



# Can Your Mind Change Your Body?

Physical and mental health are more connected than you might think.

By **JENNA KASHOU**

**T**he rich, savory aroma of lamb wafted through my parents' house as I arrived for Easter dinner. My mom had been cooking all day, preparing a smorgasbord of my favorite Middle Eastern delicacies: stuffed grape leaves, seasoned rice and roasted eggplant.

But, suddenly, I felt very tired. My head began to throb. Those delectable aromas turned to nausea, and within a half-hour, I was in the fetal position to keep the room from spinning. I fumbled for my phone to call my doctor and racked my brain for a pill I could take that would make this feeling go away.

I'd been used to the sudden onset of migraines, but this was entirely different. It was like water had been swelling in a hose and someone turned the knob to release the flood.

When my doctor could offer no explanation, I worked with a holistic

practitioner to find the root cause of my nausea and to determine if it might be linked to my persistent GI issues and migraines. Was it the physical manifestation of anxiety I'd been stuffing back down my throat for months – or years?

"There are so many pathways that connect the body with the mind," says Dr. Kirti Thummala, Froedtert pain psychologist and assistant professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin. "This affects the emotional, psychological, social and cognitive functions."

A big part of her job is education about what pain actually is. "It's by definition an unpleasant physical and emotional experience, so when you feel stressed, angry or disappointed, these emotions feed back into the pain loop," says Thummala. "And stress is just like a volume dial that turns up the pain."

I was so focused on treating my migraines for the past three years, I didn't realize my mental health was unraveling. The emerging field of holistic psychology suggests many people live in their subconscious – allowing past conditioning and experiences to keep them on a kind of mental and emotional autopilot. And, yep, *autopilot* is an accurate description of my life lately.

I am, sadly, wired with an overactive nervous system, existing in fight-or-flight mode. Through holistic practices like somato-emotional release and craniosacral therapy, I've uncovered some patterns and experiences that feed my stress response. I would have never thought of that as trauma, but my body showed me otherwise. "It's like revving a car engine over and over – sooner or later, it will experience wear and tear. The best thing you can do is relax to turn off the flight response and teach your body that sense of safety," says Thummala. She suggests the best place to start is by being more aware of how you respond emotionally – with thoughts and behaviors – when you're feeling sick.

Dr. Edie Beguelin, a Whitefish Bay-based holistic practitioner focusing on energy and bodywork, advises getting out your head. "Your brain can be a micromanager and impede healing. Your cells have an innate ability to heal themselves." Movement, hydration, proper nutrition, breath work and relaxation are her prescriptions for healing.

Healing is a long, slow process, and it takes dedication to practicing wellness strategies. But it's incredibly empowering to accept that you are your best healer and have all the tools at your disposal to change the way you feel. For now and for me, progress means regulating my thoughts and emotions enough to never have to miss out on Mom's roasted lamb again. ●