

Mind can conquer matter

By Ruth Ostrow

BELIEF is everything. My friend Anne has scleroderma -- a condition classified as a disease of the auto-immune system and in the rheumatoid family. It effects the connective tissue around the body which can result in people "turning to stone".

A nurse for 20 years and now a psychotherapist, Anne has used both alternative and conventional medicine to cope with the symptoms.

With a positive attitude and a determination to live a full life instead of being dogged by her disease, she looks more vital each time I see her.

The only tell-tale signs are fingers that are slightly disfigured and discolored from poor circulation. But even this has not stopped her doing whatever she has wanted to.

"Disease has got nothing to do with how happy or contented we are in life," she told me recently. "My illness challenges me on so many levels and it has helped me to grow so much."

Recently she wasn't so lucky. After a bad winter and a period of prolonged stress, she had a severe attack.

"My hands became contracted and claw-like. I couldn't open them," she said, showing me her fingers, one still hooked over and another bearing the remains of a serious infection.

"This might look bad, but six weeks ago all of my fingers were like this. Not just this one. The tip of one finger was gangrenous which developed as a result of poor circulation. If I had gone into hospital they would have had to amputate. I was in such pain I was ready to do I don't know what. I just didn't want to be here any more."

In desperation, she went to a GP who talked to her about her underlying beliefs. Despite her positive outlook, Anne uncovered some unconscious philosophies not helpful to her healing.

"I guess deep down I've always believed that life is difficult, life is torture. We are supposed to suffer.

"I heard myself stating my beliefs out loud and suddenly the penny dropped -- I didn't have to believe these things any more. I cried from relief.

"I refused to go to hospital, working instead on changing my core beliefs -- peeling back layers until I hit rock bottom," she said.

"Within a short time my circulation began to improve. The fingers began to move and the gangrenous sores slowly went away. I regained full use of my hands and the pain has stopped completely," she told me in front of people who had witnessed the miracle.

Last year I interviewed Dan Russell, the founder of the Hypnotherapy Training Centre and Northern School of Tai Chi, in Carlisle on England's Scottish border. Russell is a big advocate of beliefs playing a role in healing.

He spends time in emergency rooms of hospitals around the world teaching doctors how to talk to patients.

Trained in Tibet and Taiwan where he meditated for years and studied martial arts, he says that the way patients are talked to when they go into shock or become ill can actually determine whether they recover or not.

"People can live or die on the basis of unconscious messages. We have to become aware of the power of the mind and of beliefs. Words can imprison us or set us free. The body is excellent at self-healing if talked to correctly," he told me.

Marc Cohen, professor, medical researcher and university lecturer at RMIT University in Melbourne and President of the AIMA (Australasian Integrative Medicine Association), has done his own experiments around beliefs.

He says that he became fascinated with the placebo-effect when he gave a trial group of people a sugar tablet that he called a happy pill, and which he explained would make them feel blissful. Almost everyone in the group thanked him afterwards for the buzz.

He says that the placebo effect is a psychological condition, but tied in closely with biology.

"We start with a belief, it triggers the biological reaction, which reinforces the belief and makes it reality," he says.

In other words, if we believe something then our brain starts producing the chemicals and hormones needed to cope or reinforce that belief.

I have experimented with sexual fantasy to prove that imagining something can trigger the same hormonal release as the real thing, just as thinking fearful thoughts can trigger a fight-or-flight reaction and the release of adrenalin.

Studies have confirmed that meditation can stimulate areas of the brain leading to profound healing.

On the other hand some shamanic cultures use beliefs to kill, for instance by pointing the bone. It seems that beliefs and thoughts can harm or heal.

Of course, not all ailments can be healed by changing beliefs. I have watched many women close to me battle with illness, try to change thinking patterns, and die anyway. It has been a heart-wrenching process and there clearly are multiple factors in why some people survive and others don't.

But for many, unconscious beliefs do play a large part in healing and cannot be dismissed by the medical world.

On many significant levels we are what we believe.

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 09 OCT 2004

