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The Psychology of Physical Symptoms

J.W. Pennebaker

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Physical symptoms are fascinating phenomena to examine. We all experience them, use them as signals to guide our behavior, and usually assume that they accurately represent underlying physiological activity. At the same time, we implicitly know that bodily sensations are often vague, ambiguous, and subject to a variety of interpretations. It is not surprising, then, that there is often a disparity between what we think is going on in our bodies and what is objectively occurring. In short, phenomena such as physical symptoms are the stuff of psychology. My own research into physical symptoms started by accident several years ago. In a hastily devised experiment dealing with the effects of noise on behavior, I had to write a post-experimental questionnaire that would be long enough to allow the experimenter time to calibrate some equipment for a later portion of the study. I included some physical symptoms on the questionnaire as fillers. The experiment was a total failure, with the exception of the symptom reports. People's perceptions of symptoms were easily influenced by our manipulations, even though their actual physiological state had not changed. And so began the present inquiry. Despite the pervasiveness, importance, and sheer amount of time and money devoted to discussing and curing common physical symptoms and sensations, very little empirical work has been devoted to examining the psychological and perceptual factors related to sensory experience. Occa sional papers have tested a specific theory, such as cognitive dissonance, wherein physical symptoms served as an interesting dependent measure.

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