

Our bodies: Time to tone and atone

JANIS SIEGEL JTNews Columnist

As the Jewish community enters the New Year and atones for the “not-so-nice” acts of thoughtlessness or unkindness we might have done to others, it might also be a good time to look at what we do to ourselves.

A growing body of clinical evidence shows that chronic stress can trigger genetic predispositions to life-threatening diseases and neurodegenerative conditions like dementia, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s disease.

But spirituality, religious community, and a connection to others can prevent and even slow the onset of these conditions, according to research from Israeli researcher Dr. Yakir Kaufman, the director of behavioral neurology at Jerusalem’s Sarah Herzog Memorial Hospital.

“Chronic stress has been shown to be a risk factor in heart disease, stroke, cancer, infection, wound healing, autoimmune disease, depression, infertility, pain, and many other disease states,” Kaufman told simpletoremember.com, a curated Jewish online site. “If anxiety, sadness, anger, or dissatisfaction persist, these eventually will



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take their toll on the immune, nervous, and hormonal systems and bring about either mental or physical disease.”

It’s not the everyday frustrations of life like traffic jams or annoying neighbors that cause problems, according to Kaufman, but the deep and long term negative effects of an unhappy marriage or the loss of a loved one that get us into trouble.

But there is good news if we’re willing to make changes.

Kaufman said we can take charge of our emotional health by changing our focus.

He is buoyed by the words of Rebbe Nahman of Breslov, the great-grandson of the founder of the Chassidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov, that guide his work.

“If you believe you can damage then believe you can mend,” quoted Kaufman. “Amazingly, the same mind-body mechanism that causes disease can work in the reverse direction and enhance health.”

Kaufman specializes in studying the effects of behavior on mental decline in the elderly.

In 2007, he studied the spiritual and religious practices of 70 likely Alzheimer’s

patients who were showing early signs of cognitive decline.

Kaufman enrolled and monitored these patients to assess their quality of life while documenting their spiritual and religious practices using a standardized assessment scale.

Study results showed that those subjects who experienced more spirituality and private religious practices accounted for a 17 percent slower rate of mental decline.

“Physical and mental disease can be prevented,” said Kaufman. “The most profound way to reduce stress is through changing our state of mind.”

Kaufman’s model, called psychoneuroimmunology, or PNI, details the reactions within our bodies brought on by our behavior.

In our everyday non-stressed lives, our actions signal the brain to communicate with the nervous system. Our nervous system then communicates with the immune and hormone systems. In this scenario, the body’s responses are within normal ranges and are equal to the situation.

But when we’re extraordinarily stressed, our behavior signals the hormonal and autonomic nervous systems directly, and bypassing the brain. Our

bodies then bathe our organs in cortisol excreted from the endocrine system, and adrenaline sent out from the autonomic nervous system. The body produces these two potent stress hormones for short-term situational help to withstand the stress.

These two hormones can penetrate the DNA within the nucleus of our cells, said Kaufman, and can change their original programming, possibly causing them to express a trait for disease.

The hormones also weaken the immune system and expose us to diseases we might not otherwise be vulnerable to.

“Various studies indicate that stress events or a breakdown of psychological defenses are related to the onset of allergic, autoimmune, infectious, neoplastic, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, and other illnesses,” said Kaufman.

“Other studies tie stress with heart attacks, stroke, cancer, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, infertility, depression, obesity, and many more problems,” he continued, “The first three illnesses listed above are the main cause of morbidity and mortality in Western societies today. This means that stress, by causing a ‘negative’ mind-body interaction, is a significant

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