A Smile a Day Keeps the Doctor Away

Taylor Rehberg

Mr. Hall & Mrs. Wheeler

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“‘I believe that if you’re a positive person your attitude has a lot to do with [recovery]. I definitely feel I will never get [cancer] again’” (Wilkinson 797). Beliefs like this help thousands of people survive health scares and traumatic illnesses. A positive attitude can alter people facing life-changing illnesses, and sustain the everyday health of humanity. Simple techniques can teach this outlook. A positive attitude affects the way in which the body heals and deals with illness.

The vicious fight for life required when one battles a complex illness can make anyone question the need for a positive attitude; however, such an approach can determine the result of the ailment. The study of 57 women with breast cancer exhibited “a significant correlation between a positive mental adjustment to cancer and survival rates, without recurrence of the disease, at 5, 10, and 15-year follow-up” (Wilkinson 799). Many of those patients attended psychological therapy sessions to learn to replace their negative thoughts with a fighting spirit and a positive plan for coping (Wilkinson 799). Likewise, those encountering the risks of threatening surgeries need this coping attitude. “Optimists evidence better physical recovery immediately after coronary artery bypass surgery and up to 6 months post-surgery. Therefore, optimism is linked with less incidence and better recovery” (Tugade 1164). Alongside the patients, their loved ones are also affected by the illness and loss of life. “When charting the changes in immune function during mourning it was reported that the immune systems of grieving spouses were weakened” (Ornstein). While attitude affects traumatic occurrences, it also affects everyday health.

Because of all of its effects on everyday health, positive attitudes are important to people. Some effects were found by Mayo Clinic: increased life span, lower rates of distress, resistance to the common cold, and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease. In one experiment following negative emotional stress, participants viewed films that induced joy, contentment, or sadness. “In three independent samples, those who participated in joy or contentment conditions showed better cardiovascular recovery compared to those who watched the sad or neutral films” (Tugade 1168). In contrast, negative thoughts can impair thought process, decision making, and attitude, but “the undoing hypothesis is the thought that positive attitude can broaden a person’s thoughts and perhaps even ‘undo’ the [effects] of negative emotions” (Tugade 1167). Learning this “undoing” process could amplify the techniques used to change mental outlooks.

Understanding the importance of a positive attitude should drive advocates to teach others ways in which people can improve their outlooks when they are young. “The theory of psychological resilience shows that resilient people are able to ‘bounce back’ from stressful situations more efficiently and quickly” (Tugade 1169). Through relaxation, creative exploration, optimistic thinking, and humor, people are able to gain this resilience and train the brain. “Studies have shown laughter has a positive effect on our cardiovascular health, our stress levels, and our immune system. There is also a correlation between the effects of laughter and the healthy function of blood vessels” (Campus). These changes could make a significant difference in one’s mental outlook.

An optimistic outlook impacts the body’s healing process and its ability to remain healthy in an extensive way. Not only can a positive attitude influence the results of traumatic illness and everyday health, but also the techniques to achieve it can be quite simplistic. Laughter really may be the best prescription for health.

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