



How and Why Does Social Wellness Relate to Mental Health?

Studies suggest that social support can promote thriving in certain life circumstances, specifically “experiences of adversity and opportunities for growth.”¹ Moreover, “social relationships—both quantity and quality—affect mental health, health behavior, physical health, and mortality risk.”² For individuals with mental health conditions, growing and maintaining social wellness can support resilience and recovery. Social isolation can significantly impact health and well-being. Studies show that people who are socially isolated are at increased risk of death: “Importantly, social isolation factors predicted mortality at hazard ratio levels similar to or higher than those of several standard clinical risk factors...similar to that related to smoking.”³ Providers are in a unique position to help promote social wellness and decrease isolation among individuals with mental health conditions.

What is Social Wellness?

Social wellness involves having relationships with friends, family, and the community, and having an interest in and concern for the needs of others and humankind. Social support and connectedness is a key ingredient for supporting recovery.⁴

Relationships that Nurture Reliable Support Systems

Supportive, intimate relationships are connected with both health and well-being for all people,⁵ emphasizing the importance of social wellness. Support systems might include family, friends, romantic relationships, community and neighborhood linkages, spiritual connections (linking social and spiritual wellness), and peer relationships. Providers can encourage individuals served to nurture positive relationships and make healthy new connections. Attention to cultural preferences, experiences, and needs is essential when supporting people’s social wellness.

Enhancing social wellness develops confidence, self-expression, and communication skills. It also increases a person’s capacity for empathy and compassion, as well as “interest

in and concern for the needs of others and humankind.”⁶ Healthy, positive, interpersonal relationships can help individuals with mental health conditions develop trust with others and build a sense of belonging. Though, it should be noted that, if strained or abusive, interpersonal relationships can also negatively impact health and well-being.⁷ Providers can work with individuals served to help identify relationships in their lives that may have a negative impact on well-being, and help connect these individuals to necessary resources for addressing such relationships.

Social Wellness Supports Other Dimensions of Wellness

Physical wellness

A positive social support network can greatly impact a person’s success, as well as how they feel about the journey of healing and recovery. Studies on self-management show that meeting physical wellness goals are more likely with the guidance and encouragement of behavioral health professionals, mentors, peers, or a combination of these supports;^{8,9} as well as with involvement with social networks.¹⁰

Social networks are influential in shaping health behavior and, therefore, health outcomes. Studies show that an individual’s likelihood of becoming obese increases when the individual’s network includes others, like friends and family, who are also obese. Additionally, married partners often share similar health behaviors related to diet, exercise, smoking, smoking cessation, and alcohol consumption.¹¹

Knowing this, providers can look to encourage specific positive social connections that both promote social wellness and support the growth and maintenance of physical wellness. Encouraging individuals with mental health conditions to join a walking group, for example, can promote both physical and social wellness.

Emotional wellness

Studies show that being part of a social network can influence emotional wellness:¹²

- Members of a social network are influenced by and learn from each other, including the norms of health-related behavior
- Connecting with others may increase self-esteem and produce positive emotional states, such as a sense of purpose, belonging, and safety
- Being part of the bigger social picture (e.g., involvement in community organizations) increases access to, as well as the variety of, available social supports

Developing Social Capital

Social capital is a determinant of health that “refers to the material, informational, and affective resources to which individuals and, potentially, groups have access through their social connections.”¹³ Studies show that high levels of social capital can improve the emotional wellness of individuals with mental health conditions (e.g., through a decrease in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD).¹⁴ Providers can work with individuals served to identify social resources and supports in their communities. This can include suggesting involvement in volunteer opportunities, which can promote occupational wellness while fostering the development of social capital.

Occupational wellness

Social connections and inclusion in social networks are important. In the United States, those individuals who are most socially isolated are at increased risk for poor health outcomes and early mortality.¹⁵ Providers can help reduce the risks of social isolation and support social wellness for individuals with mental health conditions by sharing opportunities to develop social-emotional skills and participate in the community through volunteer, educational, or work opportunities.

Volunteer, school, and work environments allow individuals to develop interpersonal relationships and be part of more extensive social networks. To enhance social and occupational wellness, providers can work with the individuals they serve and resources in the community to find:

- Volunteer opportunities, which can increase life satisfaction and well-being while promoting community involvement¹⁶
- Supported education programs, which provide access to safe learning environments with diverse interpersonal, cultural, and social experiences¹⁷
- Supported employment programs, which are more effective than prevocational training in helping individuals with serious mental illness secure competitive employment¹⁸



Remember: the wellness approach to recovery offers a holistic framework in which people are viewed as whole human beings.¹⁹ Whether working toward effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, or service delivery, keep the Eight Dimensions of Wellness and the value of social wellness in mind when serving individuals with mental health conditions

Relevant Resources

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

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

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

[Connectedness & Health](#) | Stanford University

[Signs of Social Wellness](#) | University of New Hampshire Health Services

[Suggestions for Increasing Social Wellness](#) | University of California, Davis

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Endnotes

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