

Leach

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March 2007 Newsletter:

What Good are Good Coping Behaviors Anyway?

Dear Patients and Friends:

Writing in the March 2007 issue of *Reader's Digest*, Dan Ferber, Ph.D. describes how the mind affects our health in ways we never before imagined. It seems that more and more evidence suggests that if we can control our own thoughts and worries, we can calm inflammation and fight disease—from arthritis to Crohn's disease to heart disease. Is this knowledge new? Is this something that only applies to hysterical patients, or those with serious mental problems?

While the specific studies mentioned included recent findings that stimulation of the vagus nerve—one of the 12 cranial nerves, that courses only millimeters from the atlas, the top vertebra in the neck—can shut down inflammatory responses, there is a large body of evidence supporting the notion that our mind has an important role in maintaining good health.

Refer back to our December newsletter (posted to the main page of our website) and Harvard Psychiatrist George Vaillant's, "Harvard Study of Adult Development," that followed the health status of nearly 1,000 Harvard alumni, inner city men and Terman women until their deaths and concluded that "poor coping behaviors" were one of six predictors for early death or disability (along with smoking, alcoholism, overweight, no exercise, and an unstable marriage).

Indeed, the research for the mind-body connection is so strong it's not debated anymore, but rather now the only debate is over *how strong* the connection is. So, for example, if you're trying to prevent heart disease is it more important to develop good coping behaviors or get moderate exercise three days weekly? While the jury is out on those type specifics, it makes good sense to try to develop good coping skills while we continue to work to improve our diet and exercise, and avoidance of smoking and excessive drinking. Further, we know that the mind-body connection does not apply merely in cases of hysterical or mental patients, but instead affects us all.

For example, just one of the important findings of the last two decades was that exposure to significant stress (such as childhood stress like sexual abuse) can result in shrinkage of several important brain centers (i.e., the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex and amygdala), and was demonstrated first in laboratory animals and later in humans with MRI imaging of the brain (see: Sandi, C. (2004). Stress, Cognitive Impairment and Cell Adhesion Molecules. *Neuroscience* 5:917-30).

So if stress affects us all, and can even damage areas of our brain, how does the body deal with stressors? It turns out that its not always how much stress you're exposed to that determines whether inflammatory chemicals will be released into the blood and help trigger disease. Rather, it is how we cope with stress that may be most clinically important to our health. That is why developing good coping behaviors is so important to our health, regardless of whether we're fighting migraine headaches, sciatica, cancer or heart disease.

Pharmaceutical researchers are hard at work trying to identify drugs that may block the deleterious influence of the chemicals (pro-inflammatory mediators) released in the body in response to stress. But as with so many other areas of wellness, prevention such as developing

good coping behaviors may ultimately be far more important to maintaining good health than finding drugs to help us deal with stressors, or their illness related manifestations.

This year, in addition to introducing the CDC developed, Physician Assisted Counseling and Exercise (PACE) program to our practice, we will be suggesting cognitive behavioral therapies to our patients—especially to those with chronic pain syndromes or chronic inflammatory processes—that are proven safe and effective. These stress-management strategies will include proven techniques such as journal writing, art and humor therapy, assertiveness, time management, and creative problem solving.

We will provide references and resources for patients to explore these strategies, and referral sources when necessary. Do ask about these resources during your next visit, by e-mail, or during your exam process here, as we work with you to attain improved health.

Sincerely,

Dr. Robert A. Leach

For More Resources on this subject:

- For information from the National Institutes of Drug Abuse on the use of cognitive behavioral therapies go to <http://www.drugabuse.gov/newsroom/06/NR4-01.html>
- For information from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute on overcoming sleep disorders including lifestyle changes and use of cognitive and behavioral therapies go to http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/inso/inso_treatments.html
- For information for women who wish to lose weight while quitting smoking by using cognitive and behavioral therapies, (National Institutes of Drug Abuse) go to: http://www.drugabuse.gov/NIDA_notes/NNV0117N4/Women.html
- For information from the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases regarding research of fibromyalgia, including treatment of the underlying sleep disorder associated with this disorder by using cognitive and behavioral therapies go to: http://www.niams.nih.gov/ne/highlights/spotlight/2004/fibro_sum.htm

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