

# mind-body connection

Ever experienced butterflies in your stomach before a presentation? A buzz of excitement when thinking about that holiday? The warm fuzzy feeling of spending time with a loved one? These are just some examples of how emotions are experienced in the body, and how our mind can influence our physical state.

The connection between our thoughts, emotions, and physical state is commonly known as the mind-body connection. Although certainly not a new concept, the role of the mind is increasingly recognised in models of physical illness and in frameworks of optimal physical health.

The mind and body are inextricably linked and in a state of constant communication. This occurs through a shared language – involving neurochemical, hormonal and electrical messengers – that are released by the brain and endocrine, nervous, and immune systems. Importantly, this communication is bi-directional, meaning that the mind can influence the body, and vice versa.

Not only can our physical health impact our mental wellbeing (think regular exercise and sleep for mental alertness), but our thoughts, beliefs, expectations, and emotional experiences can influence the physical functioning of the body. Similarly, our beliefs, expectations, and emotional responses to physical experiences such as pain or injury can impact how well, and how quickly, our bodies recover.

Adopting a holistic approach to wellbeing involves understanding that the mind and body are interconnected and inseparable systems; optimal care of one requires us to look after the other.

## evidence

Research shows that neglect of our mental wellbeing can contribute to numerous physical

disorders, such as heart disease, diabetes, chronic pain, migraine, and digestive complaints. In contrast, cultivating positive emotional and cognitive styles can increase immune function, facilitate healing, bolster physical health, and help us to live longer.

## wellbeing

Regular positive emotions (e.g., joy, contentment, gratitude) can:

- Improve immune system functioning
- Reduce pain severity and manage chronic pain
- Increase longevity

Optimistic beliefs about how your treatment will work and the recovery process, can:

- Contribute to better pain management and recovery from injury
- Contribute to better physical health and recovery from illness.

- **The mind & body are inextricably linked and communicating.**
- **The mind can help heal the body.**
- **An unwell mind can contribute to physical illness, and vice versa.**
- **Knowing about the mind-body connection can help you heal, recover and thrive.**

## stress & ill health

Mental distress and ill-health:

- Loneliness is a greater predictor of early death than is obesity, high blood pressure or smoking.
- Grief over losing a loved one can physically damage the heart ("broken heart syndrome").

Chronic mental stress is linked to:

- Impaired cellular repair
- Heart disease
- Autoimmune disorders (e.g. psoriasis)
- Endocrine disorders (e.g. diabetes)
- Gastrointestinal disorders (e.g., irritable bowel).

Gut health impacts mental health via:

- Imbalances in neurotransmitter production (85% of serotonin and 50% of dopamine production occurs in the gut).
- Imbalances in gut microbiota, which can contribute to depression and anxiety.

## taking action

### cultivate calm

Reduce stress and build calm and focus with the following actions:

- Deep, slow breathing
- Mindfulness & meditation
- Yoga or Qigong

### positive emotions

Cultivating positive emotions activates the body's rest & repair functions, by activating the parasympathetic nervous system and increasing heart rate variability. Take action by:

- Building an optimistic outlook
- Laughing more or seeing the funny side of life
- Practicing gratitude

### connect

People matter. Take care of your social world by:

- Taking time for family and friends.
- Smiling and saying hello to people in your community, e.g., a neighbour or colleague
- Having a mindful conversation

### express yourself

Avoiding our emotions can lead to suppression of the immune system. Learning to identify, name and sit with difficult emotions can help to regulate them better. Start by noticing and naming your emotions as they appear, e.g., "This is sadness".

### coaching or therapy

Chat to a psychologist for a tailored approach to help you heal, recover or build fitness for your mind and body.

## resources

### books

The Essence of Health, Dr Craig Hassed  
The Whole Health Life, Shannon Harvey

### video

The Connection at [www.theconnection.tv](http://www.theconnection.tv)

### apps

Mood Meter (emotional intelligence)  
Buddhify or Headspace (mindfulness)

### podcast

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/allinthemind/mind-body-connection/5882006>

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"Happier thoughts lead to essentially a happier biochemistry. Negative thoughts and stress have been shown to seriously degrade the body and the functioning of the brain, because it's our thoughts and emotions that are continuously reassembling, reorganizing, re-creating our body." John Hagelin