

NEWS ■ FASHION

BEAUTY ■ HEALTH ■ LIFE

MARY O'CONNOR



Boost your immune system by forgiving your enemies

It may have happened ages ago but the hurt is still festering in your heart. It could have been your partner, former teacher, boss or relative who said or did something which wounded you deeply.

Time has marched on but that tight knot of resentment and pain remains inside you, imprisoning you in a joyless world and maybe even leaving you open to serious illness.

If you could forgive the person who hurt you could release this dam of trapped emotion. But is that easier said than done and where do we start?

Dr Mario Martinez - an American clinical neuropsychologist, author and international speaker who has spent his career studying how personal cultural beliefs affect biology and health - says it is important to learn to forgive, if only for our own good.

Forgiveness protects against illness, he says. If our lives are dominated by chronic patterns of fear and rage, this can result in our immune systems becoming deregulated and being unable to fight off serious illness.

On the other hand, our belief systems enhance our immune function when they trigger compassion and empathy. He believes too that people who feel powerless and defenceless in situations, such as in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, may suffer illnesses caused by suppressed immune systems. He points to a high probability of more allergy-related problems, auto-immune illnesses, diabetes and fibromyalgia.

The Florida born expert, who has spent 30 years studying how immune, nervous and endocrine systems and thoughts interact with each other, says it is important to express anger, notably "righteous" anger. This is the most appropriate and healthy response to certain events.

"Anger is good if we express it and let it go. There are two types of anger (1) righteous anger and (2) indignation. Righteous anger is good. We are doing something to protect ourselves or a child or are rightfully defending ourselves. This brings up our natural killer cells - the pre cancerous ones.

Other anger, such as indignation, is not healthy or productive, he feels. "Someone goes to a restaurant for example and orders wine. When they get the wrong one, they show up the waiter. That's not good. It does not serve a purpose. It only puts someone down."

Bottling up anger is bad for you, he believes. Research carried out into women with rheumatoid arthritis revealed that many who had the condition - some had been sexually abused - never developed ways to express their anger, he says.

"RA is partly caused by a genetically related rheumatoid factor that can be triggered at any time. It's an antibody that attacks your own antibodies. Research by my colleague Dr George Solomon, who is a pioneer in psychoneuroimmunology strongly



Anger is good if we express it and let it go, says Dr Mario Martinez.

suggest that the genetic predisposition (rheumatoid factor) interacts with several personality variables, including difficulty expressing anger, excessive care-taking behaviours and unresolved childhood abuse. Of course, some people with the rheumatoid factor never develop the illness."

Feel your anger

You cannot forgive without first being angry at the person you hate, he stresses. "Your approach is not to vindicate the predator. Feel the anger in your body at whoever hurt you. Then breathe it away. You are letting the body get rid of it. This needs to be repeated. Let go of the anger and express gratitude, not to the person who hurt you but to what the experience taught you. Maybe it made you wiser or more careful. People learn how powerful they are, the courage they have. It does not mean you have to condone the act and stay close to the

perpetrator. What you are doing is freeing yourself from they being your master. You are not free while you are trapped in anger."

By forgiving we are taking action and consequently protecting ourselves. We are now allowing our lives and health to be disrupted by destructive emotions anymore.

"We have an alarm system within us and when we believe something is bad or dangerous we secrete cortisol (the stress hormone). It suppresses our immune system. It stops everything or slows down things until later, ie. digestion. People who have an alarm mindset have a cortisol state all the time."

He says while emotions are necessary, it is important to remember they are "transitional systems" and we "should not stay with them".

Some 99 per cent of illness is stress related, he says. "Stress brings out genetic weaknesses eg diabetes. Lifestyle and belief systems are

extremely important in health and illness, too. We must empower ourselves. This gives us the option to take responsibility for our health."

Illness is a wake-up call, a sign that all is not well in the body and mind, he says. "Studies indicate that those who survive for years afterwards have used their illness as a way of changing their lifestyle. The ones that don't change are the ones that die."

He warns against allowing yourself to become a victim in life, to let helplessness take over because this state comes at a tremendous cost to self.

"Sometimes you can feel helpless, disempowered. An experiment was carried out with rats which taught them to be helpless - they were given shocks in a small space. After a while, they gave up. Then they were implanted with cancer cells and these grew like wildfire. But the rats who were taught to press a lever to avoid getting shocked stayed healthy. Our natural killer cells go down when we're in a state of helplessness. There is a lot of power in being a victim but it comes at a tremendous cost to yourself."

Stigmata

Dr Martinez, a Catholic who lives in Nashville, became interested in stigmata, the mysteriously appearing wounds resembling those which Jesus received when crucified, in 1989. It was a natural lead-on from his interest in how emotions and spiritual beliefs affect biology and the immune system, he says.

He is one of three to four experts worldwide who investigate stigmata cases for the Vatican. There are 30 stigmatics in the world today, there have been 340 since the 13th century. Some 98 per cent of them are Catholics and 80 per cent are women. There have only been two or three who were priests.

He says the Catholic Church does not recognise stigmata as divine intervention and it is not a criterion for canonisation. When the phenomenon cannot be disproved by science, the Church leaves the matter open to individual interpretation.

"The Catholic Church wants to avoid a circus atmosphere. The world already thinks Catholics are weird. They don't want to appear more weird!"

He says stigmata occurs in rare cases. Often wounds are self inflicted or they may be a scientific explanation. Padre Pio, one of the most famous stigmatics, who first experienced Christ's wounds in 1918, bled a cup of blood a day, he says.

"We'd die if that happened to us. His wounds never got infected. That's possible. The immune system can keep infection from happening and the wound from healing."

This "superimmunity" comes about because the person's belief is so strong it may change the body's biology. "The interesting thing is how

biology follows belief. Most of the older stigmatics would have a model of stigmata from the medieval paintings - the wounds in the palms. Modern stigmatics have it in the wrists (newer archaeological research shows the nails were most likely driven into the Lord's wrists where the arms bone structure would better support the weight of the body)."

Some people choose stigmata as a "blessing", he says. They pray for it believing suffering to be redemptive. For others, it just appears. Many cases are self inflicted by attention seeking personalities.

Working with stigmatics is often a slow delicate process, he says. "We have two approaches. If they want it, yes. But if not, we help them reverse it. If the mind can wound, it can heal."

He believes it is better to identify with the love of Christ and helps those who do not want their stigmata to focus on this and not the Lord's suffering as a way of connecting with Him.

"Stigmata is a model of suffering. Padre Pio was in constant pain. I investigated one case where a person was given a tremendous amount of valium but it didn't help. Stigmata involves tremendous piercing pain. The Vatican does not believe it's divine intervention. Christ already suffered for you. You don't need to suffer for him."

A renewal of faith often occurs in countries where stigmatics live and people are often healed of illnesses, he says.

"Stigmata usually comes when a country has a crisis of faith. It is seen as Christ's gift, it becomes venerated. There is usually spontaneous healing I think it's a collective belief in the power of prayer. But I feel it's very dangerous to identify with the suffering of Christ. You should celebrate that the suffering was done to relieve yours, to make yours into a life of joy."

Dr Martinez will give a talk called "Guardians of the Heart" on Wednesday November 17 at 8pm at Galway Cathedral. The lecture is open to the public and health professionals and admission is €20 generally and €10 for students. This talk will explore the emotional language of relationships and show how people can protect the fragility of their partner during times of turbulence rather than demanding protection from each other.

He will conduct a morning workshop on the "Psychology of Forgiveness" and an afternoon one on "The Psychology of Abundance - How to teach our biology to accept abundance" on Sunday November 21 from 10am to 6pm at the Clybaun Hotel. The cost is €125.

He is available for private consultations (€60 per hour) during his stay here. For details telephone Denise at (086) 3933816 or Marie at (087) 9185421.