

Colds: Are They All in The Mind?

Health psychologist David Moxon wraps up warm with plenty of positive mental attitude in an attempt to banish winter sniffs and snuffles

MY Grandfather lived until he was ninety-two, only taking a couple of days off sick in his entire working life. "I haven't got time to be poorly," he maintained. And he was one of the most up-beat, easy-going and contented people I have known. Was his cheerful disposition and good health coincidental? I doubt it. During my own University studies I learnt that mind and body were intrinsically linked. One has a definite affect on the other, which is why those who often succumb to a cold are feeling 'down' at the time. This idea isn't new of course. Look back to the ancient Greeks, if not further for similar thinking. Hippocrates, often regarded as the founding father of modern medicine, made judgements about his patients physical health by assessing things such as their temperament. He believed that personality characteristics could be linked to certain physical ailments, and later scholars followed suit with similar ideas. In the late nineteenth century Sigmund Freud went one step further, suggesting



that diseases such as asthma and eczema could be attributed to a repressed mental state, while scientific studies in the early 1990's proposed that people were more susceptible to developing a cold if they were worried or anxious. How did scientists prove these theories? Well that's what is particular enlightening. Volunteers were each given nasal drops containing a mild cold virus so, in theory, every participant should have developed a cold – but this didn't happen. Some developed colds others didn't, with those that showed the highest levels

of stress succumbing to illness. So what does research like this tell us? Well it confirms those ancient observations about mental state and physical health for a start. There *are* links between the way we think and our physical wellbeing, which means that simply being in a room full of people coughing and spluttering all over you isn't enough to guarantee you catching a cold. It is how you are thinking and feeling at the time that effects the efficiency of your immune system, and it is this that determines whether you succumb to the virus – or not. As winter sets in and

days grow shorter it is worth taking the time to reflect on your mental state. Are you an anxious person? Are you prone to depression or mood swings? Do you bring enough laughter and fun into your life to combat the suppression of your immune system? It's thought provoking stuff, although it would be wrong to blame every ailment on a negative mental state. Developing a blister on your foot is more likely down to an ill-fitting shoe, than feeling anxious and depressed after all! Let's face it, everyone gets sick at some point, but maintaining a positive mental attitude may just reduce the frequency. The arrival of colder weather means that it's flu' jab time again. I'm a fan of the vaccination as it gives your body a definite helping hand, although I must admit a good dose of laughter and fun is still my favourite prescription!



David Moxon is a British health psychologist and specialist in pre and post retirement health and behavioural issues.