

Mind/Body Medicine

An Interview with Steven Gurgevich, PhD

- Please explain the mind-body connection.

It is no secret that our mind and body are exquisitely linked to interact together. It was perhaps even better known in ancient times that our emotions affected our body, and vice versa. In ancient Greece, three doctors would see the patient together. They were the "knife" doctor, the "herb" doctor, and the "word" doctor. The modern day counterparts (surgeon, internist and psychiatrist) rarely see a patient together, let alone even speak together. Modern research on stress has shown that anything which influences our minds also influences our bodies. Expose someone to enough stress and sooner or later you will see their body showing signs of strain as a result of that stress. The strain of stress does not have to be as dramatic as a heart attack. The body can express strain by more subtle or chronic symptoms, such as irritable bowel, headache, rash, hypertension, or simply making other conditions worsen. One of the principles behind mind-body healing is that the same mechanism that can make you sick can also be used to make you well. That is, your thoughts, emotions, responses to the environment, lifestyle, and inner conflicts can be experienced as stressful, or they may be used in a positive manner to create healing responses. Pretty simple, actually.

History is rich with persistence and acceptance for mind-body treatment methods. And there is now an abundance of empirical research that testifies to the fact that mind and body interact together in ways that can make us ill or ways that can be healing. We now think of the "mind-body connection" as a mechanism which can be affected to achieve a healing response. The manner in which we communicate with or through the mind-body connection can be words, thoughts, ideas, and images or pictures in mind (imagination). When working with children we do not trouble them with learning the language of words like hypnosis or trance. In pediatrics we simply call it imaginative medicine. Besides, the actual words we use to describe mind-body medicine are not as important as the forces that make these methods effective; which are motivation, belief, expectations, and intention.

- How can people harness the power of their own mind/body connection?

Mind-body medicine approaches vary greatly and allow each person to find which method(s) may be best suited for them. Some involve working with a therapist and others may be self-learned and self-directed. These include medical or clinical hypnosis, autogenic training, biofeedback, meditation, guided imagery, visualization, and neurolinguistic programming. So which one is right for you? Let's start with a description and examples of use.

Biofeedback training is a system of providing the patient with information about how their body changes in association to thoughts, ideas, and images in mind. That is, objective measurements of physiological changes are fed back to the patient so they can learn to control and train their body's responses in directions for greater health and comfort. And with repetition, they teach or condition their body to repeat these changes quickly and automatically. The types of biological information that is fed back to the patient might include muscle tension, heart rate, blood pressure, brain waves, skin conductance, blood vessel changes, and so on. As the therapist offers a variety of relaxation instructions with calming thoughts, soothing images, and encouraging words, the patient can watch the computer monitor showing any increases or decreases in muscle tension across the head, and the rise or fall of temperature in the fingers. The beauty of biofeedback training is that the individual can actually watch objective and measurable changes in their own physiology that are a result of their thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

Guided Imagery and visualization are two separate but similar methods of hypnosis. Guided imagery involves the therapist facilitating a progressive relaxation of body and mind, and suggestions for the patient to allow their own images or imagination to guide them toward the method of relieving symptoms. This can also include discovering images that have a message about the symptoms or condition, which gives the patient insight, understanding and control of those symptoms. Visualization exercises include graphic or vivid images that are held in mind with the intentions for healing and comfort. And as in biofeedback training, the repetition of these exercises causes learning or a conditioning effect so that these physical changes are available wherever and whenever the patient chooses to use them.

Hypnosis is my favorite modality of mind-body medicine. It requires no equipment, can be taught in one or two sessions, and can be used just about anywhere when needed. I tell my patients that hypnosis is a system of methods that allow mind and body to share information more effectively. One of those methods is called "trance" in the jargon of clinical or medical hypnosis; or "daydream" in common language. I see a hypnotic trance and a daydream as being very similar if not identical. For in each, the individual is conscious and aware of where they are and what they are doing, while at the same time they are wonderfully absorbed in their own thoughts and ideas. The trance or daydream-like state is only the first part of medical hypnosis and is referred to as the "induction," or getting into that pleasant state of mind. But the powerful features of hypnosis are the "utilization" of that altered state to access and communicate with the mind-body connection. Utilization involves using words, ideas, images, metaphors, and imagination to provide the mind-body with information that will cause it to produce a therapeutic or healing response. These responses can be pain relief, clearing the skin, calming the gut, lowering blood pressure, suppressing or enhancing the immune system, removing anxiety, accelerating recovery after surgery, changing behaviors, enhancing performance, and unlearning negative patterns by re-learning positive and comfortable patterns of activity within the body. Just about everyone is hypnotizable to either a greater or lesser degree. And even those with less ability can still learn to use it, but it may require more practice or working with a therapist.

- Is there more acceptance of the mind/body connection in mainstream society than, say, 10 years ago?

Unfortunately, hypnosis has had to deal with negative connotations because of the way it has been portrayed in the media or by "stage hypnotists." Stage hypnosis and medical hypnosis are totally different. Stage hypnosis is used to entertain with confusion, illusion, and trickery; while medical or clinical hypnosis is taught to an individual so that they can take advantage of the healing powers and abilities by accessing the mind-body connection. The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis was founded in 1958 to train physicians, psychologists, dentists, social workers, nurses, and counselors on how to use these methods for healing. They offer certification for those who have achieved a specified amount of training and supervision, and they offer the opportunity to find certified professionals by geographic area and specialty at their website at www.ASCH.net.

- Can mind/body techniques cure disease?

The first step in using the mind-body connection for healing is look at some of the many books and magazine articles, audio recordings, and other instructional materials that explain the methods and that will provide you with an "experience" for your self. You will quickly discover that you have been using many of these methods all of your life without realizing how they may be powerfully applied for healing. As I tell my patients, "If you have ever been absorbed in a daydream, a good book or movie...you have experienced a trance." The next step is learning to utilize it for healing and achievement.