

The Mind-Body Connection

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With the recent resurgence of yoga, there is much discussion about the connection between one's mind and one's body. It is easy to see how some external factors influence our health. For example, if we overeat, we get an upset stomach; if a friend moves away, we feel sad. But, we cannot forget about internal factors and how they affect us. Physical, emotional, spiritual, mental and social factors can impact these same aspects of our health. If we think positive thoughts, does this mean our bodies will never get sick? Probably not, but our body certainly responds to the way we think, feel and act.

The mind-body connection suggests your thoughts influence your physical body. Therefore we should be able to use our thoughts to positively influence our physical body reduce stress, and improve our mood.

Research shows when you imagine an experience, you often have similar mental and physical responses to those you would have if the event actually happened. If you recall a time when you were happy, grateful or calm, your mind will relax. If you think of a time that you were scared, your heart rate might increase and you may even get sweaty palms. Sports psychologists often recommend athletes use mental imagery to visualize themselves in competition before they compete as a final preparation. It is believed to enhance success and performance.

Obviously to simply sit in a room, stare at space and think happy thoughts won't dissolve all of life's miseries. However, maintaining a positive attitude and attitude of acceptance can often produce surprising results. Philosopher, psychologist and physician, William James said: "*The greatest discovery of any generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitude.*" Is it any surprise then that research shows that optimists are generally healthier than pessimists?

In general, optimists:

- Have stronger immune systems
- Recover from sports injuries faster
- Live longer
- Have a lower risk of depression
- Bounce back faster from failures and setbacks
- Achieve more in sport, studies and many other aspects of life.

Did you know your body undergoes over 1,400 chemical reactions when it is under stress? Is it any wonder then that prolonged periods of stress or other negative internal thoughts or emotions can lead to physical, mental or emotional health concerns? In addition, stress can weaken the immune system, making you more susceptible to colds or flus. A study by Hans Eysenck of the University of London has shown that people who do not effectively manage stress have a 40 per cent higher death rate than those who manage stress well. Numerous other studies link stress with the development of heart disease.

The good news is there are many exercises that can help improve your mind-body connection. The benefits of practicing these exercises include decreased anxiety, decreased pain levels, improved sleep, stronger immune system and ability to heal and increased sense of control and well-being. Some mind-body exercises include:

- Practice an attitude of gratitude - deal with negative, but try to focus on the positive too.
- Make time for things you enjoy.
- Deep breathing exercises and focusing on breath awareness.
- Progressive muscle relaxation.
- Guided imagery.
- Stretching/yoga - There are a variety of styles and levels to choose from.
- Meditation - Also many types to choose from such as recall a person, place or thing you love.
- Close your eyes for 30 seconds to give them a break.
- Seek resources to help you improve your mind-body connection.

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at Be_Well@nstu.ca. Please contact Erin at ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca to provide her with your NSTU email address.

[From The Teacher, April 12, 2013, Volume 51 Number 11, page 6 © NSTU 2013]