



Mind over IMMUNITY

There is lots of information out there on how to boost your immunity on a physical level but here are five psychological strategies that will give your immune system a lift.

WORDS / SOPHIA AULD

At the age of 27, Leigh McEvoy was devastated to discover that the mild tingling and weakness in his left arm and leg were caused by multiple sclerosis (MS). MS is believed to be an autoimmune disease in which the body's immune cells attack the central nervous system. It affects about 24,000 Australians, with no known cure. While MS is a severe example of what can go wrong, most of us, like Leigh, take our immune systems for granted.

Your immune system is a vast network of interacting cells and chemicals that are performing constant surveillance of your body. "Many people think the immune system gets activated only when it's under threat," says Dr Warren Stanton, a teacher and counsellor with a PhD in human thought processes. "Our immune system is operating all the time ... In its uncompromised form, it's always on the lookout to sort out anything that comes into your system that threatens your continued existence. Then it takes action."

As the mainstay of your immune system, white blood cells are produced in bone marrow, from where they travel throughout your blood and tissues to detect and overcome microbes (germs). Other defenders are proteins called antibodies, which fight infection and the toxins produced by some germs. Your immune system has a great memory: every time a microbe is overcome, the immune system remembers that microbe. If you come into contact with it again, it will quickly be dealt with.

Under normal circumstances, your immune system works effectively to

protect you from infection or abnormal cell growth. However, factors such as chronic stress, poor diet, smoking and lack of sleep can compromise your immune status, making you prone to illness and infection.

While a lot of information is available about physical habits to support immune health, like eating nourishing food and taking supplements, the psychosocial aspect of immune health is lesser known. The burgeoning field of psychoneuroimmunology is making amazing discoveries into the complex interplay between your mind and your immune system. Thoughts, after all, are nerve impulses, just like other signals sent throughout your body.

Here are five lesser known ways to give your immune system a "shot in the arm", using psychological strategies known for boosting immunity — no needles required!

DEVELOP HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES

Whether you've been intentional about developing them or not, you'll have particular strategies you use to cope with the demands of daily life. Some of these may be unhelpful, like eating sugary treats to beat an afternoon energy slump or drinking alcohol to unwind after a hard day.

In addition to being better for you, certain coping strategies have immune-boosting benefits. Learning to relax and deal with stress is particularly important, according to Dr Judy Lovas, a psychologist specialising in psychoneuroimmunology. A teacher at Sydney's Nature Care College, Dr Lovas also runs Art and Science of Relaxation,

a business providing presentations on evidence-based relaxation strategies for healthcare professionals.

Scientific evidence for the importance of relaxation in immune health continues to grow. "Slow, deep breathing can reduce the death rate of immune cells and enhance the immune system's ability to protect against cardiovascular disease," Dr Lovas says. "Yoga and meditation can slow down the shortening of telomeres in our chromosomes. Telomeres are the protective ends on each chromosome that act like plastic tips on shoelaces that stop them from fraying."

For Queensland-based McEvoy, meditation has been a vital part of coping with MS. Initially reacting angrily to his diagnosis, McEvoy threw himself into strenuous exercise, which was "in hindsight, not the best response, albeit something I could release my emotions with". Ten years on, he has a more balanced coping style, sitting to meditate at least once daily and maintaining the meditative state throughout the day. "I am by no means an expert," he says. "This has taken a lot of time and practice, but it helps me to observe my body sensations and emotions rather than react to them."

The mindful state has scientifically proven immune benefits. "Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) can increase the activity of specific immune cells called cytokines," says Dr Lovas. "Cytokines are the chemical messengers of the immune system and help regulate immune function."

Another coping strategy shown to increase activity of disease-fighting cells is cognitive behavioural stress

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Getting adequate sleep is vital for immunity.

management (CBSM). “There was a significant improvement in lymphocyte proliferation after a 10-week CBSM program for women with early stages of breast cancer,” Dr Lovas says.

Getting adequate sleep is also vital, she adds. “Many studies show how ... a range of sleep disorders can impair our responses to vaccines and increase inflammation and susceptibility to infectious diseases.”

Mark Glascodine, from Melbourne, was diagnosed with late-onset Friedreich’s ataxia (FA) at 35. He has used a different set of strategies to cope with his diagnosis. A career change, staying busy and volunteering have been crucial for maintaining his wellbeing.

Friedreich’s ataxia is a genetic disorder that causes progressive damage to the nervous system, resulting in symptoms ranging from muscle weakness and speech problems to heart disease. Ataxia (loss of co-ordination) is caused by degeneration in the spinal cord and nerves that control muscles in the limbs.

Because FA is a progressive disorder, Glascodine, originally from the United Kingdom and now 57, had to leave his job of 10 years at Shell Australia. He retrained as a career counsellor, then focused on the disability employment sector. “[My] coping strategy is primarily to keep myself busy through making a contribution in a new area,” he says. “Plus doing more locally, through volunteering at Family Life op-shop.”

CULTIVATE SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

For Glascodine, raising his two sons and having the support of his wife have helped him deal with his disease. Social relationships and support can

influence your body’s inflammatory processes, one of the immune system’s vital functions, according to Dr Lovas. “Studies have shown that people who are married with close friends and participate in community activities have lower levels of inflammatory markers in their blood compared to people with fewer social relationships [that] are more isolated,” she says.

Researchers have identified how social relationships influence the activity of genes. “They found that people who were more isolated had greater pro-inflammatory activity ...

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and those who were less isolated had more anti-inflammatory activity in their genes,” says Dr Lovas. “This can translate to how effectively we combat disease, infections and inflammations.”

Glascodine found that broadening his support network was vital. He “realised that peer support groups for carers or sufferers for particular disability groups are very important for social and information-sharing reasons”.

McEvoy remained very private about his disease for seven years, sharing his diagnosis only with family and close friends, before opening up to the support of others. “Putting myself out there and being vulnerable opened the doors to a lot of information and support from friends, community and local MS and disability services,” he says.

In addition to helping people with diseases, social support has been shown to affect inflammatory markers during pregnancy and in older, healthy women. It has also been linked to better survival rates from breast, colorectal and lung cancers.

PRACTISE POSITIVITY ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

McEvoy and Glascodine share a profoundly positive outlook on life as well as a balanced view of what it means to be healthy.

McEvoy notes that health encompasses mind, body and spirit. He has developed a lifestyle that gives his body “the best platform for healing”. This includes eating fresh, organic food, maintaining a physical routine including yoga, swimming and nature walks, and minimal psychological stress. “The human body is a complicated vessel so I’m always learning,” he says. “Allowing time to really get to know myself through meditation has helped develop peace of mind, and balanced this solitude with laughter, friends, fun and family.”

Glascodine feels healthy, despite some speech slurring and being wobbly on his feet. He works on maintaining both physical and mental wellbeing and notes the value of contributing to the world. “I feel I am making a contribution to society through work, the family and the community,” he says. “I advise people retiring from work you should do three things: keep healthy, follow your passion ... and make a social contribution. ... You can’t play golf seven days a week and feel fulfilled.”

Dr Lovas highlights the importance of perceptions in influencing immune and physical function. As an example, studies have shown that nerve activity when imagining a bodily movement or actually performing that movement is very similar. “What we perceive in our ‘mind’s eye’ can have a significant effect on our body,” she explains. “Immune function in someone who perceives necessary cardiac surgery as a frightening, expensive, inconvenient ordeal is lower than someone who perceives the surgery as a fantastic, positive opportunity.”

Dr Stanton also emphasises the importance of your perceptions in maintaining a sense of wellbeing. He discusses the difference between your nature and your thinking mind, with your innate sense of wellbeing coming from your nature. “It’s actually what we do with our thinking mind that



Finding healthcare professionals you feel comfortable with is paramount.

interferes with that.” He recommends a practice of mindfulness, which involves tuning in to your sense of self. “It’s a way of life. ... You flip the switch and start living from that innate sense of wellbeing. ... You’ve then got to set about changing your belief structures.”

DO A BELIEF INVENTORY

Most of us are feeding our minds a junkfood diet of unpleasant thoughts, Dr Stanton says. He also believes that many of our decisions are motivated by fear because we’ve been taught that fear is good for us. “There’s a pandemic of fear in our culture,” he says. “If you maintain a fear about anything, it’s compromising your continued health and existence.”

There is a distinction between fright and fear, Dr Stanton notes. Fright is an instinctive response that protects us from danger, whereas fear is a learned reaction. But we can learn to overcome fear. “In our culture we’re really big on using our thinking mind, as if it’s got the answers to everything,” he says. This can cause us to overlook our inherent sense of wellness that comes from within. Repeated tuning in to and focusing on this innate sense of wellbeing will cause it to expand, further increasing your sense of wellness.

Both McEvoy and Glascodine acknowledge the huge impact their belief systems have on their health. McEvoy describes the importance of accessing this internal sense of wellness. “Until very recently, I believed I could only tap into the support from the world around me,” he says. “I was wrong, as the love, support and nurturing I was seeking comes from within.” He describes himself as an optimist and his MS as a blessing. “MS has invited me to simplify my life, which has allowed me to see the

APPS TO AID MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS

The Mindfulness App

This app, free for iOS and android, offers various levels and types of meditation and describes itself as “the perfect tool for anyone looking to improve mental health and overall wellbeing”. It includes a five-day guided introduction to mindfulness, guided and silent timed sessions of 3–30 minutes, reminders to stay focused on your practice, and a library of premium meditations and courses.

Headspace

Available for iOS and android, the Headspace app has a free 10-day trial to teach you the basics of meditation and mindfulness. “With 10 sessions of 10 minutes each, you’ll learn how to train your mind for a happier, healthier life,” they say.

Stop, Breathe & Think

Free and available for iOS and android, this award-winning mindfulness and meditation app is simple, fun and easy

to use. You start by checking in to how you are thinking and feeling, then the app recommends guided meditations or yoga and acupressure videos tuned to your emotions.

Insight Timer

This free app is the most popular meditation app on iTunes and Play Store. It has guided meditations, peaceful bells with polyphonic overlay and ambient background sounds. Insight Timer is home to more than 1.4 million meditators and has generated 1.3 billion meditation minutes — more than any other app.

Calm

Available for iOS and android, Calm is “a simple mindfulness meditation app that brings clarity and peace of mind into your life”. It has options for guided and unguided meditation, plus programs to help you in various areas, such as sleep, focus, anxiety, gratitude and stress management.

extraordinary in the ordinary and find real authenticity.”

Glascodine notes that belief systems are influenced by many things, such as your upbringing, educational experiences and financial situation. If you feel your belief system may be detrimental to your health, enlist the help of a trusted friend or counsellor to help you identify negative beliefs and foster more positive ones.

ESTABLISH MEDICAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

While evidence directly linking immune function to good medical support is lacking, research does show a strong positive correlation between a healthcare team member’s communication skills and a patient’s health.

“Studies conducted during the past three decades show that the clinician’s ability to explain, listen and empathise can have a profound effect on biological and functional health outcomes as well as patient satisfaction and experience of care,” according to information from the Institute for Healthcare Communication. “The connection that a patient feels with his or her clinician can ultimately improve their health mediated through participation in their care, adherence to treatment and patient self-management.”

This means finding healthcare professionals you feel comfortable with

is paramount to achieving the best from any treatment. McEvoy has the utmost respect for the health professionals who have helped him on his journey, including neurologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and nutritionists. He advises to keep an open mind and go with your gut instinct. “I believe no matter what the experts advise, you are the best judge of what is the right path for you,” he says.

Glascodine adds that good healthcare providers can help you get timely appointments and share from their repository of “gold dust information”. “It’s often all the information on top of medical that you need to know and medical people pick this up over time. Willingness to share this is much appreciated,” he says.

Whatever your choice of health professional, search until you find one that helps you feel at ease, explains their advice clearly and gives you choice and control over your treatment options. If you feel uncomfortable or pressured, look elsewhere.

Remember, your immune system is constantly working to detect and combat disease. Following these steps will give that system a fighting chance to keep you healthy. 🌿

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