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DEB SHAPIRO

# YOUR BODY SPEAKS YOUR MIND

Decoding the Emotional, Psychological, and  
Spiritual Messages That Underlie Illness



**sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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# **PART ONE**

FINDING MEANING IN THE  
MIDST OF CHAOS

# ONE

## MIND & MATTER UNITE

I want to make something very clear. Illness is real. Accidents happen. Medicine can help. I am not writing this book in order to convince you that the sole reason for your illness is in your mind and that you must have done something wrong or are to blame for being ill. And I am not saying that simply by understanding how the mind and body work together you will be able to miraculously cure yourself of whatever ails you.

What I am saying is that the role of the mind and emotions in your state of health is a vital one. It is only a part of the overall picture, but it is the part that is invariably overlooked. By understanding this relationship you can understand yourself more deeply and can claim a greater role in your own well-being. I remember having an upset stomach when I was a child and my grandmother asking me if I was having a problem at school. What she knew instinctively we are at last beginning to prove scientifically: that there is an intimate and dynamic relationship between what is going on in your life, with your feelings and thoughts, and what happens in

your body. Recently, a *Time* magazine special showed that happiness, hopefulness, optimism, and contentment “appear to reduce the risk or limit the severity of cardiovascular disease, pulmonary disease, diabetes, hypertension, colds, and upper-respiratory infections.” At the same time, according to this article, “depression—the extreme opposite of happiness—can worsen heart disease, diabetes, and a host of other illnesses.”

If we separate an organism into its component parts it cannot function. Each piece has a role to play, even if it is a very small role, so if only one part is malfunctioning it will affect the whole. Recently our car broke down. When we went to pick it up after it was fixed, we were told that it had been just one small wire that had caused the problem, yet the engine could not function properly without it. In the same way, if you ignore the role that your feelings and thoughts play, you are ignoring one of the most important component parts that make up your whole being. And it may be the one that needs to get fixed.

## AS YOU THINK SO YOU BECOME

Generally speaking, most of us tend to think of our bodies and minds as separate systems and believe they function, for the most part, independently. We feed and water the body, take it for walks, or give it exercise, and enjoy its sensory capabilities. Likewise, we feed the mind with ideas and intellectual pursuits and amuse it with various sorts of entertainment, while also experiencing all sorts of emotions that we usually attribute to the way we treat ourselves or how other people treat us: making us feel either good or bad. When anything goes wrong in any of these systems we go to someone to sort it out, such as a doctor to treat the body or a psychotherapist to treat the mind.

Yet instinctively we know that is not the whole story. For instance, can you remember the last time you had an interview for a job? Or went on a first date with someone you really wanted to impress? In either case, no doubt you wanted to appear calm and collected but at the same time you were feeling quite self-conscious and nervous. Can you recall how your body felt? Self-consciousness will

tighten your buttock muscles (so you are literally sitting on your tension), you will sweat more than usual, may feel slightly nauseous, and you will probably fluff your words, just when you want to appear suave and confident. In other words, your psycho-emotional state affects you physically. This much is easy to understand, but when it comes to more complex emotions or illnesses, few of us consider this relationship to be relevant. As there are obvious physical causes for illness, such as viruses or accidents, how can states of mind have anything to do with it? Emotions may influence the nerves, but how can that have any relevance when we're faced with a disease? As Geoffrey Cowley said in *Newsweek* magazine: "People may not be surprised that they blush when they are embarrassed, that a frightening thought can set their hearts racing, or a sudden piece of bad news can throw all their systems temporarily out of whack. Yet they find it hard to believe that mental abstractions like loneliness or sadness can also, somehow, have an impact on their bodies."

In this book I want to show you how the mind and body are not two but one—a single bodymind—and how every part of the body is the mind expressing itself through that part. When something goes wrong it is usually a *combination* of both physical and psycho-emotional causes. I am not saying that by understanding the bodymind relationship you will be able to cure all your physical difficulties. What I am saying is that such an understanding adds an essential, and invariably overlooked, component to your healing process.

By learning the bodymind language of symptoms and illness you can learn what is being repressed or ignored in your psyche and emotions and the effect this is having on your physical body. From this vantage point you will soon discover that there is an extraordinarily intimate two-way communication going on that affects both your physical state and your mental and emotional health.

#### THE EFFECT OF THOUGHTS REVIEW

This is a simple exercise that shows the effect that thinking has on the physical body. You need to do this with a partner.

**Stand at right angles to your partner.**

Hold your right arm (or left arm if you are left-handed) straight out in front of you at shoulder height. Your partner then puts his or her hand on your outstretched wrist. Now try to hold your arm steady while your partner tries to gently but firmly push your arm down (not too forcibly!). The aim is to find your natural level of resistance. Relax.

**Now close your eyes.**

For a few moments, think of something that makes you feel upset, sad, or depressed. When you get the feeling, stick your arm out and resist your partner trying to push your arm down. Then relax.

**Now think of something positive.**

Put your mind on something that makes you feel joyful and happy, that puts a smile on your face. When you have that feeling of happiness, stick your arm out and once more try to resist as your partner tries to push your arm down. Then relax.

**Switch roles.**

If you want, you can now change places and repeat this with your partner.

Most people notice an immediate difference between the two arm tests. They find that when they have upsetting or sad thoughts and feelings there is no ability to resist, as if all the energy has been sapped out of their arm. Yet when they focus on joyful thoughts and feelings the arm becomes strong and resists easily. In particular, notice how immediately your thoughts and feelings are translated into a physical response.

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**CHEMICAL SOUP**

The truth is that you are little more than a chemistry set. All your thoughts and feelings get translated into chemicals that fire off throughout your body, altering the chemical composition and behavior of your cells. Hence a sad feeling will influence the cells of

your tear ducts and make them produce tears, or a scary feeling will give you goose bumps or make your hair stand on end.

During the past ten years there has been a growing body of research showing how the mind and body respond to each other, clearly demonstrating how emotional and psychological states translate into altered responses in the chemical balance of the body. This in turn affects the immune, neural, endocrine, digestive, and circulatory systems.

But how does all this happen? How do your thoughts and feelings affect you physically? The answer, in a word, is neuropeptides. Secreted by the brain, the immune system, and the nerve cells, neuropeptides are chemical messengers that carry information from the mind to the body—and back again—through the body fluids. Every cell in the body is covered with thousands of receptor cells. Each receptor cell has a specific pattern that locks into specific neuropeptides. Once in position, the neuropeptides transmit information through the receptor cell into the cell itself, influencing the behavior of that cell. For instance, one of the neuropeptides is beta endorphin, which is responsible for that blissful feeling that every runner knows as the “runner’s high.” As endorphin receptor cells are found everywhere, that blissful state is experienced both in the brain and throughout the physical body.

Neuroscientists have known for some time that the limbic system is the emotional center of the brain. The limbic system includes the hypothalamus, a small gland that transforms emotions into physical responses. It also controls appetite, blood-sugar levels, body temperature, and the automatic functioning of the heart, lungs, and digestive and circulatory systems. It is like a pharmacy, releasing the neuropeptides necessary to maintain a balanced system.

In the limbic system sits the amygdala, a brain structure that is connected to fear and pleasure, and the pineal gland, which monitors the hormone system and releases powerful endorphins that not only act as painkillers but also as anti-depressants. This indicates the intimate relationship between the mind, the endocrine system, and the nervous system—the connection between how you feel and how you behave, between your emotions and your physical state.

Clusters of neuropeptides are found throughout the limbic system, the heart, the sexual organs, and the gut or stomach area, accounting for those moments when you have a “gut feeling” about something. Neuropeptides provide the link between perception, feelings, and thought, on the one hand, and the brain, hormonal secretions, and every cell of the body, including those of the immune system, on the other, thereby creating a single, whole-body communications system. In other words, each part or system of your body is listening and responding to your mental chatter, your every thought and feeling.

“We can no longer think of the emotions as having less validity than physical or material substance,” writes Candace Pert in *Molecules of Emotion*, “but instead must see them as cellular signals that are involved in the process of translating information into physical reality, literally transforming mind into matter.”

There is no major section of the physical system that is not influenced by your thoughts and feelings that in turn become neuropeptides or information messengers. “A basic emotion such as fear can be described as an abstract feeling or as a tangible molecule of the hormone adrenaline,” writes Deepak Chopra in *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*. “Without the feeling there is no hormone; without the hormone there is no feeling. The revolution we call mind-body medicine was based on this simple discovery: wherever thought goes, a chemical goes with it.”

So can we honestly say there is any real difference between one part of our being and another? Is the only difference the means of expression? H<sub>2</sub>O exists as water, steam, rain, sea, cloud, or ice, yet is still H<sub>2</sub>O. In the same way, your feelings are expressed through your behavior and actions, your voice, or through different chemicals and physical systems within your body. As Dianne Connelly writes in *Traditional Acupuncture: The Law of the Five Elements*: “The skin is not separate from the emotions, or the emotions separate from the back, or the back separate from the kidneys, or the kidneys separate from will and ambition, or will and ambition separate from the spleen, or the spleen separate from sexual confidence.”

This complex unity of body and mind is reflected in our state of physical health or illness. Each state is a means the bodymind has of giving us an indication of what is going on beneath the surface. If damage to one part of your being is repressed or ignored, then it can manifest as damage in another part. Having been rejected by your lover you walk out and hit the door, bruising your arm. Is the pain in your arm not expressing your feelings of anger or confusion at being pushed away? To say “I have hurt my arm” is the same as saying that “a hurt inside me is manifesting in my arm.” What the arm is expressing is simply a repressed form of the verbal expressions of anger or hurt. In his film *Manhattan*, Woody Allen brilliantly captures this bodymind relationship. When his girlfriend, played by Diane Keaton, announces that she is leaving him for another man, Allen does not respond. Keaton wants to know why he isn’t angry. “I don’t get angry,” Allen replies, “I grow a tumor instead.”

In the words of the great Indian Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda, “There is an innate connection between the mind and the body ... All diseases have their origins in the mind. The pains that affect the physical body are secondary diseases.” To isolate the effect (the illness) as being unconnected from anything else is to deny the cause. In which case the cause (underlying feelings and attitudes) will make another effect known at some other time: another area of disease or discomfort will arise in an attempt to show you where you are out of balance.

Thoughts have energy; emotions have energy. They make you do and say things, and act in certain ways. They make you jump up and down or lie prone in bed. They determine what you eat and who you love. The energy behind what you think and feel does not just disappear if it is held back or repressed. When you cannot, or do not, express what is happening on an emotional or psychological level, that feeling becomes embodied (you take it deeper within yourself) until it manifests through the physical body. The emotion most often repressed is rage, as that is often the most inappropriate or difficult to express. It may be rage from childhood issues, from current relationship or work issues, or from too many life changes.

Invariably, this rage is connected to a loss of control, which is also the most prevalent problem in stress-producing circumstances.

## THE STRESS FACTOR

Imagine you are trying to squeeze some toothpaste out of a tube but you have forgotten to take the top off (or to flip the lid!). What happens? The toothpaste has to find some other way out. This usually means that it will come out of the bottom of the tube or perhaps force a hole in the side—whatever or wherever is the weakest point.

Now imagine that the tube of toothpaste is you. You are under pressure and beginning to experience psychological or emotional stress. But you do not take your lid off, as it were, by recognizing what is happening and taking time to relax or deal with your inner conflicts. So what happens to the mental or emotional pressure building up inside you? Eventually it has to find a way out, and if it can't come out through the top (by being expressed and resolved), it will come out somewhere else. It will find the weakest point—whether through your digestive system, your nerves, your immune system, or your sleep patterns. Pushed down it becomes illness, depression, addiction, or anxiety; projected outward it becomes hostility, aggression, prejudice, or fear.

The clearest way to see how the mind directly affects the body is through stress. The cerebral cortex in the brain sounds the alarm whenever there is a form of perceived life-threatening or stressful activity. This affects the limbic and hypothalamus organization, which in turn affect hormone secretion, the immune system, and the nervous system. This fight-or-flight response enables you to respond to danger if, for instance, you are on the front line of a battle or face-to-face with a large bear. However, seemingly unimportant events can also cause a stress reaction because the brain is unable to tell the difference between real and imagined threats. When you focus on your fear about what *might* happen, it plays as much havoc with your hormones and chemical balance as when you confront a dangerous situation in real life. For instance, try remembering a gruesome scene from a horror movie, and you will feel the muscles

in your back, shoulders, or stomach contract. The images are just in your mind, yet they trigger an instant response in your body.

Being pushed or knocked during rush hour, coping with an ill child, dealing with a dispute with the neighbors—your response to all these situations has to be contained, for society does not normally permit you to react by screaming or throwing a tantrum. Suppressing the normal fight-or-flight response in this way means that the chemicals coursing through your body have nowhere to go. How are they to dissipate? How are they to find expression?

More importantly, the fight-or-flight response built into your body was only intended to be temporary. Once the danger has passed, the body is meant to come back to normal functioning. When there is consistent psychological and emotional pressure, the higher levels of adrenaline and cortisol that the stress response releases are sustained, leading to a compromised immune system and more likelihood of physical sickness.

Some of the physical symptoms that result from excessive stress are headaches, high blood pressure, heart palpitations, muscle tension, heavy breathing, disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, nausea, dry mouth, gastritis, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, backache, excessive sweating, rashes, acne, and hives. The immune system becomes compromised, so it is much easier to catch a cold or other infectious illness. Alongside these, there may be psychological changes such as depression, anger, rapid mood changes, and anxiety. You may also experience impaired concentration, memory loss, an inability to make decisions, confusion, irrational fears, self-consciousness, or marital and sexual problems. Behavioral changes may include sloppy dressing, fidgeting, sudden outbreaks of tears, over-indulgence in habits such as smoking or drinking, phobias, and impaired sexual performance. This is quite a list, and many of these symptoms can easily lead to more serious states of ill health.

The link between psychological stress and physical problems is perhaps best illustrated by research, cited by Dr. Larry Dossey in *Healing Breakthroughs*, which shows that more heart attacks occur on a Monday than on any other day of the week—and not only on

a Monday, but most often at 9 o'clock in the morning. No other animal dies more frequently on a particular day or time of the week. What causes so many heart attacks to take place just as the first work day of the week is about to begin? Obviously, job dissatisfaction does not always result in death! But the relationship between job stress and physical problems cannot be underestimated—millions of working days are lost each year due to the effects of such stress. A study carried out by Dr. Norman Beale found that redundancy (or the threat of it) led to a 20 percent increase in visits to doctors and a 60 percent rise in hospital visits.

Padma O'Gara's story shows how badly one's health can be affected by the stress of being in the wrong job:

"I had suffered from low-back pain for many years with pains down my legs. Doctors told me it was wear and tear. I managed to contain it through practicing yoga and was even able to teach yoga on a part-time basis, my main job being in the management sector of the Careers Service. Then in 1990 I started to have trouble with my eyes. I kept losing vision, and it was quite painful. I lost my vision for three weeks and was told it was glaucoma. Leading up to all this was a feeling that I was wasting my time in my job, that I should be teaching yoga more, rather than attending endless meetings at work. In the process of having two operations on my eyes I thought that I should finally resign, but I did not trust that I would manage financially. On returning to work, my back flared up very badly, and I was in considerable pain.

"A few months later I was given a proverbial push up the backside. I was driving on the motorway when a car hit me very hard from behind. I never saw what it was, but it knocked my car out of control, and my foot seemed to jam on the accelerator. I was going faster and faster. I was sure I was going to die. I found myself promising that if I lived I would give up my job and be true to my heart by teaching more. Immediately, I felt the accelerator lift and the car come under control.

"The next week I gave in my notice. Since then I have built a teaching practice and have thankfully not noticed the financial

change. What I have noticed is that my back problem is now non-existent and my eyes are fine. Finally, I feel that I can see where I am going, and it is in the right direction!”

Stress can arise at many times and in many different ways. In particular there is the emotional stress caused by major life changes such as moving house, getting married, or losing a loved one. At these times you may experience tremendous uncertainty and fear, nervous excitement, or overwhelming sadness. Emotions contract the muscles and blood vessels, heighten the release of hormones such as adrenaline, affect digestion and breathing, and weaken the immune system.

When I was eight years old, I was sent to boarding school, an experience I was not too thrilled about. Within a few weeks I had developed tonsillitis. In those days having your tonsils removed meant staying in the hospital for a week. After that I had a week at home, eating nothing but mashed potatoes and ice cream—good comfort foods! What those two weeks really did was reconnect me with home, security, and a sense of belonging. I then returned to school without further mishap. I can now see that the nature of the illness—infamed glands and a sore throat—indicated that I was having a very hard time swallowing my reality of being at boarding school.

However, that was not the end of the bodymind relationship. I was given gas (ether) to put me to sleep for the operation, but as I was going under I thought I was dying. For many years afterward, just as I was going to sleep, I would see coffins spinning around my room. In my twenties, when I was training in massage therapy, I was asked to be the model when it came to demonstrating massage on the neck. The other students all stood around me on the massage table. When the demonstration was over, I opened my eyes and my immediate thought was, “Why are all those people staring at a corpse?” It was only many years later that deep tissue massage was able to release the perceived memory of death from my neck and jaw.

Trauma does not necessarily equal illness, but unexpressed fears and anxieties surrounding trauma can lead to physical problems. Obviously, you cannot avoid crisis. What you can do is become more conscious of your feelings, acknowledging and releasing them