

New Research will Change the Way We Think About Depression. (Finally!)

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The way we have been thinking about depression is broken. Depression is widely considered to be a mental illness – an disorder of the mind – but new research has challenged that, and the findings will change the way we think about and treat depression.

Physical illness rarely carries the same crippling stigma as mental illness. There seems to be a gap between the way we think about the two, with physical illness often garnering more respect and permission to ‘be’. To understand depression in a way that and fosters better treatment options and greater clarity, we need to find out more about what it is – or what it is not.

Enter a team of international researchers, who have gone and done just that.

The Research – What They Did.

For the very first time, in a comprehensive study lead by a team of researchers from around the world, we have scientific proof that depression is not just a mental disorder but a systemic one that affects the whole body. [The massive study, published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*](#) involved an analysis of 29 previous studies,

comprising a total of 3,961 people.

The researchers were interested in the way depression manifested in the bodies of those individuals. They found that depression affects the whole body on a cellular level. In light of this, the researchers have called for depression to be considered a systemic disease, rather than a mental one.

The results make sense of the longstanding observation that people with depression are also more likely to be diagnosed with cancer and heart disease.

What They Found.

The study revealed that depression was linked to oxidative stress in the body. When compared to people without depression, those who were depressed had elevated levels of malondialdehyde – a compound that indicates oxidative stress.

So what is oxidative stress? Let me explain. Oxidative stress happens when the body overproduces free radicals and then struggles to get rid of them from the body. Free radicals cause damage to critical parts of cells including proteins, DNA and cell membranes. When the free radicals damage these important parts of the cells, the cells aren't able to function properly. Eventually, they can die.

Free radicals are produced naturally by the body but overproduction can be triggered by stress, pollutants, alcohol, the air we breathe, the food we eat (particularly fried food), the body's natural immune system response (inflammation) or tobacco smoke. In short, modern living makes us vulnerable.

One of the ways the body detoxifies free radicals is through antioxidants. Antioxidants inhibit oxidation by scavenging free radicals from the body. When there are too many free radicals floating around and not enough antioxidants to mop them up, the body struggles to keep up with the detoxification of the free radicals. The body comes under oxidative stress and this is when the damage to the cells can spread throughout the body.

What it Means.

The findings open up new avenues for the treatment and prevention of depression. Heal the body and we can heal the mind.

In their study, the authors conclude that;

'Results suggest that oxidative stress plays a role in depression and that antidepressant activity may be mediated via improving oxidative stress (and) antioxidant function.'

After receiving the usual treatment for depression, the levels of malondialdehyde (the indicator that the body may be under oxidative stress) decreased, and the levels of antioxidants increased. Eventually, both malondialdehyde and antioxidants were restored to such a level that the bodies of people with depression were indistinguishable from people who did not have depression.

Future Promise.

Depression has long been thought of as a disorder of the mind and this is the way it has been treated. Antidepressants target neurotransmitters in the brain, and though some people find great relief from these, many don't find relief, or eventually relapse.

It seems that in treating only the mind, we have been getting it spectacularly wrong. The mind and the body are deeply connected. An abundance of scientific research has consistently delivered us the proof.

Depression is an illness of the whole body, not just the mind. In recent years, the theories around depression being caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain have started to break down.

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We know that when some people are given antidepressants that target serotonin levels in the brain, they find relief. For a long time, this was taken as evidence that a lack of serotonin caused depression. Just because something makes it better, that doesn't mean that the body is deficient in that 'something'. This is similar to saying that shyness is caused by a lack of alcohol, or that headaches are caused by a lack of paracetamol, or that fatigue is caused by a lack of caffeine.

There is another reason the low serotonin/depression-is-all-in-the-head theories are becoming shaky. If one of the symptoms of depression is low serotonin, what causes the low serotonin? The way we have been thinking about depression – as purely a mental illness – stops short of a full explanation.

Antidepressants have given great relief to many people, but there are many who find no relief at all. It's likely that by treating the chemical imbalance, we are only treating part of the problem. Think of it like treating fatigue with a decent sleep. When fatigued people sleep, they feel less fatigued. Does this mean that fatigue is from a lack of sleep? Sometimes, yes, absolutely. And in these cases, a decent sleep will be exactly what's needed. Sometimes though, fatigue will be a sign of something else happening in the body – an infection, a virus. In these cases, sleep might help but the relief won't be lasting because it won't be treating the cause.

When we change the way we think about depression – as an illness of the whole body, not just an illness of the mind – we open up new possibilities for treatment. The body can heal and so can the mind. This is not new information, but hopefully, with our ever expanding understanding of depression, we can use this old information in new and powerful ways to heal the mind, body and spirit in more enduring and effective ways.

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