



Connecting Physical and Emotional Pain By Angel True

The human body is an amazing piece of equipment which is intimately controlled by an even more amazing piece of equipment – your brain. Not so coincidentally this is where your emotions are formed as well. Is it so unreasonable a stretch to think that there might be a link between the two?

You've heard it all before no doubt – the mind and body connection. It's the latest craze and the hippest subject. It's so over talked right now, or people just assume you get it, that you almost can't turn anywhere in the alternative world or even the mainstream world these days without someone wanting to talk about, engage or utilize this connection. My own coaching practice is based on this concept of mind and body connection and I too have somewhat taken it for granted that people understood what that meant and how it worked.

Recently I've been recovering from a fairly serious chronic neck and shoulder injury that knocked me out of regular activity and down to basic survival mode for nearly 2 months due to the pain level. In the process of identifying and healing the injury I've had to come to a much deeper level of understanding and awareness of my own mind and body connection to see where my physical and emotional injuries relate – and heal both in order to deal with the problem. In the process of doing so I've begun to re-evaluate my own use and awareness of this connection. It's one thing to profess a "body awareness" and another to profess an "emotional consciousness" – but what is required to profess a true "mind and body connection"?

For me, truly understanding the mind and body connection began in assessing the management and understanding of my own "pain". The connection was in understanding my processing and carrying of external judgment and emotional hurt and correlating it with how my body was acting to create my neck and shoulder injury. At first this was a difficult thing for me to really understand – that emotional pain was creating physical injury – but with a little effort I began to see the interrelationship.

What I noticed was that when the pain is physical you can notice it exists rather quickly – your body is full of nerve endings and pain receptors. Your body is designed to understand and communicate the source of physical injury to you in a fairly efficient manner. If it's an acute or urgent pain your autonomic responses take over and your body reflexively moves away. If it's less acute your pain receptors still tell you something is wrong which gives you the ability to identify the source fairly rapidly and find a way to deal with the issue.

Emotional pain doesn't have nearly the same amount of obvious indicators as physical pain does – though they are still there – nor do they serve the same purpose. If you are suffering from extreme emotional pain caused by obvious trauma or abuse there are fairly distinct behavioral characteristics that can be noticed. Because of the acute nature of these emotional injuries the indicator behaviors are usually somewhat easy to identify by a trained professional, and if severe enough you can probably identify them in others easily without that training and maybe even yourself. Just like physical pain, with the proper treatment emotional pain and injuries can be managed and even mostly eliminated. However, unlike physical pain which is designed to show you exactly where the injury is emotional pain and the subsequent indicators is often more designed to mask the pain or avoid future injury.

This much had always felt pretty simple and obvious to me, but what I didn't really understand was the deeper level that chronic and severe pain interacts at. This is where my own personal process of understanding the mind and body connection began to shift and expand.

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If you've ever had to manage through chronic physical pain then you know that it's just about one of the worst things to have to deal with in life – especially if it's extreme pain. But what about your emotional pain? Emotional pain is a bit different and often more complex but it can be equally excruciating to deal with. Of course, in order to truly understand the mind and body connection you must see where and how these different pains go together and are inter-related.

In addition to just hurting, a lot, chronic physical pain has a way of sapping your strength and pulling you down both physically and emotionally. If it gets bad enough it can start affecting your work, your personal life, and your sleep. Every moment becomes about managing, easing and doing anything you can to escape the pain. When you hurt that much no amount of emotional "cheer me up" will do the trick for more than a few minutes or hours at a time – it just hurts.

Though severe emotional pain has some obvious behavioral patterns, even less acute emotional issues still have indicators that help identify where the pain comes from. As noted though, these behavior indicators serve a slightly different purpose than physical pain. Emotional pain reactions serve to distract you from and avoid the real emotional pain. What is often neglected though is how damaging and how painful these less acute emotional issues and behavior patterns can be. In a time of "be tough" and "pop a pill" in order to get better the management of the underlying physical and emotional issues, and their connection, frequently gets overlooked or simply ignored.

Now of course you know that a good support group of friends and family can help tremendously. Of course you also know that therapy can be extremely helpful and effective if applied appropriately with someone that understands the issue and the effective reframing and treatment options.

But what may get neglected is connecting the two. To begin to understand the mind and body connection a little better in your own body try one or both of these exercises:

Mind/Body Exercise 1 – Emotion Focus:

Sit comfortably and allow yourself to reach a place of calm. Focus on an emotional issue that is currently relevant and present for you. Without trying to understand or solve this emotional issue just begin to feel the emotion. As you begin to have the emotional experience notice what sensations in your body come up. Notice any pains, tingling sensations, hot or cold spots, or anything else that feels different than usual or suddenly calls for your attention. When you identify one or more spots of physical sensation focus your attention on those areas. Using your breath as a tool, imagine that you are sending oxygen and energy into those locations. Take several deep, long, slow breathes – at least 3-5 but as many as you need. Notice what happens to that physical sensation as you do this. Does it dissipate, intensify, shift or move around? Now notice what is happening with the emotional issue you focused on. Does it feel lighter, less important, easier to manage, transformed to a deeper level, or become something new?

When you are done gently allow yourself to relax and breath normally. Take some time to relax and come back to full presence.

Mind/Body Exercise 2 – Body Focus:

Again, sit comfortably and allow yourself to reach a place of calm. Scan through your body to identify any unusual sensations like you did in Exercise 1. Leave your mind calm and relaxed and using your breath as a tool again send oxygen and energy into those locations you identified. What begins to happen to those sensations? Do you notice any emotions or thoughts coming up for you? If you begin to notice emotions arise move towards them and feel them more but without trying to understand or solve the issue. As you begin to feel the emotion notice what

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happens. Do the sensations in your body change? Does your awareness of the emotion begin to shift or deepen? Follow the emotion wherever it takes you and again notice how the sensations in your body relate to this shift.

When you are done gently allow yourself to relax and breath normally. Take some time to relax and come back to full presence.

At first you might find it difficult to really make the correlation between the physical sensation and the emotional content. With time and practice though, you'll find it more obvious and easier to do. What you are likely to discover is that emotional pain can be treated with physical awareness and vice versa – to a certain extent.

With emotional pain what is often overlooked is the fact that even low levels of simple daily issues can have a much broader and more severe impact than an equal amount of physical pain. What is also neglected is that emotional and physical pain have a connection that runs very deep and is often not acknowledged. What is important to understand about this mind and body connection is how subtle it can be, especially if you aren't paying attention. While we have an easy and readily available ability to identify physical pain with physical injury the relationship between emotional pain and emotional injury are much harder to identify. It is this very connection that you will need to foster in order to truly engage the mind and body connection.

Just like chronic pain can affect your life and pull you down, so to can emotion pain. The difference is that you may just not notice it as much. Depression and anxiety – two emotions nearly everyone has experienced at some point – are the easiest examples to understand their impact on your life. When you are depressed or anxious your energy level, mood, appetite and sex drive can all be affected. Most of us have made this connection even if we don't know what to do about it all the time. Notice how the symptoms of emotional pain are physical in nature? Even though the actual injury is something else such as stress, loneliness or other emotional challenges – it manifests the injury as depression or anxiety that also expresses as physical symptoms.

With physical and emotional pain the difference is that you usually have great clarity about addressing physical pain – but your awareness and understanding of emotional pain might be vastly more complicated. If you're anything like the typical human your mind can play tricks on you by hiding and masking the true emotional issue. While you might think it's "just depression" the reality might be that there's a deeper issue of holding onto judgment, feelings of abandonment, fears of inadequacy, self-esteem issues or any of a number of other significant emotional issues that regularly occur in our modern lives that are driving and fueling the depression or anxiety.

The other difference with the emotional pain is that more often than not you may allow yourself to continue to suffer without addressing the deeper issue, releasing the pain or solving the problem that created the emotion. You do this because of the masking effect of emotional pain. This can be just as draining and exhausting as chronic physical pain. In our modern society we've simply learned to "cope" with this emotional pain and sense of disconnection that follows.

What is most important to understand though is not just how physical and emotional pain manifest but how one can manifest as the other. This is where your newfound skills and understanding of the mind and body connection can begin to address the issue with more success, as it did in my own process of healing. As stated earlier, nearly every physical pain or injury has an emotional component to it.

For me the weight of carrying external judgment and emotional hurt was borne by my shoulders. Over a long period of time of carrying and denying this pain and injury my body adjusted and compensated by hunching over and tightening up as a protection from the pain. After a particularly difficult period of time of holding these issues

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my body finally gave way to physical injury. The correlation was realized and my body found a way of getting my attention I couldn't ignore. It manifested my emotional injury as a physical pain with clear indicators I couldn't ignore.

In order to heal both the emotional and physical pain you must begin to make the connection and treat both of them simultaneously. By using your mind and body awareness begin to notice where these pains interrelate. In my body I had to learn to release these old emotions and patterns and build new structures for accepting and allowing these interactions to roll off of me more lightly. I also had to work on taking the physical steps necessary to heal the physical injury. It is only in completely engaging this mind and body connection that I have been able to slowly begin to heal both my mind and my body – but it still takes time and effort.

Take a moment now to go back to the exercises you performed earlier. See if you can identify whether your real pain or injury is emotional or physical. What do you discover if you deal with either the physical or emotional pain separately and how is this different from dealing with both of them simultaneously? By integrating the mind and body connection with both the emotional and physical healing tools you already have, or by seeking help with someone capable of assisting you, you'll achieve better and more rapid results.

If you give both your mind and body the proper attention the chronic pain, whether physical or emotional, doesn't have to be chronic anymore! And the best part? If you deal with the emotional pain now it might not need to manifest as severe physical pain! See what kind of difference this awareness makes in your life.

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