

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DOCTOR – Emotions Cause Real

Symptoms and Illness by Ann Gerhardt, MD
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Bottom Line at the Top: Emotions and psychological stress cause physical symptoms and disease and should not be ignored.

A recent article in the Journal of the American Heart Association highlighted the cause and effect relationship between stressful events and heart disease. In the article patient vignettes illustrate how sudden cardiac arrhythmias or heart failure have followed severe emotional distress. One woman, who witnessed her husband's cardiac arrest, resuscitation and death, spent weeks in a coma and cardiogenic shock. It wasn't hysterical shock – she had real cardiac damage and almost died.

Disease resulting from emotional stress is not new. In the 1950's women were given Valium. Men were assumed to have no emotion-induced symptoms or illness because they presumably could control their emotions. Then doctors identified the connection between certain personalities types and heart disease. **Scientists noted higher cancer, heart disease and death rates in patients of either sex who had suffered major life stressors, like death of a family member, job loss, major relocation or loss of a home.** The mind-body connection became harder to ignore.

We know little about what causes the connection and even less about how to influence it to improve health. For now, doctors establish that your teenage daughter is the cause of your belly pain, feel their work is done and send you home to buck up and carry on. They (usually) are not un-caring: The doctor's black bag just doesn't contain get-a-life or just-deal pills.

The article goes on to explain the possible physiologic mechanisms by which psychological shock might induce cardiac decompensation. **Extensive hormonal, circulatory and regulatory systems monitor what's happening to and in our bodies all the time. Those systems respond in times of stress, theoretically to keep us alive and functioning.** Blocking them completely in order to prevent stress-induced disease might harm us. We need those systems for 'flight-or-fight' reactions that save us in near-miss driving mishaps and severe infections.

Scientists are working on approaches to modify our physiologic reactions to prevent disease. We already know that some stress-induced chest pain is due to blood vessel spasm that can be prevented with a class of blood pressure medications called calcium channel blockers. We know that emotional tension can cause tension headaches, irritable bowel spasm and back and neck pain, treatable with muscle

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relaxants. We don't yet understand why or how stress induces spasm.

Will elimination of psychological stress solve the problem? Would a frontal lobotomy and heavy sedatives really prevent disease? Knowing how to interrupt the signaling network between stress and potentially damaging physiologic responses is stuff of the future.

In the meantime, stop being embarrassed about your mind-body connection. We all have it. Some of us are more aware of it than others. Those who deny that it exists are oblivious, arrogant or naïve. Acknowledging it as a cause of symptoms and medical disease could possibly lead to change that improves your existence. Pushing your doctor to help deal with the mind-body connection, rather than blowing it off, gives you an ally rather than a critic.