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Light on Holistic OT

## Embracing Mind, Body, Spirit Therapies

By Emmy Vadnais, OTR/L, and Mandy Lubas, OTR/L

Welcome to the new holistic occupational therapy column in Advance online! We are excited to share topics related to holistic practice: mind, body, and spirit health, wellness, and prevention approaches. Each month, we will highlight holistic healing and preventative approaches that can be integrated in to OT practice; report on relevant research; share inspirational stories; encourage you to integrate these approaches in your practice; and explore continuing education opportunities. This column was born from the phenomenal response we received from dozens of OTs expressing their gratitude for our recent article, [Holistic Occupational Therapy: Complementary and Alternative Medicine is an Emerging Specialty Practice Area in the Profession.](#)

According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, holistic means "related to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems rather than with the analysis of, treatment of, or dissection into parts, i.e. holistic medicine attempts to treat both the mind and the body." We are well-trained in both psychology and biology - the mind and the body.

### Descartes and Separation of the Mind and Body

Our health care system has been primarily based on a reductionistic approach that separates the whole of the body, the mind, and the spirit into parts. This was based on the 16th century philosopher Rene Descartes' dualism theory that separated the mind and the body. This paradigm allowed scientists to study the parts that make up the whole and has served wonderful purposes, such as assisting many to heal from infections and other illness through the understanding of germs and the invention of penicillin.

However, through the ever reaching depth of study into parts, the approach of healthcare seemed to have forgotten the wholeness of a being. We are finding now, through research and clinical experience, that the mind and body do influence one another and appear to be one in the same.

### Reintegration of Mind and Body

We are now in an era where addressing the whole may be equally important as addressing the parts. Psychoneuroimmunology is the study of the interaction of the bodymind - how the mind, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs can affect the nervous and immune systems, and the overall health and functioning of the body.

Candace Pert, PhD, states in her groundbreaking book *Molecules of Emotions: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine*, "The concept of a network, stressing the interconnectedness of all systems of the organism, has a variety of paradigm-breaking implications. In the popular lexicon, these kinds of connections between body and brain have long been referred to as 'the power of the mind over the body.' But in light of my research, that phrase does not describe accurately what is happening. The mind doesn't dominate the body, it becomes the body - body and mind are one."

From Pert's work we can see that the mind can affect the body, and the body can affect the mind.

### The Power of Belief: Spirituality and Healing

The term "mind-body medicine" has been used frequently to describe approaches where the mind may affect the body and the body may affect the mind. While it is an important development in our healthcare system to understand these connections, it leaves out the word "spirit." Spirituality is equally if not more important to address in healing, as a person's sense of self, belief in their life's meaning or purpose, and their connection to something greater than their self may hold a profound key to their healing, health, and wellness.

Many spiritual teachers guide us to be at one with ourselves, or our god or higher power, and to create heaven on earth. Practices such as prayer, meditation, and relaxation have been used for millennia to access greater power, peace, and inner wisdom. Prayer, meditation and relaxation can induce the relaxation response - the term coined by Dr. Hebert Benson to describe the lowering of the heart rate and breath rate and a reduction in stress hormones. These practices have also been shown to lower anxiety, stress, depression, and physical and emotional pain. Our connection with our

spirit, whatever our beliefs, can strengthen our energy and vital life force, which can enhance our ability to stay well and recover from an illness.

A person's belief is crucial to their ability to get well, stay well, or make peace with a challenging situation. The placebo effect is often recognized in clinical studies when a person has improvements that cannot be attributable to the 'intervention' itself, but may come from the person's belief that it will help them.

Studies have shown that a placebo effect generally occurs 30 percent of the time. Herbert Benson, MD, a cardiologist who was the first to scientifically demonstrate the correlation of the interaction of the mind and body, believes that the placebo effect may work up to 90 percent of the time. If a person believes something will make them better, then it likely will.

Conversely, there is the "nocebo effect," where a person who is told they might experience negative effects from taking a sham pill or from a procedure is more likely to experience those negative effects. These phenomena demonstrate the power of the mind and belief in encouraging or discouraging health and wellness.

### **Complete Systems for Holistic Occupational Therapy**

To support holistic occupational therapy, we can look to the harmony with nature around us and nature within ourselves and complete holistic systems that know these truths, such as Ayurveda and Yoga. These sister sciences may be some of the world's oldest complete forms of healthcare and ways of living.

Ayurveda is the science (Veda) of life (Ayur) and it balances the body using natural therapies such as nutrition, herbs, meditation, and daily routines. Its aim is to preserve health and prevent disease by balancing one's life. Ayurveda is a 5,000 year old Indian system of healing that encompasses these aspects while offering solutions to achieve harmony at the level of body, mind and spirit. The World Health Organization recognizes Ayurveda as a complete, natural healthcare system.

Yoga is the Sanskrit word meaning to "yolk, union, communion, bind, direct, concentrate one's attention on." It is the science of mind bringing balance and purity to the body by disciplining the intellect, the mind, the emotions, and the will, thus allowing one to look at all aspects of life. Yoga is one of the sixth orthodox systems of India philosophy.

These two sister sciences complement each other and together act to achieve harmony of the mind, body, and spirit. This is the essence of true health and well-being and can be incorporated into occupational therapy practice.

### **Community of Holistic Occupational Therapists**

Our intention is to grow a community of holistic occupational therapists who sincerely understand the interaction of the mind, body, and spirit and how to incorporate holistic care into practice. As therapists, we have the opportunity to assist our clients to believe in themselves, and access their mind, body, and spirit for strength and inner wisdom to assist them with wholeness. We can be facilitators for change, utilizing holistic care with more emphasis on getting to the root of problems, as opposed to treating the symptoms, to assist with prevention and healing.

More and more research continues to emerge demonstrating the efficacy of mind, body, and spirit care. We will highlight more holistic approaches in coming articles and phone conversations.

We aim to inspire you! We encourage you! We support you! Discover what holistic areas interest you. Please educate yourself in holistic approaches.

To connect with other OTs interested in and practicing holistic approaches and to learn more, join us once a month for our holistic OT phone conversation. Ask to join the e-mail list at [emmy@emmyvadm.com](mailto:emmy@emmyvadm.com) to receive updates on Holistic OT. Please 'like' our Holistic Occupational Therapy Facebook Page and join the conversation on-line at the Holistic Occupational Therapy Group page on Facebook. We look forward to connecting with you!

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