

Mental health – a mind-body approach

It's estimated that 350 million people worldwide are currently suffering from depression (Singhal & Baune, 2017) and that one in six people will be affected by a depressive disorder in their lifetime (Yirmiya, Rimmerman, & Reshef, 2015). There is no doubt that depression is a huge burden on society and healthcare providers.

Depression, anxiety and mood disorders are often seen as entirely psychological in cause. However, more and more research is highlighting that chronic health issues, poor diet and lifestyle choices can, and will, negatively impact our mental health. This book is in no way negating the importance of psychological support for mental health issues, but it is merely attempting to raise the profile of a 'whole body' approach in supporting mental health.

The mind-body connection

It is strange that when diagnosing a condition, we prefer to restrict the diagnosis to one part or system of the body. If we have a blood problem we go to a haematologist, a gut problem, a gastroenterologist and a nervous system problem, a neurologist. However, if conditions cross our artificially drawn boundaries, which they frequently do, then there may be a loss of focus on the condition by health professionals.

This loss of focus is starkly apparent when a condition transgresses from the mind to the body and becomes psychosomatic. Somehow a psychosomatic health issue is viewed by many as a lesser issue than a purely psychiatric or purely bodily disease.

The reverse of psychosomatic is considered even less; i.e. soma-psychic – to transgress from the body to the mind. It is strange that we readily accept that our five senses work in a soma-psychic manner by transferring bodily senses to a psychic sense of self. However, we find it harder to accept that the illhealth or wellness of our body can also transfer to our mind and sense of self.

This book is effectively about soma-psychic and psychosomatic illness and wellness – how diet and lifestyle choices will, and do, translate to mental and physical illness and wellness.

The Hippocampus

The part of the brain most heavily associated with mental health, memory, emotion and mood is called the 'hippocampus'. The hippocampus is the name used in biology for seahorses. It is the unusual seahorse-like shape of the hippocampus that has led to its evocative name. Just as seahorses charm and enchant the depths of the sea, our own hippocampus (when supported and nurtured) can help to enchant our own lives.

Researchers have noticed that there are a lot of scientific papers linking problems with the hippocampus to depression – in particular, the shrinking or failure to regrow this part of the brain after

stress. This has led to the formation of a theory about the causation of depression called the **'The neurogenic theory of depression and anxiety'**. In support of this theory is the fact that antidepressant medication has been found to decrease hippocampal shrinkage and encourage its regrowth (Miller & Hen, 2015).

Stress

Stress is so part and parcel of everyday life that it is almost seen as normal for all of us to be overwhelmed by too much stress. Sadly, excessive psychological stress can damage and undermine the function of parts of the brain associated with memory and our sense of mental wellbeing.