MIND-BODY CONNECTOR

"Fulfillment and joy happen in the present moment"

Let's get something straight. The mind and the brain are not one in the same. We can distinguish the mind as consisting of mental states, such as: thoughts, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and images. The brain, in contrast, is more like the hardware that allows us to experience these mental states, which can occur as being fully conscious or unconscious.

With that in mind, we can have emotional reactions to situations without being aware of why we are reacting. The general theme is that different mental states can positively or negatively affect our physical health. For our purposes, we don't need a dissertation about the human nervous, endocrine and immune systems or chemical responses with hormones and neurotransmitters.

Everyone is familiar enough with the connection of the body response to stress, be that muscle tension, pain, high blood pressure and stomach issues – butterflies notwithstanding. Physical problems, like heart disease, can also affect emotions in becoming anxious, depressed or further stressed.

Also well-established is how a positive outlook on life might help you better handle pain or stress and stay healthier than someone who is less hopeful. Then there's physical exercise that produces endorphins, which are natural painkillers and help balance mood.

It's easy to identify these examples of the mind-body connection, but there's a lot more to the practical side and getting into action, especially to handle stress most effectively.

This brings us to a combination of approaches to heal the mind, body and spirit along with ways to prevent compromising our well-being. Avoiding the buildup of toxic emotions is also about remaining present and aware aka mindfulness. Paying attention allows us to identify emotions as they arise, process them and choose how we react.

One way to effectively express, feel, and get your feelings out is to talk about them with a trusted friend or therapist or by journaling. Other techniques that focus on the interaction between the body, mind, and behavior include – but are far from limited to: Yoga, Tai Chi, guided imagery, hypnotherapy, biofeedback, prayer, meditation and mindful breathing practices in general.

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These can all be valuable tools for increasing awareness of the body's biological processes, such as heart rate and breathing patterns, all to help you manage emotions and mitigate their neurophysiological impacts.

The following mind-body activities can help you control of your mental and emotional health and create an environment within your body that supports health rather than disease. They also add to our mindfulness repertoire that can enrich our daily lives.

ACTIVITY: 1 – BODY SCAN (TIME: 5 MINUTES)

The body scan exercise is straightforward. You will pay attention to the physical sensations throughout your body. The goal isn't to change or relax your body, but instead to notice and become more aware of it. Don't worry too much about how long you practice, but do move slowly.

Begin by paying attention to the sensations in your feet. Notice any sensations such as warmth, coolness, pressure, pain, or a breeze moving over your skin. Slowly move up your body – to your calves, thighs, pelvis, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck, and, finally, your head. Spend some time on each of these body parts, just noticing the sensations.

After you travel up your body, begin to move back down, through each body part, until you reach your feet again. Remember: move slowly, and just pay attention.

Suggestion: Create a guided recording very slowly describing the above and use to do.

ACTIVITY: 2 – BREATHING AWARENESS (TIME: 5 MINUTES)

For this simple exercise, you only need to do it – nothing else. Also, you can do it any time, so no one will know that you are doing it, including in public.

Simply stop everything you are doing and focus on your breath. Every time you get distracted by an anxious thoughts or worry, just bring your attention back to your breathing. This exercise is great because it pairs respiratory control with mindfulness for situations when anxiety is too difficult to manage.

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Imagine you are climbing up the ladder to a slide where you breath in deeply. When you exhale, imagine you are sliding down the slide. Pause to get back to the ladder and climb back up when you breath in, slide down while breathing out.

Now imagine a glass filling or a balloon inflating while you breath in, emptying while your breath out.

As you finish your breathing exercise, how do you feel? Calm? Less worried? Happy?

ACTIVITY: 3 – MINDFUL EATING P1 (TIME: 3-5 MINUTES)

Choose a food you would like to practice with (ideally something you can hold in your hand without getting messy). Something as simple as a single raisin will work well. Move slowly through the steps and take a moment to focus on each one. Notice how it looks on the table in front of you. Observe its color, shape, size, contour and all details. Proceed to pick it up and focus on every sensation from the moment you hold it to bringing and putting it in you mouth, texture and taste while chewing and swallowing.

ACTIVITY: 4 – MINDFUL EATING P2 (TIME: 30-60 MINUTES)

In a less intensive mindful way than in Activity 3, Enjoy every aspect of a meal experience. Set the ambiance with the lighting, soft relaxing music and maybe light some pleasant candles. Set and sit at a real table. Enjoy the preparation and cooking. Don't rush. Remain in in the moment and avoid multitasking. Leave your phone and television alone.

Savor the flavor. Chew slower and don't rush to swallow. Cut into smaller pieces than usual. Observe everything. Respect your body and health. Drink more water. Eat your favorite food last. What's for dessert? Remain nonjudgmental by not giving yourself a hard time about anything you otherwise may have reservations about eating. Enjoy cleaning up and stay in the moment.

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