



The mind-body connection

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer



Imagine that you are walking to your car late one evening. It is very dark and no one else is around. You rush to get in only to slam your finger into the door. The pain! Then you hear heavy footsteps coming up behind you. All of a sudden, your finger stops hurting as fear—a response by your brain—takes over.

The mind has a great deal of power over your body, but despite perceptions, is not a separate entity. Your mind and your body know each other intimately, and communicate endlessly; the two systems are not separate and differentiating them into components is false. Your brain and nervous system communicate with the rest of your body just like all other organ systems. All work together. The body is literally ‘wired’ by the brain and communication constant.

The mind can produce real physical symptoms and sensations, including pain. We may not be able to isolate the physical cause of a symptom with tests or examinations, but that does not make it any less real. The body might be calling out via the mind that something is wrong. Psychological stress might exacerbate existing but hidden problems such as with the intestines or stomach, with sexual function, or cause feelings of weakness and dizziness.

Stress is often at the base of these real physical symptoms as the body sends distress signals in response. Stressors like work, family, relationships, finances or the endless stream of things we choose to worry about, can all trigger symptoms.

Stress also appears to lower the body’s resistance to illness. Though everyday stress is not usually a

health hazard, long-term or chronic stress suppresses the immune system. Stress can also trigger allergies or a recurrence of herpes, and can harm cardiovascular health by raising blood pressure and heart rate. (On the positive side, it appears that positive emotions can trigger a biochemical response that promotes heart health and boosts the immune system.)

Faced with the physical effects of stress, our usual strategy tends to be to shove it down as we ‘tough it out’. Next, we self-medicate with painkillers, alcohol or other drugs but these do nothing for the real problem. Sure, they may mask it briefly, but this only allows us to ignore it for a bit longer as we remain we are in denial.

Over time, ignoring these signals will cause bigger problems with real physical complications. We need to learn to listen to what we are being told by our body via physical symptoms.

Our bodies have built-in healing systems that help keep us well. People with certain traits often enjoy better health, fewer colds and heal faster from illness. Among these are

strong social ties, spirituality, a positive outlook, personal commitment, a belief that they have control over their lives and a feeling of challenge.

Finding ways to manage stress and to arrange our lives such that we do less harm to ourselves works to improve our health. Whatever methods we find, helping ourselves starts with recognizing the message that our bodies are sending us: something is wrong—do something about it!

Faced with the physical effects of stress, our usual strategy tends to be to shove it down as we ‘tough it out’.