



How Does Physical Wellness Relate to Mental Health?

Mental and physical health are both indicators of overall well-being. Helping individuals establish physical wellness habits and routines can support decreased symptomology and increased health. For example, exercise is effective in the treatment of clinical anxiety, and certain types of exercise can improve mood.¹ For individuals with mental health conditions, it is important to work with a primary care doctor to establish healthy lifestyle habits, like those presented here.

What is the Physical Dimension of Wellness?

Physical wellness involves the maintenance of a healthy body, good physical health habits, adequate nutrition and exercise, and obtaining appropriate health care. It is important to empower people to focus on nutrition, exercise, smoking cessation, and stress awareness and reduction as a means of self-care and prevention of co-occurring medical conditions. It is also important to offer services and supports that empower service users to establish healthy habits and routines and to access timely preventative and needed health care services.²

Taking Care of the Physical Body, Inside and Out

It is essential for providers to encourage individuals with mental health conditions to take care of their bodies regularly. This means supporting people to schedule regular checkups with primary care, dental, women's health, and men's health providers. Any checkups recommended for certain age groups or sexes should be scheduled and attended annually. Not only are these checkups important, but providers can encourage those they serve to engage in timely follow up after visits, like prescription pickup or lab work.

Weight management

While necessary for everyone, proper nutrition and hydration are especially important for individuals with mental health conditions because this population is at risk of experiencing chronic health challenges, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease.³ Given the high rates of chronic conditions among individuals served, eating well is essential for both prevention and recovery.⁴

The food people eat and how they relate to eating can be shaped by many factors, including but not limited to:

- culture
- tradition
- preferences
- circumstances
- access to healthy food
- cost of healthy food

Eating Healthier with ChooseMyPlate.gov

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) promotes MyPlate, which offers these points for developing a healthier eating style: “Focus on variety, amount, and nutrition; choose foods and beverages with less saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars; and start with small changes to build healthier eating styles.”⁵

Eating well can help people avoid obesity and reduce the risk of developing diabetes and heart disease. Small steps, like adding vegetables to each meal or drinking eight glasses of water a day, can make a big difference. For behavioral health providers, helping people to set wellness goals may enhance their emotional and physical health. Similar to developing any other new habit, a little support around healthier eating (even just asking how things are going), can be incredibly helpful.

Physical activity and exercise

Taking into account that roughly 80 percent of individuals with serious mental illnesses are overweight or obese,⁶ a focus on physical fitness is important to create and sustain good health habits for a lifetime. Providers can encourage individuals with mental health conditions to start an exercise program. Physical activity can decrease symptomology, including those that negatively interfere with overall well-being and contribute to chronic diseases.⁷ A cost-effective approach to physical activity that providers can support others in is walking.

Smoking cessation

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), adults with a serious mental illness or substance use disorder smoke almost 40 percent of all cigarettes smoked by adults.⁸ These numbers are particularly alarming because individuals with behavioral health conditions are more likely to die from chronic diseases, like heart disease, cancer, and lung disease,⁹ all of which are associated with smoking.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) suggest that service providers should:¹⁰

- Ask individuals who smoke cigarettes if they are interested in quitting
- Discontinue the practice of using cigarettes as an incentive or reward for individuals served
- Offer individuals who smoke help and support to succeed in quitting

Sleep and rest

Sleep problems are more likely to affect individuals living with psychiatric disorders than the general population. These challenges are particularly common in individuals managing anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).¹¹ Sleep problems during childhood and adolescence have been found to be predictive of generalized anxiety disorder, depressive symptoms, and oppositional defiant disorder later in life, and these diagnoses are also predictive of sleep challenges over time.¹²

Sleep is essential—getting enough good-quality sleep can help individuals with mental health conditions by supporting:

- Healthy brain functioning
- Physical health
- Alertness and proper functioning during the day
- Emotional well-being
- Decreased symptoms of depression
- Increased motivation
- Increased ability to cope with change

Improving Sleep Hygiene

Here are some suggestions for sleeping longer and better. These are topics that can be reviewed with individuals served in service planning and goal setting:¹³

- Sleep in a quiet room or try incorporating white noise to assist falling asleep¹⁴
- Set the room to a cool temperature; 60-67 degrees is ideal¹⁵
- Incorporate relaxing scents through the use of aromatherapy¹⁶
- Avoid artificial lights, including blue lights from cellphones and computers¹⁷

Chronic disease self-management

Another way to empower individuals with mental health conditions is by teaching and promoting chronic disease self-management. The CDC says: “Self-management education refers to programs that help people who have chronic conditions learn how to manage their conditions and live life to the fullest.”¹⁸ While most of these programs have been conducted with behavioral health professionals, there is a current movement toward peer-led self-management. The findings of self-management programs, like Health and Recovery Peer (HARP), demonstrate “improved physical health- and mental health-related quality of life among individuals with serious mental illness and comorbid general medical conditions, suggesting the potential benefits of more widespread dissemination of peer-led disease self-management.”¹⁹

Not only is chronic disease self-management essential, but prevention is key. For individuals with and without chronic diseases, regular checkups with primary care, behavioral health, and dental providers is needed to support physical wellness. An ounce of prevention can be a pound of cure.

Connecting Physical Health and Social Wellness

Importance of social supports and networks

Physical wellness can support another dimension: social wellness. “A social support network is made up of friends, family, and peers...Research shows that those who enjoy high levels of social support stay healthier and live longer.”²⁰

A positive social support network can significantly impact a person’s journey of healing and recovery. Consider the outcomes of recent self-management studies that show that individuals are more likely to meet physical health goals with guidance and encouragement from behavioral health professionals, mentors, peers, or a combination of these supports,^{21,22} and involvement with social networks can promote mental and physical well-being.²³

Social networks are influential in shaping health behavior and, therefore, health outcomes. For example, married partners often share similar health behaviors related to diet, exercise, smoking, smoking cessation, and alcohol consumption.²⁴ This also applies to networks built over social media, where a randomized control trial found online networks were effective at motivating people to exercise.²⁵

Knowing this, behavioral health providers can look to encourage specific positive social connections that both promote social wellness and support the growth and maintenance of physical wellness.

Complementary and Alternative Medicine

When treating individuals with mental health conditions, it is important for providers to consider Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM). CAM is a broad category of treatment and management options that includes mind-body techniques.

Some examples of CAM that have shown to be effective include: breathing and relaxation techniques; meditation and mindfulness practices; art, music, and dance therapy; and martial arts and yoga. Yoga has positive benefits for people with several types of mental health conditions, including depression, ADHD, anxiety, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Meditation is especially beneficial for reducing stress.²⁶ By reducing stress, some of these CAMs may lower the risk of developing chronic diseases, like heart disease and hypertension, that negatively influence physical wellness.



Remember: the wellness approach to recovery offers a holistic framework in which people are viewed as whole human beings.²⁷ Whether working toward effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, or service delivery, keep the Eight Dimensions of Wellness and the value of physical wellness in mind when serving individuals with mental health conditions.

Relevant Resources

[Physical Wellness Toolkit](#) | National Institutes of Health (NIH)

[Wellness Institute Publications](#) | Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey

[Creating a Healthier Life Handbook](#) | Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

[Wellness, Diet, and Fitness](#) | SAMHSA-Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) Center for Integrated Health Solutions

[Guides for Physical Activity and Weight Management](#) | SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions

[Complementary and Alternative Medicine for Mental Health](#) | Mental Health America

[Meditation](#) | Mayo Clinic

[Choose MyPlate Online Toolkits](#) | United States Department of Agriculture

[National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health](#)

[SmokeFree.gov](#)

[High Blood Pressure: How to Make Control Your Goal](#) | Million Hearts Initiative

[Shared Decision Making](#) | SAMHSA

[Sleep and Sleep Disorders](#) | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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