Holistic health attempts to prevent, rather than cure health problems. It regards the person’s physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions as an integrated whole. The physical dimension involves caring for the body by exercise, proper nutrition, and proper medical care when a disorder exists. The mental dimension considers the impact of thought processes and emotional states. The spiritual dimension involves the development and nurturing of a sense of purpose of life.

These three components make up an integrated individual; any event affecting one dimension simultaneously affects all others. When the three function harmoniously, the person is perceived as being in balance; health problems, on the other hand, are a result of “dis-ease” or imbalance. In addition to this internal relationship, holistic health is concerned with the social and environmental influences that affect well-being.¹²

A holistic approach to personal health is not new. As early as 1891, Luther Gulick, a pioneer in American physical education, explained the purpose of physical education:

Our endeavor is for true symmetry, not merely symmetry of body, symmetry of mind, symmetry of soul, but a symmetry of these symmetries, a symmetry of body with mind with soul.³

The renewed interest in this three-way symmetry is relevant today because we have learned that many of the major diseases affecting contemporary men and women (cardiovascular, cancer, arthritis and respiratory diseases) are undoubtedly stress-related and psychophysiological in origin. In his book *Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer*, Ken Pelletier, states: “Most standard medical textbooks attribute anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of all disease to psychosomatic or stress-related origins.”⁴

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Five essential concepts from holistic health can be incorporated into physical education teaching: (1) integration of the whole person, (2) stress management and techniques, (3) establishing a centered, balanced perspective through re-education, (4) awareness training, and (5) individual responsibility for personal well-being.

**Body, Mind, and Spirit**

The Cartesian dualistic model artificially separates mind, body and spirit and does not reflect our actual experience of daily life. The Feiffer cartoon captures this popular concept of the duality of body and mind.⁴ Similarly, traditional physical education theories focus only on the physical dimension, leaving the mental and spiritual to psychologists and counselors.

The holistic approach to movement emphasizes constant exploration and integration between spirit, mind, and body. Certain techniques, such as bioenergetics and Rolfing, are based on the premise that emotional responses are channeled into the connective tissue surrounding the muscles. Thus stress produces a physiological and muscular as well as an emotional reaction. Habitual unconscious patterns of tightening specific muscles in response to stress may pull the body out of alignment.

Physical education once required posture tests of all students before prescribing individual exercise programs. Holistic health practitioners rightly point out that requiring the person to stand in front of a grid while being told what was “wrong” with his/her posture fostered tension. The holistic practitioner would assume that some postural imbalance is caused by emotional stress and that physical stretching or an exercise program alone would not correct the imbalance if the psychological aspect is ignored.

Holistic approaches assume that tension is the body’s way of demanding attention. The problem for most persons is that tension building up in the body remains unrecognized. For example, tightly held shoulders may result in a headache.

One solution is to learn where in the body the individual channels the tension. When a golfer unconsciously places tension in the jaw, this disrupts the flow and rhythm of the swing. Recognition of excessive jaw tension allows the golfer to relax the jaw before approaching the ball. The essential factor is to consciously control the release of tension.

Hatha Yoga, one of the oldest movement disciplines based on integration, teaches the student to focus on an integration of the body, mind, and emotion.⁶

The physical dimension is reflected in the specific executed movements. Their precision enables specific muscle groups to be stretched without strain. When done slowly and held for at least ten seconds, the stretches...
permit the participant to feel the line of stretch throughout the body.

Concentration on the body and the kinesthetic reactions that follow reflect the mental dimension. The student should stretch to the point of a slight pain or "sweet tension" that represents the limit for that day. Sweet tension becomes the focal point for the position, and the student is taught to remain receptive to the experience. Many physical educators incorporate part of this idea when they teach static stretching, but the emphasis on the slight pain that signals the edge of the stretch serves to join the body and mind together.

Because I have experienced these moments of integration as unexpectedly rich and because they've added purpose to my movement, I label them as spiritual. This expression has no reference to "soul" in Gulick's earlier statement. It merely emphasizes the possibility of experiencing something intangible in movement. Anyone who has been involved in running knows that feeling of intense joy, endless energy, and rich harmony.

The emotional aspect of yoga is emphasized by breathing, and the conscious use of breath goes beyond static stretching. Yoga teaches the student to breathe deeply and slowly, because holding the breath also holds tension.

An integrated approach to well-being assists the individual coping with stress. The mental dimension influences physical health, thus having an impact on the body. For example, treatment with placebo drugs frequently alleviates chronic aches and pain. Conversely, the body can influence the mental state, as when a person, breathing slowly and rhythmically, can experience stress levels. Well-being, in short, is viewed from a physical, mental, and emotional perspective; it is not simply the presence or absence of a physical symptom.

**Intervention and Stress Management**

Students can understand stress reactions as response to physiological, behavioral, and cognitive conditions when the person is viewed as an integrated whole. Recognition of body tension patterns provide alternatives to past conditioning by opening up the possibility of new intervention responses. For example, the stress management program developed for the California State University, Fullerton Gymnastic teams teaches gymnasts to recognize how they experience tension. Once they recognize individual manifestations of tension in nail biting, tightened shoulders and jaw, and upset stomach, they can stop the patterned reaction by intervening with deep breathing, stretching, or whatever coping method is useful. These techniques break the stress pattern without disturbing the tension level needed for optimal performance. They provide athletes with something specific to do when they are told to relax or concentrate.

Prompt intervention is important so that students and athletes may release tension consciously before it causes imbalance or pain. In stress management classes, students can visualize their tension by drawing pictures of their body and coloring areas where they channel tension. This helps them to become sensitive to stress responses and to individual patterns that manifest tension. Each person must learn the internal language of the body so that the awareness serves like a biofeedback machine which amplifies the body's processes and signals the presence of imbalance.

**Establishing a Center**

The ability to react is predicated on the early identification of tension, blocks, dis-ease, and imbalance. The body/mind re-education process promotes the development of a centered referential awareness for the purpose of managing daily pressures. This centered perspective functions to measure subtle body messages and give a reading of internal pressure.

One way to develop this reference point is through conscious experience of a personal balance, and body alignment. This perspective is strengthened by developing a relaxed, mental outlook focused in the present. Teaching students the actual process of relaxation may be the most helpful thing we ever do for them.

Relaxation training transforms the relaxation concept into the reality of...
feeling relaxed. It enables individuals to experiment with a variety of techniques to remove tension. For example, programmed rituals and breathing will assist the basketball player attempting to relax before a foul shot. Athletes frequently employ such rituals with very little conscious awareness, but bringing such rituals to conscious awareness can enable the athletes to gain more control over their emotional states. From the holistic perspective, this re-education process is essential to alter the prevailing view that aspirins, tranquilizers, and muscle relaxers are necessary to ward off headaches and stress-related tension.

Awareness is also enhanced when students discuss or write about feelings experienced during movement participation to fully experience, ob-completing a 600 yard run, students can easily talk about pain and joy and how they coped with it. Quite literally, they are bodies of knowledge. Sharing this information begins a process whereby students learn new methods that refine their coping skills. Consistent sharing will begin a feedback cycle characterized by comfortable participation without risk of criticism or disapproval. Looking within is vital to developing an awareness of personal feelings and an understanding of body messages.

Taking Responsibility

The intricate relationship between stress and disease suggests to holistic practitioners that the individuals must take a more active role in their health care. They insist that illness be recognized as the body's way of giving feedback. This does not mean the abandonment of traditional care, but rather the development of greater sensitivity to the onset of "dis-ease." In fact this changed perspective may provide a broader range of medical options because an early identification may permit diagnosis and treatment at an earlier stage in a disease cycle.

The overriding emphasis on reaching a goal quickly inhibits perceptions of subtle, but essential body messages. . . . the goal is to feel the movement, not merely to do it.

People under great pressure often become sick because of the body's unanswered demands for respite. Holistic health practitioners argue that since individuals create tension, they can also release it. The individual can prevent unconsciously reaching the overload point by consciously releasing tension. Although we have limited control of our external environment, we can control the way we respond to a given situation.

Increasing Awareness

The recognition that tension resides in the body not only aids optimal health but enhances performance. Awareness of tension in the body is the first step in changing the response to stress. Athletes need to develop the awareness that they can make needed changes. In wrestling, one way to develop this awareness is to have students wrestle while wearing blindfolds. This requires them to feel their partner's force. Running while blindfolded requires the runner to become aware of different aspects of running. Similarly, a blind student's demonstration of her methods of perception can provoke other students to increase their sensory awareness.

An overriding emphasis on reaching the goal quickly inhibits perceptions of subtle, but essential body messages. Changing the speed with which movements are performed can also enhance awareness. In soccer, slow motion dribbling enables the participant to fully experience, observe, and appreciate the subtle aspects of dribbling. The goal is to feel the movement instead of just moving the ball to a specified point.

Professional Impact

Given the rapidly growing public interest in holistic health, physical educators have an unique opportunity to contribute to their own preventive health, and to help students recognize stress and respond constructively to it. Not only will this approach complement existing programs, but the wealth of potentially rich experiences resulting from increased body awareness could effectively augment physical education programs.

This article suggests techniques that develop an awareness of the body's feedback and psychological resources. The educator's role is to develop a quality awareness leading to improved skill performance by identifying those areas of tension and imbalance which inhibit performance.

Gullick's vision renews the challenge to the profession. It is a challenge we ignore—particularly in view of the rich potential of contemporary holistic philosophy and techniques—at our peril.

References


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