

Mind and Body are Inseparable

Our language choice can help span the imagined gap

Most people in our country have a rooted belief that mental health and mental illness are unrelated to physical health and physical illness. The fact is, the two are wholly intertwined.

Although Descartes, a 17th century philosopher, began the view that the mind and body are separable from one another, 20th century research and medical advances have proved interrelationships between mental and physical health. The former view, however, still seems most prevalent today.

One reason the public continues to emphasize the difference between mental and physical health is embedded in our language. Health matters dealing with the mind are almost always referred to as “mental health,” which immediately causes a distinction from physical health. In the Surgeon General’s report on mental health, the connection is explained as such: “People continue to see mental and physical as separate functions when, in fact, mental functions (e.g., memory) are physical as well. Mental functions are carried out by the brain. Likewise, mental disorders are reflected in physical changes in the brain. Physical changes in the brain often trigger physical changes in other parts of the body, too.”

A common example that shows how the brain can alter the physical body comes from the brain orchestration of the racing heart, dry mouth and sweaty palms that accompany a terrifying nightmare. A nightmare is a mental state associated with alterations of brain chemistry that, in turn, provoke unmistakable changes elsewhere in the body.

While the connection of mental and physical health is explainable through science, our language still remains the core divider between the two facets of the health and illness spectrum.

Many people avoid speaking about mental illness because they are unsure of the proper terminology or language to use. It is important to be politically correct, so as to not offend or hurt other people – but it is just as important to speak freely with others about mental illness to help dispel the secrecy and stigma that surround the disease.

Please see page two for a glossary of standard industry terminology and words that perpetuate stigma. To learn more about language surrounding behavioral health or the connection between mental and physical health, please visit www.coleman-professional.com.

Excerpts taken from: Report of the Surgeon General on Mental Health – Surgeon General David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.