

Definitions of healing and healing interventions across different cultures

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Abstract: For centuries healing has been embedded in non-Western cultures. Traditional cultures believe that healing is derived from the divine and utilize a holistic approach to healing including the body, mind, and spirit. The community and environment are key elements in individual healing along with herbal remedies and ceremonies. Western cultures have accepted some traditional methods of relaxation and exercise, such as yoga and tai chi. In this paper we will examine some similar themes of traditional practices to better understand traditional patients' healing paradigm and find new tools as practitioners of Western medicine.

Keywords: Traditional healing; spirituality; holistic medicine; psychosocial spiritual

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Introduction

Since the beginning of human communities, illness, diseases, and death have been an intimate and integral part of life. In their attempts to understand and intervene in the nature of suffering, cultures, through time, developed fundamental principles and paradigms to explain and describe health and illness creating frameworks to help the afflicted achieve healing.

Often these healing traditions under the umbrella of "Traditional Medicine" are interwoven with cultural, social, psychological, and spiritual elements, which utilize preexisting deep-seated connections between the infirm and the healing practices.

Traditional Medicine is comprised of different practices, and can vary greatly across cultures and regions. In some cases these customs are believed to originate from luminaries or the divine, are passed down through the generations, and are well-developed and documented. Other healing traditions are primarily oral customs

interpreted by individual healers, strongly influenced by local customs and milieu. However, despite culture-specific elements, comparative studies on healing across cultures also identified common threads (1). For example, most take a holistic view of healing, recognizing and oftentimes emphasizing the mind-body-spiritual connection, and also believing that community and the environment are key elements in individual healing.

As healthcare practitioners caring for patients in an increasingly globalized age, we are likely to encounter patients who find relief through Traditional Medicine while simultaneously seeking conventional Western scientific medical care. In this paper, we aim to provide a starting point for culturally-sensitive conversation and the possibility of integrating mind-body-spiritual concepts of healing into conventional care. We will discuss general perspectives on healing within Traditional Medicine, emphasizing commonalities and highlighting cultural-specific practices through examples from different healing traditions.

Definition of disease

In most traditional healing systems, disease is thought to occur if there is a disturbance in the body, mind, or spirit. Disease may be caused and manifested in the physical, the psychological or spiritual realms, or a combination as one area affects the others. As an example, Ayurveda, A Traditional Medicine of India, is based on the idea that illness is a deficiency or block in physical, emotional, and spiritual harmony that may leave an opening for disease. In Ayurveda the body is divided into the doshas or humors that consist of seven body tissues: lymph, blood, muscle, adipose tissue, bone, bone marrow, semen, and waste products. If the body is at equilibrium, then the disease cannot take root. However, if the system is off balance, disease causing factors can block the channels and disease will result (2).

The idea of blockages in the physical realm also is found in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which utilizes meridians or paths through which the blood and “qi” or life force circulates. There are 36 meridians connecting sites on the body. The 12 principal meridians are symmetrical and correspond to visceral organs. Not only is disease caused by physical factors, but also by exogenous atmospheric factors (wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness, fire), endogenous emotional factors, trauma, bad diet, exhaustion and excessive sex (3). The meridians are used in diagnosis and treatment.

Disease may also originate from the spirit realm and affect the mind and the body. In Traditional Navajo Medicine, contact with animals, ceremonies, ghosts of the deceased, or living or dead enemies may lead to illness (4). African traditions often see sickness as caused by ancestral spirits, witchcraft, or sorcerers. Accordingly, healers often counteract spells or appease the ancestors (5).

Some disease may be caused by mental imbalance. In Curanderismo, the healing practices found in Mexico, “susto” is an illness that refers to soul loss and occurs after a trauma when the soul leaves the body. In addition, jealousy can cause illness (6). In traditional African medicine, mental illness may be seen as a calling to be a healer. The visions seen in schizophrenia are interpreted as communication with the ancestors and the divine. In this way psychiatric illness is embraced by society and used as a tool to heal others (7).

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of disease uses familiar techniques of asking

questions, inspection, and auscultation as a primary source of information. However, physical symptoms and signs are not the only concerns and manifestations in diagnosis. In the Ayurvedic tradition, the examination evaluates nine attributes: psychosomatic constitution, disease susceptibility, quality of tissues, body build, anthropometry, mental health, digestive power, exercise endurance, and age. Then the evaluation of the disease is performed by means of an interview, a physical examination, and evaluation of pulse, urine, stool, tongue, voice and speech, skin, eyes, and overall appearance (8).

Similarly, the importance of diagnosis can be seen in Native American traditions. The spirit world plays a large role in causing disease and therefore Native American healers, also known as shamans, often call upon the spirits to aid in diagnosis. There is usually only one diagnosis, although there may be multiple causes for the illness including physical, psychological, animals, other natural phenomena, ceremonies, ghosts of deceased humans, and contact with foreigners, especially enemies, living or dead. There are various ways of diagnosing illness including coal gazing and interpreting burnt embers from a fireplace. Diagnosis may involve the use of hallucinogens such as peyote. Once diagnosed, a ceremony may be held where the patient repeats prayers said by the healer (4).

Traditional healing incorporates nature into diagnostic systems. The individual is seen as a part of a greater whole, and thus the relationship of the individual to the environment is a key component of the traditional healing system. Nature and the human body are viewed as constantly influencing each other. In Ayurveda, all objects and the human body are combinations of the five elements or the Panchamahabhutas: Akash (ether), Vayu (air), Agni (fire), Jala (water), and Prithvi (earth). There are three bioenergies derived from the elements, these are Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. These energies are challenged during the seasons and also if there is any emotional or physical imbalance (8).

Complementary forces in nature are seen as essential components of Traditional Chinese Medicine. These forces are known as Yin and Yang, a concept which is derived from opposing sides of a hill or mountain. Humans are viewed as a representation of the universe and so a balance between these forces is maintained. Traditional Chinese Medicine also incorporates the five-element theory with elements seen as analogous to organs: lung:metal; liver:wood; kidney:water; heart:fire; and spleen:earth (3). The elements interact with each other and have directions, seasons,

climates, tastes, and stages of development. If they are out of alignment or cannot interact properly then disease can result. Techniques such as acupuncture, acupressure, moxibustion, cupping, and massage are utilized to bring balance back to these opposing energies.

Prevention of disease

Traditional healing believes in maintaining a sound body, mind, and spirit in order to prevent disease. Purification rituals play a role in preventing illness and fostering healing. A belief of Ayurvedic Medicine is that toxins or ama build up in the body and affect the life force. In Ayurvedic Medicine there are five cleansing methods utilized including: Vaman (therapeutic vomiting or emesis), Virecha (purgation), Basti (enema), Nasya (elimination of toxins through the nose), and Raktamoshksha (bloodletting) (9).

Native American rituals involve sweating, which purifies the body and soul. Sweat lodges are small, dark structures where hot rocks are covered with cold water to create steam. In this protected environment the community or individual go to pray for healing. Participating in a sweat lodge ceremony is a way of cleansing the body, mind, and soul and being in harmony with the universe (10).

Many traditional healing systems emphasize body and breathing in disease prevention. Ayurvedic Medicine fosters regular massage with body oils, yoga, and pranayama also known as breathing techniques for maintaining balance. Qigong is traditional Chinese mind-body exercise, which is also based on movement, breathing, and meditation. In practicing meditation and exercise regularly the body can maintain homeostasis and prevent the onset of disease (3).

Diet also has an important role in prevention of disease. Both Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine believe that combining foods with certain properties at different seasons may ensure good digestion. Diets are typically focused on organic vegetables and grains. Emphasis may also be placed on the environment of the meal including relaxed atmosphere without noise and distractions. The elimination of caffeine, sugar, and other toxins is also essential. Overall, a healthy lifestyle is key to prevention of disease (8).

Treatments

Herbal remedies are a unifying theme and used throughout traditional healing systems. They are universally used as preventive and healing medicines and during rituals.

In Ayurveda properties of the drugs are important, as well as their taste and toxicity. Herbs are combined for modifying effects, such as to make them less toxic or to have synergistic effects. The methods of combining and using herbal medications are complex and involve formal skills, which are taught by expert practitioners (8).

Herbal medicines in Traditional Chinese Medicine are described as having the following properties: taste or flavor; action of ascending, descending, floating and sinking; attribute of meridians; and toxicity. The herbs are combined in a way such that the delivery of the primary treatment herb is aided by the associate, adjuvant, and messenger herbs. Herbs are usually boiled in water or delivered orally with honey. Burning herbs in combination with acupuncture may be used in a process called moxibustion to stimulate points on the meridians (3).

Ceremonies are also utilized communally in many cultures for healing purposes. Communal healing is practiced in Native American cultures with the family and the tribe surrounding the individual in chanting and praying. In addition, fasting, purification, images, and dance are used during the ceremonies to involve the healing power of spirits. Examples of communal ceremonies include: Sundance, Yuwipi ceremony, Ojibwe healing ceremony, and shaking tent ceremony (11).

Discussion

With increasing globalization and cultural interaction and cross-pollination, healthcare providers are encountering patients with a myriad of belief systems about healing and healing practices. A common theme across cultures is the interconnectedness of mind-body-spirit in healing. Thus, methods used by Traditional Medicine are often holistic, encompassing the psychosocial spiritual aspects of not only the sick, but also the family and the community. For example in Native American traditions, a shaman will preside over a ceremony in which the whole community participates. Herbs and prayers will be utilized. After the ceremony, the healer and community continue to offer the sick support. In this way healing becomes a shared experience between the sick and the community. The community plays an essential role within the culture of healing.

In the past century, Western medicine has made extraordinary leaps through scientific methods in defining, diagnosing, treating, and in many cases, curing diseases. However, its emphasis has been predominantly on disease and on organ focused specialties, and much less person

centered. In contrast to other healing traditions, patients are extracted from familiar environments and moved into hospitals, often limiting interactions with the larger community. Psychosocial spiritual assessment is not routinely incorporated as part of a person's treatment plan, especially among the adult population.

However, in recent decades, there has been growing recognition for the mind-body-spirit aspects of caring for the patient and their caregivers, as reflected by the establishment of National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health as well as medical subspecialties such as Hospice and Palliative Medicine. Patients are also proactively seeking out healing practices that stem from Traditional Medicine to complement conventional Western treatment. In a national survey of complementary and alternative medicine use in 2012, 33.2% of U.S. adults report using complementary health approaches (12). The more common complementary modalities include interventions with roots in Traditional Medicine such as dietary supplements, deep-breathing exercises, yoga, tai chi, osteopathic manipulation, and herbal medications.

In recent years, the field of Integrative Medicine has been gaining traction. Its goal is to incorporate complementary therapies with good safety records and some evidence supporting their benefit together with Western medicine—ultimately combining a more mind-body-spirit oriented philosophy with conventional Western care.

There have been published clinical practice guidelines for the use of complementary modalities, especially for oncology patients (13-16). The four main domains of complementary modalities include mind-body interventions, manipulative and body-based therapies, biologically-based herbs and supplements, and energy therapies.

Mind-body interventions utilize the mind-body connection to “enhance the mind's capacity to affect bodily function and symptoms” (17). Modalities within this category include hypnosis, relaxation therapies, guided imagery, meditation/mindfulness-based stress reduction, biofeedback, yoga, and creative therapies (art and music therapies). Manipulative and body-based therapies include exercise therapy (tai chi, qi gong), massage therapy, and chiropractic and osteopathic manipulations. Biologically based interventions include dietary supplements, herbs, minerals, and botanicals. Finally, energy therapy is based on the theoretical framework that there is energy involved in the biological process, and interventions include Reiki, therapeutic touch, and healing touch (18). Currently, there are active clinical trials examining how these complementary

modalities can be best incorporated into everyday clinical care.

However, one must be cautious not to utilize complementary therapies as a tool isolated from the core philosophies of healing from whence they originate. Western medicine has yet to tap deeply into the mind-body-spirit connection central to many other healing practices across cultures. In the coming decades, we hope for growing awareness and understanding about spirituality's impact on healing and wellness. This will likely be incorporated gradually into various aspects and levels of Western medicine's lexicon of diagnosis and healing techniques.

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Footnote

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