

Thinking Your Way to Better Health teaches readers how to use the mind-body connection to relief stress, prevent disease, improve sex, and slow aging. Self-help quizzes and detailed suggestions will forever change how we think about health.

Thinking Your Way to Better Health: How to Use the Power of the Brain for Health and Self-Healing

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# **Thinking Your Way to Better Health**

**How to Use the Mind-Body Connection  
For Health and Self-Healing**

**Andrew Goliszek**

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# 1

## **The Brain - An Organ of Healing**

Ancient philosophers, including Aristotle, considered the heart, not the brain, the seat of thought, reason, and emotion. Egyptians, before mummifying their deceased, would first remove the brain because they didn't consider it important enough to preserve with the rest of the body. Even the Bible refers to the heart as being deceitful above all things, desperately wicked, and having evil thoughts. Of course we know the opposite is true; that it is the brain, controlling the rest of the nervous system, which regulates all our other organs and life processes. In fact, one is officially declared dead, not when there's major organ failure, but only when brain function and activity cease to exist.

The human brain is an exceedingly complex and marvelous organ comprising a network of neural connections and approximately 100 billion neurons. As early as the seventh or eighth week of embryonic development, many structures of the adult are already recognizable. This first trimester is the stage that developmental biologists refer to as the sensitive or critical period because it's during this time that the nervous system is so malleable and growing so rapidly that it is especially vulnerable to outside agents such as alcohol, nicotine, chemicals, stress hormones, and other toxins that pass through the placenta. By the end of the eighth week, our brain is nearly as large as the rest of the body. By the third trimester, it is complete and ready to absorb information from the world around it.

But the human brain is much more than a collection of neurons. If that's all it was, we wouldn't be nearly as smart as an octopus, which can have as many as 150 billion neurons. And if size were the criteria, we certainly would not be as intelligent as dolphins, elephants, or sperm whales; the latter having



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brains almost five times the size of ours. Weighing in at a mere two percent of our total body weight, the brain is one of the marvels of evolution. Within its many folds is an organic computer that rivals anything we may have on our desktop. By tapping into that power, we can use one of the greatest forces of nature to regulate the life processes that keep us healthy and disease-free.

### **Brain versus Mind**

The brain is the organ that creates the mind, which in turn is the thinking and perceiving part of our conscious. From the moment we're born, we respond to stimuli around us. Our brains are like mini computers with empty files, ready to input data as fast as humanly possible. Neural connections sprout; and the more we're stimulated, the more data we input during the first few years of our life, the more effectively those connections grow.

During the first ten years of life, the brain's outer portion or cerebral cortex grows the most rapidly and undergoes the greatest amount of change. Therefore, a large amount of sensory input and education is essential for proper growth, development, learning, and memory. While the expression "use it or lose it," is true at all ages when it comes to the brain, it's especially true at this critical time of life. Babies that have their vision cut off soon after they're born will not develop their eyesight properly because vital neural connections won't form. Children who are not touched or stimulated during infancy will not fully develop emotionally. At the other end of the age spectrum, older individuals who no longer perform regular mental activities will have increased memory loss and a decreased capacity in certain intellectual skills.

Throughout our lives, we're constantly using our brain — both consciously and subconsciously — for a variety of functions, even during sleep. So the old adage that we only use 10 percent of our brain is really not true. In fact, we must continue to improve both mental capacity and the ability to condition our brain to perform effectively throughout life.

Mind, on the other hand, refers to our collection of experiences, memories, feelings, and emotions that, together with our subconscious, is what makes us who we are. The mind-body connection is sometimes called the brain-body connection because our brain is really the control center for every one of our organ systems and the catalyst that triggers the multitude of reactions that leads to everything from cancer to self-healing.

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We don't fully understand the intricacies of how nerve networks operate, but we do know that the brain has an incredible ability to change connections in response to sensory stimuli. This ability is called **plasticity** and is responsible for creating feelings and emotions and producing cognitive behaviors such as thinking and memory. Until recently, we didn't realize to what extent we're consciously able to trigger the brain — with no external stimuli at all — into actions that can literally alter the thousands of biochemical reactions occurring in our bodies every second.

Visualization or imaging, for example, is being used along with traditional chemotherapy treatment to help patients destroy malignant cells. Prayer sessions are becoming a part of healthcare at many hospitals with the belief that spirituality plays a vital role in a patient's healing process. Both imaging and prayer are examples of how the brain, as a result of stimulation by nothing more than thoughts, can be mobilized into boosting the immune system enough to cure diseases as life-threatening as cancer.

### **The Brain and Immunity**

Development of the immune system begins during the first few weeks after conception. Neural folds appear and release cells that form a neural crest. The neural crest then contributes to the proper formation of the thymus gland, which is necessary for the full and effective development of the immune system. Once the central nervous system (CNS) develops, it begins to communicate with the immune system to create immune responses. Individuals with poor brain development, or with psychiatric and neurological disorders, often have poor immune responsiveness, lowered antibody production, and impaired lymphocyte activity. All of these are also triggered by stress reactions.

The sensitivity of the CNS is why prenatal care is so important during the critical period of development. Unless the CNS develops and grows properly in an environment without toxins such as alcohol, nicotine, drugs, and other agents, the immune system will not develop properly either. Babies are then born with underdeveloped spleens, thymuses, and lymph nodes, with a subsequent decrease in white blood cell production. Many children whose mothers may not have known they were pregnant until the second or third month are often born much more susceptible to infections and diseases.

The nervous system is the first system to be visible during early embryonic development. Once it begins to form, everything else follows. The endocrine

and lymphatic organs, together with the brain and nerves, form the neuro-endocrine-immune system, which controls the healing process and keeps us healthy. Some of the brain's structures, such as the hypothalamus and pituitary, play an especially critical role in our ability to respond to events happening around us. The manner in which we respond, however, is the result of brain conditioning, much like the conditioning we do to our muscles during exercise.

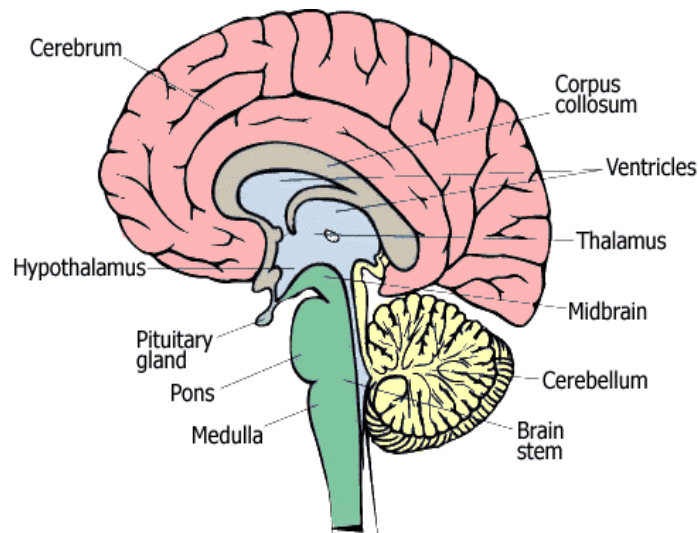


Figure 1.1: Main Components of the Developed Brain

As early as day 14 of embryonic development, cells begin to form and migrate to other developing tissue to enhance the formation of other organ systems. Following this, rapid changes occur that stimulate growth and lead to proper overall development. Here are the main stages of nervous system development:

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**Week 2:** Neural plate forms; rudimentary nervous system begins to develop

**Week 3:** Neural crest forms; spinal cord begins to develop

**Week 4:** Primitive tissue of the brain forms; heart can be seen beating

**Week 5:** Sensory organs begin developing

**Week 6:** Major brain divisions are evident; head grows rapidly

**Week 8:** All major internal organs have become established; nervous system is developed enough to allow reflex actions

### **Hypothalamus/Pituitary: The Brain's Thermostat**

The lower area of the brain contains a section of tissue called the hypothalamus. Known as the body's thermostat, the hypothalamus maintains homeostasis, the constant state in which our body operates. Functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, reproduction, growth, metabolism, electrolyte balance, hunger, defense, sleep, wakefulness, and breathing are controlled by signals generated by this area of the brain. Babies born without most of their brain (anencephaly) can still survive for several weeks because the main systems that keep the body alive continue to operate.

The hypothalamus is the one area of the brain in which there are anatomical differences between the sexes. One section involved in mating behavior, the preoptic area, is about 2 times larger in men and has almost double the number of cells. There are also differences in hypothalamic size between homosexual and heterosexual men, though it's still not known whether this factor plays a significant role in male sexual behavior.

In order to function properly and direct the brain, the hypothalamus receives signals from the skin, the eyes, the nose, the peripheral nerves, and from the multitude of internal receptors that respond to changes in temperature, fluid concentration, and pressure. Because it's so sensitive to stressors and environmental signals, the hypothalamus is also involved in an incredible number of biochemical reactions, and is the reason why stress can have such a deleterious effect on so many different organ systems. Altering the hypothalamus surgically, for example, can literally destroy the immune response.

Directly below the hypothalamus is the pituitary, which releases more hormones than any other endocrine gland. But although it's the principle

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gland that releases hormones, the pituitary cannot do so without the chemicals first produced by the hypothalamus. The anterior pituitary is involved in many of the reactions occurring during stress, anxiety, and physical trauma. A pathway comprising the hypothalamus, pituitary, and adrenal gland plays an important role in how we deal with both physical and emotional stressors and will be discussed in the next chapter.

The other side of the pituitary, the posterior pituitary, releases the remaining two hormones. Vasopressin or ADH (anti-diuretic hormone) is important in regulating the body's fluid balance. During stress, it also contributes to the release of cortisol, which depresses the immune system and makes us more prone to illness and disease. In the case of major depression, both vasopressin and cortisol levels are very high. Oxytocin, the other posterior pituitary hormone, is mainly involved in muscle contractions, especially the uterine muscles during the final stages of pregnancy and the mammary gland cells during suckling in order to eject milk. In males, oxytocin increases contractions of the prostate gland and the vas deferens, the vessel that transports sperm.

## **The Limbic System**

A network of nerves above the hypothalamus, the limbic system is often referred to as the emotional brain. It has a large number of sensory receptors and the greatest concentration of opiate receptors found in the brain. The rush or feeling of euphoria one gets after taking an opiate such as heroin or morphine is caused by the binding of these drugs to limbic system receptors.

The limbic system controls and regulates emotions such as fear, rage, love, hate, sexual arousal, aggression, pleasure, and pain. Located here are punishment and reward centers, believed to be important in learning and in triggering the motivational system used in avoidance behavior. Different areas of this system elicit different responses. Some years ago, I worked with a research scientist who was investigating how tobacco additives could be used to stimulate those areas of the limbic system that produce pleasure responses.

One part of the limbic system important in learning and memory is the hippocampus. Whenever we learn something new, structural changes occur that allow us to remember. New evidence from Alzheimer's patients shows that there is considerable atrophy of the hippocampus, which would explain the loss of memory and the inability to recognize even recent experiences. Plasticity is essentially lost, and the brain can no longer file away information.

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It's also believed that the limbic system is the part of the brain most involved with violent behavior. As part of a medical experiment, for example, a woman had an electrode inserted in one section of her limbic system and received a mild current. She immediately became angry and violent. When the current was switched off, she again became pleasant and cooperative. There's now agreement among neuroscientists that disruption of nerve impulses within the limbic system may be responsible for at least some cases of violent behavior.

Like all other areas of the brain, the limbic system is affected by external signals from the environment, as well as internal signals we send to ourselves because of the way we think and perceive events. No organ is more prone to suggestions than is the brain; and no organ in the human body is more responsive to how the body responds to those suggestions. Fighting a cold or eliminating a tumor often depends on the positive signals we send, which in turn unleash a wave of chemicals that trigger the massive immune response that stops disease in its tracks.

### **Why Placebos Are So Effect**

Nearly one-third of patients given a fake treatment like sugar, distilled water, or a salt solution improve their condition. Why is it that just the expectation of getting better will often be enough for a placebo to work? Dr. Robert DeLap, head of the Food and Drug Administration's Offices of Drug Evaluation explains that, "Expectation is a powerful thing. The more you believe you're going to benefit from a treatment, the more likely it is that you will experience a benefit." This is exactly why placebos are used when testing a new drug's medical benefit. If patients on the new drug fare significantly better than those taking a placebo, the study helps support the conclusion that the medicine is what's effective and not the power of positive thinking.

For centuries, unorthodox treatments have produced astounding improvements in health that could not be explained in traditional terms. During the last few decades, researchers have been studying how the placebo effect triggers the mind to regulate and control the body. In 1955, a groundbreaking paper "The Powerful Placebo" showed us how 32 percent of patients responded to placebos. Ten years later, breakthrough studies demonstrated how dummy pills sped up pulse rate, increased blood pressure, and improved reaction speeds when participants were told they had taken a stimulant, but

had the opposite effects when participants were told they had taken a sleep-producing drug.

It's hard for us to accept the notion that just thinking about curing a disease will often be enough to actually do it; that we can respond as well to a sugar pill as we can to a real drug. But according to Dr. Michael Jospe, a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology, who has studied the placebo effect for more than 20 years, our belief system gives us more healing power than we realize. He points out that all people experience physiological reactions to anticipation and stress that help them cope and survive. Each time you experience something and react to it, you learn from it and condition yourself to react before the event even occurs. So the relationship between a thought and a negative reaction is something we experience daily.

That goes for positive associations as well. "The placebo effect is part of the human potential to react positively to a healer," adds Dr. Jospe. "You can reduce a patient's distress by doing something that might not be medically effective. It's like kids and Band-Aids. When you put a Band-Aid on a child and it has stars or comics on it, it can actually make the kid feel better by its soothing effect, though there's no medical reason it should make the child feel better." In other words, if we think we're being treated, or that our symptoms can be controlled and our health improved, our body will respond positively even without medication.

In some cases, the placebo may be as good as the actual treatment. One study found that placebos do as well as antidepressants in the majority of patients treated. Other studies have shown that multicolored placebo pills work best overall, green placebos produce better results in anxious or phobic patients, red or orange ones perform better as stimulants, blue ones as sedatives, and yellow ones for depression. Barring some of our new miracle drugs, there are few medications today that have the power of our body's own chemicals.

Amazingly, placebos are also organ-specific. They work exactly the way the actual drug is supposed to work on precisely the body part or organ they're intended to affect. So a placebo taken for joint pain will alleviate the pain in that particular joint, and one taken for a digestive problem will work on the stomach or intestines. One of the best examples of this was illustrated in a Canadian prostate study where more than half the men who had benign enlargement of their prostates were given placebo pills and reported significant relief from their symptoms, including faster urine flow. Researchers theorized that their patients' positive expectations of the drug's

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benefits caused therapeutic smooth muscle relaxation by decreasing nerve activity to the bladder, prostate, and urethra. In another major placebo study, two-thirds of subjects given a pill they were told would produce severe stomach activity quickly experienced strong stomach churning.

The placebo effect can be just as dramatic when performing surgery. In a famous 1958 study, researchers made small skin incisions on heart patients in order to mimic the real operation and see if their patients would respond to what is called “sham surgery.” To their surprise, the patients improved better and recovered faster than the patients who had real surgery. Similar studies involving sham knee operations produced such amazing results that doctors began testing the procedure on many more patients.

So why doesn't the placebo effect work on everyone? The answer may lie in one's personality and attitude. Patients who visualize positive outcomes, eliminate stress, and participate actively in their own healing are the most successful. Those who dwell on the negative and believe that there's no hope experience the “nocebo effect,” a negative reaction that depresses the immune system and makes one even more vulnerable to disease. Which proves one thing: having a positive attitude and the will to get better triggers the release of brain chemicals needed for spontaneous healing.

Fifty years after H.K. Beecher published his groundbreaking paper on the placebo effect, we're still asking, how does this happen? How exactly does the interplay of psychological and physiological mechanisms trigger a healing process that can be more effective than any medicine we take? Today's brain imaging techniques lend support to the theory that thoughts and beliefs not only affect one's psychological state, but also cause the body to undergo actual biological changes. Together with the nervous, endocrine, and immune systems, the staggering array of chemicals produced during emotional responses is what sets the healing process in motion.

When you think about it, the human body is an immensely complex system of molecules, which stimulate nerve connections that respond to our mental suggestions. So it makes sense that the placebo effect is really nothing more than a normal immune response. How else can we explain what some people call miracle cures but what more and more doctors refer to as unexplained spontaneous healing? Mind over matter is not simply a catchphrase. Its truth is based on what we know to be fact: that the brain, given the right set of directions, the right environment, and the proper stimuli, will always choose healing over disease.



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## **Is Spontaneous Healing Just a Coincidence?**

Norman Cousins, the longtime editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, was diagnosed in the mid-1960s with ankylosing spondylitis, a degenerative fatal disease that leads to a breakdown of collagen and eventually death. Given only a few months to live, he left the hospital and moved into a hotel room, where he spent hours every day watching comedies and laughing out loud as much as he could. Instead of getting worse, he began to regain use of his limbs. As his condition improved, he resumed his life as an editor and detailed his disease and complete healing in the bestselling book *Anatomy of an Illness*.

Since Cousin's remarkable cure, many such stories have been told. A cancer patient given months to live is visiting his grandchildren ten years later. A tumor that doesn't respond to chemotherapy begins to shrink after the patient uses visualization techniques to treat herself. Until recently, physicians and researchers who presented unexplained spontaneous healing were ignored or, worse, called crackpots because it's difficult for most scientists to accept what can't be tested or proven. Doctors, especially, find it hard to believe that patients can actually heal themselves because it makes them feel less significant.

But all that's changing. A physician I know once said that 85 percent of his patients cure themselves. Spontaneous healing occurs because something within us triggers a major response in our immune system, which literally floods our body with white blood cells that attack and destroy whatever is causing the illness. We shouldn't be at all surprised that this happens as often as it does. Without such a response, we'd be dying of diseases so quickly they would wipe out the human race. What *should* surprise us is that we know so little about how to use the mind-body connection to strengthen immunity and spontaneously heal ourselves in the process.

## **Personality, Attitudes, and Behavior**

The human brain is composed of a myriad of subsystems, each one interacting in a way that is responsible for the way we think, act, feel, and perceive events around us. In other words, personality, or the quality that makes us unique, is a function of the brain and its development. Neuroscientists have long believed that the three most important factors determining our

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personality, temperament, and natural tendencies are genes, environment, and body chemistry.

According to experts, our personality is molded during the first few years of life. Psychologists today believe that we're born with a distinct personality that is shaped by the things we're exposed to as children, our mental activities, attitudes, interests, and behaviors. It's who we are from the moment we enter this world and what makes us unique and different from anyone else. It is, according to leading neuroscientists, programmed into our DNA.

Often, what makes people sick and more susceptible to illness and disease is their inability to recognize their own personality types. They force themselves to exist in an alien world, so to speak, and to live in a way that does not compliment their own personalities. How many times have you said to yourself, I wish I can be like that? The truth is you can't because you may have a personality type that is totally opposite to what would make you be or act like that other person. You then feel guilty and get stressed out because you feel that you're not accomplishing all you can. The result: an ulcer, high blood pressure, depression, or worse.

Attitudes are the collection of feelings, dispositions, and mental states we get ourselves into in response to physical and emotional stimuli. The manner in which we respond to all this is behavior. Recent studies have shown that two vital hormones — dopamine and serotonin — act as triggers or switches that turn certain behaviors on and off. High levels of dopamine cause individuals to be more outgoing and extraverted and to seek out pleasure. As the levels decrease, the opposite happens. Low levels of serotonin cause depression, irritability, anxiety, and even violence. So as we can see, even behavior has a complex nervous-endocrine system connection and is altered by signals from the brain.

### **The Introvert versus Extrovert Brain**

Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, coined the terms “introvert” and “extrovert” to describe two specific personality types. At the time, he had no idea that the nerve networks of an introvert's brain are literally wired differently than those of an extrovert's. While an introvert's brain shows more blood flow to those areas associated with memory, planning, and problem-solving, an extrovert's brain has more activity within the areas responsible for senses such as touch, smell, sight, taste, and sound. As a result, introverts and

extroverts display certain personality characteristics and react differently to the same situations.

There's no advantage to being either, because in its own way each brain has a unique ability to stimulate the immune system and trigger spontaneous healing. The problem lies in the way the brain perceives life events and activities, responding in a manner that's not compatible with personality type. It's during those times that we are especially vulnerable to stress reactions and ultimately to illness and disease. So, trying to be someone you're not will only confuse the brain and ultimately affect your health.

Although all of us are predominantly one or the other, we tend to display some of the opposite characteristics on different occasions. You're more open and outgoing when visiting family and friends, for example, then when meeting new people or being in a strange group. But since your dominant personality has been wired into you early in life, and affects just about everything you do, knowing whether you're basically introverted or extroverted will help you understand why you often feel the way you do. Which one are you? Here are some of the key traits.

***Introvert Personality Traits***

- You feel more comfortable being alone
- You find small talk boring
- You think before you speak
- You listen more than you talk
- You derive your energy from within
- You're a private, behind-the-scenes person
- You enjoy reading, daydreaming, and just relaxing
- You prefer to do one thing at a time
- You process your thoughts and are able to concentrate for a long time

***Extrovert Personality Traits***

- You're outgoing and enjoy being around others
- You find it easy and like to chit chat about anything
- You speak before you think

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- ❑ You talk more than you listen
- ❑ Your energy comes from people
- ❑ You prefer being in the public eye
- ❑ You enjoy being on the go and going to social events
- ❑ You enjoy multitasking and often have several projects going at once
- ❑ You tend to become distracted and often find it difficult to concentrate

Since we can't alter our genes and, therefore, our personality, we need to accept who we are and focus more on attitudes and behaviors. And though behavior isn't changed easily because it's often the result of brain chemistry, it's more reasonable to change behavior than it is to change personality. The next chapter illustrates the extent to which the mind, through attitudes and behaviors, suppresses the immune system and triggers disease processes. In subsequent chapters, we'll see how behavior modification can actually affect stress and immune reactions and how certain techniques can help condition the brain to elicit chemicals and hormones that promote health and self-healing.

Thinking Your Way to Better Health teaches readers how to use the mind-body connection to relief stress, prevent disease, improve sex, and slow aging. Self-help quizzes and detailed suggestions will forever change how we think about health.

Thinking Your Way to Better Health: How to Use the Power of the Brain for Health and Self-Healing

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