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Witch doctor knows best? How Traditional Medicine Provides Valuable Support for Modern
Medicine's Treatment of Mental Illness

Humans need only to observe the ocean during a storm to understand how much more powerful Mother Nature is than they are. Many people do not come into contact with nature on a regular basis to a further extent than gardening or being inconvenienced by the weather. But the ocean during a storm serves as a reminder that nature is so much more than that. The ocean is mainly used for sport, such as surfing, swimming, boating, or fishing. And when it is thought of in this way, it would seem that the ocean belongs to those who command it and use it to their advantage. It takes simply the sight of a few massive waves powerful enough to flip boats and a few minutes of watching violent waters churn for one to realize that the ocean most definitely commands herself.

Ancient civilizations seemed to have a much better understanding of the power of nature than modern society, who tends to believe they have overcome it. Ancient people lived and evolved in harmony with nature, learning everything they could about the earth and its animals. Perhaps some of the most valuable information discovered by the ancestors of humanity was in regards to the surrounding plant life. Early medicine men learned by trial and error about which plants had curative properties, whether physical or spiritual. While the field of medicine has advanced drastically since these early beginnings, certain primitive communities which may not have complete access to modern medicine, particularly in the Amazon region and Africa, still

rely on their intimate relationship with plants and spirituality to treat hundreds of different ailments. Studies have shown that traditional medicine is usually more effective in treating mental illness than modern medicine, and some communities who have access to both traditional and modern medicine will still choose traditional healers to treat their mental conditions.

Although traditional medicine is often quickly disregarded as sub-par attempts to remedy illness, Western communities stand to learn valuable techniques particularly in the realm of mental illness and must give more credit to these popular ancient treatments for the healing success they have had.

To understand the importance of acceptance for traditional healing techniques in Western society, one must first understand the definition of traditional medicine. Writer and anthropological researcher Arthur C. Lehmann defines traditional medicine as a “term used to describe the primary health care system of indigenous people whose medical expertise lies outside ‘biomedicine’ the ‘modern’ medicine of Western societies” (*Eyes of the Ngangas* 154). Considering that Lehmann’s definition leaves much room for interpretation, more specific examples may include drinking herbal concoctions, practices conducted by shamans of either good or bad nature, the use of naturally occurring hallucinogenic substances for strictly spiritual purposes, invisible energy manipulation and more. By contrast, modern medicine is well known to the Western world as a medical doctor in a lab coat with a PhD who treats illness based on scientifically proven facts about the structure and function of the human body. Western medicine rarely, if ever, speculates that the cause of an illness is supernatural, even if an unusual condition is not understood and the treatments are guesswork at best.

One society which has had success in curing illnesses using traditional medicine is the Ecuadorian community of Amazonian Indians. It is believed that there exists a group of

specialists who can interact more freely with the supernatural world, and therefore have the power to either inflict or cure illnesses due to supernatural causes. These specialists are called shamans, and it is believed that they choose to become either bewitching or curing shamans at the initiation of their journey to connect with the supernatural world. Once connected (through extensive training and the help of a locally brewed hallucinogenic drink), the curing shamans answer calls from the community who needs their services. Curing shamans believe they can see into the body of the patient and find out with which “magical darts” a person was shot. They will then regurgitate two “spirit helpers” (which may come in the form of previously swallowed plants, insects and worms) and hold them in their mouth as vessels with which to catch the negative energy of the dart infecting the patient which the shaman will suck out. Once he has captured the essence of the magical dart inside the spirit helper, he will spit out the spirit helper, allowing the family of the patient to believe he had actually sucked that object out of the body. While the shaman believes that capturing the essence of an infectious magical dart is all that truly matters, the spirit helper serves as more physical and reliable proof of his services. After this ritual, the patient will feel relieved from knowing the infectious agent has been sucked out of his body and he may resume his life free of symptoms. However, if the illness persists (perhaps due to biological disruption of homeostasis), the community will designate the shaman as having grown too weak to perform his duties and he must return to refresher training (Harner 138-142).

Practices such as this one could be legitimately useful to the community in curing physical symptoms brought on by a mental condition such as anxiety or depression. Anxiety and depression can be hard to treat when they have progressed far enough to start causing physical symptoms of pain and discomfort especially because the victim may not understand that the physical symptoms are caused by mental suffering. As a result, they may seek to treat the

physical pains, when they should be seeking treatment for the mental distress. The traditional healer, in this sense, confronts both problems in a sort of two-for-one treatment. They cause the patient to believe they are treating the physical pain, which is most likely the patient's primary concern. But since the pain is not caused by any physiological disruption, it is easily evaporated as soon as the anxiety- or depression-affected mind is calm.

While swallowing insects for later regurgitation is not likely to gain much popularity in Western society, there are other ways in which certain important underlying messages from traditional medicine have already been incorporated into modern practices. Courses of treatment used in Western medicine which involve the spirit of traditional medicine may simply imply outsmarting one's own brain. For example, occupational therapists use the successful technique of mirror box therapy on stroke victims to encourage movement of a previously unresponsive hand (Lamont et al. 371). The patient places the weakened hand inside the mirror box, which has a mirror on the side of the box facing the strong hand, and the strong hand on the table next to the mirror. The patient is to look in the mirror, which appears to show an image of the hand that is hidden inside the mirror box, and attempt to move both hands in identical motions. Even though the weakened hand may not be able to move much, the mirror box tricks the brain into thinking the strong hand producing reflected strong movements in the mirror is in fact the weak hand moving, and therefore the weak hand is often able to move more freely than if the patient was looking directly at it. Another example of outsmarting the brain is seen in speech therapy of patients with a stutter. In the movie *The King's Speech*, which is based on a true story, the speech therapist puts headphones on the king and plays loud music while he is reciting his speech aloud. Not surprisingly, since the king cannot hear himself stutter, his ability to speak clearly improves greatly.

Humans can easily be victimized by the power of their own minds, but there is no reason that modern medicine cannot reverse this power and exploit the strength of the mind to be used for healing purposes.

From a scientific point of view, outsmarting the brain and tricking the mind to heal itself is often equated with the placebo effect. According to researchers of psychology Arthur and Elaine Shapiro, a placebo is “any treatment... used for its ameliorative effect on a symptom or disease but that is actually ineffective or not specifically effective for the condition being treated” (quoted in Beauregard 227). In other words, the placebo is a treatment that works but for unclear reasons. The ambiguity of this phenomenon is precisely the thing that makes it a good candidate for treating mental illnesses, as mental conditions are often ambiguous themselves. Studies organized by cognitive neuroscientist Mario Beauregard have concluded the effectiveness of placebos in the cases of Parkinson’s disease, unipolar depression, general pain, psychostimulation, and emotional processing (227-231). In all of these instances, it would seem that placebo-controlled trials were able to produce real results based on merely the subject’s expectation of receiving an active drug. If the power of expectation is enough to skew results in actual drug trials, then the mind’s potential combined with evidence-supported modern physiological treatments could lead to a holistically advanced level of care without the overuse of unnecessary prescription drugs.

The two obstacles preventing Western health care from incorporating the power of the mind into routine treatments include the apprehension from the public to trust a foreign and sometimes poorly understood method, and the skepticism from the health care professionals to encourage their patients to participate in holistic treatments. These two challenges can be overcome by a simple solution: education. Western medical professionals must be trained in the

validity of traditional treatments so that they can go on to educate their patients not to fear them. This is not to say that Western doctors should suddenly encourage their patients to visit a witch doctor, as it would be irresponsible to deny the cultural component involved in exactly how traditional treatments are administered effectively. However, these doctors can speak highly of practices such as yoga, reiki energy healing, and different forms of meditation. It is true that every medical treatment has its limits, and neither traditional nor modern medicine alone can remedy every illness. However, if doctors and psychiatrists were to explain the proven benefits of some traditional treatments, perhaps used in conjunction with modern treatments, they could reduce the amount of unnecessary prescription medications being given, foster a general acceptance for different concepts of healing and ease any distrust the population has towards these foreign remedies.

The field of medicine is far too advanced to neglect the positive powers of traditional healing techniques and deny itself an additional tool in the toolbox just because the tool originated on a foreign continent. Thousands of studies have proven an existing relationship between the mind and body in the context of health and illness. Traditional medicine is more likely to take this relationship into account, while modern medicine is more likely to focus only on physical health and treating the symptoms directly, usually with the use of pharmacological agents. However, there are many instances in which a person may not be able to use drugs or the drugs do not work on the person for one reason or another, and if that is the case, modern medicine needs to have somewhere else to turn. Just as humans will never be more powerful than the mighty ocean, it is crucial for Western society to realize that synthetic drugs may be effective, but they will never compare to the united strength found within the bond between the science of medicine and the power of the natural mind.

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