

How can we manage stress better?

Mind/Body Medicine: an idea whose time is now--even for teens!

Susan, a sixteen year old at the High School recently came to me because of fatigue. She had only been sleeping about six hours each night. Although she usually finished her homework by 10 pm, she was unable to fall asleep for over two hours. She described tossing and turning, worrying about the day gone by and the day ahead. Her appetite had been affected and she was finding it hard to concentrate at school in the morning. No one had identified any upsetting events in her life that might account for her feelings. She described pretty average stress from school, but had stable friendships and was getting along fine at home except her mom and dad were on her case to get more sleep. Try as she might, sleep would not come until nearly 1 am. Her parents had become very concerned and not sure what to think.*

*The name and story are fictitious but reflect a composite of true patients.

What is a doctor to do?

Traditionally, doctors might look at this case as a matter of normal adolescent “fatigue.” Or they might search for a medical cause such as anemia or hypothyroidism. Some might delve deeper into the issue of whether such a teenager might be depressed. Therapy might be suggested. Many doctors would actually prescribe sleeping medications, at least in the short term.

What more is there to do?

Fortunately, just before I saw Susan, I had the privilege of attending the “Spirituality and Healing in Medicine” conference in Boston. Sponsored by Herbert Benson, MD of Harvard and the Mind/Body Institute, the conference was a remarkable multi-disciplinary gathering of practitioners who think about the spiritual dimension to medicine and healing. If we consider overall health as a “three-legged stool” made steady by the triad of Surgery, Medications, and Self-care and we realize that over 60% of all healthcare visits in our country are for mind/body or stress-induced conditions, we realize that the “Self-care” leg is the least developed in our culture.

I knew that in order to “heal” Susan I would need to understand more about her. The dimensions we explored included her spirituality and her stress-what induces it and how she responds to it. Sure enough, when I asked her “What gives your life meaning and purpose?” she emitted an audible sigh, and got teary eyed as she explained that she has been quietly grappling with the meaning of God and her religious identity. Triggered by the long and sorrowful death of her beloved grandmother six months ago, she had not been comfortable talking with anyone about it, but would often think of her and the “Meaning of Life” late at night.

You mean there is treatment for this?

What is “Spirituality” as it relates to medicine? “Spirituality...is expressed in an individual’s search for ultimate meaning through participation in , among other things, religion or belief in God, family, work, naturalism, rationalism, and humanism.” As surprising as it might seem, this definition comes from the Association of American Medical Colleges. More and more often doctors are being taught in their standard curriculum to incorporate a sense of “spirituality” –the patient’s and their own---into the care they extended to patients. In the first year program at Albert Einstein College of Medicine an afternoon of workshops is dedicated to religion and spirituality.

What Mind/Body Medicine teaches is that these questions and beliefs are a core part of each of us, even adolescents, and that true well-being and healing need to take this into account. I was able to talk to Susan about how normal such questions are and to help her recognize the importance of her own spirituality.

I told her about the Relaxation Response, a discovery made by Dr Benson over thirty years ago. The Relaxation Response is the body’s learned ability to bring itself to a relaxed, anti-stressed, state through the repetition of a word (such as ‘peace’), sound(breathing), prayer(Our Father who...), thought(imagining something beautiful), phrase(‘Om’) or muscular activity(knitting or exercise). When everyday thoughts intrude, if the mind returns to the repetition, eventually the train of everyday thought will be broken. With practice, the space that is created by this process of meditating will be filled with calm, answers, and peace.

So how does one really do this?

The technique is really quite simple to learn. I suggested Susan spend two sessions with me learning the basic techniques of breathing, meditation and relaxation and that she go home to practice them. I also suggested she consider taking a Yoga class at one of the many local programs that have sprung up.

Why Yoga? Because at the core of yoga is the combination of poses (*asanas*) and breathing exercises (*pranayamas*) which are the basic Benson repetitive actions that will induce a Relaxation Response and lead to a marked decrease in anxiety.

After two sessions in my office and practicing at home with email encouragement from me for two weeks, Susan returned to my office and reported that she was able to sleep after practicing her “breathing” at bedtime. She was amazed at how simple the process seemed and how much more easily she was able to control her anxiety and some of her thoughts. As a practitioner, I was amazed at how frequently we see “co-morbid” or “mind/body” conditions that we need only ask about to uncover and begin to treat.

We still don’t know the “Meaning of Life” but Susan is enjoying a better One in the mean time.