

Let's X-ray the mind for a complete treatment

By Ruth Ostrow

THE other day I fell and twisted my foot. It was not a big fall, and the pain was only momentary. I walked around the house with ease, feeling the occasional twinge but not enough to stop me doing anything.

At the time I was planning a big event. Miraculously, after hours of co-ordination, the strings had all come together and I was finalising the details, gathering notes, packing documents, when the phone rang.

It was one of the main players, ringing to cancel. "Sorry, sorry," she pleaded, but I began to feel a panic in my stomach as the strings started to unravel before my eyes given that one appearance was dependant on another.

As I got up off the couch to get a cup of tea and consider my position, I suddenly felt the most excruciating pain shoot through my foot. I noticed that it looked swollen. I tried to put pressure on it but was overcome with agony. I hopped over to the kitchen, made an icepack and hobbled back to the couch.

After 10 minutes I took the icepack off and gently massaged the foot. Having recently studied physiology and anatomy, I knew what to look for, where to probe. Nothing seemed broken or torn. I figured I'd bruised something. I got up again to get that tea and was again hit with jaw-dropping pain.

Luckily, a friend was passing by and popped in. Lying on the couch I unburdened myself to him, talking of how "unsupported" I felt in my life, how people kept letting me down, how devastated I was about the cancellation and what it all meant. Twenty minutes later he had me rolling with laughter. "Oh, boo hoo!" he was teasing, as I saw myself playing the victim for all it was worth.

"The fact is, in business shit happens all the time. There are so many people with competing agendas it's par for the course that things get messy," he said. "And you have always managed anyway."

"You're right," I said, standing up and striding over to the kitchen feeling more self-confident. "I'll sort it out." As I reached for the mug I realised that my foot had supported me, and that the pain had become tolerable.

In retrospect, what I was suffering was a psychosomatic condition. Psychosomatic disorder doesn't mean that the pain isn't real, or "all in the head" as is commonly believed – rather that there is an unconscious mental/psychological component to the illness or wound which tells the brain how to perceive, or deal with, it.

A doctor would have X-rayed my foot; my friend X-rayed my soul instead, and with better results. Fear of not being supported had made my own body cave in.

So many people have similar conditions which manifest as very real ailments – bad backs, itchy skin, chronic chest infections, ulcers, chronic urinary-tract infections. These pains are real, there is real inflammation of the bladder, real infections have taken root in the chest, real spinal problems. But for some people, medication may be treating the symptom, not the cause.

For instance, a girlfriend of mine was a chronic urinary-tract infection sufferer. Her then urologist was smart and enlightened enough to ask if there were any relationship issues she wasn't dealing with. He explained that anger can often lead to a tightening of the muscles that govern urine flow and without flow, the acidic fluid can get trapped causing inflammation and infection.

It turned out she had been in a very toxic relationship that was making her feel particularly unvalued and criticised. Since leaving this man she has only had one infection in seven years. It's not that my foot wasn't sore when I walked to the kitchen. It is still sore when I touch the bruised area. But when I was feeling like I couldn't cope, the brain somehow amplified the pain. It's a well-known sports phenomenon that endorphins and other natural euphorics kick in as nature's pain killers to help players get on with the game when they mentally "choose" to keep going.

Holistic practitioners consider bad backs can be symptomatic of feeling unsupported, and that chest infections can often be symptomatic of grief or the things we repress and won't speak of. None of this is new. But it's surprising to unravel just how powerful the mind is in matters of healing and well-being.

In the end I can't help feeling that many non-life-threatening conditions may have a psychosomatic component to them, in that there is often a stressful situation in the background that causes immunity to drop and renders us vulnerable to opportunistic infections, or which causes the body to spasm, or overheat, which may lead to dermatitis, headaches and the like.

Which is why I'm a big believer that doctors should ask the questions my friend's urologist asked, treating the whole person, not just the disease.

Certainly as patients it helps if we can do our own exploratory work before seeing a doctor – not so much into our foot or bladders, but into our own souls.

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