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Medications: The answer or the problem?

By Linda Fodrini-Johnson



Western medicine treats the presenting illness primarily with prescription medications or procedures. I wonder, is that the best approach? In April, I attended a conference on how Integrative Medicine approaches illness by using a combination of methods as a better way to resolve challenging mental and physical health conditions.

Integrative Medicine, as defined by Duke Integrative Medicine, is "An approach that is grounded in the definition of health." The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

I was personally astonished at the outcomes of these alternative approaches to treating illnesses such as addiction, pain, and anxiety and even Alzheimer's and MCI (mild cognitive impairment).

I counsel families who are at a quandary of what to do with illnesses that do not seem to be responding to treatments. The patients/clients are often on 8-15 different medications. That alone has to be contributing to some of the behaviors or the decline. Integrative medicine looks for effective interventions that are natural and less invasive. Each patient might get a different

formula based on lab results that look at many markers that guide the physician in addressing the illness or condition by using diet, supplements, counseling, mindfulness, and exercise.

According to Duke Integrative Medicine, the principals that define integrative medicine include the following:

The patient and practitioner are partners in the healing process.

All factors that influence health, wellness and disease are taken into consideration, including body, mind, spirit and community.

Providers use all healing sciences to facilitate the body's innate healing response.

Integrative medicine is based on sound science. It is inquiry-driven and open to new paradigms.

What I heard from the medical experts at the conference was that many of the drugs could be eliminated or significantly reduced with this approach. Some of the primary roots of many of the conditions discussed were "inflammatory" in nature. The power of mindfulness on almost every condition considered is something we all should pay attention to - and has little if any cost.

One of the most exciting sessions from Dr. Ronald Siegel of Harvard was called "Mindfulness & Aggressive Rehab for Chronic Pain." He told us of his serious back pain and how a combination of exercise and mindfulness ended his pain after first trying months of bed rest. He told us about a study of several hundred people from the general population selected to have MRI's of their back. They found that two-thirds of these individuals had herniated discs or other negative results, but only those who reported that they didn't like their jobs complained of pain. His point is that those with pain might need to have some cognitive therapy, resume normal activity and work with their negative emotions. Fear exacerbates pain and pain is everywhere. Suffering he said is optional. You can find Dr. Siegel's lecture on "The Science of Mindfulness" at Google.

Dr. Andrew Weil spoke about mental health and the overuse of medications to treat depression and anxiety. He stated that we have more depression now than during World War II and the Great Depression. He pointed out that studies using placebos and the SSRI's (anti-depression) medication for depression showed no real change with medications alone and that what is needed is a bio-social-spiritual model to treat these mental health conditions.

Dr. Weil says that today's population is not connected to nature, depends on diets of processed foods, have less social connections (which are protective), and have increased dependence on technology, which increases anxiety. To address these mental health conditions, we need to look at the whole person. He also talked about the protective value of including the Omega fatty acids and Vitamin D in the diet.

Dr. Weil suggests that if drugs are used, it should be short-term use only. To reduce stress and help with relaxation, individuals need to increase physical exercise, seek behavioral/cognitive therapy, and learn relaxation exercises like his breathing technique. His technique is included in many of our offered classes.

Another interesting session was "The How of Happiness: The Science of Interventions Aimed at Increasing Well-Being" by Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky. Two big take aways for me were both the importance and value of the "count your blessings" intervention. An easy exercise - just once a week write down what you are grateful for during the past week. Those in the trial that did this daily did not have the same results as those that did it weekly. It turns out at those who did this weekly were happier! The other key to happiness was the power of "random acts of kindness" for yourself or to others as a way to increase your immune system as well as to add to your sense of happiness.

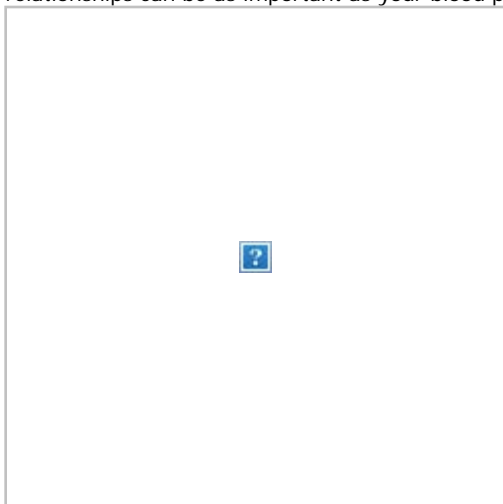
If you or a family member is not responding to interventions, a second opinion is helpful. I often suggest University Hospitals for those second opinions.

UCSF - Osher Center for Integrative Medicine - (415) 353-7700

Stanford Integrative Medical Center - (650) 498-5566

UC Davis Integrative Medicine - (916) 734-4754

Being well and staying well is about you and your total environment. Your spiritual life and your relationships can be as important as your blood pressure. Thrive!



Linda Fodrini-Johnson, MA, MFT, CMC, is a Licensed Family Therapist and Certified Care Manager. She has been practicing professional care management since 1984. Linda founded Eldercare Services, a full-service care management and home care company in 1989. Eldercare Services has merged with Home Care Assistance who will be combining our team with theirs in order to give clients more opportunities to have a terrific match when caregiving is needed. HCA is a company with a large footprint across the country and is known for excellence in care delivery. Eldercare Services as a division of Home Care Assistance will continue to do what we have for the past 30 years and provide the advocacy, navigation and counseling for families who want the best for their older family members with our Professional Aging Life Care Managers. Questions - give us a call (925) 937-2018.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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