

Experience the Mind-Body Connection: A Metaphor for Immune Competence^{1,2}

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“I couldn’t believe it. I could not resist the downward push on my arm.”

“I could tell, the person was thinking the hopeless, helpless, powerless thought, she lost all her strength”

“I finally realized how my thoughts truly could influence my health.”

Feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, and powerless are common feelings especially when sick. We often forget that evoking or ruminating on negative thoughts decreases our energy level and strength. This change in strength can be used as a metaphor for immune competence. In many cases caretakers of a family member with Alzheimer disease or a disabled child have reduced immune competence. For many of these care takers, life feels like being on a treadmill with no end in sight. Just recalling or ruminating on a hopeless, helpless, powerless memory causes our energy to drop. Experience the change in energy and physical strength when you shift your thoughts in the following exercise taken from our book, *Fighting Cancer-A Nontoxic Approach to Treatment* (Gorter and Peper, 2011).

How Our Thoughts Affect Our Strength

This exercise needs to be done with a partner or a friend. Take turns, but begin by identifying who is the subject and who is the tester.

- Begin by standing facing each other. First test the strength of the subject’s arms (see figures 1a and 1b).
- The subject extends her left arm straight out to her side at shoulder level. The tester places his right hand on top of the subject’s left wrist and gently applies downward pressure while the subject resists. The tester slowly increases the pressure until he senses when the subject can no longer hold the arm in a horizontal position.
- Relax, and repeat the test with the subject’s right arm.
- Identify which arm appears stronger and more able to resist the downward pressure.

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² Adapted from Gorter, R. & Peper, E. (2011). *Fighting Cancer-A Nontoxic Approach to Treatment*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.



Figure 11.1a and 11.1b. Testing how a subject can hold her arm up and can resist the downward pressure.

- Now let the subject relax. Then have the subject mentally evoke a past memory or experience in which she felt either:
 - (1) hopeless, helpless, and powerless
 - (2) empowered, positive, and successful.
- The subject should not reveal to the tester which memory is chosen.
- Encourage the subject to think about the memory and make it as real as possible—feel it, hear it, and so forth. The goal is to experience that memory as vividly as if it were happening in the present moment.
- At that point the subject extends their stronger arm straight out to the side. The tester once again tests the strength of the arm by pressing downward on the wrist.
- Do not share your experience at this point.
- Now relax and have the subject focus on the opposite memory, again making it as real as possible. Once the subject feels the experience, she should raise the same arm again out to her side at shoulder level, and the tester will test the strength of the arm by pressing down on the wrist.
- Now share and compare your experiences.
- Reverse roles. The tester becomes the subject and repeats the same exercise.

What did you notice? In 98 percent of all cases, when people think of hopeless, helpless, or powerless memories, they have significantly less strength than when they think of empowering, positive, and successful memories. The person feels less able to resist the pressure, as if the energy has just drained from their body. In our single blind studies done in groups (total N=200), the testers did not know which memory the subject was evoking. Yet, the testers could discriminate which type of memory which the subjects evoked by sensing the difference in subject's arm strength.

About two percent of people who did this exercise, the arm felt stronger or there was no difference in strength when they thought about the hopeless memory. In most of those cases, the subjects were thinking of a memory that included anger and resentment or they could not access a memory.

The subjective experience of the change in strength and resistance is the analogy to levels of immune competence. When feeling empowered and hopeful, the immune system becomes more competent and the body can cope better with challenges.

This practice illustrates the positive and negative effects of our thoughts. It also illustrates that we can change. When captured by hopeless, helpless, and powerless memories, acknowledge the feeling, "*I feel at this moment,*" and then shift your focus of attention to an empowering memory or present experience. Use some of the following approaches facilitate this transition.

- Go to a different location (nature)
- Look at a picture or listen to music which you associate with positive experiences
- Ask people for support and positive distraction

When this practice is done in groups, and we have done this with hundreds of people in a group, it is a powerful demonstration and motivator for wanting to learn how to control thoughts and emotions. The practice uses the person's own experience as a somatic biofeedback device instead of using biofeedback equipment to demonstrate the mind-body relationship. We use this practice as one of the initial experiences to show how mind and body are interconnected and as a rationale for beginning cognitive therapy and mindfulness training.

For more pragmatic suggestions on how to deal with ruminations, transforming thoughts and emotions see our book: Gorter, R. & Peper, E. (2011). *Fighting Cancer-A Nontoxic Approach to Treatment*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.