

Mind Games

The idea of mind-body medicine, of "mind over matter," is not new to medicine or science. Biofeedback, hypnosis, guided imagery, meditation--these are but a few of the tools in the mind-body armamentarium. As time passes, more will be added to the list, as we come to fully appreciate the power of the mind to cause and aggravate disease states, as well as alleviate them.

Recent studies have demonstrated that behavior therapy can influence glucose metabolism in the brains of obsessive-compulsive patients. Other studies have suggested that dynamic psychotherapy (talk therapy) normalizes serotonin metabolism. Dr. David Spiegel did a landmark study in 1989 which showed that patients with metastatic breast cancer who participated in group psychotherapy lived an average of 18 months longer than controls.

Clearly, a pattern is emerging that is undeniable, that the mind is a tool with a potential to heal that has yet to truly be tapped. The new and rapidly expanding field of psychoneuroimmunology is proof of this. It is no longer magical thinking to suggest that one's thoughts, moods, attitudes and beliefs have an impact on the transmission of neuropeptides and the integrity of one's immune system. And from there, it's not much of a leap to suggest that negative thoughts of anger, resentment and attack may actually cause disease; and that, conversely, positive thoughts of love, acceptance and forgiveness may have the power to heal.

Now consider the scientific studies that have been reported by Larry Dossey, M.D., Co-Chairman of the Panel of Mind/Body Interventions, Office of Alternative Medicine for the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Dossey documents more than 130 studies that show that if you take prayer into the laboratory under controlled conditions, it appears to do something remarkable, not just to human beings, but to bacteria, fungi, germinating seeds, rats, mice and gerbils. In the case of human beings, the gist of a study done in the Coronary Care Unit at San Francisco General Hospital designed to evaluate the power of prayer in healing, was that the prayed-for patients were five times less likely than the non-prayed-for patients to require antibiotics. They were three times less likely to develop pulmonary edema. None of the prayed-for patients required endotracheal intubation. Fewer patients in the prayed-for group died. The patients who were prayed for did not know they were being prayed for, so we're not talking about a placebo effect here. And we're not talking about how someone's mind can have an impact on their own body. We're talking about how someone's mind can have an impact on someone else's body. In this case, it happened from a distance and without their participation!

Clearly, we have not just entering a new millennium. We have entered a new frontier of mind-body wonderment, which promises to change many of our concepts about illness and disease, thus paving the way for new tools, new techniques, and an ever-expanding capacity to heal physical conditions by harnessing the power of the mind.