

## Blog 8

### **Professor Helen Payne, University of Hertfordshire, discusses the inter-connection between our minds and bodies and how understanding this connection can help with the treatment of unexplained 'physical' symptoms.**

1. Our bodies and minds are profoundly inter-related. Neuroscience research tells us that our thoughts are governed by our emotions, which are, in turn, grounded in our bodies. If we can learn to explore the emotional content of our physical symptoms, even understand their purpose perhaps, we are more likely to be able to self-manage them.

Our emotional distress, such as when we are fearful, anxious or depressed often disconnects us from others. We are told that these feelings mean we are unwell in our mental health, in our minds. This distress is seen as separate and distinct from physical symptoms in our bodies, our physical health. We have a mental and physical healthcare system, without a connection between the two. Symptoms such as irritable bowel syndrome, ME, fibromyalgia, chronic pain, asthma or eczema are understood to mean that we are unwell in our bodies.

However, ground-breaking research demonstrates that there is a complex and dense inter-connectedness between the brain and the body, meaning that the split between body and mind in medicine is unhelpful. The brain is entwined with the whole body through the nervous system via the spinal cord for example, including all the systems, organs, musculature, liquids and chemicals constantly influencing the brain. There actually is no separation between body and mind.

Your whole being is ever changing; new pathways are forming in your brain as you read this. We are dynamically predisposed to all influences. We can become hyper- (over) aroused or hypo- (under) aroused at any one time. We can freeze – becoming rigid in body and mind, or be shut down and numb. When balanced in body and mind we can feel peaceful and connected with ourselves and others. Learning to listen to our bodies, to the signals termed symptoms, such as pain or other physical symptoms, can help us to regulate ourselves.

2. We can use bodily symptoms as a gateway to the self-healing/management of conditions by accepting that both body and mind are connected to the point of being one and the same. Awareness practices to support feelings of wellbeing and resilience to cope with unexplained symptoms such as pain, and life events including trauma, can help us to learn that both body and mind are connected, enabling us to feel more in control of our unexplained symptoms, pain and our feelings of depression and anxiety, promoting feelings of wellbeing. If we are able to re-connect our body with our mind we discover powerful insights and practical skills to help us associate intensely with our body as a source of effective knowledge and healing potential - our **body wisdom**. Accessing this source of wisdom can help us to transcend many common, yet challenging, physical and emotional issues. This embodied, enactive approach is a new and exciting, emergent field. Professionals including doctors, psychologists, neuroscientists, researchers, movement psychologists, counsellors/psychotherapists in the health care and wellbeing fields are becoming much more aware of the role our bodies play in emotional distress. The secrets for transforming our relationship with our body in a holistic way can be learned so that we can experience more life force energy, creativity and resilience on a sustained basis over time.

3. When we are not in alignment with our body's wisdom, our bodies send us all sorts of 'signals' – both big and small.

Here are some of the many signals termed 'symptoms' you may have experienced:

- Stress, anxiety/fear
- Lethargy and fatigue
- Over-eating & weight gain / under-eating
- Isolation, loneliness
- Depression
- Sleep disturbances/insomnia
- Lack of creativity/motivation
- Chronic unexplainable physical conditions (e.g. IBS; fibromyalgia; chronic fatigue; headache; chronic pain; backache; numbness; skin conditions; dizziness; palpitations)

4. Research at the University of Hertfordshire has demonstrated that movement can help increase wellbeing and prevent pain. For example, if you stand, balanced between your two feet hip width apart with knees slightly bent, holding your head high, bending and stretching your knees and swinging your arms gently around your torso in a co-ordinated rhythm for a sustained period of time you will generate chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins zoom around making you feel less down so you can do more. This increased activity level then results in a spiral upwards towards feelings of wellbeing. Furthermore, these endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of physical pain, increasing still further your activity levels.

This and other insights into the bodymind connection have contributed to the development of a research – informed clinical service, The BodyMind Approach® is used for individual and group processes for people to learn to self-manage their unexplained physical symptoms.