

Spirituality in Health and Disease

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“Aum, may all be happy,
May all be free from illness,
May all see what is auspicious
May no one suffer
Aum, may peace pervade the entire universe”
-Brihadaranya Upanishad

Introduction:

In a much earlier time in the history of the world, the priest and the medicine man were one and the same in most cultures, until the development of scientific medicine led to a division between the professions.

The technological advances of the past century tended to change the focus of medicine from a caring, service oriented model to a technological, cure-oriented model. Technology has led to phenomenal advances in medicine and has given us the ability to prolong life. The mainstream modern medicine, (allopathic system) has given yeoman contribution by preventing and controlling many deadly infectious diseases in the form of vaccinations and antibiotics.

Spirituality has gained increasing attention in the medical literature over the past few decades. Spiritual or compassionate care involves serving the whole person - the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual. Allopathic medical professionals in developed nations have started to collaborate with traditional, complementary, and alternative medicine to enquire on the role of spirituality in patient care. However, there is scant evidence of such movement in the Indian medical community.

What is spirituality?

Although there remains no clear consensus on definitions, there is growing acceptance of a broad definition of spirituality as a multidimensional aspect of the human experience encompassing:(1)

cognitive/existential aspects (beliefs, values, meaning and purpose);(2) emotional aspects (need for connection, love, hope, inner strength and peace); and(3) behavioral aspects (specific spiritual practices and life choices). Spirituality often plays a positive role in patients' illness experience.

As such, spirituality is not open to the normal methodologies of scientific investigation. It is the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things. *“Spirituality is recognizing that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives.”*

Mental Responsibility for Chronic Diseases and Evaluation of Curative Methods:

The subconscious idea of disease or health exerts a strong influence. Stubborn mental or physical diseases always have a deep root in the sub consciousness. Illness may be cured by pulling out its hidden roots.

Disease is generally considered a result of external material causes. Few people recognize that it comes through the inaction of the life force within. When the cell or tissue vehicle of life energy is seriously damaged, the life energy withdraws from that place and trouble consequently starts. Medicine, massage, physiotherapy and electric treatment merely help to

stimulate the cells in such a way that the life energy is induced to return and resume its work of maintenance and repair. Medicine and food have a definite chemical action upon blood and tissues. They are useful so long as the material consciousness in man is uppermost. They have their limitations, however, because they are applied from outside. The best methods are those that help the life energy to resume its internal healing activities.

The modern world is facing a pandemic of lifestyle disorders that require changes to be made consciously by individuals themselves. As the holistic art and science of yoga is the best lifestyle ever designed, it has potential in the prevention, management and rehabilitation of prevalent lifestyle disorders. Interestingly, modern research has begun to focus on the psycho-physiological beneficial effects of yoga which need to be understood as more than merely a form of physical exercise.

Some Indian Systems of Traditional Medicine in Practice:

Ayurveda defines health as a complete one involving physical (bodily), mental, and spiritual well-being. The yogic way of living is a vital tool that helps attain that "state" of health as described by Ayurveda and WHO as well. It is more important to have both a sense of "being" healthy as well as "feeling" healthy. Hence, the qualitative aspect of health, the spiritual nature of the human life, is rightly considered more important in yoga and other Indian systems of traditional medicine.

Yoga:

Yoga has been with humanity since times immemorial and has stood the test of time. Yoga is one of the most researched interventions. Researchers are generating more and more scientific evidence to support the use of yoga. However, for introducing yoga in mainstream medical practice, clinical trials are required. This poses challenges. Major benefits of yoga may occur due to its lifestyle components (healthy diet, activity, relaxation, and positive attitude) as well as psychosomatic harmonizing effects of pranayama and yogic relaxation.

Yoga implies both the process as well as the attainment of a state of psychosomatic, harmony, and balance (samatvam yoga uchyate - Bhagavad Gita) and this restoration of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual balance may be the prime factor behind the changes seen across all short- and long-term studies. Pranayamas (awareness of breathing) also produce a sense of relaxation.

According to Swami Kuvalayananda, founder of Kaivalyadhama, positive health does not mean mere freedom from disease but is a jubilant and energetic way of living and feeling that is the peak state of well-being at all levels – physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual. They emphasized that yoga helps cultivation of positive health through three integral steps as follows:

1. Cultivation of correct psychological attitudes (maitri, karuna, mudita and upekshanam toward those who are sukha, dukkha, punya and apunya)
2. Reconditioning of neuromuscular and neuroglandular system – in fact, the whole body – enabling it to withstand stress and strain better
3. Laying a great emphasis on appropriate diet conducive to such a peak state of health, and encouraging the natural processes of elimination through various processes of nadi shuddhi or mala shuddhi.

Some prominent studies conducted prospective, randomized controlled trials on angiographically proven coronary artery disease patients with yoga intervention and demonstrated that yoga-based lifestyle modification helps in regression of coronary lesions and improvement in myocardial perfusion. The effect of yogic lifestyle on some of the modifiable risk factors could probably explain the preventive and therapeutic beneficial effect observed in coronary artery disease.

Meditation

Medicine and meditation come from same root word 'medere' – making whole. Even Healing and Holy have the same origin. Meditation is found in all cultures, religions and regions, both East and West.

Meditation has been with humanity for thousands of years and it is highly relevant today in the management of myriad illnesses. The standard dictionary definition is 'thinking deeply or spiritually about a subject.' It is a technique or method of freeing one's mind from emotions and other distractions to allow deeper insights into ourselves and the world around us. The ultimate goal is illumination, and while this may not be fully achieved, along the way peace and relaxation, quietening of emotions, insights and perspectives may be accomplished.

The mind during meditation connects us with our inner selves, the 'Master Within'. It may be focussed (using a mantra) or non-directional. Spirituality may be a component of some meditational practices, although certain meditation techniques may be practiced without any underlying spiritual belief system.

Well-known meditations include Raj Yoga, Mantra, Mindfulness, Vipassana, Transcendental Meditation, Kundalini, Sudarshan Kriya, Kirtan Kriya, Sahaj Samadhi, Osho's Meditations, Silence, and Pranayama.

Conclusions:

Emphasis should be laid on the total care of the suffering person rather than attention simply to the patho-physiology of disease. When a disease has an unpredictable course and the fact that the drugs have limitations, one should try complementary alternative therapies. Regular prayers, meditation, positive attitude, yoga, pranayama and exercise should be added to life style along with healthy diet. All these can certainly reduce the stress and provide enough courage and strength to face unavoidable stress and disease. Moreover, these therapies help boost immune system and are helpful in enrichment of physical, mental, and emotional health.

Health care professionals are required to respect the patient values and beliefs and develop competent communication skills. Inclusion of spirituality in the health care system is the need for Indian medical students, professionals as well as their patients. This could form the basis for integrating traditional,

complementary, and alternative medicine and allopathic medical systems in our country.

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