

Your Emotional Immune System*

Most people come to counseling because they are struggling with an emotional issue that they need help resolving. The general perception is that they are having a mental problem – that something's not quite right in the head. Colloquial descriptions of mental illness such as: "He's out of his mind!" "She's not quite right in the head." and "He's a few loops short of a full box of fruitloops." reinforces this perception of the root of emotional issues. And given this perception, clients often imagine that they will talk and the therapist or counselor will listen, and perhaps offer feedback and suggestions that will help them sort out and move through the problem. And many cases, this is what happens and very often, it helps greatly.

The problem with the image of the "standard cure" is that talking alone only involves the cerebral cortex – the part of the mind that deals with ration and reason. The emotions are rooted in the limbic brain and in the body. While emotions are generally considered to be triggered by our thoughts, talking about our thoughts and our feelings is a slow way to heal. The other limitation of relying only on talking is that the "standard cure" generally takes place from the neck up. The body is ignored. This is significant because science has now documented the fact that emotion information travels through our bodies on neuropeptides and bind to neuropeptide receptor cells that are scattered through out the body. This is a dry way of saying that emotions are stored in our bodies. And at some level, most of us already knew this experientially. When we get angry or nervous, we feel our stomach churning, get painful knots in our shoulders, pains in the neck, backaches, headaches, and/or have find it difficult to breathe.

Some savvy readers may be saying, "Wait a minute, what about prescription medication like Prozac or Wellbutrin? Don't they fix the problem?" The answer is tricky. First, the research suggests that such drugs work much better in conjunction with counseling than they do on their own. And they do not do anything to change the emotional information that's stored throughout the body, so that information hangs out in the body waiting to get triggered until the original issue gets resolved. Medication can, however, help get people into a stable place where they can address and release the pain. It's just that popping a pill isn't enough. It's sort of like taking a dexatrim (80's over the counter weightloss drug) and then eating a whole pan of brownies every night and wondering why you aren't losing weight. In addition, while many people experience positive results with prescription medication, in some cases the side-effects are more painful than the original problem. Some research, for example, suggests that Prozac may trigger suicide in some people.

It makes sense then, that if the emotions are stored in the body, the way to heal them must involve the body. For a lot of us, this is scary. Our culture teaches us to ignore the body early on. We learn to eat when other people put food on the table and stuff ourselves with "food products," often processed with lots of sugar and/or fat, (think chocolate, sour cherry balls, potato chips, and all that other crap they sell in the vending machines) when we're not hungry. In school, we learn to sit still even though our bodies want nothing more than to be in motion. And in athletics, many of us learn to ignore pain to "get 'r done."

The saving grace in all of this is that our limbic systems are open feedback systems and, especially in the context of healing relationships, we can we can repattern our limbic systems. The wide body of research suggests, for example, that the core therapeutic agent of counseling, whatever the approach,

lies in the client/therapist relationship. In other words, there is something very healing about entering into a relationship with a counselor or therapist wherein you feel fully seen, heard, and validated. And many counselors include some body oriented aspects to their practice – breathing and meditation exercises, art, music and possibly movement. And, approaching the body more consciously and directly adds to the healing process. The good news is that there are some gentle ways to begin to access the body and release emotions. The first step is to become aware of the body. You can do this by taking a moment to sit quietly, breathing in a focused, gentle way and slowly scan your body as you continue to breathe. First, bring your awareness to your feet. Just notice how they feel. Do they feel achy? Tense? Soft and relaxed? Spacious? Warm? Cold? Anything else? When you've really scanned your feet continue scanning up your ankles, calves and shins, knees, thighs, glutes, abdominal region and lower back, solar plexus area and mid-back, chest and shoulder blade area, shoulders, upper arms, lower arms, hands and fingers, neck, jaw, face and scalp, taking a few moments at each body region to breathe and really let yourself feel what's going on.

Another way to access the body is by bringing your awareness to your hands and noticing the subtle energy that's flowing there. Once you get a sense of this in your hands, bring your awareness to your feet and notice the subtle energy that's flowing through them. It's important to keep breathing as you do this.

Simple meditation can also help by helping us bring our bodies into a state of relaxation. Many forms of meditation also provide skills and tools to help the practitioner learn to watch their thoughts and emotions as they move through and out of the body. If standard meditation feels too overwhelming, you can also try yoga, tai chi, chi gong and other awareness oriented movement arts. It's especially helpful to practice these in groups, for example in a class.

The bottom line is that the more you come home and fully inhabit your body, the more able you are to compassionately watch the emotions flash through you and to observe your reactions to their signals. And, the more able you are to release the painful emotional files that are stored on those neuropeptide receptor cells into the past where they belong.

There is a wealth of research indicating the impact of unreleased/unresolved emotional pain on physical health. The two are so connected that social scientists use physical symptoms as a measure of emotional health. Moreover, research psychologist John Gottman** argues that people who experience contempt from someone they love are more likely to get colds. Contempt is marked by behavior like eye rolling, using words designed to put the other in a less than position like “bitch” or “scum” or generally assuming a position of “I am better than you.” According to Gottman, it is so stressful that it depresses immune system functioning.

The other part of the story is that since the limbic brain is essentially the body, the way we treat our bodies has an incredibly strong impact on our emotional health. For example, when I was in grad school, I had a friend who dropped into an emotional black hole. At some point, her pain grew so intense that she attempted suicide. After she got out of the hospital, I invited her over to watch a movie. She said she hadn't eaten yet and asked if she could eat at the house. Of course I said yes. She arrived with a bag of Oreo cookies and a huge diet coke from UDF. When I asked her what happened to dinner, she pointed to the cookies and acknowledged that this was what she ate every night for

dinner. When I asked what else she ate, she added coffee, candy, and donuts to the list. I remember being a bit blown away by this and asked if she ever ate “real food.” She told me that about once a week, she’d get a chicken sandwich from Wendy’s. This was over a decade ago, before I developed a modicum of tact, and I blurted out, “No wonder you’re depressed. How could you not be depressed living on chocolate, sugar and caffeine?” She started crying and confessed that her therapist had challenged her on the same issue.

She also confessed that she felt paralyzed because she didn’t know how to cook and didn’t have the money to eat at restaurants that didn’t have drive through windows. Beyond this, she didn’t even really have a clue about basic nutrition. Because I was living in a Martha Stewart moment, I took her nutritional well-being as a project. I convinced her to add in things like fruits, vegetables, protein to her diet and conned her into walking along the river with me a couple of times a week. I even, somehow, lured her into cooking with me. I don’t know that she ever acquired “the joy of cooking,” but she did, at least, learn how to steam rice and vegetables and how to make decent pasta sauce. This, along with seeing her therapist and taking anti-depressants (which she had been doing before), seemed to have helped her get out of her black hole. Mind you, eating cherries and broccoli didn’t wipe out her depression all together, but her mood balanced a bit.

The reality is that anytime your body system gets out of balance, you are much more prone to emotional volatility. It’s as if you have an emotional immune system. It works pretty well during ordinary circumstances when it’s in balance. But when you get tired, hungry and/or don’t get the proper nutrients into your body, or don’t give your body the proper exercise it needs, this emotional immune system gets compromised. Little things that don’t ordinarily affect you can trigger an emotional explosion. And major issues.... they can send you reeling. If you get your emotional immune system stays compromised for a long enough period of time, you are more susceptible to falling into a black hole like my friend in graduate school or moving through life like a ticking bomb, exploding in the wake of any obstacles or conflicts that come your way.

The bottom line is that in order to be emotionally healthy, you have to take care of your body. The catch here is that when you ignore your body for so long, or if you never learned healthy patterns to begin with, trying to jump start a healthy living program can seem overwhelming. The influence of social networks may further complicate your efforts to change. Social research on quitting smoking and on obesity suggest that, controlling for everything but the kitchen sink, the people who people our worlds tend to struggle with the same issues. Whole social networks of people tend to quit smoking at the same time. Similarly, entire social networks of people tend to get obese together. This suggests that if you are out of balance, if your patterns of living aren’t healthy, it’s likely that the people in your world aren’t doing such a great job of living healthily either. This means that the people to whom you regularly turn to for help may be floundering in the same way that you are and may not be all that helpful.

If you notice that you are feeling stuck -- perhaps drifting towards a black hole, biting people’s heads off, or feeling anxious -- check in with your body. What are your sleeping patterns? What are you eating? What are you drinking? Have you been taking the “better living through chemistry” route, drinking coffee or other caffeinated drinks to wake up, and alcohol or other CNS depressants (downers) to relax? Are you getting enough exercise? It’s good to do an honest inventory of your lifestyle habits and write your answers down. If your responses suggest a need for some changes, ask

yourself what you need in the way of support to change your patterns and give yourself permission to ask for the help you need, whether it means going to a counselor, getting a personal trainer or taking a class, going to a wellness center, or all of the above. The good news is that making positive changes in your lifestyle will help your emotional well-being. And sorting through and releasing old emotional stuff will help you improve your physical well being. It may be hard work, but the pay-off of emotional balance is worth it.

*Thanks to local singer/songwriter Elizabeth Bolen for the concept of Emotional Immune System.

**John Gottman is a psychologist who ran the “Love Lab.” He developed a system which allows him to predict with 95 percent accuracy whether that couple will still be married fifteen years later just by watching them interact for an hour.

Originally appeared in Outlook Weekly