

Painting The Whole Picture

As the autumn term draws to a close, and the winter damp and dark moves in, many are possibly finding their physical and emotional resilience more tested than during the brighter summer months. Indeed, the start of winter is often accompanied by an increase in counselling service referrals. University counsellor, Claire Pointon, writing in the BACP Journal "Therapy Today" (October 2014) speaks of a "giant wave of demand" that normally hits her counselling services by mid November. I too have noticed an increase in demand for counselling from students after the half-term break. This might be partly explained as a result of increased worry concerning approaching examinations or completing UCAS applications – events that I know can pose a significant demand on parents' emotional reserves too. Additionally, it might take students time to settle into the new school year before they realise they want to talk about something troubling them. However, I'm sure that these factors alone don't paint the whole picture.

In September, I was asked to speak at an assembly for the Year 12 and 13 students about the school counselling service, as well as giving some information on maintaining good emotional well-being. When first asked to give this talk I wondered what to include as "information" for maintaining emotional well-being, beyond "don't suffer in silence, speak to someone, seek help when you need it." However, when I focused on what might we all do to improve how we feel emotionally, it resulted in me thinking about physical health as much as mental health. Western 20th Century medicine very much encouraged a split between mind and body. Many then discredited Sigmund Freud's theories about the dynamic unconscious and how it could affect our physical health. However, the tide is turning again and increasingly modern medicine is giving credence to the role of the unconscious in the phenomenon of medically unexplained symptoms and the placebo effect. Equally, however, the body can affect the mind. The mind lives within the body and the body is what supports the mind – hence it is difficult to imagine perfect health of one, without health of the other. There are even some current theories suggesting the gut is a "mini-brain" in its own right. Jay Pasricha, M.D., director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Neurogastroenterology believes that irritation in the ENS (enteric nervous system), or imbalances in the microbiota that live there, may trigger big emotional shifts experienced by people coping with intestinal issues, including IBS. She even suggests that digestive system activity may affect cognitive skills.

Modern life can be busy and demanding, and in the process of keeping on keeping on, we might forget to care for ourselves adequately. Additionally, the winter months can place us under further physical strain. Anaemia, lack of B vitamins and lack of vitamin D (linked with insufficient daylight exposure) have all been implicated in some way with symptoms of low mood. Inadequate calorie intake and sleep also affect our mood, judgement of situations and general functioning. Lack of fun, free-time, exercise and getting outdoors to be in natural environments equally have implications on our emotional well-being. I am therefore very much for taking a holistic approach, remembering we aren't simply drivers of our machine, but we are our machine, the well-being of one aspect of self inextricably linked to the other. On which note, I would like to wish everyone a happy holiday period with a good balance between rest, fun and (where necessary) productivity.