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Basics



## The mind-body connection



A broken wrist is usually easy to diagnose and treat — and you likely know exactly what caused it. Some health conditions, though, are not so clear cut. Often, these health conditions involve a deep connection between the body and the mind.

Consider heart disease: there are many known lifestyle factors that contribute to it. These include smoking, poor diet and lack of exercise. But researchers are discovering that attitudes and emotions (the “mind”) can also contribute to heart disease and other physical health challenges (the “body”).<sup>1</sup>

### **Stress and health**

Stress causes a biological response known as fight or flight. You either confront a threat (fight) or you avoid it (flight). But that’s a simple explanation. The stress

response triggered in fight or flight is a complex mix of physical, mental and emotional reactions.

Have you ever had to give a big presentation? If so, you might remember how you felt. Your heart pounds, your breath quickens, your stomach gets butterflies and your palms get sweaty. This mind/body stress response isn't meant to make you feel sick. In this case, it's meant to help you perform well. This is called acute stress. It is in response to a challenge, and it goes away quickly. In the case of giving a big presentation, the response was probably over as soon as you finished presenting.

But sometimes, the stress response happens frequently. It can be triggered by more common day-to-day experiences. A spat at home. A slow commute. A work email. A bill in the mail. Over time, this type of stress, called chronic stress, can take a real toll on your emotional and physical health. Worried that you might be experiencing chronic stress? Here are some of the signs:

- Feeling tired or angry
- Feeling irritable or unfocused
- Headaches
- Not sleeping well
- Feeling anxious or sad

These are all signs that stress may be working overtime in your body.

With the hectic pace of life today, many people feel the negative effects of chronic stress. But it's worth noting that the mind/body link can also have many *positive effects*.

## **Building a positive mind-body connection**

There are a number of things you can do to put the mind-body connection to work for you. By reducing stress, you can counteract some of its harmful effects on your body. With mind-body exercises like yoga or tai chi, you can help better control anxiety and pain. Some mindful activities can help boost your energy and your mood, and even help you find more happiness and compassion to improve the overall quality of your life.

Some mind-body practices include:

- Gentle movement and meditation, such as yoga and tai chi.
- Biofeedback, a type of therapy that uses sensors attached to your body to measure key body functions. Biofeedback can help you learn more about how your body reacts. This may help you learn how to control your breathing, heart rate, and other functions impacted by stress.
- Progressive relaxation, a technique where you concentrate on tightening, then relaxing various muscle groups. This can be combined with other meditative and breathing exercises for a deep sense of physical and mental relaxation.

For these practices, you may need to seek help from an experienced guide, mentor, or professional. But you can do some mind/body exercises right in your own home, car or office, and you only have to spare a few moments.

For example, mindfulness meditation is something you can do when you have time and where you can find a few minutes to focus. You don't need a guide, a yoga mat or any other special equipment. You just need to close your eyes, pay attention to your breath, and focus on present thoughts. When your attention wanders, return to the present. Mindfulness can bring help you focus, tune out distractions and find a little calm in the moment — *and* over time, help your mind and body feel better.

<sup>1</sup>. American Psychological Association. Mind/body health: heart disease.

<sup>2</sup>. Doyle, C and Hutton, J. (2013) King's College Hospital. Understanding the mind-body link. [p 3-4]

<sup>3</sup>. National Institutes in Health (2012) News in Health Mindfulness Matters.

<sup>4</sup>. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Relaxation techniques for health.

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