

PSYCHOSOMATIC DISORDERS: ANCIENT AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

Psychosomatic disorders represent a complex interplay between mind and body, where psychological factors significantly influence physical health. The concept of psychosomatic illness dates back to ancient civilizations, where disease was often viewed as a manifestation of spiritual or emotional imbalance. In modern medicine, psychosomatic disorders are recognized as conditions in which emotional stress or mental conflict leads to physiological dysfunctions. This paper explores the evolution of psychosomatic thought from ancient philosophical traditions to contemporary scientific models, focusing on mechanisms, clinical implications, and integrative approaches to treatment.

Keywords:

psychosomatic disorders, mind-body interaction, ancient medicine, stress, psychoneuroimmunology, holistic healing, emotional regulation

Relevance of the Topic

The relationship between the mind and body has fascinated physicians and philosophers for millennia. In today's world of increasing psychological stress, psychosomatic disorders have become more prevalent, affecting millions of people globally. Chronic stress, anxiety, and emotional trauma are now recognized as contributing factors to diseases such as hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, peptic ulcers, migraines, and even autoimmune disorders.

The relevance of this topic lies in understanding that health is not merely the absence of physical disease but a dynamic balance between emotional, psychological, and physiological states.

Revisiting ancient perspectives and integrating them with modern neurobiological insights provides a more comprehensive approach to patient care and disease prevention.

INTRODUCTION

The term “*psychosomatic*” originates from the Greek words “psyche” (mind) and “soma” (body), emphasizing their interdependence. Ancient civilizations such as Egypt, India, Greece, and China viewed disease as an imbalance of spiritual, emotional, and physical energies. The Greek physician Hippocrates (460–370 BCE) emphasized that emotions such as anger or grief could directly influence bodily functions.

During the Middle Ages, this holistic view declined due to the dominance of religious interpretations of illness. However, with the rise of modern psychology and neurology in the 19th and 20th centuries, the psychosomatic concept was revived. Sigmund Freud and his followers suggested that repressed emotions could manifest as physical symptoms — a concept that later evolved into modern psychosomatic medicine.

Today, the field incorporates findings from psychoneuroimmunology, neuroendocrinology, and behavioral medicine, demonstrating the biological mechanisms through which mental states affect bodily health.

Main Body

1. Ancient Perspectives on Psychosomatic Health

In ancient times, medicine was inseparable from philosophy and spirituality.

- In Ancient Egypt, health was believed to depend on the harmony between the heart and the soul. Emotional distress was thought to disrupt this harmony, leading to physical illness.
- In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), emotions were directly linked to organ systems: anger affected the liver, sadness the lungs, and fear the kidneys.
- In Ayurveda (India), disease arose from imbalances in the three doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha), which reflected physical and mental harmony.
- Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle viewed health as the unity of body and soul, and Hippocrates' humoral theory associated emotions with body fluids — for example, excessive black bile leading to melancholy (depression).

These early approaches emphasized holism, a principle that remains central to psychosomatic medicine today.

2. Development of Psychosomatic Concepts in Modern Medicine

The modern era of psychosomatic medicine began in the early 20th century.

- Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) proposed that unconscious emotional conflicts could produce physical symptoms (conversion disorders).
- Franz Alexander and the Chicago School (1930–1950s) identified specific “psychosomatic diseases,” such as ulcers, hypertension, asthma, and ulcerative colitis, which were linked to chronic emotional stress.
- Hans Selye's stress theory (1936) introduced the concept of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), showing how prolonged stress disrupts homeostasis and leads to disease.
- The emergence of psychoneuroimmunology in the 1980s scientifically demonstrated that emotions and stress can influence immune responses, hormonal secretion, and neural activity.

Thus, modern psychosomatic theory integrates biological, psychological, and social factors — the biopsychosocial model — as essential components of health and illness.

3. Mechanisms Linking Mind and Body

Psychosomatic disorders develop through several interrelated mechanisms:

- Neuroendocrine Pathways: Chronic stress activates the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, increasing cortisol levels, which suppress immune function and promote inflammation.
- Autonomic Nervous System (ANS): Prolonged emotional arousal can cause hypertension, tachycardia, and gastrointestinal disturbances.

- Immune Dysregulation: Emotional stress affects cytokine balance, contributing to autoimmune and inflammatory diseases.
- Cognitive and Emotional Factors: Negative thinking, anxiety, and repression of emotions alter pain perception and immune response.

These findings confirm that mental and physical health are deeply interconnected through physiological pathways.

4. Common Psychosomatic Disorders

The most frequently reported psychosomatic conditions include:

- Cardiovascular diseases: hypertension, coronary artery disease, arrhythmia
- Gastrointestinal disorders: irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, gastritis
- Respiratory disorders: asthma, hyperventilation syndrome
- Dermatological conditions: eczema, psoriasis, urticaria
- Neurological and pain disorders: tension headaches, migraines, fibromyalgia

Patients often experience a vicious cycle: emotional distress causes physical symptoms, which in turn increase anxiety and perpetuate illness.

5. Modern Therapeutic and Preventive Approaches

Treatment of psychosomatic disorders requires a holistic, integrative approach:

1. Psychotherapy: Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychoanalysis, and mindfulness-based therapies help patients recognize and manage emotional stressors.
2. Pharmacotherapy: Antidepressants, anxiolytics, and stress-modulating agents can reduce symptoms when combined with therapy.
3. Lifestyle interventions: Adequate sleep, balanced nutrition, and physical exercise improve resilience and reduce stress.
4. Mind-body techniques: Meditation, yoga, tai chi, and relaxation training restore balance between emotional and physiological systems.
5. Interdisciplinary collaboration: Cooperation among psychiatrists, neurologists, and general practitioners ensures comprehensive care.

Preventive strategies should focus on early identification of stress-related behaviors and promotion of psychological well-being.

Conclusion

The evolution of psychosomatic thought—from ancient holistic traditions to evidence-based modern medicine—demonstrates the timeless understanding that mind and body function as one system. Ancient healers intuitively recognized what modern science now confirms: emotions, thoughts, and beliefs profoundly affect physical health.

Today, psychosomatic medicine bridges the gap between psychology and physiology, offering integrative models that view the individual as a whole. Future directions include the expansion of psychoneuroimmunology, digital health interventions, and personalized psychosomatic therapies aimed at prevention and long-term wellness.

Ultimately, understanding psychosomatic relationships allows clinicians to treat not just the disease, but the person — addressing emotional, social, and biological dimensions of health.

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