IMPROVING THE LIFE-MIND-BODY CONNECTION

Your thoughts can affect your mental and physical health in profound ways

Have you ever found that when you're feeling deeply stressed or worried, you may also experience tense muscles, headache, or stomach upset? Or that having a chronic illness, such as diabetes or heart disease, can take a toll on your mental health and lead to depression? There is a strong connection between the mind and body, and good health means taking care of both.

Research studies show that the hormones and neurotransmitters associated with emotions can also have physical affects that impact blood pressure, heart rate, the immune system, sleep patterns, appetite, and mood. Many glands in the body produce hormones, including the thyroid, hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenal glands. Production of too many, or too few hormones from certain glands in the endocrine system can make a big difference in your emotional health. For instance, people with low thyroid hormone levels, a condition called hypothyroidism, often experience physical symptoms such as muscle aches, joint pain, dry skin, and fatigue, as well as mental health symptoms such as depression and impaired memory.

Conversely, your thoughts can also affect your mental and physical health in profound ways. An example of this is the placebo effect, when a person's mental or physical health improves after treatment that appears real, but is designed to have no therapeutic value. Placebos can consist of sugar pills or injections with no active ingredients, and even sham surgery. Amazingly, placebos can still work even when the person knows that the treatment is not real!

Understanding the connection between mind and body can help you become more aware of how your emotions impact your health, and vice versa. Ways to improve your emotional health include the following:

- **Learn ways to manage your stress and limit worrying.** Meditation, yoga, deep breathing, and other relaxation techniques are healthy ways to cope with life's problems and calm the mind.

- **Take care of your physical self.** Get adequate rest, eat nutritious foods, and exercise on a regular basis.

- **Practice mindfulness and gratitude.** Our bodies physically respond to our thoughts, whether positive or negative. Spend more time living in the present and enjoying simple pleasures, and focus on the positive things in your life. Negative thinking is a habit that can be unlearned.

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