

## Mastering the Emotion/Vertebral Cortex Connection

As chiropractors, we are proud to call ourselves holistic health care practitioners. We emphasize the importance of the whole body working together and the interdependence of its parts, instead of simply focusing on symptoms. Yet while we believe in a strong emotion/vertebral cortex connection, we are faced with a simple fact: The vast majority of us are not educated and trained psychologists or psychiatrists. We treat our patients' physical aches, pains and illnesses, but are we recognizing emotion as at least a partial cause of many of these physical ailments?

Of course, you can go back to school to obtain a psychology degree. Or you can partner with mental health professionals to create a truly holistic approach of care for your patients - and open the doors to new opportunities for referrals as well.

My education and training in acupuncture and biofeedback have given me additional insight into the role emotions play in impacting physical well-being. For the past several years, I have met with two esteemed local psychologists on a weekly basis. During this time, we have referred many patients to one another. And with our patients' permission, we have also learned to share vital information that helps each of us deliver the best possible treatments and care. By gaining greater insight into the emotional state of my patients, I am able to understand more fully the emotional causes and extent of their physical pain. (In acupuncture, for example, specific emotions can be directly traced to corresponding aches and pains on the body.)

This collaborative approach has helped speed the recovery of many of my patients, and has helped put an end to the myth that "when you go to a chiropractor once, you have to go for the rest of your life." Only by finding the true emotional and physical sources of pain can we, as chiropractors, finally find lasting (if not permanent) health care solutions. Adjustments, for example, last longer once a patient learns to manage emotional situations that trigger physical pain. And patients suffering from physical pain are better equipped to handle the emotional issues in their lives once their discomfort has been alleviated.

My success with this approach can serve as a reminder to all of us in the field to pay attention to our patients' emotional fabric. When I ask my patients what happened to cause an ache or pain they are experiencing, sometimes they answer, "Nothing," or "I don't know," unless there was a specific physical incident, like a car accident or sporting mishap. In today's fast-paced world, many patients have been conditioned to separate their physical and emotional well-being. It is our job to dig deeper, to learn a little more about the lives of our patients so that we can deliver complete, holistic care. We all have emotional issues in our lives.

A stressful meeting, a divorce, a death in the family, to name a few, all serve as very real contributors to many of the conditions we treat every day. But if we as chiropractors overlook or don't understand these basic emotional root causes, we are doing little more than handing out aspirin - providing

temporary relief instead of treating a much larger health issue.

For example, here is a real-life case study: A female patient who faces tight deadlines in the demanding field of finance recently came to my office complaining of neck pain. When questioned, she said she wasn't aware of any tension or stress at work or at home. I used a low-tech biofeedback technique to test her answer: I had her place her tongue lightly between her front teeth whenever she was engaged in concentrated or intense activity, such as a meeting or while calculating financial reports. Soon thereafter, she returned to my office, surprised at the results. She had repeatedly bitten her tongue to the point of bleeding, while feeling no pain whatsoever. My patient's mind had become so disconnected from her body that she didn't know that she frequently clenched her jaw, which was causing her neck pain. Feelings of tension and stress had become so common to her that she no longer recognized them. Now, she has learned how to manage situations that cause these feelings. She is taking responsibility for her own physical health. As a result, her adjustments last long beyond her visit to my office.

Subconscious emotions can also trigger physical ailments. Patients often tell me, "I don't know what happened. I woke up and suddenly my (back/neck/shoulders) hurt." The patients' minds are so busy working out unresolved issues as they sleep that their bodies tense up, causing muscle strains, clenched jaws, and overall aches and pains. They may not be taxing their bodies by lifting physical weights, but the emotional loads they are carrying are detrimental to their health.

As chiropractors, the challenge is to walk that fine line between psychological issues and physiological care. As I mentioned earlier, very few of us are psychologists or psychiatrists. But by asking the right questions, staying attuned to our patients' emotions, and even partnering with select mental health professionals who recognize the emotional and physical connection, we can begin to deliver truly holistic care.

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