Optimizing Surgical Outcomes with Peri-Operative Mind/Body Therapies

Surgery is undoubtedly stressful for our patients – emotionally, mentally, and physically. Release of stress hormones and initiation of the “fight or flight” response may counter a physiological challenge, but can also impede healing and magnify pain. This occurs whether we are dealing with elective, urgent, or emergent surgery.

We are all familiar with the positive effects of placebo, which account for at least 35% of the total treatment effect. Placebo can be interpreted as the positive psychosocial aspect of a particular treatment. Alternatively, nocebo is the negative effect of a particular treatment, representing the negative mental and emotional variable in a patient’s perspective toward that intervention. Studies are ongoing to discover whether there is a particular physiologic basis of these complex responses. Anything which increases a patient’s positive expectation can augment the “placebo effect” and thereby improve the medical or surgical outcome.

The quality of the provider-patient relationship is a vital part of a patient’s response to a recommended therapy. Mutual trust, respect, and compassion go a long way toward supporting a patient’s outcome. Not surprisingly, these same qualities are known to reduce litigation risk as well. Multiple integrative modalities can be implemented pre-, intra-, or post-operatively for improved surgical outcomes.

Mind/Body Peri-Operative Modalities
Surgeons often concentrate on the indications and complications of a given procedure when they counsel a patient, but the anxious human being preparing for surgery needs more support. For instance, anxiety tends to increase a patient’s request for pain medications. Treating this anxiety can minimize narcotic requirements. Anything providers do to alleviate a patient’s stress during the peri-operative period is very important. Relaxation, visualization, energy therapies, and the use of positive healing statements are key components of a successful peri-operative Mind/Body program.

Relaxation techniques:
Simple breathing exercises trigger the body’s relaxation response, and can profoundly improve the patient’s level of comfort as well as their resting pulse and blood pressure. These can easily be taught to patients to significantly reduce anxiety without pharmaceuticals. Music therapy is well studied as a complementary therapy. Even listening to relaxing instrumental music helps.

Visualization exercises:
Visualization exercises, also known as imagery, empower patients in their healing process. “Guided imagery” CDs are easiest for patients to use, as one learns the techniques while listening passively. These are recommended for peri-operative use. Initiating this practice early in the pre-surgical period is ideal, but it can be successfully initiated and employed post-operatively as well.

Positive Healing Statements:
Positive healing suggestions self-chosen by the surgical patient are empowering in the peri-operative period, and trigger the “placebo” effect to optimize outcomes. Such therapeutic statements spoken to the patient during the surgery, typically by the anesthesiologist (intra-operative or post-anesthetic suggestion), have been shown to reduce use of post-operative narcotics, nausea, and hospital stays.

Energy Therapies:
Various energy therapies work with the human energy biofield to support the patient’s ability to maintain emotional, mental, and physical equilibrium. They can have profound effect on the patient’s experience. Brennan Healing Science, a hands-on energy therapy requiring extensive training, has been shown to reduce post-operative pain scores, narcotic usage, immobility, and anxiety scores. (See graph) Acupuncture is widely used, sometimes as a sole modality, for anesthesia. Reiki promotes deep relaxation and a sense of well being.

Other Integrative Modalities
Other integrative modalities also enhance recovery. An ideal peri-operative program might include the following:

Nutritional Support
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Optimization of all vitamins & minerals, especially A, B, C, D, E, iron, copper, zinc, pantothenic acid, and probiotics for optimal wound healing.

Herbal Supplements
- Ginger root is effective for post-op nausea, and curcumin reduces inflammation.
- Arnica may reduce postoperative wound pain and bruising.

Aromatherapy
- Clinical aromatherapy reduces pain, anxiety, and insomnia.

Support Services
- Surgical patients should be encouraged to surround themselves with friends and family members committed to their success. Ask the patient about their social/caregiver support network and about any spiritual needs to plan for the optimal home situation for recovery. Social services or chaplain services can be accessed as needed.

Humor
- Levity, candor, humor, and laughter aid in the immune response, reduce anxiety, make a connection to staff, and speed healing.

Sail Through Surgery: WDH’s Mind/Body Program
- The Sail Through Surgery program at WDH is a mind/body peri-operative program available to every surgical patient. This program provides patient education, support materials, and therapies. The Sail Through Surgery brochure provides patient instruction and information to access other modalities.

References