On Your Mind, Mar/Apr, 2018

**Health Issue**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My little 8 year old Amy says that her tummy hurts…a lot. Sometimes she’s just patting it, but sometimes she’s doubled over in pain. We’ve taken her to her pediatrician and she ran all the right tests. All came back negative. She’s our oldest child. She has brothers ages 3 and 6 months. She loves being their “big sister.” The doctor thinks Amy’s tummy aches might be psychosomatic. What’s that? Does that mean she’s faking these pains just to get attention? Signed, Perplexed

Dear Perplexed,

I’m so sorry that Amy, and all of you, are going through all of this right now. It’s got to be puzzling at the least, but also maybe a bit terrifying. Seeing Amy having these tummy aches and not having infection, allergy, something, anything, that seems to be causing them.

But wait! You do have a cause for her pain. Psychosomatic illness is still an illness. A medical illness has medical causes. A psychosomatic illness has psychological causes. They are every bit as real as medical causes. They just come from a different part of Amy’s body. She’s not faking anything, for attention or for any other reason.

If her pediatrician had found a medical cause for her pain, the pain sensation from her tummy would have been signaling to her brain that there was an infection. Psychosomatic illness gets bad press because people assume that it’s “all in your head.” Body pain of any sort is an alarm system, alerting you that body defenses, the immune system, are under attack.

Actually, it is a blessing that Amy has no medical infection. Her thoughts and feelings are confusing to her right now, and it is taking the form of tummy aches. You and her daddy are the very people to help her unconfuse her thoughts and feelings.

For doubling over pain, use a heating pad and have her take deep, calming breaths until she feels some relief. Also, use the 1-10 pain scale and help her notice when the pain is less (lower numbers). For mild tummy aches, make a practice of talking with her about her day. Use active listening to say what you think she is feeling. If you are right, she will agree. If you are wrong, she will tell you what she is feeling. As your family has added a new member recently, give Amy “big girl” status without necessarily loading her up with extra responsibilities. Also, Perplexed, make a point of having “just us girls” time at least once a week, with daddy taking care of the little ones. These things will, over time, really help unconfused her thoughts and feelings. Tummy aches will become a thing of the past.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

My seventh grader, Adam, just had eye surgery and has to wear a patch over his right eye. He was going to try out for the middle school baseball team, but the patch will be on all season. He’s in his room right now and says he’s not coming out with this “dumb ol’ patch on my eye.” He understands the need for the patch, but seems embarrassed and fears people will make fun of him. Ideas? Signed, Aargh!

Dear Arrgh!

Your signature tells me you have a sense of perspective and humor on the matter. Not to tease or make light of Adam’s feelings, but humor and perspective do have healing qualities. I took my granddaughters to the movie, **Wonder** last Fall. Aubree’s 3rd grade classroom teacher had read the book to her class. The story followed a family where the son had facial disfiguration from birth. He actually got through his embarrassment and fears by drawing attention to the obvious and being the kid with facial disfigurement. At times, he made jokes at his own expense. He lifted the mood around him and, as movies go, all worked out in the end.

Now, Adam’s eye patch is temporary, but he might like a good read. Also, encourage him to help out with the middle school baseball team, even though he won’t be playing this year. Give him a wall calendar for his bedroom to count down the days until the patch is history. Help him create a tongue-in-cheek narrative about being kidnapped by pirates, sailing the seven seas, and barely escaping with his life by swimming away after he was forced to walk the plank (LOL). These measures will help him have control over his circumstances, rather than letting his circumstances have control over him. Hang in there.