
The Beacon

Guiding You Through the Process of Change

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The Physician as Mental Health Consultant

You may wake up one morning and notice that you don't feel well. It could be that your stomach feels upset, your head hurts or your shoulders feel very tight or you feel stiff and sore all over. Or you've been tired for weeks, unable to fall asleep or waking up several times throughout the night and feeling exhausted in the morning. So you think to yourself, I should see my doctor, I probably have a bug of some kind, or (s)he'll give me something to help with my pain or allow me to sleep better.

Today, there is an enormous body of research that demonstrates the existence of a mind-body connection. What happens to you physically can affect your emotions and how you feel about situations and events can affect you physically. This means that physical symptoms sometimes can have a psychological cause, and the treatment, therefore, should address the psychological rather than just the physical, or a combination of the two approaches.

You may not realize it but your primary care or family physician, your first stop for medical attention, can also be your first stop for psychological attention. Your doctor will check you out physically by taking a history of your symptoms, doing some tests in the office, or sending you for tests such as blood work. However, this professional also has expertise in recognizing when symptoms may have a psychological, rather than physical, explanation and which methods are best for dealing with these psychologically based issues.

Hopefully, your physician will question you about how you are feeling about your life at the time of the appointment. If not, take the initiative and bring up the topic yourself. This is the time to be open with him/her about any issues that may be disturbing you or causing you distress. These issues could include feeling stressed, down, or worried much of the time,

job concerns, marital problems, family problems, difficulty managing life events, or feeling that you just aren't happy with the course of your life. Strange as it may seem, any one of these issues could result in you experiencing physical symptoms, which you might mistake for a virus or a lumpy mattress. Even if you believe that you are coping just fine, you may be surprised to learn the cumulative toll that stressful life events can take on our body and mind. There should be nothing embarrassing about speaking to your doctor about what is going on in your life that may be affecting what is going on in your body. Primary care and family physicians are accustomed to looking for signs of psychological stress and distress in their patients, and can provide you with referrals to qualified mental health professionals who can help you directly address the issues underlying your physical discomforts and symptoms.

So, by all means, schedule a consultation appointment with your primary care or family physician. Let him/her know all of your physical complaints. But also be sure to bring up what else is going on in your life that may be directly or indirectly influencing how you are feeling and how your body is functioning. Your physician possesses the knowledge to sort out which symptoms should be treated medically and which symptoms should be evaluated from a psychological perspective as well as the experience to point you in the right direction.

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Suggested Readings:

Borysenko, Joan. Minding the Body, Mending the Mind. Bantam New Age Books, 1988.

Chopra, Deepak. Perfect Health: The Complete Mind/Body Guide. Harmony, 2001.

Kabat-Zinn, Jon. Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Mind to Face Stress Pain and Illness. Delta, 1990.

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