

The Sick role and illness behavior

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Sir William Osler, M.D.

Becoming a patient

“Patients are human beings with very human hopes and fears. In the hospital, they have been removed from their accustomed environment. Their valuables and their clothes have been taken away from them, and they feel “miserable, scared, defenseless, and, in their nakedness, unable to run away”.

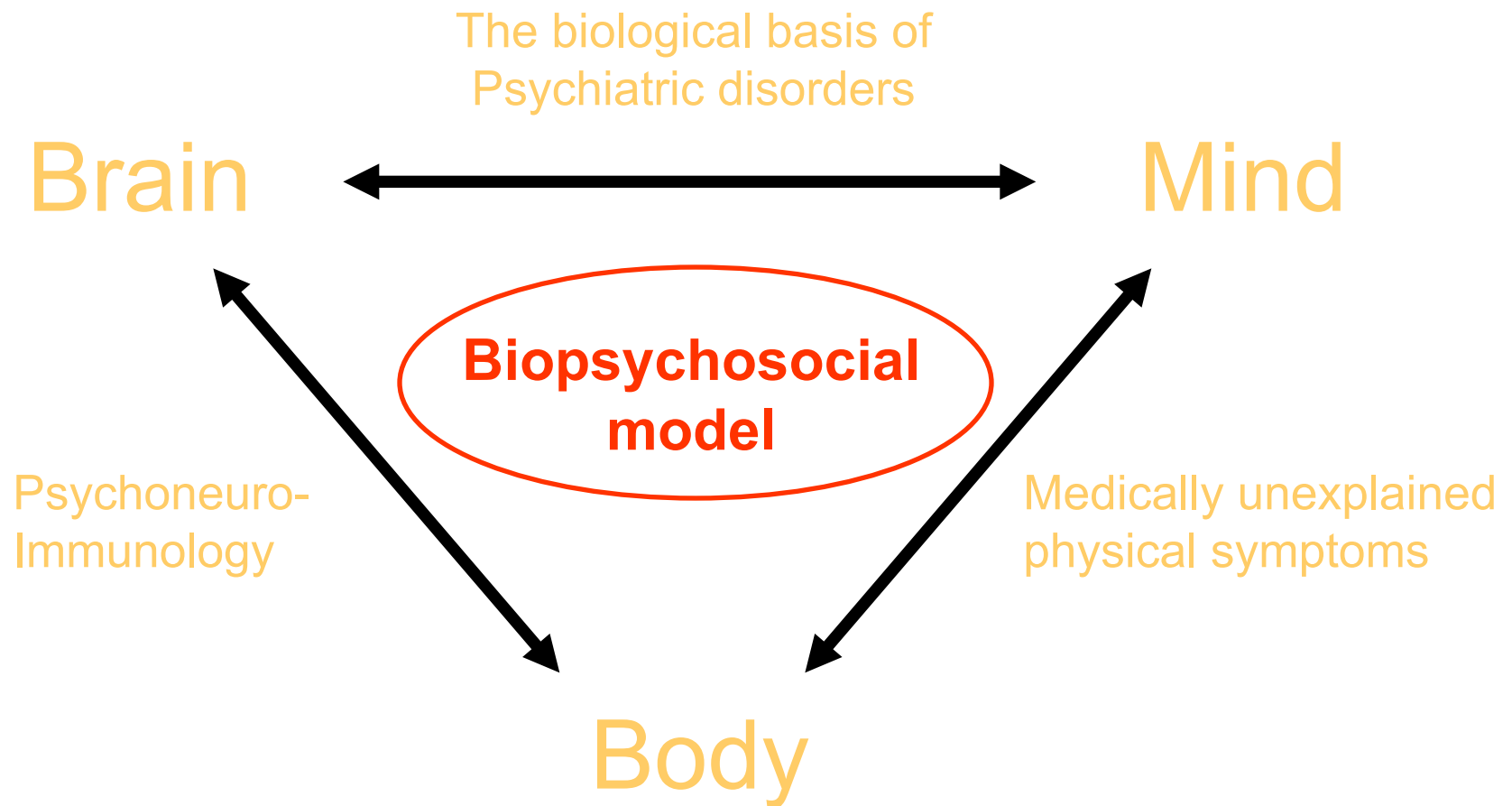
Francis W. Peabody, MD in a 1927 lecture to Harvard Medical Students.

The brain-body connection:

Hans Selye

- Stress: the inability to cope with a physical or emotional threat
- 3 stages:
 - Alarm: fight or flight response (nervous and endocrine systems activated for defense against stressor)
 - Resistance: continued high alert (hormones helpful in alarm stage now become counterproductive increasing risk for disease)
 - Exhaustion: body no longer able to cope
- Showed that the brain could, literally, kill the body

Acceptable disease model



Signs and symptoms

- **Signs:** 'objective' manifestations of a disease process (e.g., a rash, high blood pressure)
- **Symptoms:** 'subjective' experiences (pain or other form of distress)
- Healthy individuals develop a new physical symptom every 5 - 7 days
- 95% of these symptoms are never brought to the attention of a doctor.

Why symptoms lead to medical visits

- **Intensity**
- **Duration**
- **Change in presentation**
- **Family history**
- **Previous experience**
- **Unfamiliarity**
- **Perceived threat**
- **Loss of control**

Definitions

- **Disease** refer to objective physiological or mental disorder at the organic level and confined to the individual organism .
- **Illness** is a subjective state, a psychological awareness of dysfunction at the personal level also confined to the individual .
- **They present together but not always.**

Definitions cont...

- **Sick role** derived its meaning from Parson's concept and it refers to a state of social dysfunction, a social role assumed by the individual that is variously specified according to the expectations of a given society, it extends beyond the person to include relation with others.
- **Illness behavior** is the behavior of a person in the sick role .

Sick role involves

- Exemption from normal social responsibilities and other people are expected to take over duties .
- Is not expected to get well without being taken care of.
- Has an obligation to want to get well and seek appropriate medical help .
- Other people are under obligation to be kind and sympathetic to.

Illness behavior involves

- Much of it is a result or associated with the recognized disease .
- Some are generated by the fear of disease or the positive rewards and support provided for a person in the sick role .
- Some times a person may adopt the sick role and illness behavior without having illness or may show illness behavior which is out of proportion to the degree of illness.
- Behaving normally in the presence of undiagnosed illness .

Relevance to medical practice

- A basic principle in learning theory is that patterns of behavior which are rewarded tend to increase in frequency .
- It is not surprising that not all who consult doctors with somatic symptoms have objective evidence of disease .
- Probably these have been trained to do so under stress since childhood .

- To put it in the simplest form, the sick role can be attractive , and so it is liable to be adopted whenever its advantages outweigh those of health.
- Different people adopt the sick role according to their coping ability, or to get a secondary gain .



"It is more important to know what kind of a patient has a disease than what kind of disease a patient has."

Sir William Osler, M.D., 1891

THANK YOU