

COVID 19 – A MENTAL HEALTH RESPONSE (PART 2)



Focusing on a mental health response to COVID 19, is not about being irresponsible and ignoring the government advice/directives; it's about understanding that mental health is every bit as important as physical health.

If we forget to look after our minds, the longer we are in lockdown, the more our mental health will be impacted. In order to prevent the multitude of negative consequences that this would create, we need to make our minds fortresses of peace.

Therefore, it's important that we support and sustain our emotional and psychological well-being – whilst acting responsibly and within the guidelines laid out, applying the exemptions with conscience and care.

In this article we want to underline the fact that we are not powerless in this situation, as long as we call on our greatest resource, our minds – and to do that it would help to understand the enormous capacity of our thoughts and feelings; and how alongside our beliefs they are the biggest factors in keeping us safe and mentally strong.

Before outlining what would help you to create a fortress of peace, it would be useful to understand some of the mechanics of the mind and its intimate relationship with the body.

The epigenetic revolution has been changing our long-held view of genetic determinism, which is the idea that the genetic code we are born with essentially decides our fate. Epigenetics means, 'above our genes'. This discipline has enabled us to understand that although we are born with a set of genetic predispositions, we are not entirely defined by those factors and can in fact influence gene expression.

The term epigenetics was first coined in 1942 by Conrad H. Waddington, who was a developmental biologist and geneticist. His work laid a valuable foundation for the discipline – but epigenetics really began to achieve respectability in the mid 1970s. It's since the turn of the century that there has been a significant surge in research and copious amounts of data overturning the belief that genes simply 'act out' in accordance with our familial inheritances, causing our cells to perform their functions within the limitations of those parameters. However, a new paradigm has emerged highlighting the

fact that there are other factors impacting on gene expression – these include diet/nutrition, stress, relationship and social factors, environmental pollutants, and behaviour.

Over the last 40 years it has become clear that it's the environment that is pivotal in the way genes express themselves – to be even more precise it's our perception of the environment that arguably has the single greatest influence. In other words, our thoughts, feelings and beliefs (the way we see ourselves and the world), are the factors that most influence our biological activities and our experience of reality.

Understanding the power that our thoughts, feelings and beliefs have to shape our world view and experiences is highly relevant given the current crisis that is consuming the globe. Increasing numbers of individuals are having an acute emotional and psychological response – and if this is left unchecked these feelings of anxiety, worry and fear will become chronic, leading to a range of negative consequences both physical and mental. Epigenetics has shown us that we can then become victims not only to the vast array of environmental insults but also to those genetic inheritances and frailties we are born with.

It's important for balance to say that epigenetics has not only helped us to understand that genes can be switched on by our environment and our beliefs about the environment, but they can also be switched off. So, we are not victims in this story unless of course we allow ourselves to be.

As stated in the first of these articles, psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) since the time of its conception in 1975, has also been informing our understanding, about the impact our thoughts and feelings have on the central nervous system and immune system. It was Dr. Robert Ader, psychologist and professor of psychiatry, who first made the connection between brain, behaviour and immunity. This discipline has developed significantly in the last 25 years, exploring further how our beliefs and perceptions affect our mental health, which in turn impacts on our physiology. Topics that have been explored at some depth include how we are affected by: bereavement, physical health challenges, the aging process, familial issues and conflicts and a range of other lifestyle factors.

Both epigenetics and PNI have provided us with enormous insight, giving us access to hope and personal power, which at a time like this is so precious.

This is why we asked you to consider 'washing your mind as well as your hands'. This wasn't a clever play on words, this was an important invitation to improve your mental hygiene. Any negative self-talk at this time simply isn't helpful.

One final piece in this jigsaw of the mind is cognitive neuroscience. The origins of this discipline can be traced back to the 1950s, but the term cognitive neuroscience was coined by psychologists Michael Gazzaniga and George Armitage Miller in 1976. It is from this point that neuroscience and psychology became complimentary in an attempt to further unravel the secrets of our souls.

Cognitive neuroscience has added to the abundance of evidence supporting the premise that we can make ourselves anew. This has helped the neuroplasticity revolution, which has proven that our brains are not machines, static organs, mindlessly performing a myriad of electrochemical reactions. Our brains are full of infinite possibilities, they can repair, heal, rewire, adapt and change in a multitude of ways.

There are 100 billion neurons in the human brain and each neuron can be connected to up to 200,000 other neurons via the dendrites (tree like structures) that facilitate the communication between neurons. It's these dendrites that sprout when we learn something new, creating a new pathway of knowledge and experience or reinforcing an existing pathway. These neural pathways become the basis of all behaviour. The more they are reinforced the more we habitually act in accordance with

those templates. This has been summarised by many neuroscientists as: 'neurons that fire together wire together' and 'neurons not in sync, do not link'. A process that is known as synaptogenesis.

What relevance does this have to what we're going through now?

Well, put simply, if our neurons are firing in a state of fear and being linked together in this way, then a variety of neurochemicals are produced, which affect our physical bodies in detrimental ways. Neural pathways are created hardwiring these negative changes into our brains, which make it easier for us to maintain that pattern of thinking and harmful beliefs are formed as a result.

The opposite is also true. If our neurons are firing together around positive thoughts, feelings of peace and contentment, the neurochemicals and hormones that are created, protect us from our genetic frailties and familial inheritances. Positive beliefs are then hardwired into our brains and our self-image is strengthened, so too are our immune systems – as a result we are fortified against those environmental factors that would cause us harm. Neuroplasticity tells us we each have the extraordinary capacity to learn, unlearn and relearn.

This is why it is critical to create a culture of positive self-talk because the cutting-edge sciences which include epigenetics, PNI and cognitive neuroscience, make it clear that our most underused (and misused) and incredibly precious resource is our minds.

If we simply react to the events around us as if we are powerless, then that perception of the environment will lead us down an undesirable path, where our thoughts change our brain chemistry, our brain chemistry pollutes our bodies and internal organs and systems, then we experience the negative consequences of that as pain, trauma or illness. This in turn maintains the belief and the feeling that we are weak and powerless.

This simply isn't the case but to claim that power it's imperative to understand that it actually resides within you – and can only be activated by things that make you feel good about yourself at your core. This needs to become a healthy obsession.

We've already suggested a number of activities that can help you to change how you feel and improve your emotional and psychological resilience, such as: meditation, mindfulness, LKM, dancing, singing, exercise, pampering, finding things that make you laugh and listening to and watching them as part of your daily self-medication. Creating order in your space also helps with these feelings of elation – it's important to make your personal space a sanctuary, somewhere where you can truly nurture yourself.

Self-care is the key to good and stable mental health, so make it a priority.

Here's a simple exercise you can try to create some conscious synaptogenesis – getting those neurons to fire and wire together:

I am a self-healing organism and I am wonderfully well...

My brain produces copious amounts of healing hormones which are distributed throughout the body... creating health and well-being...

I'm full of peace and positive energy and as a result my genes express themselves beautifully... instructing my cells to perform every function exactly as needed...

I'm full of love and hope, which calm my central nervous system and enhance my immune system...

My immune system performs incredible miracles every day and I marvel at its magnificence...

I choose kind, loving thoughts and I wish others well...

I choose to accept and love myself... and to forgive myself...

I choose love over fear... I choose faith over doubt... I choose peace over conflict...

I choose to find the jewel of benefit in every situation...

I look at my mistakes with kind eyes and as a result I grow from them...

I learn from my past... I fully embrace the present moment... and look forward to a bright future...

I now understand that every thought provides me with the opportunity to be a better version of myself...

I think of those I love and respect and wish them all that they need on the road ahead...

I levitate above fear and anxiety... and immerse myself in the ether of love...

Every day is the first day of the rest of my life... and provides me with unlimited opportunities for positive change...

I am a self-healing organism and I am wonderfully well...

One of the most effective ways of imbibing these affirmations – and creating a new script that will get your neurons to fire and wire together – is to record them. When we listen to affirmations in our own voice, although we might initially meet some resistance, this is the voice that your brain and unconscious mind most recognise. It has the greatest influence on changing the geography of your mind.

If you choose to make a recording, don't hurriedly say each affirmation, say it in a calm, relaxed way and before moving onto the next affirmation, leave enough space to repeat it in your mind – then move on to the next one... and repeat the process.

When you've completed the sequence, start at the beginning and go through the whole list again. You can even do this a third time... and you'll end up with a recording, dependant on your pace, somewhere between 6 and 10 minutes long.

Then listen to this meditative piece at least once a day, when going for a walk, whilst having a bath, or when having a moment to yourself.

If this does not appeal to you, you could write the sequence down several times – writing each affirmation three times is a good guide. Writing is another powerful way to imbibe these messages. Performing either of these tasks daily will prove empowering as you create those neural pathways that will set up new traits, which will become habits, then patterns and drivers, leading to a natural state of positive thinking. As you strengthen the new neural networks, the old negative ones become redundant and the internal balance of power shifts in your favour.

Fear disables, dismantles and disempowers – and love repairs, heals and uplifts our spirits.