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Mind, Stress and Health

Richard Totman
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Over the last few decades, there has been a plethora of research on the interaction between diet and health. Although views of health diets have changed since the 1960s, there has been little change in many of the major health problems facing humans, particularly coronary heart disease and cancer. Using this observation as a springboard, the author does an admirable job of exposing the reader to the problems of correlational analysis and interpretation; he emphasizes the need to put studies, which have looked at the interaction between diet and health to the ultimate test, the intervention study. What the author's search of the literature has revealed, however, is that intervention studies show little direct evidence that changing diet with respect to cholesterol, salt, fiber, or saturated fat has any direct effect on the incidence or mortality from coronary heart disease, cancer, hypertension, obesity, atherosclerosis, or diabetes mellitus.

So if these dietary factors do not predict health consequences, what does? This is the central question that the author addresses throughout the book. Because of the wide-ranging aims and implications of this question, there are several omissions which the author described in the introduction, e.g., animal studies. However, in examining studies of humans exposed to naturalistic stressors, the author comes to some interesting conclusions.

Specifically, the author compared studies which have addressed such personality variables as depression, repression, and the Type-A coronary prone behavior pattern, with the "flimsy evidence," concerning diet. For example, in discussing the links between Type A behavior and coronary heart disease, the author notes that there have been problems with the definition of the type A construct and its assessment, as well as the specification of components that are important contributors to disease outcome. This discussion provides the reader with a framework to balance the arguments of the extent to which personality variables interact with health.

In examining the linkages between the mind and health, person-environment interactions are discussed within a theoretical model of stress. Emphasizing the dynamic nature of stress as an experience with meaning and value, the author presents an overview of the major naturalistic stressors (i.e., marriage, bereavement, divorce, and unemployment) and how they can be translated into organic states. After a brief description of the immune system, the author presents data on the interaction between psychological stress and modulation of immune function, paying special attention to the effects of natural killer cell cytotoxicity. To the author's credit, the discussion does not end here; it includes mediators of the interaction linking the central nervous system (e.g., opioid peptides), endocrine system (e.g., cortisol) and immune system, although not in great depth. To aid the reader, figures are used well throughout the text and the book is well referenced. Although it would be impossible to discuss the complex interactions linking the central nervous system and the immune function in detail, the author presents a good overview for a reader unfamiliar with the research area. While well done overall, some discussions of immunological research are described uncritically, e.g., the discussion of repressive coping style and cancer does not include mention of the obvious flaws in many of the studies.

In general, Mind, Stress and Health appears to be intended for a reader not conversant with the interactions between the mind and health. It presents a good introduction to advances in psychoneuroimmunology, and it offers evidence of possible relationships in clearly understandable terms. Although not able to provide all the evidence on this interaction, Mind, Stress and Health is thoughtfully written and challenges traditional medicine to examine our current state of knowledge. It forces the reader to consider less tangible psychological factors as possible contributors to illness and disease, which the author believes are crucial to the advancement of medicine.