



From Dragon Fire to Moonbeams: Using the Powers of Your Mind To Help the Problems of Your Body



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**"It is more important to know what sort of person has a disease,
than to know what sort of disease a person has."**

—Hippocrates 4th Century B.C

MIND OVER MATTERS

It has long been known and demonstrated that our attitudes, feelings and expectations greatly influence our behavior. If we are positive, happy, and optimistic, what we do corresponds to that in meaningful ways. Our actions are more purposeful, motivated and energized. We are more likely to succeed and accomplish our objectives. The reverse is also true. Negative attitudes, feelings and expectations beget negative behavior and failure. Quite literally, we program ourselves by our thoughts and they propel us in the corresponding direction.

All of this falls under the heading of self-fulfilling prophecy. Directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously we influence the flow of our lives. That which we expect and anticipate often occurs. This is especially true when we can affect the process in some way. Even if our influence is silent and subtle, the impact of our prophecies cannot be denied.

Obviously expecting to win the lottery does not work. All the wishing won't make it so because we have no control over the selection. The laws of probability govern whether we win and the odds are definitely not in our favor. When it comes to outcomes over which we have some control, however, the picture changes. If we expect to get the job, date, contract, sale, grade,

or promotion, we increase the likelihood that we will. If we are pessimistic the odds are we won't.

Many people are pessimistic by nature. Their way of looking at the world and themselves is colored by their experiences. They come not to expect positive outcomes and thereby ensure repeated negative experiences. A vicious cycle ensues whereby negative expectations create negative experiences feeding right back into expectations. Helping people see things more clearly and more positively is one of the challenges of counseling and psychotherapy.

MIND OVER BODY

The relationship between expectations and outcomes is very clear in the area of physical problems. Our minds have a powerful affect upon our bodies. While much remains in the domain of medical science, emotional issues need to be included in the prescription. Countless studies show that what people anticipate and how people view their medical experiences directly correlate to what actually occurs.

Specifically, if we expect pain, suffering or complications they will occur. More importantly, if we anticipate fast healing, little suffering, and few problems, that is more likely to occur. Research has repeatedly shown that positive expectations directly influence

surgical outcomes and recovery time. Similarly, depression after heart attacks or strokes slows the healing process and can adversely affect the outcome.

A recent Newsweek feature article stated,

"The past 10 years have witnessed an explosion of research findings suggesting that the mind and body act on each other in often remarkable ways. With the help of sophisticated new laboratory tools, investigators are demonstrating that emotional states can translate into altered responses in the immune system, the complex array of organs, glands, and cells that comprise the body's principal mechanisms for repelling invaders."

Researchers have discovered that the brain transmits messages to stimulate our defenses against disease and infection. These messages stimulate the body's production of chemicals that allow us to fight more aggressively. Their critical finding relevant to our topic is that the highways along which these communications take place can be clogged or opened by the kinds of feelings and thoughts the patient experiences. Negative expectations and down feelings can cause mammoth traffic jams that block the path of our inner healing mechanisms. From all this has come the young, but powerful discipline called psychoneuroimmunol-

ogy (PNI) which studies the interactions and communications between our brain, immune system and mind.

MINDLY INFLUENCES ON BODILY ACTIVITIES

Numerous examples of such mind/body communications exist. Cancer patients are being helped to develop more positive attitudes through relaxation exercises. They are also learning to use visual imagery as a psychological weapon against the invading cancer cells. Dr. Carl Simonton pioneered a combination of counseling, relaxation and visual imagery to aggressively combat the disease invaders. In a psychological version of Pac Man, the patient is asked to visualize some force within him/her overpowering and overcoming the cancer cells. Positive results have been achieved by these positive oriented efforts.

In addition, research has linked depression with cancer suggesting that there is some connection between emotion and susceptibility to disease. Of interest is that researchers are finding that social isolation may be as major a risk factor in disease and terminal illness as cigarette smoking. Similarly, those with friends and family around are healthier and more resistant to disease and resilient in their recovery. Passivity is another factor that is positively correlated with disease and terminal illness. Those more assertive in nature and more in control of key elements in their life, are heartier, healthier and more able to combat disease.

Needless to say, emotional stress impacts health directly and indirectly. A variety of stress related disorders such as ulcers, high blood pressure, headaches, gastritis, and the like, demonstrate the close connection between mind and body. Research also shows that those under high levels of stress are more susceptible to disease and less able to fight back effectively.

On a simpler and more practical level is the notion of "will to live." Many critically ill people have overcome the odds and pleasantly surprised their physicians and family by

their will. We hear of those "too tough" to die and those whose drive and determination produced miracles. We even were told that the whales made it safely out of their ice impacted trap because they had the "will to live."

A long known and only recently appreciated mindly influence has to do with placebos. There have been many instances where giving people a pill made of sugar and suggesting it would help make a significant healthful difference had done just that. While in reality the "medicine" has no chemical or physical value, the patient's beliefs and expectations were powerful enough to induce positive bodily changes.

The same is true of hypnosis which through mental suggestion can often completely block out pain, numb certain areas, accelerate healing and the like. It can also influence territories once thought not to be susceptible to our control such as heart rate, blood pressure, blood flow, etc. Once again, these findings reflect the mental potentials that we possess to constructively or destructively influence our physical well being.

The same is true of love. Bernie Siegel, M.D., a surgeon, has found that encouraging loving feelings and positive expectations among cancer patients can have powerful affects upon their emotional state and ultimate fate. He encourages his patient's to enter Exceptional Cancer Patients, individual and group therapy emphasizing "carefrontation."

Chemically speaking, much is being learned about the body's natural production of agents that help us relax, dull pain, and protect or retaliate against disease agents. Findings reflect that our minds directly and indirectly influence the secretion of these important components of our wellness and comfort.

WHAT'S A SICK PERSON TO DO?

Obviously it is not easy to be positive in the face of serious, uncomfortable, life threatening conditions. This is especially true in chronic situations

which drain us of energy and strip us of hope. Conditions for which only intermittent relief can be achieved leave us upset, distressed and negative. Job's "Why Me?" question exists in all who are forced to suffer at the hands of fate and who must endure physical trauma and disruption on an ongoing basis. Though not quite as bad in time limited recovery, the early stages of any physical problem is emotionally draining as well. Yet all we know suggests the more positive we can be, the more successful our recovery or adaptation.

Clearly, you need to try as best you can to pump mental iron to compensate for sagging feelings and deflated attitudes and expectations. You need to hang on to a variety of positive perspectives and fight the undermining forces that lead you down depressing paths into blind alleys. You also need to be able to draw strength from those who are trying to help and be supportive.

All's fair in love, war and illness. Whatever works is allowed. In many respects illness is a war. It is a battle between your healthful, healing parts and the invading physical pirates who are trying to steal the treasures of your life. Just as you would fight off those who tried to invade your home, so you must defend your body against whatever physical forces have invaded it.

By striving to generate positive expectations and by using any of the techniques we will describe, you will be protecting yourself and fortifying your fight with solid ammunition. Just as you have successfully waged a variety of struggles to achieve your goals, so you must now do battle with those physical forces undermining your health and wellness. Your mind, when properly programmed, is an able resource to help you protect and defend your body.

If you are a care giver to someone going through an illness, your role is to help them fight and mobilize their positive resources. Obviously that is not an easy or envious job. Sick people are often grouchy, cranky, impatient, and irritable. Trying to inject positiveness may be like trying to climb a tall

mountain without assistance, gear, or practice. But climb we must in a labor of love to inject hope and positive feelings into our charges emotional veins.

While not wanting to annoy or aggravate the patient, our gentle and consistent positive influence can go a long way in helping them see things optimistically. Although altering people's attitudes is not an easy or automatic task, neither is it an impossible one. Be patient with your patient. It will take some time for the natural healing process to begin. Your role is to prime the pump when you can. You also need to take care of yourself and be aware of the multitude of conflicted feelings within you. Fears, guilts, angers, etc., need to be vented and resolved.

If in fact our attitudes influence our health, then two things become clear. First, it is important for us to maintain positive attitudes on an ongoing basis. This will influence our health and wellness in a positive way and help protect us from invasion. Second, when we are sick we need to muster as much positive energy as possible to help move us toward health. Mobilizing positive energy will help to mobilize our immune system to its fullest capacity.

STIMULATING THE HEALING PROCESS

There is no owner's manual when it comes to installing a positive perspective. Neither is there any magic. The important thing is to try and to be motivated to continue the pursuit of more optimistic expectations. This is especially true if you have tended to be a negative person even when you were healthier. Striving toward positive expectations will bring you closer to them. Seeking professional help toward these goals is also of value.

It is possible for things to be otherwise. I met a man recently who is suffering from a terminal illness. He has undergone a variety of treatments, all of which have been helpful in combating the disease. His doctors unanimously agree that his positive attitudes have also been very helpful. Though not always an upbeat person, he made

peace with some of the ghosts of his past. He has embraced life optimistically and fully enjoys every day.

He is able to ride the down times of physical discomfort resulting from treatments by looking toward a better tomorrow. A fighter by nature, he challenges the invading forces to a battle royal. He is accepting his inevitable fate, but also fighting hard to not be consumed by it. Relaxation, exercise, balanced nutrition, and fun are all part of his armor. At least three times a day he uses visual imagery in which the fire breath of a dragon consume the invaders of his body. So far he is defying the odds and has won at each crisis point. He is both an inspiration and a demonstration of the powerful potentials of medical technology and mental attitude working together to fight back and survive. Nowhere is Darwin's "Survival of the Fittest" finding more relevant than to our own struggles to survive.

The same is true of a quiet, gentle woman whom I have met. An aneurism threatened both her life and her functioning. At one point her surgeon warned her best chance was as a blind and wheel chair bound person. At 38 years of age this seemed unjust to her. Rather than go with that dire prediction, she invented her own scenario.

Moonbeams helped her cause. She saw them dancing brightly through her head helping to heal. They guided her surgeons knife and helped him avoid severing important connections. As she visualized these, she gained hope and her optimism twinkled beyond reasonable expectation. In so doing she beat the odds. With her vision and mobility intact she radiates a smile almost all of the time. Her sentence revoked, she is enjoying life as never before, convinced beyond a shadow of doubt that mindly moonbeams can light the way.

Here are some ways you can begin to influence the healing process by turning toward more positive anticipations and optimistic outcomes:

AFFIRMATIONS

We truly are what we think. Affirmations are positive statements that

we repeat over and over, silently or out loud. In them we affirm our rights and our goals, our dreams and our wishes. Stating them enables us to energize in their direction. Repeating them makes them more believable to those negative parts of us. Initially, you may just be mouthing words, but eventually you will come to embrace these statements and embody their ideals. Make up your own affirmations or choose from these:

I am o.k. It will take time but I will heal and be better.

I cannot worry what will be. I enjoy each day for all that it offers me.

I am overcoming this. I have the power to help myself heal. All of my energy is directed toward my recovery.

I deserve to feel well and those feelings will return.

There is much to be thankful for. I can look past my pain to more pleasant experiences.

My will to live is strong. I will fight with all my strength for my health.

RELAXATION TRAINING

Important to our wellness is to be able to relax, to feel comfortable, to sleep deeply, to be at peace within our minds and bodies. Relaxation training offers easy to follow mental concentration exercises to create feelings of peacefulness and calm. It can be used repeatedly throughout the day. It can be called upon to offset pain or uncomfortable treatments. Such a relaxation program gives you a sense of control over your mind and body, a feeling often missing in a person enduring an illness and treatments.

Many books and cassette tapes dealing with relaxation training are readily available. Many hospitals and doctors' offices have relaxation specialists who can be of assistance. Many counseling centers have staff members who specialize in biofeedback relaxation, autogenic training, meditation, self-hypnosis and other relaxation techniques. Of all the different help psychology offers, relaxation works easiest and most directly.

GUIDED IMAGERY TECHNIQUES

Combining relaxation training with visualization is a very powerful technique. Each of us possesses the ability to close our eyes and picture a variety of images. We can go by mental power to a farm, mountain range, beach or snow scene. We can see ourselves actively engaged or passively observing the scene. We can bring in others or not as we see fit. We can create symbols in our minds eye to represent anything we like.

If I told you to close your eyes and create a force of health helpers for yourself you could do it. They might be people, colored lights, dragons, pac man-like figures, moonbeams or butterflies. They could be anything your mind conjured up. Similarly you could create visual images to represent the unhealthy forces within you. In so doing you could visualize your health helpers ridding your body of those unhealthy forces. They could be removed through force, gentle persuasion or love. You need to choose the way consistent with your own nature.

Your health bearers can attack these villainous viruses or simply show them the door. Such guided imagery can actually help in the healing and recovery process. If needed, seek out psychological assistance to help you develop a visualization and relaxation program. Healthful, powerful, in control visualization is far better than the weak and defeated pictures we tend to flash ourselves during times of illness and distress. Taking control of ourselves is a powerful energizer of healing.

REASSESS WAYS OF DEALING AND FEELING

Illness can be one of the most powerful catalysts to change. In contemplating our life and death potentials, we naturally assess ourselves and our lives. In times of illness, we are acutely aware of gaps in our lives or less than prideful parts of ourselves. It is a good time to take stock and plan for some changes. We won't become completely

different people as that is neither realistic nor desirable. We can, however, fine tune some things that would enhance our feelings about ourselves and our lives.

Similarly, we can begin to assess our typical ways of seeing situations, reacting to them and dealing with feelings about them. Dysfunctional, avoidant, or negative tendencies can be modified. Developing more positive beliefs can be encouraged while optimistic anticipations can replace negative thinking traps. Confronting and resolving feelings can replace stuffing or denying them.

Sometimes books can be helpful in accomplishing these goals. Other times working with a counselor can help to stimulate new beliefs and behaviors. Counseling can also help us to understand why we held onto hurtful ways thereby paving the way for growth and change. Though our minds tend to resist change, illness provides an ideal opportunity to search for healthier ways of thinking, feeling and doing. These healthier states of mind can help us achieve healthier bodily states, while generally enhancing the quality of our life.

POSITIVE DISTRACTION

Life is endurable largely because we can distract ourselves from emotional conflicts and painful times. Going to work, visiting friends, exercising, taking a class, playing golf, going out to lunch, all serve a healthy, distracting function. When we are sick many of these distractions are unavailable to us. When we do not feel well it is hard to be distracted from our pain, discomfort, weakness or fear.

All the more reason for you to push yourself into positive distractions. TV, though helpful to some, is not sufficient. If you are able, crafts can provide both distraction and a sense of accomplishment. Doing puzzles (word or pictorial) does the same as does cleaning, organizing, sorting through old photographs, and the like. Whatever suits you and fits into your situation is something to seek out. Allow time

each day for positive distractions. Many people have discovered hidden talents while they were sick. These can be continued after recovery as enjoyable and prideful pastimes.

VENTILATION THRU WRITING

Many strong emotions surge during illness. Often there is no one to talk to other than friends and relatives who visit. With them conversations must be kept light and simple. While one can be more open with care givers, other factors typically interfere.

To keep positive attitudes, motivations and behaviors flowing, toxic feelings need to be dumped. Angers, fears, aggravations from others etc. need to be released to prevent their build up to depressing, anxiety provoking levels. Such accumulations prevent positive expectations and bury them with polluted feelings.

If you can, try writing about your experiences and feelings as a way of venting them, or talk into a tape if that is easier. What you write need not be profound nor do you need to share it with anyone. You can write it and rip it up or save it for future review and disposal. That you write is what's helpful. It gets what is inside you out and cleanses your mind of toxic material. It can be done in diary form or as not to be mailed letters to relevant people (i.e., Dear Doctor, Dear Hospital Administrator, Dear Brother, etc.). It can be orderly or rambling, coherent or free associative. That it expresses what you truly feel is all that is important in terms of paving the way for positive feelings and outcomes.

READING INSPIRATIONAL PRAYERS AND MESSAGES

Just as affirmations are helpful in sustaining positive attitudes, so reading inspiring materials can help give you added strength and hope. You may find such messages in a variety of sources depending upon your beliefs and interests. In addition to the Bible, Kahil Gibran's writings, classic poetry by a variety of authors etc., there are

many books of inspiration material available. In addition, there are also biographical books dealing with people who have overcome major illness, accidents, and handicaps which can provide a model of strength in rising to the challenges through positive "won't quit" attitudes. As much as anything, such sagas shout out our mindly strengths over our bodily limitations.

LOUD LOOSE LAUGHTER

You may think it sounds funny, but laughter has a healing influence on us. Like tears it vents feelings and buried angers. When we are ill it is hard to laugh. We are distressed and sad. Our thoughts are heavy and grim. We are angry. All the more reason to laugh or at least try.

Buy funny books, rent funny movies, and listen to funny tapes. See the humor in everything. From certain angles the world is a joke. So are we. Try to stop taking it all so seriously. Laughing is an elixer of helpful, healthful healing. Try as best you can to include it in your life generally, and especially when you are sick and having medical

problems. You will be pleasantly surprised by its positive effects.

KEEP STRIVING TOWARD A HEALTHIER, HAPPIER PLACE

We have come full circle; from creating your own inspiring, affirming messages, to borrowing them from others, to not taking very much very seriously. Any way you slice it, the burden and responsibility is yours. You can choose to feel sorry for yourself, hold negative expectations and be depressed and miserable. In so doing you can work against yourself and your recovery by blocking natural paths to healing.

Or you can choose to struggle against the tide in ways that will speed up your recovery and sustain you during these difficult times. Similarly you can choose to be grouchy and irritable or pleasant and appreciative to those trying to be helpful. You can choose to follow these suggestions or to shrug them off as silly, unhelpful or impossible to achieve.

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are making a choice between health and illness; between striving to limit pain or perpetuate it; between striving toward speeding up healing or retarding recovery; between striving toward survival or not. Those are serious choices and should not be taken lightly. Using your mind to help overcome bodily problems is not easy. So what? Nothing you've done that had worth was simple or straight forward. All of the important happenings in your life took effort and energy, patience and persistence. You have everything to gain and nothing, absolutely nothing to lose by following these positive prescriptions. So do it. Do it now. Do it for yourself and for those who care about you.

Take a dragon fire "pill" or a moonbeam "capsule" or any other elixer of emotion and prepare to engage the enemy and take control of the situation. Hear the battlecry bugle call of the cavalry, smell the sweat of the horses, and see yourself at the front of the line racing toward recovery. Go for it. Now!

Good Luck.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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