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I'm often asked, "What is the difference between Integrative Primary Care and just Primary Care?". Depending on your provider, you might not notice any difference at all.

Integrative Medicine can be understood by looking at two main axes. The vertical axis refers to the fact that we are more than our biochemistry. Attending to the needs of our psychosocial, mental, emotional and spiritual selves as well as the physical constitutes an integrative approach. Along the horizontal axis, we can see that different types of providers might more aptly be qualified to assist us. An Integrative Primary Care provider, while retaining responsibility for overall monitoring of your wellbeing might also collaborate with mindbody therapists, acupuncturists, massage therapists, nutritionists, physical therapists or others. We recognize that to get to the roots of suffering may require deeper work than just chemical or medicinal support.

Terms such as wholistic are often used, and connote recognition that we are more than the sum of our parts. We exist in a social, cultural and familial milieu and are influenced by the environment around us. To make the lifestyle and behavioral changes often needed for our state of health requires attention to the many components that go into our choices and decision making.

An example comes to mind. A number of years ago, while working as an epidemiologist for the State Health Division, we were struggling with a tuberculosis (TB) outbreak in one of the downtown Asian districts. It was not until a nurse made a home visit that we uncovered the fact that nobody was taking their medicine. True to their culture, the patients arrived every month at the TB clinic to pick up their medication and politely answer all the questions asked them. And also true to their culture they, without disagreeing with the health professionals, then took their medicine home and put it in their cupboards --- along with the rest of the accumulated unopened bottles. Why? It was the wrong color. In their cultural belief, different types of illnesses required certain color medication.

Though this example may seem extreme, we each have unique beliefs that we take for granted. Often, the difficulty with "compliance" with healthcare recommendations is unconscious even to those having the problems. Taking the time to delve more deeply pays off in the long run.

This, then, leads to the team approach that an Integrative Medicine physician uses. If a patient is clearly struggling with lifestyle changes, spending some time with a counselor may uncover blocks to success. Roughly 80% of chronic pain is estimated to have an emotional component, which needs to be addressed for the greatest likelihood of relief.

Many providers in conventional medical practices listen deeply to their patients and work collaboratively with other types of therapists for the best interest of their patients. If you see such a provider, you are already seeing one who practices medicine in an Integrative way.

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