

Features

January 20, 2008

Healing with mind-body medicine

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle columnist

Mind-body medicine is based on a relatively new, rapidly developing area of care called psychoneuroimmunology, or PNI. "Psycho" refers to your thinking, emotions and mood states; "neuro" refers to the neurological and neuroendocrine systems in your body; and "immunology" refers to your immune system.

Mind-body medicine explores the influence of your mind and emotions on your immune system and entire body. PNI explores the connection between the psychological and spiritual conditions within a person and their physical well-being. Some studies have even suggested that the mind and spirit (including mood, attitudes, self-image and outlook on life) can help people recover from diseases of all kinds, including cancer.

For many years, the primary form of treatment for people with chronic pain (pain that lasts longer than six months) has been medication. However, using medication by itself is often not enough to relieve pain, and the medication may cause side effects that make the situation even worse. As a result, more and more Americans are combining complementary and traditional treatments for their ailments, especially pain, and are finding a relief that the medications alone do not offer.

According to a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association, 40 percent of Americans and more than two-thirds of the world population use complementary therapies for treatment of illnesses. Since 1990, Americans have increased their use of such therapies by 30 percent and paid \$27 billion in out-of-pocket expenses. The American Pain Foundation has stated that the use of complementary medicine is expected to grow at a rate of 15 percent each year.

Many different illnesses respond positively to complementary therapies, and the types of therapies being used varies. For example:

- **The HeartMath** intervention, a stress reduction technique, has helped people who 1) want to prevent the unhealthy consequences of stress and 2) want to enhance healing of a current illness such as hypertension, cardiac disease, chronic pain, fibromyalgia, anxiety and panic disorders, anger and depression. HeartMath, which is a quick, easy-to-learn self-help technique, has earned global recognition and is used by corporations, hospitals and the U.S. military.
- The University of Maryland Shock Trauma Center is teaming with the University of Maryland Center for Integrative Medicine to offer Reiki (a Japanese energy therapy), Chinese acupuncture and music therapy for trauma patients to help them relax, reduce pain, release and move body energy to allow for faster healing and create a feeling of calm.
- Cancer Treatment Centers of America provides support to cancer patients in the areas of relaxation breathing, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation therapy, meditation, yoga, laughter therapy, acupuncture, tai chi, qigong, stress management classes and various support groups. These complementary therapies are provided along with nutrition therapy, spiritual support and traditional medical treatments.

- A new Mayo Clinic study found that massage therapy, music therapy and guided imagery decrease pain levels for patients after heart surgery. As a result, the Mayo Clinic now has a full-time massage therapist available for patients after heart surgery.

- **Emotional Freedom Therapy** has shown remarkable benefits in thousands of clinical applications. Stress and negative emotions aren't just in our heads - they are stored in our bodies, often in skeletal or smooth muscles, and can cause pain and disease. EFT addresses unresolved emotional blocks that contribute to pain and disease. It combines gentle fingertip tapping on key acupuncture points with focused thought. Reports from people using EFT indicate not only quick and amazing relief from pain but also corollary improvement in illnesses. EFT is a self-help technique that is easy to learn from trained practitioners and can be used anywhere, anytime.

Other complementary therapies that are used along with traditional medicine include chiropractic therapy, hypnosis, biofeedback, art therapy, homeopathy, aromatherapy and herbal therapy, to name just a few.

If you have incorporated or will be incorporating complementary therapies into your health plan, it's important to tell your primary physician and to discuss your plans with him or her. Also, here are tips about complementary therapy:

1. Assess the safety and effectiveness of the therapy.
2. Check out the practitioner's expertise, background, qualifications and competence.
3. Meet the practitioner and determine if he or she is right for you.
4. Think about the costs: Many complementary therapies are not covered by insurance yet. Check with your insurer to see if the cost of therapy will be covered.
5. Consider contacting a professional organization for the type of practitioner you are seeking. Professional organizations may have publications explaining the therapy that their members provide, can describe the type of training needed and can tell you about requirements for licensing and certification.

And, finally, remember that our knowledge of health and what affects it is constantly changing. There are many aspects of health that we did not know much about years ago. Research into the mind-body connection was scarce, and many people honestly didn't want to believe that such a connection exists. Today, there is much research into what causes disease, what therapies can help heal the body, and the power of the mind and spirit in helping people heal. We have entered a new phase of healing, and each day research indicates that we didn't know as much as we thought we did. So open your mind to the possibilities and at least ask questions. There are many people experiencing the benefits of complementary therapies who simply don't talk about it - it's time we did.