



## Psychology is Healthy

By Daniel H. Gallagher, PhD

Here in the United States, there is an ever increasing focus on health care. And, in the New York metropolitan area, it can be argued that we have ready access to excellent medical care for a wide variety of ailments, dysfunctions, and illnesses. Since most Americans still emphasize physical medical care and physical symptoms, they may not recognize the significant role that their psychology of thought, behavior and emotion may be playing in their recoveries. Physicians and public health policy creators are noting several important trends that bring psychology into major focus as playing a major role in our health. Some of those trends and impacts include:

- Health Psychology practiced side-by-side with physical medical providers. Psychologists are assisting medical staff in hospitals, physicians' offices, clinics, and in private practice.
- Inadequate response to stress is a major contributor to many illnesses. Heightened awareness and research into these psychological causal contributors to disease and dysfunction, particularly our response to stress.
- "Diseases of Civilization" or chronic illness are on the rise and lifestyle patterns and habits may be central contributing and causal factors. Changing our habits may be key to attaining health beyond simply reducing symptoms and slowing disease progression.
- Resultant research and development of behavioral and psychological treatment approaches that can assist the speed of recovery from physical symptoms.
- Increased medical and psychological research and awareness of the autonomic (automatic) nervous system's role in allowing individuals to heal faster and more completely to allow their body's natural systems to respond better to medical treatments. Psychology's research and treatment approaches are particularly well suited to assist people in monitoring and altering their "fight, fright, or freeze" states toward calm healing states.
- Increased research and awareness of the body's natural rhythms and how to employ them in healing processes. Working in sync with those rhythms in our hectic structured lives takes careful monitoring and habit change.
- As research continues deeper and broader into genetics, it appears that many factors may signal our DNA to express either disease predispositions or healthy response (epigenetics). Many of those factors can be somewhat under our control by lifestyle practices. Psychology has a long and deep history of research and treatment approaches to habit and lifestyle change.
- The sub field of Positive Psychology can teach us how to maximize focus and energy on attaining ever higher levels of health beyond merely waiting for illness to occur and healing or controlling it. Here the

emphasis is on maintaining and increasing health as attractive goals beyond fighting illness and negative symptoms.

- Studying the healthiest populations in the world is leading researchers to try to bring possible health promoting factors into our lives to reduce illness and dysfunction. Psychological interventions and policy contributions can play a key role.

Let's look a little deeper into some of the above developments. Health psychologists are contributing significantly to the care of individuals with chronic pain, diabetes (especially type II), headache, obesity, hypertension, strokes, cardiovascular difficulties, diabetes, ulcers, etc. As the awareness of the role of distress and lifestyle increases into the causa and maintenance of other medical conditions, health psychology's contribution will be even greater. The science will inform the integration of physical and behavioral treatments.

Ever since the 1980s, when *Life* magazine ran a cover article indicating stress as our major health concern, we as a culture seemingly accepted the difficulty. There seems to be a general belief in the medical community that a majority of office visits and hospital stays for physical disease and dysfunctions have stress and lifestyle as major contributing factors to their development and maintenance. Recent research indicates that a majority of Americans feel a great deal of stress. Other research indicates that a majority of Americans believe that stress is a major contributor to disease. However, less than half of those same respondents believed that stress affected *their individual physical health*, even though many of them felt that they did not cope well due to their stress.

Perhaps a large part of the answer may lie not in thinking of outside stress as always negative, but rather as development of coping to small ever increasing levels of various stressors as a form of coping "inoculation." Then we need not fear anticipatory anxiety that takes us into fight or flight. When we develop stronger coping to stress and reduce mental and physical "inflammation" of fearing possible future events, we can stay in the repair and regenerate nervous system mode that allows true healing. Psychology has been central in research and treatment models for building coping and highest performance.

The developments noted above seem to indicate to this author that psychology not only plays a key role in assisting medical professionals treat with anti-illness models through Health Psychology as adjunct treatments. Professional psychology as a whole may hold basic value in actually creating, maintaining, and growing true health for individuals, families, communities, and our country. All psychology can be health psychology; talk with your psychologist and be healthy.

Daniel Gallagher, PhD is a licensed psychologist in private practice for 30 years; his background in related mental health professions extends through 40 years. Dr. Gallagher offers psychotherapy and coaching to children, adolescents, and adults throughout the lifespan as well as consult to a cross section of educators and health care professionals. His work and training includes schools, inpatient mental health facilities, senior facilities, community based centers as well as private practice. Dan brings an integrated approach to each situation he is asked to address. While recognizing that mental health difficulties are extensive and integrally connected with other health concerns, Dan also recognizes that all growth builds upon existing strengths, not merely reducing weaknesses and dysfunction. He works (and plays) to develop positive growth-oriented strategies for classroom and home functioning by helping kids and families realize that their strengths are always available to overcome their weaknesses.