

The Power of the Mind in Well-Being and Healing

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ABSTRACT

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Opinion

I have always believed from my teens that positive belief can help overrule the frailties of our body. For example, the placebo effect (placebo meaning “I will heal”) has been well known for a long time. There is a considerable history of how its effect has confused the statistical interpretation of clinical trials to determine the efficacy of new drugs. A person seemingly taking a drug with known side effects can not only be helped by the drug but can also experience those side effects such as nausea, headaches, and perhaps changes in blood pressure, even with a dummy drug. The more they are informed about the side effects, the more likely they are to report them. These negative effects are referred to as the nocebo effect (“I will harm”) by (Robson [1]). What has become more apparent is how powerful this effect can be. For example, even if a person knows they are taking a dummy pill there can be a positive effect. These positive and negative effects are not just imagination, they are real and can be measured physiologically. There is evidence that a good expectation can have a statistically significant effect on the rate of healing. We see then that it all depends on what we expect, described by Robson as the “expectation effect”. He gives a great deal of evidence to support his case, covering diverse topics such as what I regard as three fundamentals, exercise, diet, and sleep, and he also adds stress, willpower, intellectual capacity, and aging (e.g., living longer).

If we expect something to happen, our body takes action to help fulfil that expectation. It sets up the appropriate body chemistry. For example, we know that endorphins (oxytocin and endogenous opioids) are released by the hypothalamus and pituitary gland

in response to pain or stress (and with tears), and this group of peptide hormones both relieves pain and creates a general feeling of well-being. They work by binding to the opioid receptors in your brain to block the perception of pain. The brain also produces neurotransmitters like dopamine and adrenaline that can assist us, though they can be a problem with addiction. Inflammation is the immune system’s response to harmful stimuli, a defense mechanism that is vital to health. In response to tissue injury, the body initiates a chemical signaling cascade that stimulates responses aimed at healing affected tissues. Such signals activate leukocyte chemotaxis from the general circulation to sites of damage. These activated leukocytes produce cytokines that induce inflammatory responses. However, if our body does this due to our expectations, inflammation can be a problem. Our body is an amazing machine, and even calling it a machine is doing disservice to its amazing capacity for adaptation. When under extreme stress, adrenalin is produced, and we read of a young lady who lifts a car to release a loved person, or someone leaping a high fence when being chased by a bull! Also, there are people who carry out great feats of endurance to survive, e.g., Victor Frankl, a famous Jewish psychiatrist, who survived a prison camp because of his expectations and self-belief. Our mind shapes our life for better or for worse with beliefs becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Negative expectations can have a huge effect on our bodies. For example, a person who believes in a curse put on them or has undergone bone pointing, can lead them to shut down and physically deteriorate to prepare the body to cope with negative consequences, and ultimately even death.

A high proportion of people have sleep problems (Seber [2]). In terms of our next day's feelings and performance, we sleep as well as we think we did. Being anxious about falling asleep can chase away sleep! Positive and negative self-fulfilling prophecies can also determine memory capacity, concentration and fatigue during hard mental tasks, and creativity in problem solving. As well as distress profoundly affecting us, there is also a positive stress, promoted by Hans Selye as "eustress". It is our attitude to stress, and whether we view it as positive or negative will determine how it affects us. To take a very simple example of expectation, a husband is asked by his wife to wipe down the shower box after a every shower. He can either be annoyed about it or he can regard it as useful form of exercise. Just being positive isn't always enough, as it can simply lead to denial and worse difficulties. No, it is an appropriate attitude to life's difficulties that can make a difference. It is specific beliefs rather than a general optimism or pessimism. It

is not self-deception. As a counsellor/psychotherapist of 18 years practice I sometimes use cognitive-behavioral therapy (Seber [2]) from my toolbox, using ABC, where a activating event can lead to emotional and behavioral consequences C. By dealing with the underlying belief system B, the behavior can be changed, e.g., "she does say some hurtful things sometimes, but I know she loves me [3]." Let us rethink our negative expectations!

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