Emotions Impact Immunity

Cancer patients can get a jump-start in the race against cancer by learning to use the mind-body connection. The doctors treat the body, but only patients can control what they think, and how they feel about what they think. Controlling thoughts and feelings is no easy task. And do we want to control everything we think and feel? If not, how do we know what thoughts and feelings to control? What steps can we take to control them? How can controlling such thoughts and feelings help us defeat cancer? The answers to these and other questions come in understanding why awareness of our thoughts and feelings is important. Learning some simple concepts about Psycho-Neuro-Immunology (PNI) will lead us to this understanding.

PNI studies the mind-body connection and focuses on how the mind's activity transmits hormones that affect all the body's cells. Some hormones determine whether the immune system is weakened or boosted, switched on or off. Our emotions, beliefs and general outlook on life drive the brain's use of hormones, thus have a very real affect on immune function. One of the foremost authorities in healing with mind-body medicine, Dr. Deepak Chopra, offers this explanation:

> *"The revolution we call mind-body medicine was based on this simple discovery: Wherever thought goes, a chemical goes with it. This insight has turned into a powerful tool that allows us to understand, for example, why recent widows are twice as likely to develop breast cancer, and why the chronically depressed are four times more likely to get sick. In both cases, distressed mental states get converted into the bio-chemicals that create disease."*[1]

PNI is not a substitute for physical cancer therapies such as surgery, radiation or chemotherapy. Rather, it's a powerful tool for improving the psychological environment where the body fell prey to cancer. First, let's establish a clear understanding of the crucial role the immune system plays in defeating cancer. Then we'll look at PNI research that demonstrates mind/body skills can strengthen immune function. Finally, we'll identify resources for learning the skills that give us a winning advantage in pursuit of conquering cancer.

Strong Immunity Can Conquer Cancer

All modes of cancer treatment rely on healthy immune function. After a surgeon removes cancerous tissue, he or she relies on the patient's immune resistance to keep the wound free from bacterial invasion. Oncologists monitor the white blood cell count during chemotherapy. When the immune cell numbers fall below a threshold, the oncologist orders a break in the chemotherapy treatment. Radiation oncologists rely on white blood cells to clear radiated tumor tissue from the treatment site. In holistic medicine, the physician seeks to restore immunity, thus empowering it to dominate cancer. Psychologists seek to restore immunity using the mind-body relationship. Considering how all doctors rely on strong immune response for treatment success, doesn't it follow that it might be possible to build enough immune strength to drive cancer into remission?

What exactly does the immune system do? Author Daniel Goleman offers this description in his book 'Emotional Intelligence':

> *"Immune cells travel in the bloodstream throughout the entire body, contacting virtually every other cell. Those cells they recognize, they leave alone; those they fail to recognize, they attack. The attack either defends us against viruses, bacteria, and cancer or, if the immune cells misidentify some of the body's own cells, creates an autoimmune disease such as allergy or lupus."*[2]

Current cancer research investigates new methods of invoking a strong immune response. The Dana-Farber Cancer Institute just finished work with Harvard Medical School and others to stimulate immune response in cancer patients using dendritic cells.[3] Unither Pharmaceuticals of Wellesley, Massachusetts, sponsored a study this year (2004) of the antibodies' role in manipulating immune mechanisms.[4] The University of Tubingen, Germany, recently completed a study that found irreversible damage to immune cells (heavy