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Naturopathic Psychiatry

The Next Step in Emotional Wellness

Maybe Tom Cruise is crazy. In fact, I think the chances are pretty good that he is. But that doesn't mean we should completely dismiss everything he says. No, I'm not at all in agreement with his contention that psychiatry is a pseudo-science or some drug pushing cult, far from it. I think modern psychiatry is an absolute miracle which is responsible for salvaging countless lives. However, one thing Tom Cruise said about the whole psychiatry thing did make sense and that is, to loosely paraphrase, 'Much of mental illness can be treated effectively with diet and lifestyle changes as well as other natural means.'

In point of fact, this is actually true. So what if instead of having to choose between psychiatry and natural therapeutics we could make space in our hearts and in our society for both?

Most thinking people have come to terms that human beings are more than mere walking chemistry sets. Yes, we are physical, biological entities, but we have a spiritual body and an energetic body which are just as real as our muscles, sinews and organs. While modern psychiatry does much to help the physical and even at times the emotional bodies, it flatly ignores the energetic and spiritual parts of our make up. Consequently, psychiatric prescriptions often provide tremendous relief from symptoms but fall short of complete cure. Surely a psychiatric paradigm that acknowledged the need for addressing the physical, emotional, energetic and spiritual components of the individual patient would be profoundly more effective.

As a Naturopathic Physician, I've always been fascinated with the interface of mind and body and how one so dramatically affects the other. The fact that stress can damage the immune system and that imagery and meditation can help cure physical illness is an accepted fact even in the great halls of conventional medical schools. Is it such a stretch to think that perhaps by improving ones physical health, ones psychological health can also be enhanced?

This is the premise of what I like to call Naturopathic Psychiatry; the integration of Holistic Medicine and Conventional Medicine in the treatment of psychiatric illness. The beauty of a Naturopathic approach to mental illness is that one of the fundamental tenants of Naturopathic Medicine is Tolle Causum, or, "Treat the Cause". Naturopathic medicine looks for underlying imbalances in core systems such as metabolism, the endocrine system, the energetics of a person and looks at the presenting complaint of the patient as a mere symptom or outcropping of a this fundamental imbalance. Once the problem is identified and fixed, the body no longer needs to express that symptom and the patient is cured. This is a very profound medical theory with far reaching consequences.

For example, in keeping with the Tom Cruise theme, an out of state patient of mine has been calling me lately complaining of extreme post-partum depression. Her conventional physician recommended anti-depressant medication as a matter of course. It may interest you to know that I did not totally disagree with this recommendation. The patient, however, would not have it. Much like Mr. Cruise, my patient has an anti-medication bias which she is unable to see beyond. Now, I recognize that post-partum depression is not a Prozac deficiency and a Tolle Causum approach needs to recognize the complex soup of hormonal and psychological changes which new motherhood brings. Ideally I would like to treat this patient with a combination of Chinese Medicine, Homeopathy, Natural Hormone Replacement and counseling. And, if she needed it for short-term relief, I would be fine prescribing an anti-depressant medication. Being out of state, I can only make simple recommendations over the phone and I'm unable to fully treat her. Consequently the post-partum depression continues. She is totally unavailable to her newborn at this crucial time in it's development and her marriage is suffering. Here she is, caught between two worlds, when her healing most likely lies somewhere in-between.

At the Center for True Harmony Wellness & Medicine we are constantly amazed by the efficacy of the blended medicine approach. If natural medicine was the Only legitimate form of healing then pharmaceuticals would never of needed to be invented. And, if drugs were the entire solution, people would not be looking so passionately for alternatives.

Another patient recently came to me for help with anxiety. She had suffered from a social phobia and anxiety disorder on and off during most of her life. In the past she was treated with sedatives and anti-anxiety drugs, which took care of her symptoms but made her feel groggy and drugged. Together we found a whole-person program for her which combined clinical nutrition, botanical medicine, acupuncture and stress-reduction. We also did guided imagery to connect the higher parts of her self with the scared and wounded parts of her self. She is healing. She still has her drugs at home in case she has a flare-up, she just finds that she never needs to use them. But the very fact that we make it okay for her to use them, that it's not a personal failure or violation of some sacred natural medicine edict, makes her feel more safe and secure.

The key to healing any illness, be it psychological or physical lies not in the therapy the physician chooses but rather on the very approach to illness the physician takes. If the physician sees symptoms as a message from the organism that there is something out of balance, something that needs attention and support, then the right blend of medicines or therapies will be found to bring both symptomatic relief and deep healing. Symptoms are a language and it is the goal of the Naturopathic physician to understand that language.

When the healing intelligence of the body is respected and attended to and personal bias is abandoned, then a combination of the most appropriate therapies can be prescribed and true harmony restored.

This article was written by Dr. Steven Ehrlich ND, as a patient education resource for The Center For True Harmony Wellness and Medicine. Edited and revised by Sherry Fragosa, Dr.Christine Brass-Jones OBGYN, and Dr. Denise Quance Grobe N.D. If you have any questions or comments contact the office at (480) 539-6646 or through email at info@trueharmonywellness.com