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It's All in Your Head!

Opinion

If the adage "mind over matter" is unequivocally true I would be able to fly with my bare arms. It is mind over matter right? So if I believe I can fly then I can fly! Great! I head off to the nearest tall building psyched up to fly. However when I jump off the top of the roof believing I can fly most reasonable people would agree an ambulance would be summoned to take me to the ER and later the psych ward to treat my "psychosis" if I was lucky enough to survive the fall.



Yet many people believe in "mind over matter". Chemicals only make us ill because we believe they will make us ill. Right? Before you say I've taken this example to the extreme bear in mind that was my intent. I'm a critical thinker, love a good challenge, and refuse to buy into anything based on an appeal to popularity. It is my belief that the majority of people take the adage of mind over matter far too seriously and to the opposite extreme of believing the mind is powerful enough to do anything. Great! Save me! I'm jumping and I can fly! Okay, that's taking it too far but where do we draw the line? Does stinking thinking make us sick or does our health impact our mind and what do we do about it?

As someone who suffered mercury poisoning that went undiagnosed for years I

spent much time researching my symptoms and talking to anyone who would listen in the hopes of figuring out why I was becoming increasingly more ill. Some felt I was seeking attention or suffered physical pain from a poor attitude. Often was told to "relax a little", "go to church", or "take yoga". Not only were these well-meaning comments inappropriate, ill placed, and infuriating but the people who said them did not know for a fact that I did not already go to church or participate in yoga! All they did was

add to the emotional stress my illness already caused by invalidating my feelings and efforts to find out what was causing my ill health. The fact of the matter was I was suffering from mercury poisoning and upon finally being properly diagnosed and treated I made a full recovery with the exception of a manifestation of my toxic injury known, among other names, as MCS.

False hope through pretending a condition does not exist is a recipe for ignoring important symptoms rather than seeking medical attention and addressing important treatable symptoms in crucial situations. One can easily be blinded into believing "it's all in your head" and suffer damage or death as a result. "No matter what is said about mind over matter, an ill-cared-for body cannot be meditated away" (Reece, 2006).

“False hope is a recipe for ignoring important symptoms rather than seeking medical attention and addressing important treatable symptoms in crucial situations.”

Don't get me wrong. I do see some value in the adage of mind over matter. I believe that keeping a positive outlook during dark times instills hope and determination to continue against the odds. What exasperates me is a person who believes a physical illness is caused by a poor attitude. Surely a newborn's outlook on life could not be the cause of infantile illness! Attitudes can become poor even though they are not poor at the onset of an illness as one is feeling pain and fatigue from a chronic illness, losing money from inability to work, and finding no answers. I know for a fact I had a positive attitude and everything was going for me in my life when I took ill so I was not being “punished by God” as many believed.

Despite this a person's state of mind can impact health to some extent (Edwards, 2004). I strongly believe a positive mindset can help one overcome obstacles and stressful situations. However a positive attitude will not create the answers, stop impact from a fall, or reverse a poisoning. Only well thought out actions, planning, and appropriate and timely treatments can do that. Illness creates stress on the body and on the mind (Anderson, 2005). The question is which comes first? Is it the chicken or the egg? Does the illness cause the mindset or does the mindset cause the illness? I am a firm believer that the illness often causes the mindset. It is natural and normal to feel stress and be discouraged when one is losing their livelihood for unexplained reasons. “Stress is a component of every illness” (Roberts, 2002).

On the flip side I believe recovery can be impaired by mindset. “What goes on in the body has a definite effect on the spiritual, just as what goes on in our spiritual being does affect us physically” (Smith, ND). A person who does not have hope will not seek help and may resign themselves to illness and death. “A balance between an individual's coping skills and his or her stress level can also be the tipping point of whether one is more susceptible to illness or not” (Upward Quest Health, 1997 – 2006). Of course when one voraciously seeks answers with great hope she is subject to being labeled as obsessive about her illness. However “without hope we have nothing” (Doyle, 2005).





“No reasonable man would swallow a box of rat poison or jump off the top of a building and not become ill or injured no matter what his beliefs or how strong his mind is.”

Though some may disagree I stand firm that Americans take mind over matter entirely too seriously even to the point of placing so much emphasis on the mind that an emphasis on a solution is lost. No reasonable man would swallow a box of rat poison or jump off the top of a building and not become ill or injured no matter what his beliefs or how strong his mind is. It is therefore crucial that helping professionals address issues of the mind in physical illness carefully. Care should be taken not to discredit physical problems and blame illness entirely on psyche. A good emphasis would be on strengthening the mind and coping mechanisms as a complementary treatment to traditional medical interventions to prevent further problems. The goal should be to combine approaches for the most effective treatment.

Lourdes “Sal” Salvador

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