

Editorial – August 2006

“He died of a broken heart”.

Of course, no one’s heart fractures into pieces, but we all seem to understand the phrase.

Similar expressions are, “losing face”, “my boss is a pain in the back”.

It would be safe to assume that “broken heart” implies disappointments, grief, and “losing face” implies loss of reputation. Both are psychologically traumatic experiences and they take a toll on our health.

It is interesting how we try to explain our emotions and feelings in a language which includes our bodies. Could it be that for generations, we have known that mind and body are interconnected?

A mind under duress can lower our immune system. As a result we may become more susceptible to illnesses, ongoing aches and pains, ulcer, fatigue, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, etc. Stresses and depression may also lead to overeating, hence obesity.

Similarly, a body experiencing biochemical changes or trauma can influence our memory, moods, the way we look at the world and behaviours.

Inter-relationship between heart disease and mental health has already been established. Acute anxiety can lead to chest pain. Prolonged stresses can lead to heart diseases including increased mortality.

People with a cynical attitude towards life tend to have the same fate.

It is estimated that one out of six people will experience symptoms of depression after a heart attack, bypass surgery or even a diagnosis of heart disease.

A number of medical disorders have been observed to be associated with depression, i.e. a variety of neurological disorders (stroke, Parkinson’s disease and dementia, such as Alzheimer’s disease), lung diseases, endocrine disorders and cancer. However, the good news is that effectiveness of treatments (medical treatments coupled with counseling and social supports) have also been established in the process of recovery and improvement in the quality of life.

Suffering from various ailments and being in chronic pain may mean we are more irritable, impatient, impulsive, anxious and even depressed.

On the other hand, positive and happy thoughts / feelings and attitudes contribute to our quality of health and wellness. People with chronic illness, including cancer learn to adjust and adapt to a new lifestyle. In this sense, such medical conditions are deeply transformative, leading to a never ending struggle. Such experiences are taxing, not only to the people but their families and friend who must learn to cope with the care and suffering of their relative.

A change in physical health may precipitate depression. Depression can lead to disturbances in sleep, loss of appetite, loss of energy, social withdrawal, unhealthy lifestyle and loss of motivation. This in turn may complicate medical conditions when we fail to exercise, eat and rest well or neglect our health.

Diabetes also has a mind and body implication. It is considered to be a serious chronic and progressive disease with links to depression, cardiovascular illness and other serious health conditions including blindness and kidney failure. Diabetes is a challenge to manage – both mentally and medically.

Excessive weight gain can complicate both physical and mental well being. Health risks of weight gain include hypertension, atherosclerosis, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and stroke. There are mental health consequences such as loss of self esteem, loss of interest in self care, social withdrawal (thus loneliness), feelings of shame associated with the stigma of being overweight.

The good news is that healthy habits, physical fitness, mental wellbeing and a supportive environment collectively contribute towards overall health and happiness.

Some of the ways to build mental fitness are:

- 1) Get physically active. Regular exercises help reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, tension and stresses. It is a good distraction from negative thoughts and feelings. Physical activities improve moods, instill positive outlook, generate a sense of control over health and enhance self esteem. Physically active people have more social contacts.
- 2) Give yourself rest and time out. A relaxed, rested and re-energized body and mind can change the mental framework and enhance our creativity in problem solving.
- 3) Eat right. A healthy diet provides our bodies with essential nutrients which can improve our moods and energy levels.
- 4) Take control of stresses. Contact us to learn methods of coping with stresses in our lives.

In conclusion, being in good health means more than feeling physically well, it also means feeling mentally well. And yes, people do die of a “broken heart”.

Sincerely,

Naresh James
Editorial Board