Holistic healing, redefined

Leading nutritional therapist and wellbeing coach Niki Gratrix talks about the profound effect of our thoughts and feelings on our health, why alternative treatments can be so hit and miss, and why patients and practitioners alike need to start thinking in truly holistic terms. Interview by Sarah Best.

The role of the mind-body connection in health and healing has been known about for millennia, yet orthodox medicine largely ignores it. Let’s talk first about the positive side of this equation – the established healing power of positive thoughts and emotions.

What is the healing agent that has been more studied than any other in the history of medicine? The placebo effect! Every well-run study has to take this into account and then factor it out – factor out that a percentage of the subjects are getting better on a sugar pill, just because they believe it will make them better! How powerful is the human mind? In study after study, a significant percentage of patients are getting an improvement in the health condition being studied just through belief.

The orthodox view is that this is only important as something that needs to be factored out. Nonsense! They have it completely back to front and they’re missing a huge part of health and disease. This phenomenon is one of the most important proofs of how profoundly internal subjective feelings and beliefs impact the physical body.

Let’s now consider the flip side of that coin. I think most readers would be surprised at just how much is now known about the many specific, measurable ways in which stress affects our biochemistry, and therefore our health.

Yes, we now understand better than ever how chronic stress affects the body. At least 60% of illness, and possibly more, comes from the psychosomatic side of things. A thought is a real thing that can turn biochemistry on or off. Your thoughts and feelings are translated to the nervous system, the master regulator of everything else in the body, including the endocrine, immune and digestive systems.

Chronic stress causes a part of the brain called the amygdala to continually over-stimulate the sympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is the branch of the autonomic nervous system that is responsible for digestion, detoxification and repair, it is down-regulated as energy is diverted to the emergency – with obvious negative implications.

When the sympathetic nervous system is consistently up-regulated into a hyper-vigilant state this causes multiple negative effects in the body. For example, the amygdala over-stimulates the whole brain, keeping many brain circuits in a state of hyper-arousal. This adversely affects the levels of neurotransmitters in the brain, including serotonin and dopamine, leading to sleep and mood problems.

Could you give some additional specific examples of the effects of chronic stress on the body?

One of the most devastating is the effect on stomach acid and other gastrointestinal secretions, including pancreatic digestive enzymes. It is basic biochemistry that these are down-regulated when the parasympathetic nervous system is down-regulated, with devastating impacts on digestion.

Stomach acid is required for the absorption of vitamin B12, minerals and protein. Low stomach acid leads to vitamin and mineral deficiencies, methylation (a detoxification pathway) crashes, mitochondrial malfunction, blood sugar imbalances, sub-clinical low thyroid and a number of other effects. You can’t get rid of chronic candida or blood sugar issues if your stomach acid is low, because of nutrient malabsorption. Incidentally, we’ve found through testing that around 80-90% of patients with ME or CFS (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) have low stomach acid.

Another thing with stomach acid – and it’s so missed, this one – is that it’s one of the first lines of defence for the immune system because it’s a sterilizing agent that protects us against ingested bacteria, parasites and other bugs. When this line of defence is not operating, it is easy for these to get into the system. Also, 80% of the immune system is in the gut, and when stomach acid is inadequate there will be a full-scale war going on in there because the immune system is tied up fighting these invaders. This allows latent viruses to keep reactivating. Good gut bacteria is fantastically important for the immune system.

A continuing state of chronic stress can severely affect every single organ and system in the body, and it can also cause higher levels of oxidative stress throughout the body. So your thoughts and emotions can affect your health in every way.

You specialize primarily in treating CFS/ME and you’ve observed in your practice that the chronic stress pattern above is a leading causal factor. I’m sure there will be many reading this who have CFS/ME, and many others who do not, but who nonetheless recognize this pattern in themselves, along with a number of the symptoms associated with CFS/ME. How different are these two groups?

First, I estimate that up to two-thirds of people with CFS/ME are living without a diagnosis because the diagnostic criteria are poor, they’re often misunderstood and there is no biomedical test for the condition being studied just through belief.

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Illness. So many could actually have the illness and just not realize it. Second, there is the subgroup of “adrenal fatigue” patients. Some people are the “walking wounded” with adrenal fatigue is completely missed by the medical profession. There is a continuum between optimal health on one side, and diagnosed disease on the other, and you can be anywhere on that continuum. The majority of people are nowhere near optimal health but not at a full-blown disease state either. Orthodox medicine will only diagnose a problem with the adenals when they have failed. This would be called Addison’s disease – and it is rare. Organs and systems can under-function without failure and when the adenals under-function this results in many symptoms for the patient to endure – but medics will tell these people they are normal. Interestingly, with CFS/ME what is happening is multiple organs and systems are under-functioning at the same time, resulting in symptom complexes, but no single organ is failing. This is why the medics can’t find anything wrong with the majority of patients.

This can start with a physical trigger, a psychological trigger or an environmental trigger – the end result is the same. When one organ or system is under-functioning, that can affect another, which can affect another, and so on. I read a quote recently that sums it up very well: “In CFS/ME, you trade function for existence.” In other words, CFSEM is an adaptation to burnout.

When it comes to determining who will and won’t get CFSEM, there is also a genetic influence: some people get breast cancer under or overdo things and the reasons are 99% due to emotional issues. The chronic under-achiever slowing down – what does this mean? It means facing their lack of self-worth – the emotion driving the underdo type in the first place. These people are prone to push themselves to the point of collapse. The chronic over-achiever is the person who finds it impossible to slow down. The perfectionist puts a huge amount of energy into working hours getting things wrong. The helper puts everyone else’s needs before their own. The anxiety type is constantly on edge, usually due to internal trauma. All four of these types have associated behaviours that cause them not to get the rest and relaxation they need. Pacing activities is crucial to recovery from CFSEM and I now think that some 60% of patients have difficulty getting pacing right. They either physiologically under or overdo things and the reasons are 95% due to psycho-emotional trauma.

The chronic over-achiever slowing down – what does that open up? It goes straight to their core wound, and means facing their deep-level of self-worth – the motif driving this type in the first place. These people are prone to push through, going beyond extreme disease researchers, alternative practitioners, and so on. In other words, patience won’t push themselves at all due to fear. They had terrible experiences of being lost in the dark during adolescence. Their worry might happen again – not realizing they are well on the way to healing and can now do more.

Orthodox medicine’s Newtonian approach to the body is at least 400 years out of date.

“Orthodox medicine’s Newtonian approach to the body is at least 400 years out of date.” Blocks to recovery from ME

"I’ve identified four energy – depleting personality types arising from internal coping strategies that (a) would usually have been learned at a young age and (b) cause behavior which triggers stress. The chronic overachiever is the person who finds it impossible to slow down. The perfectionist puts a huge amount of energy into working hours getting things wrong. The helper puts everyone else’s needs before their own. The anxiety type is constantly on edge, usually due to internal trauma. All four of these types have associated behaviors that cause them not to get the rest and relaxation they need. Pacing activities is crucial to recovery from CFSEM and I now think that some 60% of patients have difficulty getting pacing right. They either physiologically under or overdo things and the reasons are 95% due to psycho-emotional trauma."
"Understand that you possess the innate capacity to heal any imbalance."

To what extent would you say the world of complementary and alternative medicine is operating from these principles? If we look at the treatments out there that fall outside orthodox medicine, many of them call themselves “holistic” but they are still stuck in the old model of one-shot cures which only treat symptoms.

In the CFS/ME world, some experts say it’s all about one organ, i.e. the adrenals. For others it’s all about nutrition. This is a piecemeal approach, and chronic illness requires a multi-factorial approach. You’ll have someone working only at the nutritional level, someone working at the psychological level, and someone working at the physical level and they’ll each be getting great results with a percentage of patients. What they’re not realizing is that there are others using completely different approaches from them, yet getting this same level of results!

I follow with interest the conflicts within the raw food world, and the fact some experts are saying their way is the only way. I call this “megalamania of isolation”.

It’s the one-shot approach again! Their regime works great for them and for a lot of the people they recommend it to and they might be getting a significant improvement in 30-40% of cases, but that’s still only 30-40%.

The other 60-70% need something different, or in many cases, multiple things.

We all need to eat plenty of raw plant foods for optimal health. But you could send a patient down a dead end by putting them on a 100% raw diet. Some thrive on that, but others get much sicker.

Within each quadrant there are also different levels of healing – for example the physical level is largely focussed on biochemistry, whereas the psychological level is focussed on the psychology.

While doing anything can help, the only way to distinguish between the four-quadrants is to understand where each quadrant operates.

So where digestive issues are playing a part in illness, that is an upper right quadrant cause. An energy-depleting personality type would be an upper left quadrant cause. In the bottom quadrant family relationship issues are lower left quadrant.

Nutrition is an important factor but it’s just one factor. It is part of the story. When it comes to chronic complex illness, diet is usually less than 50% of the full solution, and it’s important people realize this. When dealing with illness, you have to treat each case at the causal level. There’s no point focusing on biochemistry if the causal level is the biofield.

Some practitioners working in the top left hand quadrant believe it’s all about mind and emotions. This is the “law of attraction” or “thoughts create reality” brigade. Here the influence of diet, deficiencies and toxins is often downplayed or ignored completely – at the expense of patient welfare.

In addition to getting stuck in one quadrant, practitioners can also get stuck at one level of treatment within a quadrant and risk offering one-shot-cure approaches. Multiple levels exist within each quadrant. So for example a practitioner can get stuck only looking at anatomy or biochemistry, without any consideration for the physics of the body. Practitioners in the upper left quadrant can also get stuck, just treating the mental level, while ignoring the emotional trauma and unconscious personality traits which led to the patient getting ill in the first place.

It is noticeable that in the UK and the US there is a great deal of focus at the anatomical and biochemical levels, whereas in parts of Europe practitioners are focussing on the biofield.

This model can help any practitioner or patient start to identify the causes of any illness, and because it’s such a comprehensive road map it ensures you don’t miss anything out. This model is the result of a lifetime study of reality, summarized in Wilber’s book A Brief History of Everything. I encourage readers who are interested in this model to read the book.

In closing, could you summarize how those readers struggling with a long-term seemingly intractable illness might benefit from this knowledge?

Your expectations and attitude to recovery are hugely important to your chances of success. If you don’t believe you can recover then you won’t try, so your thoughts will become your reality. With chronic illness, staying committed to a long-term plan of recovery is critical.

Understand that you are a dynamic, complex, adaptive system which constantly reacting with everything in your internal and external environment.

You – your body
Anatomy and biochemistry of the body: atoms, molecules, cells...

The body “electric”
Poppi’s biofield photon and the physics of the energy body

You – your internal subjective experience
Thoughts, beliefs, attitudes
Feelings, emotions
The five senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch

You – your personal and cultural environment
Family and culture
Religion, spirituality

You – your relationships with others
Family
Friends
Cultural beliefs

You – your relationships with the world
Cultural beliefs
Access to information – i.e. the internet
Sunlight

If you think you’ve only got one solution you’re going to fanatical about it. For example, there is a big issue with CFS/ME patients being prescribed extremely rigid anti-candida diets – they become so obsessed with sticking to the diet that this can cause psychological problems, so then those need to be sorted out, as well as the candida. The same thing can happen when people get fixated on following a very rigid version of the raw diet.

We have to start looking at the big picture, which consists of everything that can impact us. Everything in the environment: biochemistry. Environmental toxins and the things we’re being exposed to, and also our feelings, relationships and cultural beliefs, all of which have a massive effect on our biochemistry – more than we realize. If you understand all this, you’ll be stuck looking for the one-shot-cure, and you’ll go from one practitioner promising that, to the next, to the next, because this is not how chronic complex illness works. Understanding this can save you thousands of pounds, as well as your health.

Recommended reading
A Brief History of Everything by Ken Wilber
Consciousness and Healing by Martin Schlitz, Tina Amenok and Marc Micozzi
The Biology of Belief by Bruce Lipton

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For more information, visit CFS/MEExpert.com or email mail@CFS/MEExpert.com. Niki’s blog is at NikiGratrix.com.