

Neuropsychology Expert Draws Link Between Personal Ethics and Health

By Susan L. Rife

susan.rife@heraldtribune.com



Author and international speaker believes the language we use determines both our emotional response and our physical well-being. Mario Martinez cautions that Americans who feel defenseless may suffer illnesses caused by a suppressed immune system.

Mario Martinez thinks there's a better word for the Sept. 11 attacks than "tragedy." The word implies powerlessness and victimhood.

"Infamy" would be a better choice, said Martinez.

"When you say something is a tragedy, you associate it with something that has a sadness, something that happened without criminal intention," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Tennessee.

"When they call it a tragedy, that brings in a different response than if you call it an infamy. When you say (it was) an act of terrorism or infamy, it brings out a response of wanting to act to the situation."

Martinez, an author and international speaker who holds a doctorate in clinical psychology, believes that the language we use to describe a situation determines not only our emotional response, but our physical health and well-being as well.

He'll be in Sarasota this weekend to discuss beliefs, behavior and biology in a lecture and workshop sponsored by the Center for Positive Living. His topic is "Does the Immune System Have Morals: How Your Personal Ethics Affect Your Health".

In the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, Martinez is concerned that Americans who feel defenseless will suffer illnesses caused by a suppressed immune system.

"I think there's a high probability of more allergy-related problems, autoimmune kinds of things, diabetes, fibromyalgia," he said.

America's military response, Martinez said, "has really helped. (The nation's collective health) would have been worse if we hadn't done anything."

Martinez has spent his career studying the connection between personal and cultural belief systems and health.

“What I’ve done for the last 30 years has been studying how immune, nervous, endocrine systems and thoughts interact with each other,” he said. “They’re constantly interacting with each other.”

Speaker: Our words influence our well-being

“There’s a cultural component as well. For example, migraine sufferers in the U.S. typically are treated for a vascular problem. In France, it’s seen as a liver-related problem. In England, it’s a gastrointestinal problem.

It’s rare for an entire culture to be affected by circumstances that may provoke wide-ranging physical and emotional responses such as those that followed the Sept. 11 attacks.

Martinez recognizes it for what it is: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Our brains have been programmed over thousands to expect that events will happen in a particular order: parents die before children, and so forth.

“When something is out of order, a trauma that is out of order, we’re not equipped to deal with that immediately,” Martinez said. “What we do is suppress the immune system. We suppress everything to deal with the event, but then some people suppress it too long. Then six weeks later, a year later, it starts coming up. You’ll have depression, a startled response. With some people it comes out 40 years later.”

And although the vast majority of Americans were not directly affected by the World Trade Center and Pentagon catastrophes or the Ohio plane crash, many of us saw the televised images over and over.

“You get oversensitized to it. You have an immediate reaction, and your nervous system doesn’t know that this isn’t happening. You see this situation so vividly that it has an incredible reaction for you. Plus it was out of order.”

Martinez suggests that “righteous anger” is the most appropriate response to the events of last month.

And beyond support of the American military retaliation, “one of the ways to protect yourself to that is to take action—the action you take is you don’t allow your life to be disrupted. You reconnect with the ones you love, you fly, you shop.

“And be as supportive as possible of the government. The terrorists want us to be divided and disrupted. Their game is fear.”

Martinez really doesn’t like the word “terrorism” very well, with its implications of being terrorized or terrified.

“Infamy is better. Infamy means that you respond with righteous anger to correct the infamy.”

Interested?

Dr. Mario Martinez will present a lecture and workshop titled “Does the Immune System Have Morals: How Your Personal Ethics Affect Your Health” on Friday and Saturday. The lecture is from 7 to 9:30 p.m. Friday at First United Methodist Church, 104 S. Pineapple Ave., Sarasota. Admission is \$35. An interactive workshop will be from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday at Unity Church of Sarasota, 800 Cocoanut Ave., Sarasota and its \$45. Tickets for the two events are \$75. Call the Center for Positive Living, 379-7793, Ext. 314.