

As seen in the December 2009 issue of

natural awakenings

Illness as an Opportunity to Awaken Consciousness

Transforming illness
into a self-healing
journey, the next
paradigm shift
in medicine

by Paul Epstein, ND

When we are sick and in pain, we try to return to health as quickly as possible. It is a natural response to seek treatments to 'fix' or get rid of pain and symptoms so we can return to our normal lives. However, when the treatment doesn't make the symptoms disappear, and we begin to suffer more physically and emotionally, the search for answers intensifies. The ensuing consequence is that we can get worn out not just from experiencing the physical problems of the health challenge, but also from our

efforts to get well. This often results in feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness.

It is at this point that illness provides the opportunity to embark on a journey of self-discovery, healing and spiritual awakening.

New Choices and New Resources

Rather than supporting continued unsuccessful, futile efforts to eradicate the disease or its symptoms, a fresh perspective and approach are needed. A novel cutting edge approach that asks

living questions allowing both a shift in attitude and a different, more therapeutic relationship with the disease now becomes possible, and is highly needed in order for individuals to look inside and engage themselves in the process of self-healing. This is the next paradigm shift in medicine.

Where's the healing?

Disease may tell the story of our selves, not just our cells. By taking the risk of listening, we can be led to the emotions that lie at the core of our au-

thentic being. Looking at symptoms as separate from the rest of our lives also splits the body from the mind and spirit. When we try to rid ourselves of pain and symptoms, we inadvertently can deepen this separation. Unless we make time to listen, just alleviating symptoms may leave us with a missed opportunity to interpret the underlying systemic cause and real message of the disease. The result is only temporary relief with no deeper healing.

Seeing with New Eyes

"The journey of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes - it is in seeing with new eyes." ~ Marcel Proust

"You cannot solve a problem from the same perspective that created it." ~ Albert Einstein.

Despair can turn into hope, impatience can turn into patience, fear can turn into courage and resistance can turn into acceptance. In the willingness to look inside and see with new eyes, the healing and awakening of our consciousness becomes possible. We begin to see and hear that our body is telling us something, delivering the messages of illness and symptoms. Learning to understand their meaning can be the key that unlocks the door to recovery. In this fashion, the crisis of illness thus becomes the vehicle for transformation and healing from within.

Creating a Healing Environment

A shift in perspective, attitude and consciousness allows an individual to create a context for healing with profound effects. Integrating this emotional, psychological and spiritual context creates a true 'healing environment'. This may ultimately be as important to the healing process as any particular choice of medicine or therapy. This is simply because there is no one treatment protocol or sure-fire method for any particular chronic disease.

Healing is not Paint by the Numbers.

Every patient has a unique history. The background for their disease and healing is an individual, personal and solitary journey. A holistic approach seeks

to integrate how biography can become biology and synergizes the more clinical aspects of a treatment plan with the mind, emotions, attitudes and beliefs. As people work to create this healing environment in their lives, they need guidance and support.

Shifting Roles for Doctor and Patient

Offering guidance and support during the journey of healing means the roles of the doctor and patient must shift and be redefined. In addition to providing appropriate therapies, the doctor must also become a guide, teacher, coach and an advocate in helping patients learn from their dis-ease and illness.

The patient in turn, takes more responsibility for his/her illness and consciously engages in creating the proper environment for the healing journey to proceed. The process is stimulated by opening to the symptoms, listening to the message of the illness, and believing healing and change are possible. Together the doctor and patient form a healing relationship, an important component of the healing environment.

Healing Our Whole Lives

"Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses only waiting to see us act once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something that feels helpless and needs our love." ~ Rilke

Are you willing to listen with the ears of your heart to the other voices of your self speaking? Often childhood and/or adult wounds from physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse as well as abandonment and neglect are carried as burdens, expressing themselves in self defeating patterns and addictions that eventually can become illness and disease. Recovery begins when we face our truth and learn to be with it in a new way.

The well-known psychologist, Carl Jung, believed that "all neurosis is a substitute for legitimate suffering." There are two kinds of suffering: one that

leads to more suffering and one that leads to awakening. Making the difficult choice to awaken and participate fully in our healing can be painful and is 'tough stuff', requiring courage, commitment and compassion. Regardless of the pain and suffering involved, having choices that lead to healing is in itself liberating. We come to realize directly, as psychologist Alice Miller expresses, "...the liberating experience of facing painful truth." Facing the pain of our dis-ease engages us in a healing journey and spiritual path and becomes the vehicle and the medium that awakens our consciousness.

Curing VS Healing

"If there is a single definition of healing, it is to touch with mercy and awareness those pains, mental, emotional and physical, from which we have withdrawn in judgment and dismay." ~ Stephen Levine, A Year to Live

By embracing and re-mem-bering, we experience that in the heart of the pain is the awakening and the healing. We come to understand that all sickness is home-sickness and all healing is self-healing...the journey home to our true self.

In curing, we are trying to get somewhere; we are looking for answers and our efforts are specifically designed to make something happen. In healing, we live questions instead of answers. We hang out in the unknown. We trust the emergence of whatever will be. We trust the insight will come. The challenge in medicine is not the choice between one and the other. We need both.

Dr. Epstein is a Naturopathic Physician, mind-body therapist, mindfulness meditation teacher and public speaker. He travels worldwide leading mindful healing workshops and retreats and maintains a private practice, Mind-Body Integrative Medicine, 42 Richmondville Ave. in Westport. Call 203.226.3923, email Epsteinmb@aol.com, or visit DrPaulEpstein.com.