



The Brain-body Connection: Depression, Anxiety, Stress and Physical Health

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Most of us don't slow down long enough to consider the implications of our fast-paced lives. Oh, we talk about being too busy, depressed or stressed out. But these days, everyone does. So we accept our stressed-out, margin-less lives as "normal" and keep running at full speed. It's not until we slow down, either through extended time away from our routine or illness or injury, that we begin to understand how stress impacts our mood and how our mood impacts our physical health.

The relationship between stress, depression, anxiety and physical health is complicated. Recent advances in neuroscience, medicine and psychiatry have changed how we look at illness. And it is shedding much needed light on the relationship between mental illness and physical health.

It all starts in the brain

All that we experience is processed and interpreted by the brain. It is central in how we respond to our world and our individual circumstances.

When we are injured, the brain creates natural painkillers called endorphins. To keep us healthy, the brain produces gamma globulin to bolster our immune system. The brain also produces chemicals called catecholamines that regulate our heart rate, blood pressure and mood. The brain produces interferon for combating infections, viruses and even cancer.

So, when stress, depression and anxiety affect the brain, these psychological conditions impact our physical health and well-being.

Chronic stress harms immune, cardiovascular systems

During times of acute stress our brain releases powerful hormones—adrenaline and cortisol—to heighten senses and boost our strength and energy. This healthy stress response serves us well when we face real dangers. However, this stress response was never intended to handle the unceasing stresses of modern life.

Persistent stress affects our brain first, which, in turn, affects everything else. Specifically, stress suppresses our ability to produce and maintain:

- lymphocytes, the white blood cells necessary for killing infection
- our natural killer cells, which seek out and destroy foreign invaders
- When our immune system is compromised, we are more vulnerable to infection and disease.

Researchers now suspect that mental stress causes the endothelium (the lining in our arteries) to constrict. This can raise blood pressure and cause cardiovascular problems. Additionally, women who report high levels of mental stress are twice as likely to die from stroke or heart disease as those with low stress levels. Men who report moderate or high levels of mental stress are nearly twice as likely to suffer a heart attack compared to men with low stress.

It is not surprising that 70 percent to 80 percent of all visits to the doctor are for illnesses that are stress-related or stress-induced.

Depression linked with diabetes, heart disease

In a recent study, researchers found that depressed people were about 60 percent more likely to develop type-2 diabetes when compared to people who were not depressed. Similar research found that depressed women are significantly more likely to have heart disease than nondepressed women. The investigators found substantially elevated inflammatory markers among the depressed women. Clearly, depression seems to impact more than just our psychological well-being.

Two-way link between anxiety and illness

People with anxiety disorders are at increased risk for developing physical conditions, including:

- thyroid disease
- respiratory diseases
- gastrointestinal diseases
- arthritis
- allergies
- migraine

The association between anxiety and illness appears to be two-way. Anxiety changes brain chemistry, which stresses the body and increases the risk of illness. Conversely, serious illness causes anxiety.

The impact: People with high stress, depression or anxiety disorders are more likely to have another illness at the same time and, thus, have a poorer quality of life.

What to do

Whatever the reasons for these connections, physicians need to routinely screen for anxiety and depression when treating patients for physical conditions. Tell your doctor about any feelings of

depression or worry that you have. Depression and anxiety are highly treatable conditions.

You can “de-stress” your life and decrease your health risks by making lifestyle changes that allow more time for exercise, rest and relaxation. Getting a moderate amount of exercise each day helps to ease tension and leads to deeper, more restful sleep. A healthy diet and enough sleep every night are essential for optimal mental and physical health.

Relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises or progressive relaxation therapy, work for many people. Exercise, prayer and meditation work well for others.

If you are stressed, depressed or anxious you can do something about it today. Talk with your doctor or a mental health professional, and explore this site.

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