

What Our Bodies Know -
The Relationship Between Our Emotions and Our Health

By Sharon Lewis and John Doan

Your emotional health is a significant and often overlooked determinant of your physical well being. Open any health and fitness magazine and you will see pages upon pages of exercises and dietary choices to help you achieve the wellness we all desire. However, it is becoming clearer that the choices we make about our emotional expression have as much if not more of an impact on our health. Mind and body are linked and must function as an integrated whole to remain healthy.

Recent advances in the field of *psychoneuroimmunology* demonstrate that the expression or repression of emotion has a direct effect on the functioning of our immune system. The experience of emotions involves a complex release of chemicals that affect all of the systems of our bodies. The immune system is one of the most critical of these. From fighting a common cold to fending off the ravages of cancer, our immune system is our physical front line of defense and its workings can be enhanced or inhibited depending on our own proficiency in dealing with emotions.

We are designed by nature to put the energy released by our emotions to work. The well known stress response is an example of this. Stress is the perception of various forms and intensities of “threat” It causes a cascade of hormones to be released through the body to prepare us to fight or otherwise protect ourselves. The result of these hormones may be acute (fight or flight) or chronic (activation of the system over long periods of time). However, when we learn that our natural responses are inappropriate or ineffective we can repress them and the hormones and chemicals designed to protect us go to work in our own systems in harmful ways. Disorders related to the repression of emotional responses include; Multiple Sclerosis, Breast Cancer and Other Cancers, Inflammatory Bowel Disease, Crohn’s, Ulcerative Colitis, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Gastro-esophageal Reflux, Alzheimer’s Disease, Asthma, Rheumatoid Arthritis and Rheumatic Diseases. As Dr. Gabor Mate states in his book, “When the Body Says No!” “*When we have been prevented from learning how to say No, our bodies may end up saying it for us.*”

So, finding effective and appropriate management for our emotions is critical to maintaining our health. This is known as developing emotional intelligence. Fortunately this Emotional Intelligence is demonstrably learnable and, as a bonus, has been shown to be the most important predictor of “success” as well as being critical for health.

What then is Emotional Intelligence and how can we learn it? EI can be broadly defined as the ability to “manage” one’s emotions and, as a result, be available to interact more effectively with the emotions of others. It involves understanding the interplay between our *emotional mind* and our *rational mind*, two distinct brain systems. Harmony between these two brain systems can be learned and improved. An imbalance toward either direction, being overly emotional or overly rational, can have dire consequences for our health. For example, it is commonly known that excessive anger, rage, can be

damaging to our cardiac system via cardiac arrest. However, at the University of California, researchers found that “the suppression of negative emotions by the cognitive brain, rather than the negative emotions themselves, weighs more heavily on our hearts and arteries.” In one study, men with heart disease were asked, “Does your wife show you her love?” The participants answering yes had 50% fewer symptoms than the ones answering no. Similarly, in women with breast cancer, those who reported a lack of affection in their lives were twice as likely to die within 5 years.

At first glance it appears that there is no correct course of action, both expression and suppression of emotions will cause problems. However, a middle way does emerge as one studies the literature. This middle way involves using our rational mind to acknowledge, accept and label the emotions we are feeling and incorporate those emotional signals as information that can inform the decisions we make. In this way we are able to understand and calm our emotional responses, slow and halt the flow of potentially damaging chemicals and give voice and action to our emotions. Increasing our emotional intelligence increases our ability to maintain relationships and take action, it also increases our ability to define and stand up for our personal boundaries. In turn those boundaries mean we will have fewer stressful, emotionally draining interactions to react to. In an upward spiral of increasing competence, calmness and health we are more and more able to deal with what life brings us.

The time when we looked at our health as correcting what ails our bodies and not addressing what is going on in our minds has passed. We are whole-beings, a wonderfully integrated system. Good health allows all of the pieces to operate as intended. Staying healthy is a journey that includes and connects the body, the mind and the emotions.

Authors' Note: To learn more about Emotional Intelligence look for the book “Emotional Intelligence” by Daniel Goleman. For more information on the impact of the emotions on health read “When the body says No!” by Dr. Gabor Mate or “Molecules of Emotion” by Dr. Candace Pert.

Sharon Lewis and John Doan are Life and Executive Coaches as well as Accredited Facilitators in Emotional Intelligence. Together, they are the Co-Founders of “The Foundation for Intentional Relationship”. To integrate and personalize your learning, look for classes and coaching with “The Foundation” at www.foundation4relationship.com.