

## Washing Your Mind as Well as Your Hands



The understandable concern about COVID 19 has led to some important advice being disseminated about what we need to do to address this infectious disease and we should all be heeding that advice as best we can.

Unfortunately, as that advice has been disseminated, the language used in the media has helped create a culture of fear and hysteria where people are literally overwhelmed with anxiety, worry and fear. We have seen our work quadruple as individuals who are already emotionally and psychologically challenged are sliding down a slippery slope towards despair, in some cases depression. Even those who come through our doors with the intention of working on being positive and trying to remain stable, are not coping well.

We've been given a lot of scientific data in relation to how best to stop the spread of COVID 19, but what we haven't been given enough of is the important information required to maintain good mental health.

The well-established science of psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) – please don't be turned off by the terminology – is a discipline that has over the last 40+ years helped us to understand how thoughts impact on our central nervous systems and then our immune systems. We've written about this extensively in numerous articles and you can take a look at these should you wish to understand more (see the links below).

In this item we won't get too bogged down with the science of it – that said, it is critically important to understand that anxiety, worry and fear are extremely harmful to our biological systems.

Here's a brief overview... once the fear response kicks in, the amygdala, one of the key organelles in the brain bound up with our emotional responses, can shut down our capacity to reason. This is often described as the amygdala hijack. What happens is the amygdala undermines the neocortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for what are often described as our executive functions – in other words our ability to make rational and sensible decisions.

When the amygdala is in control, our ability to think clearly is severely diminished as we come under the influence of the flight, fight and freeze response, which is handled by the central nervous system (CNS). The parasympathetic nervous system is responsible for the 'rest and digest' response and under these conditions it is switched off, as the sympathetic nervous system responsible for fight, flight and freeze is activated.

We are only designed to spend short periods of time under the influence of the sympathetic nervous system, those times in which fear is an appropriate response. But when we spend extended periods of time in hypervigilance, the neurochemicals created under those

circumstances such as cortisol, adrenaline and adrenochrome are produced at a rate and in quantities that are undermining the organism as a whole and particularly our immune systems.

Put simply, overexposure to fear, anxiety and worry weakens our immune system. So language that generates panic and hysteria is actually the worst thing for our minds, brains and bodies because we should be fortifying our immune systems and anything positive and uplifting will help us to do just that.

There is little point focusing on washing our hands frenetically, if we're not also washing our minds simultaneously. So, please follow all the government advice and the advice from your health practitioners, but realise a mind-body response is needed. The mind is no less important than the body.

The recent rise in concern about mental health and having the appropriate responses to that, should not be put to one side, at a time when our mental health is being compromised. If we can take control of our mental health, we will in fact find it's our greatest resource. So, here's our advice:

## **1. Meditation and Mindfulness**

Practise some kind of meditation or mindfulness every day, for 10 – 15 minutes. Loving kindness meditation (LKM) is a good and simple one that most can do with no prior training.

A simple way of engaging with this practice is, think of someone you love, respect, admire. Think of what qualities and virtues they have. Immerse yourself in how you feel about them and having done that for 7 or 8 minutes, spend the next 7 or 8 minutes sending those feelings out into the world. You could send them to a particular person you know is in need, or send them to your neighbours and friends, or an area of the world that you're concerned about.

This will have a wonderful effect on your brain. It will produce healing neurochemicals such as dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin – and help with your immune-resistance.

Conscious breathing is another equally valuable activity because it calms the mind, engages the parasympathetic nervous system, which leads to feelings of relaxation and relief. So, you could consider this amongst your options. For those who have a particular faith then engaging in prayer has numerous benefits for mind and body.

## **2. Eat a rainbow diet**

The more colour there is on your plate or in your bowl, the more you can be sure you're getting the primary vitamins, minerals, amino acids and essential fats that are required. The four Ss (smoothies, soups, stews and salads) are good ways to achieve this. They allow for a great variety of colour to be included in one meal.

It is also at this time worth considering good vitamin/mineral supplementation should you feel so inclined. This is an area where there is still some controversy and we certainly have no agenda to encourage people to take supplements where they feel disinclined to do so. What we do say for those who are interested, is look at the excellent research that has been done in this area over the last 50+ years, which demonstrates that the quality of nutrients in the soil and therefore available in our food has declined, and unless or until we do something about that, supplements are a necessary support in the absence of getting all the nutrients from what we eat.

Orthomolecular Medicine and Nutrigenomics are both disciplines that are increasing our understanding of why supplements for some individuals can be transformative and life-saving. If you do choose to take supplements, we recommend the 'food state' versions.

### **3. Deep restorative sleep**

Do your best to get deep restorative sleep. Sleep is critical in helping our immune systems to stay strong. It is whilst we are asleep at night that most of the body's 'housekeeping tasks' are performed.

We produce billions of waste cells each day, which are all part of the natural consequence of being alive and sleep provides us with the opportunity for restoration and healing to take place, so the system can be rebooted for the next day. So, find ways to improve the quality of your sleep.

There is no one thing that works for everyone, so look at the techniques, strategies, potions and remedies that might work best for you. Some suggestions can be found in the links below.

### **4. Exercise improves mental health**

Where possible, try and get cardiovascular exercise. We now know that neurogenesis (the creation of new neurons) is a fact. It had previously been thought that once we lost neurons (brain cells) as we age, that was that. But we now know that one of the ways that new neurons are created is through cardiovascular exercise. Somewhere around 700 new neurons are created each day as a result of such exercise. We don't have to go to the gym for this, we just need to find ways to get out of breath, whether that be via walking, jogging, a fitness routine you've put together yourself or one of the hundreds of options available on the internet.

For those who can't exercise to that extent, any movement that can be achieved will bring advantages to your whole system.

### **5. Laughter – nature's anti-depressant**

Laughter is a great way to strengthen the immune system. In fact, all biological activities are enhanced by it. Those same healing neurochemicals listed above (oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin etc.), which are all positive mood enhancers, are produced when our minds and hearts are lightened with good humour and laughter.

Make a point of listening to and watching things that generate raucous laughter and bring a smile to your face and your heart. Find some time every day to do this, certainly during these times, as this is a wonderful antidote to anxiety, worry and fear.

### **6. Music is good for the soul**

Listen to your favourite pieces of music. We all know how good music is for the soul. We all have favourite tracks that stir us in particular ways, emerge fond memories, transport us to a different time and space. Why not put together a compilation that puts a spring in your step and your natural killer cells (which are on the front line of immunity) will be dancing with you!

You could do this for family and friends too.

## **7. Pamper yourself**

As much as you can, pamper yourself. Indulge in those things you might not do ordinarily but you probably should do more often. Have that soak in the bath that you keep putting off – this is a good time to make it more of a ritual. Read that book that you've promised yourself you will read but simply haven't got around to. If you're lucky enough to have a garden spend more time enjoying it. If you don't have an outside space, bring more order to your home. Make it a sanctuary, a place you want to be.

There are probably lots of things that come under this category that rarely see the light of day. Make a list and work your way through them.

## **8. The wonder of water**

We've recently had hydration week, which may have passed you by, but given the importance of hydration, making it a focus for one week of the year when we're vertical rivers, seems somewhat inadequate. Every function in our bodies depends on water. We simply can't operate at our best without it.

There is lots of research that shows how critical water is to the human condition. In fact, the removal of those billions of cells of waste each day, which is critical in order for the immune system to work optimally, is not the only reason water is crucial. We've been placing the emphasis in this piece on mental health and water is critical in that regard too.

Research by Loughborough University in 2015 clearly demonstrated that when we are dehydrated our brains have similar reaction times in road traffic situations to those who are under the influence of alcohol. There are other studies that equally show how cognitive functions are impaired even when there's only a small drop in the volume of water in the body. For both men and women this is under 2% and at that point our perception, personality and performance are affected.

So, remain hydrated. It will help you to keep things in perspective.

## **Summary**

If you can do something from this list – the more you can do the better – you will find that your mental health will remain robust and provide you with the emotional and psychological resilience you need to deal with the current crisis.

Someone who is positive, even if they get the virus, their ability to overcome it is greatly enhanced and their recovery time will be much quicker. This doesn't apply just to COVID 19, it applies to any assault on our bodies.

There's no such thing as perfect immunity but ridding yourself of fear is the best weapon you have to meet the coming days, weeks and months.

If we stay mentally strong and connected in whatever ways we can with each other, we'll create an atmosphere of positivity and calm that will be supportive and uplifting.

**Please remember to wash your mind as well as your hands!**

