

# Thoughts Can Heal Your Body

By Robert Moss

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Our thoughts can make us sick, and they can help us get well. That may seem like New Age thinking, but medical research increasingly supports the role played by the mind in physical health.

“People have been seeking healing through prayer and intention since Paleolithic times,” notes Dr. Herbert Benson, founder of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital. “What’s new is our detailed scientific knowledge of how the mind-body connection operates.”

Scientists first proved a link between stress and disease in the early half of the last century. Since then, researchers have examined old and new practices—including biofeedback, meditation, guided imagery, spiritual healing and deep breathing. The fast-expanding field of psychoneuroimmunology, which examines how the neurological and immune systems interact, is providing new clinical evidence of the connection between thoughts and health.

“We now can measure changes in immune cells and the brain in ways that give us objective scientific proof of the connection between them,” says Mary Jo Kreitzer, director of the Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota.

Some people still are surprised to discover that thoughts can control physical sensation. “The body responds to mental input as if it were physically real,” explains Larry Dossey, a physician and an advocate for mind-body study since the 1980s. “Images create bodily changes—just as if the experience were really happening. For example, if you imagine yourself lying on a beach in the sun, you become relaxed, your peripheral blood vessels dilate, and your hands become warm, as in the real thing.”

Similarly, under clinical hypnosis, someone who is told he is being touched by a red-hot object often will produce a burn blister, even though the object touching him was at room temperature.

Brain scans show that when we imagine an event, our thoughts “light up” the areas of the brain that are triggered during the actual event. Sports psychologists have done pioneering work in this area. In one study, skiers were wired to EMG monitors (which record electrical impulses sent to the muscles) while they mentally rehearsed their downhill runs. The skiers’ brains sent the same instructions to their bodies whether they were doing a jump or just thinking about it.

The “placebo effect” is an example of how the connection between brain and body works in healing. It has been demonstrated that when a patient believes something will relieve pain, the body actually releases endorphins that do so. In a recent study, Parkinson’s patients who were given fake surgery or fake drug treatments produced dopamine (a chemical their bodies lack) in quantities similar to those they might have received in a genuine intervention. Medical research has suggested that 30% to 70% of successful treatments may be the result of the patient’s belief that the treatment will work.

“There is ample evidence that negative thoughts and feelings can be harmful to the body,” says Lorenzo Cohen, director of the Integrative Medicine Program at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Stress is known to be a factor in heart disease, headaches, asthma and many other illnesses.

Studies by Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Ronald Glaser at Ohio State University demonstrate how even minor psychological stress—that of newlyweds having their first fight or of students facing an exam—can compromise the immune system. The researchers found that a marital spat delays wound-healing and that the stress of caring for an Alzheimer’s patient leaves the caregiver more vulnerable to illness even years later.

When the body fights a virus or heals a wound, it releases cytokines (literally, “moving cells”)—chemical messengers that call in immune agents. The Glasers’ research showed that stress distracts these cytokines from doing their proper work, instead sending them ranging wildly through the bloodstream. “When the cyto-kines are misdirected,” says Kiecolt-Glaser, “they produce something you don’t want—a prolonged inflammatory response that far exceeds what is needed with infection.”

Just as our thoughts can make us ill, they also can help us heal, say those who practice mind-body therapies. There is growing clinical evidence that imagery is beneficial in treating skin disease, diabetes, breast cancer, arthritis, headaches and severe burns, among other conditions. Imagery also has been helpful in managing pain. “The mind is our most potent weapon in the battle for health,” says Lyn Freeman, a researcher of mind-body therapies for chronic diseases. “It can be both slayer and healer.”

## **What To Do**

*Adjust your mind-set to promote good health:*

•**Take a deep breath.** Hold it, exhale, then repeat for 10 minutes. Take a walk, preferably in nature. Breathe in the fresh air.

•**Laugh!** When you do, you pump more oxygen into your lungs, improve blood flow and boost your immune system.

•**Keep a journal.** Writing about emotionally charged events helps us deal with them mentally and physically.

*Robert Moss is the author of “The Three ‘Only’ Things: Tapping the Power of Dreams, Coincidence & Imagination.”*