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The Mind-Body Problem (and solution)

I think, therefore I am — no problem

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The mind-body problem is a fun game played by philosophers and epistemologists since before Aristotle's time. The essential question is whether the mind (consciousness) is separate and distinct from matter (the brain and body), or do they originate from one recondite source. Starting in late 20th century health and wellness circles, this question has evolved into whether or not mental/emotional wellbeing and physical health influence each other.

Just as philosophy deals with some ultimately unanswerable questions, medical science may never find this smoking gun (though the issue is somewhat less daunting than the meaning of life). It has, however, developed a strong theory. And by this I mean *scientific theory*, the kind of knowledge supported by extended, unbiased testing, observation, and confirmation — obtained through the scientific method and critical thought.

Real advances in what is now called *mind-body medicine* began in the 1970s under the ominously named subspecialty *psychosomatic medicine*. Founder and Director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine James Gordon recalls those early days of hypotheses and experimentation at the National Institute of Health (NIH): because of "institutional 'ambivalence,' early studies were published privately rather than by the NIH."

Since then, Gordon, Herbert Benson (clinical professor of medicine at Harvard University), and other pioneers in the field have been doggedly building a body of evidence that leaves little doubt about the mind-body connection. In support of this has been critical 21st century studies showing a direct biological connection between emotional stress and immune system regulation. Without inducing an eyes-glazed-over response with terms like *chemokines*, *cytokines IL-6* and *cellular adhesion*, I simply note that depression and anxiety have been solidly linked to cardiovascular disease, arthritis, Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and some cancers, among other ailments.

Benson sums up the current state of medicine by referring to a three-legged model, of which mind-body medicine is one leg along with surgery and pharmacology. He avers, "The average doctor does not prescribe meditation, breathing exercises or yoga, and this needs to change."

"But how does this affect me?" HR directors and other corporate officers are asking. The answer is this: If you are not considering the mental/emotional wellbeing of your workforce, your

company is paying for it. Stress and its first cousins anxiety and depression directly influence the prevention and treatment of physical illness. And behavioral and physical distress result in lost productivity, increased health plan claims, and (the hot corporate topic of the day) employee disengagement.

What can your company do? Follow the money. If stress causes absenteeism, illness, and exacerbation of existing maladies, nip this expenditure in the bud. Look for ways to decrease your employees' stress:

- Ensure that your managers manage with humanity (the Golden Rule), a proven way to increase employee engagement, thereby, decreasing stress.
- Encourage stress-reduction activities by hosting on-site, subsidized meditation, yoga, relaxation, and exercise classes.
- Re-examine (or establish) work-life balance policies.
- Re-examine your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and make sure your people are familiar with it. EAPs are all about preventing and treating emotional stress, and you've already paid for the services.
- Re-examine your wellness program. Ensure that your vendor has an integrated mind-body approach to health and wellbeing — all the better if they have integrated your EAP.

Embracing the mind-body connection is an integral part of enhancing corporate productivity, creativity, and cost savings. Meditation, relaxation, and other stress-reduction techniques are not just for mystics and spiritual enlightenment types anymore. These activities represent a direct connection to workforce happiness and healthiness. The mind-body solution — treating stress, anxiety, and depression to effect physical health improvement — has long ago graduated from the label of *alternative* medicine. Again, Herbert Benson sums it up: "We're not 'alternative' because we're empirically based."

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