclusively with the body. Therefore, stress and its related disorders are treated chemically and a very large and powerful drug industry was formed. From a psychotherapeutic perspective, I have found that how a stimulus is perceived and interpreted is the key to eliminating, or at the very least lessening, the stress response. Throughout early childhood, we each have programs or “memories” installed in our subconscious. It is these subconscious programs that are activated by a stimulus that is, in actuality, neutral. It holds significance to us and causes stress only because it matches up and is paired with an old program or memory that is out of conscious awareness. As long as the interpretation of a stimulus is out of conscious control, a person is at the mercy of the subconscious filing system. Because a minimum of 90% of who we are is in the realm of the subconscious, we are often controlled by compelling unknown forces. Psychologists know that a person who is triggered will move out of rational thinking and become irrational with a poor grasp of reality. By bringing subconscious material into conscious awareness, we can neutralize the influence of the subconscious and restore control to rational thinking in the frontal lobe. When the frontal lobe is operational, a hormonal messenger is sent to shut down the amygdala. Rational thinking then trumps fear.

If the first steps of the stress response are addressed, I am convinced that there would be much less need for drugs to regulate the reactions further down the chain. If the way a stimulus is

interpreted is thoroughly dealt with, there would be little cause to turn to antidepressants and pain killers. Furthermore, there would be less autoimmune and inflammatory disease.

The questions that must be addressed are, what is the ultimate reality? Is there an objective, external reality where rational thinking prevails or are we held hostage by an internal, subjective and subconscious reality? Which is primary? Which is in charge? Delving deeply enough, it can readily be determined that there are really just different ways of seeing the same thing. There is an old fable about a man who felt there were two warring animals within him and he didn't know which would win. The answer is that the one you feed is the one that will prevail.

Besides the "reconditioning" offered by affective therapy to provide a new response to a stimulus, modalities such as meditation, ritual and prayer offer opportunities to shift control away from the stress response.

Hopefully, reductionist thinking that is based in out-dated Cartesian science will be replaced with a more integrated approach to health and well-being. The reductionist approach has separated not only body from mind and spirit but has also reduced the body to disjointed parts. It is time to embrace a more integrated understanding of how we function based on a holistic approach, accepting that our understanding of how we operate as humans has changed since the 17th century.

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