



Three Ways Your Emotions Can Help You Live Longer

Ever wonder if how you *feel* might make you sick? Some of the common expressions we use in society show we already know that our emotions are related to our health. We say: I have a gut feeling about something. My heart feels heavy or joyful. That person gives me a headache. It does seem like we already know that how we feel affects our health. But let's look at the research to see what science tells us about our emotions and health.

It is well documented that more people have heart attacks on Monday morning than any other day of the week. Death rates peak for Christians at Christmas and for the Chinese at the Chinese New Year for Emotions clearly relate to the health of our hearts. The state of our emotions will affect whether we succumb to virus infections. Even as early as the 1940's Wilhelm Reich proposed, then heretical idea, that cancer is a result of the failure to express emotions.

Buried Emotions

In the 1980's Lydia Temoshok, a psychologist then at UCSF showed that cancer patients, who kept emotions such as anger under the surface, remaining ignorant of their existence, had slower recovery rates than those that were more expressive. In other research she showed that cancer patients had a commonality: self-denial-stemming from an unawareness of their own basic emotional needs. The immune systems were stronger and tumors smaller for those in touch with their emotions.

But, you say, can suppressed anger really cause cancer? David Spiegel of Stanford has convincingly shown in his research that being able to express emotions like anger and grief can improve survival rates in cancer patient.

We now know that anger actually causes perturbations of the heart. It makes it beat more rapidly increasing the risk of damage to the inner lining of our arteries. Anger also increases the stress hormones to prepare us to fight and causes our body to release fat into the blood causing even more clogging of our arteries.

If holding on to negative emotions hurts our bodies, does expressing happy emotions help our body? You bet! When we feel happy, our heart rhythms slow down and become more regular. When we feel good, look at a baby or pet your puppy, the neuropeptide, dopamine, increases, allowing our body organs to slow down and feel the rush of pleasure in our body. As a result of having more happiness in their lives, optimists live longer, have more friends and are more fulfilled than pessimists. But don't be fooled that you can just feel happy all the time and ignore your negative feelings and feel better.

Dr. James Pennebaker of Southern Methodist University proved in his research that experiencing feelings even negative ones has a positive impact on natural killer cell activity. He asked

students to write about very traumatic events and experience the negative feelings that were generated by those events. Pennebaker discovered that when the students dredged up their negative feelings, and re-experienced them they had few doctor visits for the next year. They actually enhanced a particular function in the immune system! It seems that it is not negative emotions that are dangerous to our health but the failure to express them that causes damage to our body.

Just recently the National Institute of Health has found what has seemed obvious to me for years watching people in therapy, a link between depression and traumas experienced in early childhood. Now it is proven that there is a link between this experience and biology. Certain peptides of negative expectations are stimulated by the negative experiences in childhood. Strong emotions felt in childhood that are not processed thoroughly and stored at the cellular level later cause physical distress.

One of the biggest researchers in this field of the relationship to emotions and health is Dr. Candace Pert. In my years of experience in working with clients in my own practice, I agree with Dr. Pert that all emotions are healthy. She has shown that they are what unite the mind and body. Anger, fear, and sadness, so called negative emotions are just as valuable to the health of the body as joy and happiness. To suppress any emotions and not let flow freely within the body sets up lack of harmony making the body work at cross purposes. I think this is what creates stress taking the form of blockages and insufficient flow of peptide and information to the cells. This sets up weakened conditions that can lead to disease.

So health is not about just always thinking happy thoughts. But if expressing negative emotion is important to our health, what can we do about it? Pert suggests that sometimes the biggest way to jumpstart healing is to jumpstart the immune system with a burst of long-suppressed anger. It is very important that we put careful boundaries around when we express our feelings and how we express them to protect our loved ones from feeling hurt and pain. But expressing all of our feelings in the right way is very important to our health.

All honest emotions are positive emotions. Since we are created with emotions, then we need to learn how to express them in harmony with the world. The research above supports the premise that unprocessed or buried emotions cause disease.

The research supports three basic ways we can use our emotions to live longer and happier, healthier lives:

1. Express them! Talk. Write. Emote-even the negative emotions.
2. Acknowledge your anger and find a safe way to express it.
3. Express as many positive emotions as you can every day!

It was Darwin who first speculated that emotion is the key to survival of the fittest. But then, if I remember my Bible stories correctly, even Christ expressed anger at the money changers. Maybe...just maybe....he was giving us a lesson on getting rid of our negative emotions.....and replacing them with the higher feeling of love.