

Poking a “Whole” in Stress

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By ***Colleen Walsh Fong***

The word “whole” has several definitions in [Merriam-Webster’s Online Unabridged Dictionary](#).

The first two are:

1. a complete amount or sum: a number, aggregate, or totality lacking no part, member, or element;
2. something constituting a complex unity: a coherent system or organization of parts fitting or working together as one.

The word’s etymology harkens back to the Old English “[hal](#)” which meant “entire, unhurt, healthy;” and Old High German “heil” which meant “salvation, welfare;” and relates to the word “[health](#)” from the Old English hælþ which meant “wholeness, sound or well.”

The terms have a nice symmetry, which was not lost upon some of the great thinkers of the “modern” age. Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung based much of his theory on wholeness, the problems deriving from loss of wholeness and regaining wholeness as being the path to restoring mental health. Wholeness and unity are cornerstones of his school of psychological thought. Albert Einstein described the universe as the whole of which we are each just a part limited in time and space.

In his groundbreaking book, “Full Catastrophe Living,” Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. discusses the debilitating effects stress has on human wholeness, or health. His

detailed book explains how stress interferes with health and provides a structured program for reducing stress and restoring wholeness, based upon the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program developed and used at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Kabat-Zinn discusses the field of behavioral medicine, and possible links between stress and many illnesses. Leading Health Centers, such as the Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins, NYU Medical Center, and Army Medical Center—to name a few—also teach stress-reduction techniques to manage illness, though stress as a cause of illness remains unproven.

Most of the techniques Kabat-Zinn uses are based upon the simplest and most basic human skill—breathing. It fits with ancient philosophies involving the human life cycle as connected with the larger tidal, moon, and seasonal cycles of the earth and universe. The basis for much of his program lies in ancient Eastern technique. Considering that ancient Egyptians had water-activated toilet systems connected to sewers, performed surgery, used cosmetics, used advanced written language (hieroglyphics), and built the pyramids, it may behoove us to take a page from the ancients' playbooks.

Diet, exercise and positive thinking are also important facets of his program.

Recent medical literature, and print and e-periodicals are rife with reports of an unbridled rise in autoimmune disease, depression, and anxiety. Stress is believed to play a role in all of these conditions. Major health facilities like those mentioned above give credence to simple and fundamental stress-management techniques. Nevertheless [antidepressant use](#) has doubled over the last ten years, despite evidence that symptoms continue in at least 50% of users. The debate over [effectiveness of antidepressants](#) as a long-term or permanent treatment for the variety of conditions they are now used to treat continues. Whether the success rate of their usage is due to the failure of users to supplement drug therapy with cognitive behavioral or psychotherapy; or to attempt to uncover biological causes through testing for hormonal imbalances or other diseases is unknown.

Suffice it to say that the possible [adverse reactions](#) to these drugs provide reason enough for due diligence. Whichever side one aligns with in this debate over natural versus pharmaceutical treatments, employing Kabat-Zinn's program cannot hurt, and may bring relief to those afflicted with chronic illness or pain.

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