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Mind Medicine: A Physician's Analysis on How Our Thoughts Affect Our Life

Dr. Birnholz:

Coming to you from the ReachMD studios, this is the *ReachMD Book Club*, and I'm Dr. Matt Birnholz. Joining me today is Dr. Hector Chapa, Clinical Assistant Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology and the OB/GYN Clerkship Director at Texas A&M College of Medicine. Dr. Chapa is the author of *Mind Medicine: A Physician's Analysis on How Our Thoughts Affect Our Life*.

Dr. Chapa, welcome to the program.

Dr. Chapa:

Thank you, Dr. Birnholz. It's an honor to be here.

Dr. Birnholz:

Given the direction and the title of the work itself, I'm tempted to just come right out and ask you the obvious question: How do our thoughts affect our life? Because that question has been long overdue in our profession. But why don't we hold on to that one for now and start with your book's origins and background. How did you come to focus on this topic in advance of writing the book?

Dr. Chapa:

I have to be very honest and a little transparent. This was a selfish project. And a lot of people don't know this, but they will when they read the intro. You know, I've done great things in my career, Dr. Birnholz. I love it. I'm thankful for that. I've been able to lecture in 13 countries and do these articles. I love that. But a lot of that was me proving to myself that I was worthy of something. For over 20 years, since my childhood, I've had this issue with anxiety and depression, and to be quite honest, despite things that I've been able to accomplish, self-esteem issues. So I think these accomplishments were a way for me to prove first to myself that I could do that.

Well, I wanted to figure out what was wrong with my thought process, how I got into where I'm at and, you know, accolades on the wall and what have you, and I don't feel it, so I wanted to dive deeper. The litany of books that are out there on mindset, why was I missing it? Why can I describe a complicated obstetrical issue or a gynecological issue but I'm missing something basic in my own thought process?

Dr. Birnholz, that may have been more than you were looking for, but the short answer is I wanted to figure out how to fix myself, and in this introspection I discovered some interesting stuff that I had to put down in writing, not only for my children but as a memory to myself to remind me that I have a choice here, and it starts with my thought process.

Dr. Birnholz:

And you initially called it a selfish project, but there is something very selfless about undergoing a process of writing to and speaking about a particular struggle during childhood that I think many in the practice of medicine can relate to, which is to say being, for instance, type A go-getters with coexisting anxiety and/or depression that is you know and often times probably in direct relation to the go-getter-ness. And I'm interested in how those challenges have informed your current views.

Dr. Chapa:

Wow, I'm so glad and relieved, honestly, that you said that. It shaped everything that I've gone through and how I handle stuff from routine, physical, medical, organic problems to patients that present with maybe nonorganic things like depression or anxiety.

During residency and medical school, I didn't see a lot of that support, and I didn't train that long ago. I mean, I'm not that old, but I've seen just in my time out of residency and in practice this shift, this welcoming discussion, and it's opened my own eyes, and I feel a different level of connection to these patients who present that, you know, "Look, I don't know what's going on. I can't function because

of these issues.” And it’s actually torn that veil and has made the discussion much more open. And I’m glad to say that it’s happening even at the medical school level. There’s a more welcoming discussion versus, “Here, take this prescription.” It’s got to be deeper than that. If we don’t get to that root issue of our thoughts and what happened, then we’ll never fix it.

Dr. Birnholz:

Right. And, you know, and on that note, you draw a clear distinction early on between the mind in general and the mindset. That seems to be a very important crux of your book. And maybe you can walk us through how you look at mindset and its importance in the scheme of things given everything that you just mentioned.

Dr. Chapa:

Yeah, I’ve had this discussion with our medical students and some of our leadership staff. What a great grand rounds discussion this would be, right? Mind versus mindset. So the mind is the person—the capability, the functionality of the organ, the brain, to process intelligence and emotion. That’s all. It’s just facts, if you will. So, “He has a beautiful mind.” “Oh, he’s got such a smart mind.” That’s concrete data. But Webster’s defines mindset as The collection of attitudes that shapes behavior based on the things you know, so very different.

And I’ll give you this example, and I hope it drives it home. I’m an educator. Uh I’m an attending physician. I’ve seen many a medical student for the last 20 years since I graduated residency in 2000, many a medical student and residents that have a fantastic mind. They know their material. But somewhere between that classroom and standardized testing environment to the clinical wards there’s a disconnect, and what happens is when they get to the wards, they question themselves; they’re unsure. The clinical practice is missing because they lack that confidence, the ability that they can do this, this certain amount of safe confidence that they can take care of somebody else, somebody’s health. That’s mindset. So, while they have a great mind, that’s information; that’s educational building. What you do with that is your mindset.

Dr. Birnholz:

Absolutely, although I’m still waiting for the moniker of beautiful mind to be attached to my name.

For those just joining us, this is the *ReachMD Book Club*. I’m Dr. Matt Birnholz, and I’m speaking with Dr. Hector Chapa about his new book: *Mind Medicine*.

So, Dr. Chapa, why don’t we turn to some more of these practical ramifications from your book and start with the strategies that you provide to stay on the right mindset track. What are some of these strategies? How should they be incorporated into daily life?

Dr. Chapa:

There are 4 things that I’ve discovered that can safeguard us and prevent us from falling down that dark spiral where I’ve lived of depression and anxiety, and the first—and it sounds very basic, and it sounds a little quirky, and it’s not though—it’s this issue of gratitude taking or gratitude journaling. There’s actually an abundant amount of information in the literature published from neurochemistry studies in psychology and psychiatry that there seems to be a continual, habitual restructuring or rewiring of your brain, of chemical flares of dopamine and serotonin, that when you write down things to be grateful for, despite darkness in your life, it is actually a form of natural antidepressant, and not just the process of thinking about it but literally taking the time to write it out.

You know, we have patient deaths, we have job insecurity, we deal with horrible issues, but that there’s always something to be thankful. That process of gratitude journaling seems to have a true physical benefit and protection against depression.

The second is connectedness. We’re all busy, we’re all running around, but even though you may think that you’re very independent and antisocial, we all – we all need social connectedness. There’s something about holding everybody responsible and having that contact. Whether it’s by Zoom, phone call, or text, you can’t stay in isolation. And, Dr. Birnholz, I’ve done it. I’ve been there. I’ve shut the door to friends and family on purpose, and nothing good comes from that. That is a very dark place, so I encourage anybody to make that effort whether you want to or not and stay connected.

And then the third thing is the sunlight. It is a remedy to seasonal affective disorder. It is literally a neuroendocrine change. We’ve got to get ourselves out and out of the offices, out of classrooms, and out of our home because that is indeed a natural antidepressant.

And then the fourth... I’m still trying to master this one. It’s balance. We can’t work all the time. We have to be normal. We have to have time for family, friends, movies, and get away from the work because it is a quick way to burn out.

So those are my 4 steps, Dr. Birnholz, that I’m working on myself.

Dr. Birnholz:

As are we all. And they’re highly intuitive, and yet, in the classic model of clinical medicine where it often boils down to “do what I say,

not as I do," I would venture to say most of us, if not all of us, struggle with at least 2 to 4 of those particular precepts.

But I want to consider those ideas in the current climate with the world that is likely going to be feeling the collective and individual impacts from COVID-19 for years to come. Many of these ideas that you spoke about change in the context of needing to adapt to a global crisis, so what lessons do you think we should draw from given this focus on mindset and these 4 ideas towards an unprecedented situation like COVID-19?

Dr. Chapa:

Absolutely, and I come back to the unpredictability that we have. I don't know what my life will look like tomorrow, and nor do you, and nobody likes to talk about that. That's why we really do have to practice this idea of living "in the moment" that's now termed mindfulness. I thought that was hokey. I mean, I'm a person of science. I don't want to know about mindfulness, but I had to figure that out for myself that it is true. And so we have to be prepared for anything, including devastating changes in our economy, our lives, personal or societal.

And it brings me back, Dr. Birnholz, to something that a man said in an incredibly dark situation who fought his way through by fixing his thought process. Dr. Viktor Frankl wrote a book called *Man's Search for Meaning*. He was a Holocaust survivor out of Auschwitz, and he was a psychiatrist whose family was taken captive, and he said everything can be taken from a man, everything, except the one greatest freedom that we have that you can't take away: the ability to choose your own attitude of mind in any set of circumstance. So I go back to that.

Dr. Birnholz:

Well, Dr. Chapa, there is no one-off conversation that can encompass fully the scope of this subject. You're tackling one of the most important areas for clinical medicine, both in the current context and going back for ages among our population of clinical professionals. But before we go, maybe you can help tell our listeners where they can look to get more resources, more help, more of that connectedness you talk about and how to access your book.

Dr. Chapa:

Absolutely. I believe this message has to be heard. We've gone too long with the traditional stiff upper lip and grin and bear it. We can't do that to ourselves anymore. We can't. How can we take care of others when we can't take care of ourselves. We can't allow that culture anymore.

And I'm not an expert. I'm not a psychiatrist or a psychologist, but I'm a patient, I'm a victim, and I've worked through this, and this is for anybody who is wrestling for these at any level. Whether you're high school, college, pre-med or practicing physician, I do want to stress that you're not alone.

For resources, of course there are plenty of things as students through AAMC or resident to GME, and if you're in practice, every institution now has wellness officers, and I'm thankful for that. If you're interested in this book and this concept, which I really believe in and is very personal for me, it's on bookbaby.com. You can do a simple Google search of *Mind Medicine* and my name, Hector Chapa, and you can locate it.

Dr. Birnholz:

Well, it's certainly a personal topic for all of us, whether we wish to admit it or not, if we're going to apply a stoic model or if we're actually going to be true to the problems and challenges that face our field within this current climate of COVID-19 and independent of it.

I very much want to thank my guest, Dr. Hector Chapa, for joining me to review his recent book, *Mind Medicine*. Dr. Chapa, it was fantastic having you on the program. We look forward to having you again.

Dr. Chapa:

Same here. My best to everybody, take care.

Dr. Birnholz:

For ReachMD, I'm Dr. Matt Birnholz. To access this episode and others from the *ReachMD Book Club*, visit ReachMD.com where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening.