



Using Your Mind to Heal Your Body

When you're ill or in pain, taking time to look at your habits, diet and attitude may provide insight into what ails you.

"Clearly, the more active you become on your own behalf, the more likely you'll do well," says James S. Gordon, M.D., director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine in Washington, D.C., and author of "Manifesto for a New Medicine." "Thinking about your illness, what may have caused it and what you can do to speed your recovery, may minimize your need for drugs and surgery because doing so maximizes your capacity for helping yourself."

The following tips may help you move faster from diagnosis to recovery by using your mind to get more involved in your care.

Strive for Self-awareness

Heredity and infections cause many illnesses. But some conditions are part psychological, part behavioral, and people often play more of a role in causing health problems than they realize.

Asking yourself questions can help you get at the root of a health problem and on the road to recovery. Start with: How did this condition come about? Is there something going on in my life that could be causing it?

If you suffer from chronic neck pain, for instance, there may be a connection between your pain and the way you sit hunched over your desk all day.

Look at Your Diet

Take a close look at your diet and eating habits as the next step in the process. An unhealthful diet can cause many health problems, including diabetes, chronic heartburn, heart disease and general malaise.

"Many people eat too much and are overweight as a result," Dr. Gordon says. "And, there's increasing evidence that obesity predisposes you to a variety of illnesses and that maintaining a healthful weight can contribute to longevity."

There are also some common foods many people are sensitive to, such as coffee, milk and red meat, as well as food additives and preservatives.

"Depending on your symptoms, you might consider eliminating these foods for a while to see if your symptoms diminish," Dr. Gordon says. "As a general rule, I suggest people who want to eat more healthfully include large quantities of fiber-rich raw fruits and vegetables in their diets, as well as a morning helping of wheat and oat bran."

Focus on the Possible

If you're diagnosed with an illness, take steps to learn about it, including the range of symptoms and outcomes.

"The dominant mode in traditional medicine is to focus on the disease and all the terrible things that might happen," Dr. Gordon says. "If you're diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, for example, you would be told it's degenerative and that, in most people, the disability worsens and becomes permanent.

By accepting this prediction, the disease and your fears about it can take over your life."

As an alternative, stay focused on the best possible prognosis instead of the worst-case scenario.

You may also want to investigate alternative treatments. "If you do some research, you may find a treatment that will at least be a complement to your conventional therapy," Dr. Gordon says.





Pushing Past Your Plateau

We promise ourselves we'll change our lifestyles for better health. We start diets, exercise programs or try to quit smoking. And then we stall. We hit a plateau, putting us at risk of losing precious gains or quitting altogether.

A healthy lifestyle change is just that -- change. "A lot of people believe that change is easy, but we are fundamentally conservative creatures, and we don't change until we have to," says Michael J. Mahoney, Ph.D., an American Psychological Association spokesman and professor at the University of North Texas. "It doesn't take much to throw us off course because we are such creatures of routine."

So sticking with a new routine is tough. Dr. Mahoney suggests you focus on being consistent, especially in the first six weeks of a change. That way, you build new patterns of behavior. Once that happens, odds are you'll "begin to speak to yourself about the change in a more positive tone."

Make a Pledge

Pledging to reward yourself if you meet your goals can be a great tool for getting past plateaus. The reward that awaits you can serve as a symbol of what you're trying to do and give you something to look forward to. "The symbol could be anything," notes Dr. Mahoney. It could be a piece of jewelry or a new golf club, for instance. Once you earn it, you can set your sights on a new reward for the next step.

When you're trying to get past a plateau, he recommends you focus each day on your behavior, your effort, rather than on your goal -- the amount of weight you'd like to lose, for instance. One crucial skill you'll need is patience. This, more than anything, will help get you past plateaus.

"Most people don't see a traffic jam as an opportunity to practice patience," Dr. Mahoney says. But the skills that help you put up with a stalled interstate "will help you realize and understand that plateaus are a natural part of life, so if you learn patience you'll get over plateaus."

"Progress," he notes, "is not always linear. If we understand this going in, it helps us be more patient with the plateaus, so that we can get past them and keep going."

Six Steps to Progress

Are you stuck on a plateau? Here are six steps for pushing onward from Michael Mercer, Ph.D., coauthor of the book *Spontaneous Optimism: Proven Strategies for Health, Prosperity and Happiness*:

1. Define your aim clearly. "It is impossible to hit your target if you don't know exactly what you're aiming at," says Dr. Mercer.
2. Don't let laziness creep in. "Sure, it's easier not to do something," he says. Instead, stay focused on your path. If you promised yourself you'd exercise at 6 a.m., don't hit the snooze button when the alarm goes off.
3. When you don't want to exercise or you want to quit your diet, take three seconds to picture how you want to look or feel at the end of your program. A lot of people begin such programs because they want to look attractive to others, while others are interested in improving their health.
4. Use a time-limit approach to your program. "Give yourself, say, 12 weeks to accomplish a goal within your program," he says. When you reach that goal, set a new one and give yourself another 12 weeks. "This enables you to track your progress and helps you to define your target. The best cure for putting things off is a deadline."
5. Give yourself rewards for reaching your daily, weekly and monthly goals. "For instance, tell yourself you'll go to a movie you've been wanting to see if you get your exercise in that day," he says.
6. Think about committing to a self-punishment if you fail. "I worked with a group that had to write a check to charity and put it in my hands. If they didn't reach the goal, which was well within their limits, they wrote the check to the charity" Dr. Mercer says. "Every one of them reached their goal."

Expect the best from others; that includes your boss, co-workers and subordinates. "Be a leader in spreading encouragement and praise," Dr. Waitley says. "You'll be surprised how people will live up to what you expect when you share your positive expectations."

