

## Just What Is Functional Medicine, Anyway?

by Dr. Stacie J. Stephenson

If you read health news at all, chances are good that you have heard of this new thing called “functional medicine.” It seems that people either embrace or criticize it, but from what I have been able to discern, many of functional medicine’s detractors don’t fully understand what it is. As a passionate believer in the principles of functional medicine and as a health care practitioner who has been trained in this method, I would like to explain, to those of you who are interested, what functional medicine really is. The next time someone tells you that you should seek it out (or that you shouldn’t), you’ll have the basis on which to form your own opinion.


So, just what is functional medicine, anyway? First of all, here’s what it’s *not*: Functional medicine is not a spiritual, mystical, or eastern medicine practice. It is not folk medicine and it is not ‘energy medicine.’ Functional medicine is rooted in western science, but it’s not at all like conventional western medicine.

Conventional medicine—the type of medicine most doctors practice—looks at medical problems in isolation. Doctors are taught a very specific method of differential diagnosis based on what a few basic test results say, and which drugs and/or surgeries relieve symptoms. For example, if you go to your doctor and say that you have had persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, emptiness, or feelings of worthlessness on most days for over 2 weeks, then you will likely get a “depression” diagnosis and a prescription for an anti-depressant. If you say that you have fatigue, dry skin, hair loss, weight gain, and feel cold all the time, you will probably be given a thyroid test. If the test is positive, then you will likely get your “hypothyroidism” diagnosis and a prescription for synthetic thyroid hormone.

It’s the same for diabetes, arthritis, autoimmune disease, even cancer. The tests may differ—a blood test, an X-ray, an MRI. The treatments may differ—a medication, a surgery, chemotherapy—but the overall process is the same. You get your test. You get your diagnosis. You get your prescription. And then you get sent home, hopeful that you will be one of the people who get a good result.

But what if you aren’t?

We are suffering from a very modern epidemic of chronic diseases in the developed world. Things like diabetes, autoimmune disease, hypothyroidism, heart disease, cancer, arthritis,




depression, and anxiety plague millions of people, and we all know those who suffer from at least a few of these. Maybe you yourself suffer from some of them. For many of these people, conventional medicine hasn't helped, or hasn't helped *enough*. They are left feeling helpless, unwell, and unhappy.

While conventional medicine is very good at quickly responding to trauma and emergencies—like if you break your leg or collapse from a heart attack—it doesn't do so well with chronic diseases. The reason is that the symptoms of these chronic conditions tend to be vague, not obvious. For example, what does it mean if you have fatigue or low energy? What does it mean if you have joint pain or headaches? What does it mean if you can't sleep or you can't stop eating sugar or you've suddenly gained a lot of weight and you don't know why? These symptoms could point to hundreds of conditions. Let's say a test shows you have inflammation. That's good information, but it's not a diagnosis. Inflammation could contribute to or cause arthritis, or depression, or heart disease, or cancer, or an autoimmune disease. What about digestive problems? What about anxiety? Are they causes of something, or symptoms of something?

Chronic disease gets very complex. Conventional medicine is not built for this type of complexity. It is **solution-oriented** and **reactive**. Functional medicine, by contrast, is **cause-oriented** and **preventive**.

Functional medicine considers everything science has discovered about the root causes of chronic conditions. Its focus is to question *why* someone has diabetes, rather than just correcting blood sugar with drugs like insulin or metformin. A functional medicine doctor won't tell you to quit taking your insulin or stop your chemotherapy, but it recognizes that drugs cover up the symptoms without addressing the original problem. Insulin can prevent diabetes complications but it doesn't cure diabetes. If you go off insulin, your symptoms will return. But what caused the diabetes in the first place? Was it a poor diet, genetics, obesity, inflammation, pancreatic dysfunction, insulin resistance, or a combination of these?

Functional medicine follows the symptoms back up the chain to the original cause, and focuses the solutions *there*, rather than at symptoms that are end-stage results of a cascade of dysfunction—the twigs at the tips of the branches of the tree that is your health. To improve the health of a tree, you don't focus on the twigs. You focus on the roots. It's a simple common-sense approach to wellness. Functional medicine does this by considering everything about a person—their diet, exercise, family history, emotional state, and the results of many sensitive tests conventional doctors don't prescribe—and extrapolates solutions from scientific research in genetics, the microbiome, infectious disease, immune function, and other exciting, cutting-edge research that hasn't yet made its way into clinical practice. We are then able to advise patients on diet, lifestyle, supplements to fill in nutritional gaps, detoxification, stress management, and ways to work around and compensate for genetic susceptibilities, in *addition* to necessary conventional medicine therapies, as well as for the prevention of health problems in the first place.



Functional medicine doctors want to know *all about you* because the simple fact is that the state of your health is *all about you*. Is functional medicine still in its infancy? Yes. Does insurance cover it? In many cases, no...or shall I say, not yet? Many of us believe that functional medicine is the medicine of the future and I predict that it will become increasingly popular as an alternative mode of health care that focuses on achieving wellness, not just relieving sickness.

If that makes sense to you, then I hope you will consider a functional medicine practitioner the next time you want to unravel the mystery of your chronic symptoms and get actionable strategies that can make a meaningful difference in your health. To find a functional medicine doctor, consult the Institute of Functional Medicine website at [ifm.org](http://ifm.org) and click on "Find a Practitioner." You can also follow me at [@vibrant.doc](https://twitter.com/vibrant.doc).

And be well!