Lessons from the Counselor’s Couch

The Connection Between Mind and Body

As a mental health professional, I’m always interested in learning about the complexity of mental illness. According to the American Psychological Association, approximately 45 million people had a mental illness within the past year. To break that down further, up to 1 in 4, or 25 percent, of adults suffer from a mental illness at any given time. We all know someone who battles the symptoms of a variety of illnesses, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Mental health symptoms alone can be debilitating and major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability for younger adults (ages 15-44). Depression can lead to feelings of despair, feelings of low self-esteem or hopelessness, low energy, changes in eating/sleeping and a general loss of joy and motivation for life. Anxiety can result in endless worrying often accompanied by physical symptoms, including but not limited to: increased heart rate, sweating, feelings of being light headed, agitation and constant nervousness. While it’s normal for many of us experience these symptoms once in awhile, those that suffer from mental illness may experience these symptoms to the point that it is difficult to function in daily activities. In addition, untreated mental illness can lead to chronic physical/medical problems, and in turn, these physical problems can be depressing and worrying!

According to the Center for Disease Control, mental illness is associated with an increased risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, psoriasis and even cancer. Individuals who experience both mental illness and a serious physical illness, such as heart disease, are also more likely to die from their illness when compared to others who do not have mental health problems. So…what is going on with this connection? Do mental health symptoms/disorders make one more at risk for physical health problems or do physical health problems have the tendency to lead to mental health symptoms/disorders? It seems that a little of both is likely true, yet to talk about all of the possible reasons for these connections is beyond the scope of this article. We do know that some mental health problems, such as anxiety for example, result in physical changes in the body. Anxiety usually triggers the “fight or flight” response, which results in our central nervous system speeding up and the stress hormone, cortisol, being released along with adrenaline. Too much cortisol is linked to all sorts of health issues. Physical disorders, such as cancer or heart disease, can lead to individuals wondering about their future and quality of life…which can feel depressing and anxiety-provoking. What is also very likely, and thankfully preventable or changeable, is that individuals who struggle with mental illness are less likely to participate in self-care activities and receive appropriate medical care.

People with depression are twice as likely to smoke cigarettes than those without depression and people with schizophrenia are three times as likely to smoke. The increase in tobacco use may be the result of individuals with mental illness looking for temporary relief from their symptoms-cigarettes offer a temporary increase in dopamine, which is the “feel-good” chemical our brain naturally releases. Those that experience depression can have less “feel-good” chemicals in their brain, leading to unhealthy behaviors that temporarily mask this deficit. Individuals with mental illness are also much more likely to abuse alcohol and other drugs. Clearly, there are significant physical problems associated with tobacco, drug and alcohol use. In addition, those with mental illness are less likely to participate in exercise plans, maintain regular visits with healthcare professionals, follow through on medication suggestions and maintain a healthy diet. The good news: regular self-care actually decreases the chances of experiencing BOTH mental health and physical health symptoms! The other good news: there are effective treatment options for mental health issues and those that receive treatment for mental illnesses can overcome and manage symptoms while reducing or eliminating the risk of physical problems. Summer is a great time to start the process!

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Developing a Conversational Writing Style

To capture the attention of readers, good writers avoid stilted or complicated language and messages. One way you can do that is to ask yourself if you would actually say to your reader what you have put in writing.

For example, would you say? “Per our recent discussion, enclosed please find the information you requested.”

Chances are you would just say: “Here is the information you requested.”

This simple test will encourage you to express yourself in human terms and adds color and interest to your writing. Using jargon, wordy expressions, and inflated sentences won’t make you appear more polished. They will simply create a barrier between you and the reader.

Don’t write: “Based on extensive review and consultation, it is our intention to increase productivity by implementing a new and efficient method of operation, and to have the process in place in 30 days or less.”

Instead write: “We’ll upgrade operations within 30 days.”

Instead of writing: “The complex dimensions and immensity of the enterprise will leave us all enervated.”

Write: “The project will be a difficult challenge.”

Focus on the important issues first. Why? It will help the reader to not get lost in details.

Don’t write: “We examined the materials, calculated the cost, and estimated the time everything would take. Since all indications were favorable, we decided to go ahead with the project.”

Instead write: “We’ve decided to go ahead with the project. We’ve examined the materials, calculated the cost, estimated the time involved, and all indications are favorable.”

Because it starts with the most important information…the decision to go ahead with the project…this approach is stronger and more memorable.

Be a storyteller: Begin with a comment that captures the readers attention, continue with absorbing comments, and close with a memorable ending. Professional writing isn’t supposed to seem stuffy and impersonal. Instead, paint visual pictures with words.

For example: “Let’s examine this closely,” or “Imagine this scene.”
Increasing Your Image in the Workplace

What is it about the way some people speak or handle themselves that commands attention and respect? When one person makes a valuable recommendation, no one pays much attention. Then, when someone else repeats the idea, everyone listens and responds with enthusiasm. Why? Perhaps it has to do with credibility. Credibility is extremely important in the workplace. When a person is seen as credible, supervisors and co-workers respond to what is said with greater regard.

Few people are born with a natural ability to express themselves in a manner which commands attention and respect. In most cases, people who sound knowledgeable have acquired their ability through diligent practice and hard work.

The way you sound significantly influences the way others perceive and respond to your message. Whenever you have something important to say, slow down, take charge of yourself and relax; then make sure that you never speak while others are trying to get their ideas across. Instead, wait, think about what has been said, then state your position clearly.

The cues your body sends are also important indicators of the way you feel and what you think. It is important to send nonverbal messages that say, “I feel good about myself. I’m confident and know that what I’m saying is important.” Be sure to sit or stand straight. Hold your head up. Use gestures for emphasis. If you are sitting, show interest and enthusiasm by leaning toward the person to whom you are speaking.

Your ability to convey a positive self-image can impact your interactions and can help you to develop better relationships. When we have confidence in ourselves, we face the world taller and straighter, and we convey a sense of strength and self assuredness. When someone is genuine and positive they are generally likeable and respected. People want to be around positive, genuine, and enthusiastic people.