

The Voice of the Body

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Selected Public Lectures 1962-1982

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Lectures

Lectures given at the Hotel Biltmore, New York City

1965—Breathing, Movement, and Feeling: The Basis of Bioenergetic Analysis

Lectures given at the Community Church, New York City

1962—Sex and Personality: A Study in Orgastic Potency

1966—The Rhythm of Life: A Discussion of the Relation between Pleasure and Rhythmic Activities of the Body

1967—Thinking and Feeling: The Bioenergetic Analysis of Thought

1968—Self-Expression: New Developments in Bioenergetic Therapy

1969—Aggression and Violence in the Individual

1972-1973—Horror: The Face of Unreality /
Self-Expression vs. Survival

1975—Psychopathic Behavior and the Psychopathic Personality

Other Lectures

1980—Stress and Illness: A Bioenergetic View

1982—The Will To Live and the Wish to Die

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1

Stress and Illness: A Bioenergetic View

THE NATURE OF ILLNESS

This lecture stems from my interest in psychosomatic illnesses such as arthritis, ulcerative colitis, coronary heart disease, lupus erythematosus, psoriasis, migraine, etc. Over the years I have treated a number of patients with these diseases with some success. I have also had many failures which have forced me to think about the nature of these illnesses. One observation has impressed me. Some persons are more prone to somatic illness while others are more prone to mental illness. It appears that there is some degree of exclusivity between these two kinds of response to trauma or stress. On the other hand I have long maintained that all illness is psychosomatic since psyche and soma are only two different faces of an organism's functioning. This seeming contradiction can be explained by Wilhelm Reich's statement that psyche and soma are both antithetical and functionally identical. Their function is identical on the energetic level on which level we can best comprehend the body's reaction to stress.

That all illness may be seen as a reaction to stress is not a new concept. The role of stress in the etiology of certain chronic illnesses was beautifully shown by Hans Seyle, a pioneer in this field. However, to justify the statement that all illness is related to stress, we have to extend

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the concept of stress to include such situations as invasion by parasites or pathological micro-organisms and even accidents. For example, if a person sprains his ankle, he becomes ill (as opposed to being well) because the resulting swelling and pain prevents him from walking normally. The stress in this case is the sprained ligament to which the body reacts with swelling and pain. The accident is the stressor agent which produces the stress, which, in turn, causes the reaction we call illness. If the sprain is mild and does not result in swelling and pain, the person would not be considered ill.

Pathogenic bacteria are also stressor agents when they invade the body putting it under stress. In this case, too, the stress may be mild causing little reaction from the body. Or it may be fairly severe if the bacteria are virulent and result in illness marked by fever, inflammation and weakness. If the body can cope with the stress caused by a stressor agent without markedly disturbing its normal functioning, there is no illness. Illness in this sense is equivalent to dis-ease and represents a breakdown of the body's normal functioning. It always denotes an inability of the body to cope with a stress.

Here is another example. Recently I suffered from an attack of poison ivy. Of course, I wasn't attacked. I simply touched the roots of the poison ivy plant which exudes an oily substance that is slightly toxic to the skin. Both of my forearms reacted after several days with a rash, swelling and intense itching. Localized areas of inflammation appeared on other parts of my body which also itched fiercely. I finally had a shot of cortisone which quickly reduced the swelling but the itching diminished only slowly. The illness in this case was the body's reaction to the stress caused by the poison ivy exudate which was the stressor agent. The rash, inflammation and itching represented the body's attempt which was the stressor agent. The rash, inflammation and itching represented the body's attempt to overcome or remove the stressor agent and to repair the damage it caused. However, there have been other occasions when I was exposed to poison ivy and did not react with illness. In those cases my body coped with the stress without upsetting my well-being.

Note that there is always some delay between the exposure to a stressor agent and the reaction to the stress it causes. That needs to be explained. Have you noticed that when you are cut by a very sharp instrument, there is no pain at the moment of the trauma? The pain sets in seconds later. The explanation is that the injury produces a momentary state of shock in the organism. The pain supervenes only when the shock wears off and the body reacts with an exudation of fluid to heal the wound. The exudate slowly thickens and hardens to cover the break in the surface of the organism. Later it becomes a scab. In this situation, the pain is due to the pressure created when the flow of blood, fluid and energy meets the resistance of the break. Pain must be viewed as a positive life expression. There is no pain in death nor in dying. It is the struggle against dying that causes pain. To understand pain as the result of a vital force against a block or resistance, consider the pain of childbirth when the baby's head is pressing against an undilated cervix. A similar condition develops when a large and hard fecal mass is being pushed through a tight anal orifice. A block or contraction is not painful when no force or energy is directed against it. On the other hand, when there is no resistance to the force or energy, the result is a flow that is pleasurable. The best illustration of this concept is the phenomenon of frostbite. When a part of the body suffers frostbite, there is no pain. The pain supervenes when the part is being warmed. It is due to the pressure caused by the flow of blood into the frozen and contracted tissues. Thawing out a frost-bitten finger or hand must be done very gradually to avoid the extreme pain and the danger of damage to the cells from the pressure. The immediate reaction to every trauma is shock which may go so far as to result in a loss of consciousness. It is only as the shock wears off and the body reacts positively to the trauma that pain develops. The same thing is true of inflammation.

An illness must be viewed, therefore, as the body's attempt to restore its integrity following some trauma. I first heard this view expressed by my professor of pathology in medical school. I have since learned that it was the common view of nineteenth century medicine and stemmed