

THE HEALTH NUGGET



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BY RISE RAFFERTY

Dark Rumbblings of the Unconscious

Her hand became weak and nearly useless. Everyone feared as the nameless phenomenon continued. MRI scans, blood tests and expert investigations could not unravel the cause of this mysterious condition. Pain from her back emanated down to her fingertips. Months later she was finally diagnosed as suffering from . . . acute stress. I can almost hear many of you say, “Was that all?”

Psychosomatic or psycho-physiological diagnoses are usually unwelcome, even though the symptoms are not imaginary. The dread of such a diagnosis keeps many sufferers from seeking medical help. Illnesses in which physical symptoms seem to stem from psychological or emotional factors are considered discreditable. Immediately the seriousness of the condition is discounted, and the sufferer is left to endure the shame of their “inability” to cope with life and its stress.

But John Sarno, MD, Professor of Clinical Rehabilitative Medicine at New York University School of Medicine and an attending physician at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York City, does not see it that way. From his experience, seeing the cause of affliction for what it is can lead to true healing.

For thirty years Dr. Sarno has treated thousands of patients with back pain. In his clinical work, his interest was triggered when he found that individuals’ different pain thresholds and their physical examinations didn’t match up. Dr. Sarno began to question his chronic-back-pain patients to

discover what could be responsible for this discrepancy. His research revealed that 88% of his patients had a history of tension-induced reactions (many of them also experienced migraine headaches, eczema, colitis, ulcers, asthma, hay fever, irritable bowel syndrome, etc.).

Sarno concluded that painful back spasms and persistent back pain often resulted from chronic tension, stress, frustrations, anxiety, repressed anger and worry. He theorized that the unconscious tension “causes changes in the body’s nervous system,” including constriction of blood vessels and reduction in blood flow to the various soft tissues, such as muscles, tendons, ligaments, and nerves in the back.¹ This reduces oxygen to the area and increases accumulation of metabolic waste in the muscle.

When Dr. Sarno began treating the underlying emotional components, patients began improving dramatically. His objective with his patients now is to see their back pain in a new light and to help them be willing to face anything that may be lurking in the shadows of their psyche.

While his approach may initially seem earthy, unorthodox and dubious, those who have been benefited by his methods are convinced of its legitimacy. Sarno does not discount structural causes of back pain such as ruptured disk or injury; however, he believes it more often stems from “a delicate and deceptive mind-body minuet that is intended to distract your attention from something that many people find more sinister than pain—the dark rumbblings of the unconscious.”²

His approach has kindled much controversy, and a lack of well-controlled scientific research has labeled his work unfounded. Also an apparent recycled allusion to the early 1800's diagnosis of "spinal irritation" has lent even more skepticism.³ This was a diagnostic term for any back ailment for which there was no "demonstrable pathology." The term satisfied the patient's need to feel adequately cared for by the medical community, while giving them a scientific "name" for their malady. Many still question anything that resembles the quack medicine of that era.

I'll be honest. I've never been interested in anyone messing with "the dark rumblings of [my] unconscious," thank you very much. Even talk of how massage releases anger or emotional pain used to sound to me like new age mumbo jumbo. But Sarno takes this concept a step further, and it now interests me. He even coined a term—Tension Myositis Syndrome" (TMS)—for the assumption that psychological and emotional factors are the primary influence in back problems. I have never questioned back pain being related to stress. I understand "muscle tension" and "stress storage." But in addition to this, I have learned how unhealthy repression can be. So, while it is always best to approach this kind of thinking or diagnosing wisely, I now see validity in Dr. Sarno's conclusions.

We tend to shy away from the new and unfamiliar when it comes to seeking medical care. But has the pendulum swung too far the other direction? Has our caution or skepticism prevented us from understanding how powerfully our mental processes affect us? Should our search for organic causes to physical ailments exclude the most powerful force in the body—the brain? Whatever you may think of Dr. Sarno's practice, beliefs or observations, I

would challenge you to consider the "rumblings of our unconscious."

Life deals heavy blows to all of us to some degree and in various ways. Our own sinful choices add to this and leave what seem like indelible marks on our minds. Whatever coping mechanism we form to mask our pain, guilt, insecurity, or grief has too often led to repression, hiding and blocking out. But hidden they are not. Rather, they manifest themselves anywhere from angry outbursts to physical ailments.

The Bible says, "A heart at peace gives life to the body."⁴ The heart can be likened to the innermost part of who we are, the storage place of all that is truly meaningful. Jesus Christ wants to restore peace to our sin-damaged hearts. His way is through the Sanctuary. There, Scripture tells us, He applies the merits of His sacrifice for "the errors of the people."⁵ These errors are that which we ignore, are unknowingly ignorant of, or have hidden away.

"Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret [hidden] faults."⁶ This act of God's searching, cleansing and healing is good news. We can step into the delicate intimacy of perceiving, agonizing, and grieving with One whom we can trust to go through the process with us. He has all the skill, tenderness, wisdom and power needed to deal with our dark rumblings.

"Therefore judge nothing before the time until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God."⁷

¹ <http://www.spine-health.com/topics/cd/stress/str02.html>.

² http://magazines.ivillage.com/townandcountry/guides/stress/articles/0,,329826_367724,00.html.

³ <http://www.spine-health.com/topics/cd/stress/str01.html>.

⁴ Proverbs 14:30, NIV.

⁵ Psalm 139:23.

⁶ Psalm 19:12.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:5.



Editor's Note—The reference cited in last month's *Health Nugget* for ¹ was incorrect. The correct reference is *Deadly Emotions*, Don Colbert, MD, p. 9.

LIGHT BEARERS MINISTRY

PO Box 1888 • Malo, Washington 99150-1888

ph. (509)779-4444 • fax (509)779-4140

www.lbm.org • email rise@lbm.org