

THE PSYCHOSOMATIC CAUSES OF DIS-EASE

With a Special Look at Allergies

By

Werner Sattmann-Frese, M.App.Sc.

First published in the Southern Crossings Magazine, Vol. 10, No. 5, September/October 1990
--

Psychosomatic medicine – a growing discipline

Psychosomatic medicine, the science linking feelings, conflicts and disease, has in the last few decades become a growing discipline within conventional medicine as well as in the alternative health disciplines. While in some countries work with psychosomatic methods is the last hope, when all other treatments fail, in other countries psychotherapy is offered as an alternative choice for disorders like asthma, ulcerative colitis, gastric ulcer and some others. While these are regarded as the so-called classical psychosomatic diseases, many doctors in Europe estimate that nowadays more than fifty percent of all patients seen in surgeries suffer from emotionally caused ailments (1). These can include hypertension, high blood pressure and heart attack, anxiety attacks, forms of cancer, headaches and migraines, back pain and insomnia, digestive disorders, and so on. With this article, I will describe allergies and asthma in a psychosomatic view. For a better understanding of psychosomatic thinking, I start with some basic psychosomatic topics.

Disease and conflict

We get sick when we are not fully ourselves, when there is a split between ego, soul and body. This also is the case, when we are forced to live under conditions that do not harmonize with our needs and feelings. Modern people are torn between their desire for pleasure and freedom on the one hand, and values and economic mechanisms that inhibit many of these deep desires on the other hand. Being constantly exposed to this elemental conflict, we sooner or later have to develop compromising mechanisms to survive with a minimum of loss of integrity. The state of physical illness is such a mechanism. Other emotional defence mechanisms such the projection of feelings are not discussed here.

The healing quality of illness

Physical illness of the human body has the function to heal the split between body and soul. This sounds paradox but the world of feelings often works in a paradox manner. Consequently, illness should not be attacked but understood and made redundant by learning from its symptoms. The present practice of fighting symptoms continues the

depriving of the soul of its means of expression since symptoms are the language with which the soul wants to project its wound into the visible world. Illness, no matter how dreadful it might be in advanced stages, is in the first place a way to protect the person from emotionally falling apart, a compromise to save the soul and a challenge to look at old unresolved conflicts as well as at unhealthy living conditions.

Illness, in particular when understood in its psychosocial aspects can be a healing and cleansing experience that leaves the person in an advanced state of consciousness. However, more often, and in the absence of attempts to understand its meaning, it provides only a temporary relief of the pressure of conflict. In any case, it is important to learn from the symptoms and increase the ability to solve the underlying conflicts on a conscious level.

Primary gains of illness

In a society that demands of its members to function by constantly overriding spontaneous needs and feelings, physical illness plays a major role in protecting people from self-alienation. Under strong emotional and social pressure, people unconsciously resort to getting sick in order to get some space for self-awareness and spontaneity without getting fired from the job or having to feel guilty. The function of illness as a momentary relief from conflict has been called the primary gain of a disease. Having a physical disease is a socially acceptable way of getting space to nurture body and soul without confrontation and demands from others.

Secondary gains

Despite the obvious discomfort of pain and disability, illness has undoubtedly a variety of advantages. Besides “enjoying” the primary gain, sick people are entitled to enjoy social benefits such as access to sickness benefit, special diets, lots of care, temporary freedom from responsibilities, and in some countries even stays in health-resorts. These are some of the so-called secondary gains of disease. For people under strong emotional and social pressure and conflicts, both primary and secondary gains together can become so attractive that people have to struggle with motivating themselves to make serious efforts to regaining their health. Rather than blaming people for this possible lack of motivation, people should get real support with facing and consequently healing their conflicts, a support conventional medicine rarely provides. Rather than providing this support, present societies mainly offer money for drugs, surgery and some other conventional treatments, thereby keeping people emotionally in a permanent state of emotional dis-ease.

And there is more

While primary and secondary gain of illness have become key concepts in psychosomatic medicine, our understanding of physical illness must not be reduced to these concepts. Illness can also replace guilt feelings and so function as a form of self-punishment; or it may be a “suicide in installments” for people who have lost hope of finding back to leading a fulfilling life free of conflict and emotional pressure. Illness is in this sense the somatisation of depression and despair. Illness can also be a quite “healthy” reaction to adverse environmental living conditions such as air pollution, noise or other stress-factors.

Symptoms

The manifestations of illness, symptoms, are real works of art that often serve many tasks at the same time. By skillfully using the body, they carry a specific message from the soul to the outside world. Symptoms form the basis for the achievement of the aforementioned gains, but often also serve as an emotional pressure release valve. To express unconscious feelings and conflicts, people's (unconscious) selves use the body's anatomical structure and physiological mechanisms, for example by not metabolizing certain essential nutrients, by creating new pathological metabolic pathways, or even by utilising bacteria and viruses.

Allergies

Having provided a basic understanding of psychosomatic thinking, I will now focus on a phenomenon that haunts millions of people in most countries of the world -allergies. Allergic reactions can be involved in diseases such as rhinitis, dermatitis (inflammation of the skin), asthma and pericarditis (inflammation of the heart muscle). Allergic reactions cause numerous symptoms that usually create inflammations typical for specific organs. Allergic rhinitis, for example, is characterised by paroxysms of sneezing, itching of the nose, palate, pharynx, and conjunctivae (eyes). The airflow is obstructed and the secretion of mucous is increased. The eyes can be inflamed, and people often look tearful. When viewed from a psychosomatic perspective, people suffering from this type of allergy show all the symptoms of people crying because of grief or helpless rage.

The allergic reaction – a misplaced conflict

Recently I gave a woman suffering from allergies a massage of her feet as part of body-oriented psychotherapeutic work. Soon she seemingly reacted with an allergic reaction to the massage oil, which contained a fragrance. Instead of opening the windows, I encouraged her to express what she felt at that moment. It turned out that she felt invaded by me and angry because I had not asked her for permission before using the oil. Having found and expressed the background feeling for the allergic reaction – in this case the feeling of being invaded - the symptoms disappeared instantly, although the room was still filled with the smell of the fragrance.

This example illustrates one of a number of conflicts behind allergies, people's difficulties with responding to the experience of emotional invasion. The conflict here is the unconscious difficulty with identifying and adequately responding to emotional invasion. Both the lack of awareness and the accompanying unconscious anger, perceived as socially unacceptable, is then transferred to the body-level, where the immune system is symbolically fighting intruding allergens. In other words, a conflict and a conflict response that should have taken place in the person's conscious experience shifted to the person's immune system. The allergic symptoms also provide a well-accepted reason for withdrawal from the place of emotional or social invasion. As shown in the above example, symptoms can stop as soon as people get in touch with and are able to express the underlying feelings.

Symbolic reactions

While the reaction of the above-mentioned client can be well understood in the framework of the actual situation, it is more difficult to understand why many people are allergic to objects such as strawberries, cats, hay or house dust. To make sense of these allergic reactions it is important to move beyond a mechanistic understanding of the body and to enter the world of symbols and metaphors.

Clinical experience shows that people who are allergic to cats, for example, quite often lack within their emotional horizon what is so typical of cats: the ability to ask for cuddles and love without giving up their independence. It appears that the view, touch or smell of a cat seems to trigger a deep conflict between neediness and independence. This conflict is the result of a learned association of being needy with the loss of self-determination or self-regulation. The unconscious belief formed in childhood might say: "I can get my needs for nurturing and body-contact met if I accept being controlled." Some authors go further and link the symbol "cat" with conflicts around love and sexuality.

Another good example of the symbolism working in allergies is the horse. By agreed definition the horse represents energy and vitality. People reacting to horses with a bout of allergic symptoms are probably in conflict with their self-experience of being vital and energetic. ???

Pollen, another example, is a symbol of impregnation, propagation, love and sexuality. Clinical observation suggests that people suffering from hay fever tend to be work-oriented and struggle with the pleasurable side of life. They tend to hold the belief that life should not be easy and moments of pleasure have to be earned through effort.

The last example to present here is the allergic reaction against house dust. Thorwald Dethlefsen (2) associates this form of allergy with the fear of everything that is perceived as polluted or dirty. As it is shown daily in television advertisements, modern society has come to regard dirt as something bad and despicable. Metaphorically, dirty jokes or dirty language is usually associated with sex or genitals. Consequently, much of what is symbolically linked with dirt is often suppressed or compulsively controlled.

An allergic reaction to house dust can consequently be regarded as a challenge to re-examine our compulsive beliefs about what is being labeled dirty. The world is not a sterile place, and it is wise to learn to live with a certain level of dirt and dis-order. We should also remember that small children have a lot of fun playing with poo before they learn from adults that poo is bad. People struggling with this type of allergy might also be wise to acknowledge their "dirty thoughts and feelings", and in so doing learn that many of these are products of questionable and often outdated moralistic values.

Emotional charge

An interesting feature of allergic reactions is their tendency to generalise. Clinical practice shows that people's levels of emotional charge are important parameters in the occurrence of allergic reactions. The higher the level of stress and emotional pressure, the smaller the

stimulus needs to be (only a picture or a thought), or the more varied the substances or symbols can be to trigger allergic reactions. People suffering from allergies show at the end of a psychotherapeutic process often the interesting phenomenon that they still test positive to the medical tests but remain free from symptoms when in contact with the allergen. While their bodies still carry the specific antibodies and thus tests positive, people seem to have made their allergies redundant since they now consciously deal with the issues that until then caused the physical reaction.

The “cure” for allergies

The consequence of what has been presented in this article is that people struggling with allergies need to deepen their understanding of their unconscious conflicts, in particular of the ones relating to emotional invasion, dirt, sexuality, the experience of pleasure and vitality. It is important to consider that all symptoms are expressions of spontaneous strong life impulses. Rather than trying to remove people’s symptoms by keeping them away from the corresponding symbols, people need to learn from their symptoms and face the scenarios that have led to the suppression of feelings in the first place. Conventional medicine and many alternative approaches still treat allergies by trying to exclude the symbols from people's lives, e.g., in their diets. A psychosomatic perspective suggests that allergy patients rather need to widen their emotional horizon. This is not done by banning certain foods from their diet or by changing the side of the road when a cat is passing their way but by looking into the “symptom mirror” to see what they lack in consciousness.

References:

- (1) **Overbeck, G.** (1984), Krankheit als Anpassung, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt/Main.
- (2) **Dethlefsen, T.**, (1990), The Healing Power of Illness, Element, Brisbane.

Useful literature:

- Braeutigam, W & Christian, P.**, (1986), Psychosomatische Medizin, Georg Thieme Verlag,
Conger, J. P. (1994), The Body in Recovery, Frog Ltd., Berkeley, California.
Dychtwald, K., (1986), Bodymind, J.P. Tarcher, Los Angeles.
Dethlefsen, T., (1984), The Challenge of Fate, Coventure, London.
Schur, M., (1955), Zur Metapsychologie der Somatisierung, in Brede, K. (ed.), (1974), Einführung in die Psychosomatische Medizin, Fischer, Frankfurt/Main.