



## The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine

Advancing the next medical frontier

You can't heal the body without treating the mind. In 2006, Massachusetts General Hospital formalized that philosophy by establishing the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine (BHI), inspired by the pioneering work of Herbert Benson, MD. The Institute integrates the best of research, teaching and clinical applications of mind body medicine into all areas of health.

### The medical challenge

Stress is pervasive and widespread. Its negative effects on health and well-being are well-documented. More than 60% of visits to healthcare providers in the United States are related to stress and its manifestations. Physiologically, stress causes the hormones cortisol, epinephrine and norepinephrine to secrete into the bloodstream, provoking or exacerbating a number of conditions that include hypertension, headaches, insomnia and chronic back pain; as well as heart disease, stroke and cancer. Stress has a profound adverse influence on physical and mental health and on performance at work and in school.

People may not be able to control stressful events, but they can learn to control their response to stress, and build

resiliency. More than 35 years ago, Dr. Benson first described the "Relaxation Response," a coordinated and reproducible state of deep rest that can be elicited in a number of ways including meditation, deep breathing and prayer. Study after study has proven that the Relaxation Response works to help individuals cope with a range of illnesses and stressful life events.

"In addition, given that the fact the major risk factors for stress-related chronic diseases are behavioral in nature, we believe that BHI resiliency enhancement programs can help prevent illness," says Greg Fricchione, MD, director of the BHI and associate chief of Psychiatry.

Today, the BHI represents a new integrative model of health care based on the inseparable partnership between pharmacological, surgical, and mind body approaches to medicine. Its services are available to all Mass General patients, and staff and the wider community – currently, more than 200 Boston-area physicians refer patients to the BHI. BHI research is conducted as part of the Mass General scientific effort, the largest hospital-based research program in the United States.

“For hundreds of years, Western medicine has looked at mind and body as totally separate entities, to the point where saying something ‘is all in your head’ implied that it was imaginary. Now we’ve found how changing the activity of the mind can alter the way basic genetic instructions are implemented.” — Herbert Benson, MD, director emeritus

### **BHI programs help patients cope**

In partnership with Mass General colleagues, the BHI has developed a number of clinical programs that combine Relaxation Response training with resiliency enhancement through cognitive skills training, positive psychology, and nutrition and exercise education. The BHI cardiac wellness program enjoys a national reputation for its work with patients with heart disease: a Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services study showed that the BHI cardiac program reduced mortality by 10 percent compared with 2.7 percent from a traditional program. Other programs help women dealing with infertility and people wishing to age well.

### **Translating science into better care**

The robust BHI research program aims both to investigate the basic science behind the success of the Relaxation Response and to apply the research to treat patients.

Until recently, how the Relaxation Response works remained a mystery. Results of a groundbreaking genomic study led by BHI researchers suggest that eliciting the Relaxation Response can affect how genes are activated, which has implications for how cells function.

In another study, conducted with collaborators at Shriners Burn Hospital for Children, rats raised in isolation — simulating a high stress, low resiliency environment — were compared to rats raised in a group. The efficiency of wound healing, an indicator of the body’s ability to respond to stress, was impaired in the isolated rats. This outcome suggests that integrating Relaxation Response training with standard treatment might improve healing for children suffering from burns.

### **BHI education and community projects benefit public health**

Children have been shown to benefit from learning Relaxation Response skills, starting from a very young age to the stressful adolescent years. The BHI offers focused programs to teachers and students from kindergarten through college. Participants show significant improvement in their levels of anxiety, and many report that they have begun to see positive changes in school performance and over all health and well-being.

### **The role of philanthropy**

Philanthropy must be a partner in this endeavor. Despite scientific evidence that mind body medicine is effective, BHI programs and services remain poorly reimbursed through the traditional health insurance system. Reduced budgets at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control have decreased funding for research. Donor support is critical — to ensure access to BHI programs and services to all who need them; to advance educational outreach efforts; and to develop innovative research studies.

“These are real successes based on evidence-based research,” says Dr. Fricchione. “BHI has enormous opportunities to contribute to health improvements in the 21st century. With more funding, we envision a day when our work will revolutionize the human potential to have healthy, fulfilling lives.”

To learn about how you can support the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, please contact: Nan Doyle at 617.643.9477 or [ndoyle2@partners.org](mailto:ndoyle2@partners.org)