

You Are What You Think

By Eve Lees

“A cheerful heart is good medicine,
But a downcast spirit dries up the bones.”

Proverbs 17:22

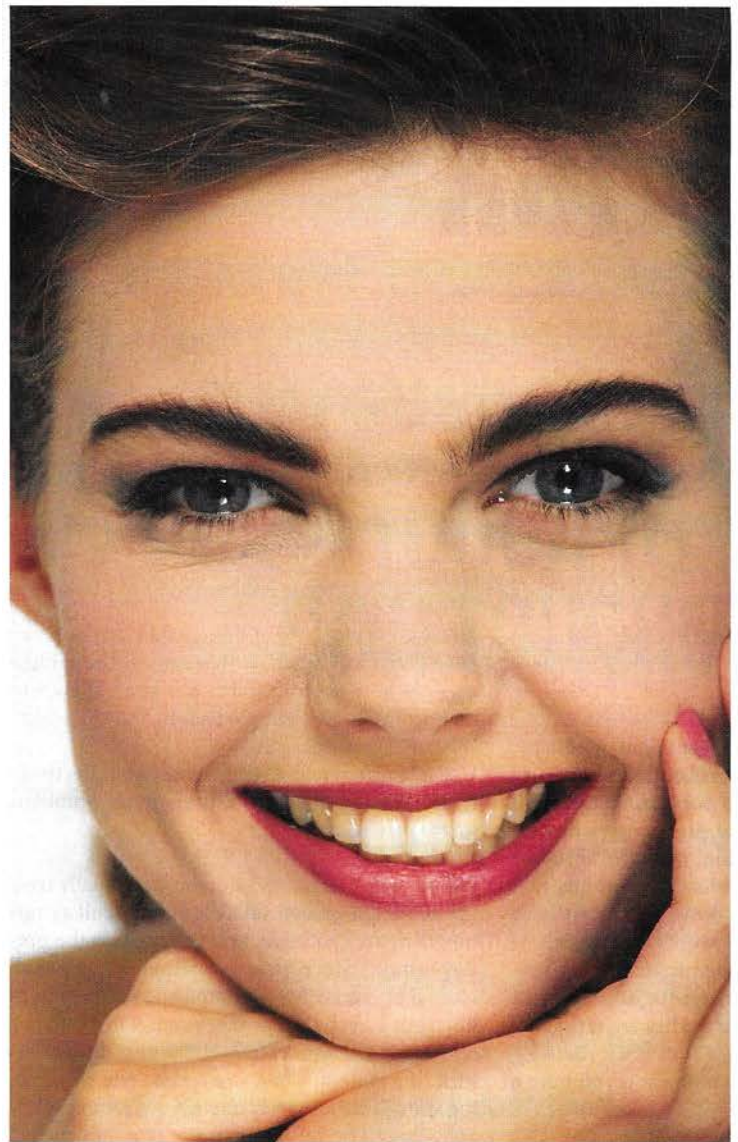
We know that our thoughts predict and affect our health. Scientists and researchers are beginning to understand exactly how. The mind and body are one system, working together. You experience this when you feel your stomach churn when you imagine a disaster. You feel it when your heart beats faster thinking of someone you love, or in how you salivate when you think of tasty foods. Thought becomes sensation; thinking creates action.

Thoughts have physical effects on your body in three ways: through the autonomic nervous system, the endocrine system and the immune system.

The autonomic system or nervous system is an intricate web running through your body. It is divided into the sympathetic system and the parasympathetic system. The sympathetic system is your energizer, allowing you to meet challenges or dangers by stimulating the adrenal glands to secrete the hormones norepinephrine and epinephrine to increase your heartbeat and breathing. The parasympathetic system does the opposite; it relaxes and calms. The endocrine system is made up of the hormone-secreting organs like the pituitary and adrenal glands. These hormones regulate your growth, sexuality and activity level. The immune system keeps you healthy by protecting you from outside antigens (bacteria and viruses) and by preventing the growth of tumour cells in your body.

These three systems are intertwined. They continually exchange information through neurotransmitters made from proteins called neuropeptides. The three systems each have receptor sites on all their cells that are able to accept these neurotransmitters. How these neuropeptides link with their receptors makes up the biochemistry of your emotions.

Researchers say that the immune system listens to emotions through its neuropeptide receptors. It responds by sending signals to the brain via neurotransmitters. The brain does the same thing in influencing the immune system. The brain therefore actively monitors and reacts to the immune response. Immune system cells also produce a hormone that can stimulate the adrenal gland into action.



The nervous system, endocrine system and immune system work together, translating your thoughts into action. When you worry, you begin a chain reaction that prepares you for fight or flight—a reaction that may not have been necessary and is exhausting if it happens frequently. An overworked immune system becomes extremely exhausted and unable to fight off bacteria or viruses. You then become ill. Or it may learn to react too strongly: instead of attacking outside invaders, the immune system attacks harmless substances in the body, creating conditions like allergies and rheumatoid arthritis.

A negative mindset (anger, depression) can have a negative effect on the functions of your immune system, because this system is closely connected to the other systems affected by emotions (the nervous and endocrine systems). In contrast, positive thinking, happiness and the ability to relax have all been shown to maintain a healthy balance in the body.

The damage of chronic stress comes from your body's learned response to a situation—not from the situation itself. Learn ways to control your reactions to stressful situations. Train your brain to think with a smile.

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