



Bring Your Body to Work
By Dr. Nancy Post

The Knee Bone's Connected to the...Stomach?

What do knee pain, sinusitis and acid reflux have in common?

Most people wouldn't think to ask the question because they'd never believe that an answer exists.

Take my client Mark, a practical man. A solid fellow in his forties, Mark is a fourth generation stone mason who runs his family's construction business. He's the kind of man who values a solid foundation – whether it's made of family knowledge or fine stone. While he treasures traditional methods, Mark believes in giving the past a vote, not a veto. He's working to grow a modern family business without sacrificing the family reputation for high quality work.

This need for stability and change simultaneously presents challenges; the family was accustomed to doing standard jobs – like building stone walls or installing driveways. Mark's leadership led to new challenges. For example, the company bid upon and won a contract to do land planning and all the ceramic, stone and walkway installation at the city's art museum. Mark has transformed a small family owned masonry business into a full service landscape and land management group. Contracts are bigger and they have given Mark enormous satisfaction as he's felt more and more capable of creating a stable base for people he loves.

His pregnant wife, Carol, a computer technology manager, supports his leadership, and has helped him to introduce technology into a family business whose best tools had always been manual. Project managers now use laptops as well as picks and axes. Despite jibes from elders, Mike has quietly updated office systems for billing, managing projects, inventorying supplies and managing payroll. He evaluated the company's performance against competitors and created plans for growth in areas of the market in which more opportunity exists. For the first time in 80 years, someone in his family has made a business plan!

Confident that he could learn the necessary business skills to continue the transformation of the business, he enrolled in a local executive MBA (Master of Business Administration)

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program, where I was teaching Change Management. In this class, students identified all types of changes that were occurring in their organizations: changes in leadership, changes in direction, changes in staff, change in location, change in vision, mission, values, changes in infrastructure, changes in resources. We also talked about personal changes, “What has changed about you since you took this job?” I asked.

“My gut,” answered Mark. “And my knee, “ he continued. “And my face....no, my nose... no probably my sinuses!” he said, struggling for accuracy.

Of thirty two people in the class, Mark, an intrinsically physical man, was the only one to notice a change in his body as a result of work place change. Other people were aware that their work had been altered as a result of work place changes, but no-one else recognized that they brought their bodies to work and that change at work would likely mean changes in their energy. He was the only one to calibrate the physical impact of changes. (Interestingly, two years later, when I attended the class's graduation ceremony, a number of the women in the class mentioned that the MBA program had changed them – adding pounds and dress sizes that they hoped to shed now that they had completed the degree!)

Mark was surprised by his own answer. “I went from using picks and hammers to sitting at a desk and driving a car! I shouldn't be feeling more pain, I'm DOING LESS! The guys shoveling gravel, they have the right to pain!”

Is pain an inalienable right? Is it only justified when it has a muscular origin?

To a man like Mark, discomfort is just something to endure and ignore until it becomes debilitating. Responding to pain demonstrates weakness, makes you vulnerable... effeminate even! Real men endure.

Yet, in front of 31 colleagues – successful managers and leaders of area organizations – he admitted not one, but three signs of work place stress! His knee, his sinus and his stomach!

Formerly a high school football player, an old injury to his lower leg bothers him chronically since broke his fibula in a tackle. He also suffers a long history of problems with his digestion, beginning as a child with food allergies and evolving into chronic and often painful flatulence (which was also an embarrassment when his work took him indoors!) Though formerly seasonal, the phlegm in his sinuses is now a constant element in his life. Damp weather makes everything worse.

These seemingly innocent problems escalated over time as his work responsibility grew.

“Are any of these symptoms better or worse at any time? And are they all better or worse at the same time, or do they come and go independently of one another?” I asked.

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“Funny you ask!” Mark replied. “They seem to come and go together. When one is worse, the others are, too.”

“And when are they worst?” I asked.

“When I’m worrying about proposals for new work”, Mark responded. “I worry a lot. If I don’t succeed, the whole family comes down. I’m carrying a lot of people.”

So, what connects Mark’s knee pain to his sinuses to his indigestion? His worry, one could answer. But also, there is a line of energy that runs from his eyes through his gut and down his leg, through his knees. It’s called “The Stomach Meridian”.

Like waterways crossing North America, connected pathways form a system of energy for the body. One of the longest channels is the stomach meridian which distributes the energy of the stomach. What does the stomach do? Digests, holds and contains – not just food, but, metaphorically, thoughts and feelings, too. “I receive, process and digest all nourishment coming from all sources in Heaven and Earth....” Suwen, Stang interpretation, 1985.

“What do you feel when you write proposals?” I asked Mark.

“First I think, what does the client need?” he answered. “Then I cogitate about how we can meet their need, thinking up all the ways we can break down the job into smaller parts. Then I think about our crew and whether they can do the job. I think about materials, timing then, finally, cost. It’s a lot to think about and the whole process takes hours. In the end, I worry whether or not our bid will win and if we’ll get the job.”

I think to myself: He breaks the work into “digestible” parts and, while evaluating the work, he uses the energy from this pathway. It’s as if the reservoir in this line of energy in Mark’s body has a pipeline to his company – his energy fuels the business. But then, there isn’t quite enough left for him, and his symptoms get worse.

Having diagnosed the source of his periodic pain flare ups, I was now able to work with Mark on addressing the problem from two directions: clinically and organizationally.

Clearly he can never be sure his bids for work will be accepted, but he can make the process of developing the proposals less onerous and taxing on his energy. In a team with other class members and his wife, Carol, the IT manager, we built a set of proposal templates that identified all the different bid elements (staff, materials, timing, cost) which he could customize using the experience of past jobs tracked within his new financial and office systems, thereby adding a stable structure to the bid process.

And for him, personally, I suggested a short course of acupuncture treatment which boosted and rebalanced his energy, as well prescribing Er Chen Wan, a Chinese herbal

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patent medicine whose origin descends back to Chen Shiwen et al in 1080 AD.* The result: support for stability and change simultaneously.

As Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallee write, “You can see that both stability and transformation are necessary for thinking – which is just a refinement of ...the fundamental notions linked with Earth.”**

In this case, classical Chinese notions of energy enhanced the life and business of an ambitious earth mover.

* Fratkin, Jake Paul, Chinese Herbal Patent Medicines, c. 2001, Shya Publications, p.215

** Larre, Claude and Rochat de la Vallee, Spleen and Stomach, Monkey Press Publication, 1990, p. 5t