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Mind **Body** connection

Understanding the mind-body connection

can be better for our health

BY CHARLOTTE
HINKSMAN

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a therapy which uses the brain's natural processes to make changes in the way we think, feel and behave and includes physical health. This article will look specifically at how your brain and body are connected and what changes you can make to improve your physical health.

"Mind over matter" – we have all heard it but do we actually believe that your mind and body are connected and that how you operate your mind has an effect over your body and your health? In my experience working with clients one on one over the last half decade is that no, not really: in fact most people need to have this specifically proved to them. It is not surprising considering the dominance of medial model thinking, which isolates the physical from the mental and emotional. Thankfully, these old beliefs are changing with increasing numbers of medical practitioners openly endorsing "alternative" therapies.

The Brain and The Body

The mind-body connection is not just a concept: you have a brain, which sits in, and is protected by, your skull. It has a brain-stem, which connects to the spinal cord.

Every single cell in the human body is controlled by this Central Nervous System (CNS). Your CNS coordinates all activity in the body. There is therefore, at any given moment, a continuous stream of communication and feedback within the CNS between brain and body. This means that nothing in your system is fixed permanently or ever a static "thing" – it's always a continuous process. Any process can be influenced by any number of variables at any given moment, which can change the outcome.

Fear and Stress

I could give many examples of how certain emotions and thinking styles impact your

physiology and I am choosing the biggies – fear and stress – for three reasons: 1) it's well known both in the medical and alternative health fields that stress causes and/or prolongs a significant number of physical health issues, 2) feeling fearful of the future is a common problem for those with an MS diagnosis, and 3) although they are created slightly differently on mental level, on a physical level they are part of one process. Therefore learning how to manage either of them will have multiple positive effects.





Above: Charlotte Hinksman is a certified master practitioner and life coach of NLP.

As a human being, you have got an inbuilt survival instinct – your fight or flight response. Here is how it worked for our ancestors: as a hunter-gatherer you came up against a life-threatening threat - a tiger sitting outside your hut. Your adrenal glands, which sit on top of your kidneys, released a surge of adrenaline (one of the main hormones and neurotransmitters) into the body. This increased your heart rate and flow of oxygen and blood into the muscles. It eliminated waste stored in your large intestine, closing off your

digestive system, so that you have the energy and lightness to either fight the threat or get quickly away (flight). This is why we can't eat and need to go to the toilet when we are anxious.

The next step in this process is the adrenal glands releasing another hormone - cortisol - our stress hormone. Cortisol spikes your blood sugar to maintain the high energy required to fight or fly and would be naturally and healthily burnt off in this process.

Once the life-threatening

threat is dealt with and with no more present danger to deal with, your body can go back into its normal relaxed state, where it can replenish and revitalise itself.

The Implications

A perfect system design for the purpose of survival - absolutely necessary and useful - back then! Here are the serious problems it can cause in modern living:

We don't have the same life-threatening present dangers to respond to, but

we will always have this inbuilt survival response.

We therefore generate fear in response to things that don't actually threaten our survival - yet the physiological impact is the same. Your body doesn't know if it is a tiger outside your hut, a presentation or a deadline at work, it just wants to keep you safe from "threat".

We therefore have this response to varying degrees of intensity and to varying outside stimulus - ranging from nervousness in the tummy, worry, general anxiety, phobias, to panic attacks that wake you up in the middle of the night.

Your body responds to imagined fears. When we just picture something bad or unpleasant happening - it could be that you think of the "impending crash" of the plane you are about to get on, missing that deadline at

work next week, or being in a wheelchair in 10 years time - your body generates the same fear response as if those things were actually happening right now -

even though they are not and may never.

Prolonged release of cortisol suppresses your immune system and decreases bone density. Spiked blood sugar, if not burned off as intended, has nowhere else to go but back into your body where it gets stored as fat - visceral fat (known as "belly fat") - the most unhealthy place to store it. This spike and drop in blood sugar is also why you get tired after an adrenaline rush or a prolonged period of stress.

Fear and stress are designed for short-term use only! They are designed to fully optimise your body in order to fight or fly, and does this at the cost of essential long-term functioning like strengthening your immune system.

Your body can get away with this in the short-term. However, In modern living with a perception of more to be afraid of or stressed about, we are not effectively dealing with these "threats" or "getting away" from them - the stimulus is either constant (deadlines at work) or there is multiple stimuli (deadlines at work, a phobia of frogs, an imagined unpleasant future). This means we are not successfully fighting or flying and then relaxing

again as your body believes it is in a constant state of mortal danger.

Your physiology is simply not designed for this and unable to sustain this short-term survival response in the long term. It suffers under the strain - your health gets sick.

What can you do, now?

How many times have we heard "manage your stress" or "you need to learn to relax"? It is one of the first things a doctor will say and there are countless research studies proving that the ability to relax the mind and the body significantly improves physical health outcomes. Now you understand why! The question is: How do you actually do that? I hope to help you:

1. Checking the Fear Reality

Although in the moment threats where flight or fight is necessary still do exist (footsteps behind you down a dark alley, living in a war zone) they are rare for most of us. Most fear therefore will be imagined

fear or stuff you don't need to be afraid of. Get better at noticing it and catching it before it escalates:

When you are having an imagined fear response, in that moment ask yourself:

- Is this real?
- Is this happening now?
- Has this happened yet?
- Is there a problem now?

2. Managing your response to external stressors

Get savvy about your stress triggers. What are these external stimuli that cause an anxiety or stress response in you? Once you know, you can begin to reduce the external triggers and manage your response better to those that remain in your life.

When you notice a stress response in your body, no matter where it is on the scale of intensity, write down:

- The situation: running late..
- How it felt: heart rate up, tight in chest..
- What thoughts you were having at the time: why do I always do this?

What you would prefer: be calm realising there is nothing I can do.

3. Eating and Digesting

Your digestion plays a very important role in your health: if it is not functioning efficiently then you are not able to extract the nutrients from your food and nurture your body. The fear and stress response in your body is directly connected to your digestion. Taking care here will help with everything:

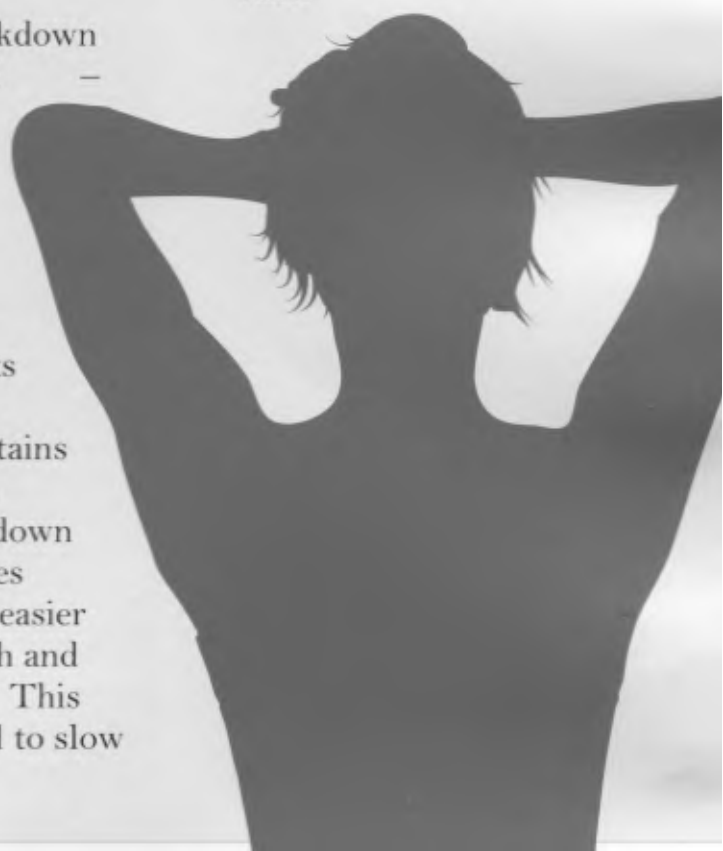
a. If you are stressed - don't eat! And never eat in a rush. If you do, you are asking your digestion to do two conflicting functions! Always calm down first.

b. The breakdown of your food - ultimately determining how well the nutrients get extracted and the waste excreted - starts in your mouth. Your saliva contains enzymes which begin to break down the food particles making the job easier on your stomach and small intestine. This is why you need to slow

down and chew properly. You will taste your food more, and you will get fuller quicker.

4. Learn to Relax

Yes, I know! We all know it. And now you know physically why its important. The more you can be relaxed, the more you are in your body's natural state where you are teaching it that it is safe and out of danger. It knows then it can work on all of those long term health processes like an optimal immune system and healthy sleep. Apart from the positive physical health outcomes, there is also the pleasantness of being in a relaxed state. If you are relaxed, you cannot be fearful or anxious or stressed at the same



time, it is not neurologically possible. You choose, then:

- Breathing properly
- Yoga
- Pilates
- Meditation
- Mindfulness
- Self-hypnosis

Any activity if you know you are an "active relaxer" (i.e. you have to be "doing" something in order to relax) for some people this is physical exercise like swimming or running, for others it is knitting or art

work. Find one that you know works for you where you can feel yourself relax physically.

Knowing what is good for you, and actually doing it are two different things: we know from research that the feeling of happiness is associated strongly with a specific area of the brain: the left prefrontal cortex. This area is associated with planning, goal setting and achievement. When people feel in control about the direction of their lives and their outcomes, they function better. I encourage you to begin believing that your health is much more in

your control by sending the message to your body that says: "I love you and I want you to be well".

NB: Please follow this advice in conjunction with professional medical guidance.

About Charlotte

Charlotte Hinksman is a certified master practitioner and life coach of NLP. She has a private practice in central Wellington. More information can be found at www.charlottehinksman.com, chinksman.blogspot.com or at www.nzanlp.org.

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Yes, you can.