

The Mental & Physical Health Connection



Mental health and physical health are often thought of as two different issues, when the opposite is true. Your mental and physical health status can have a major impact on each other. Your mental and physical health status can also be impacted at the same time. This is called comorbidity.

A study by Prince et al. (2007) looked at the interaction between mental and physical health status. The following table shows what they found:

	Mental Illness is a Risk Factor for the Physical Health Condition	Physical Health Condition is a Risk Factor for the Mental Illness	A Comorbid Relationship Exists Between the Mental Illness and the Physical Health Condition
Depression and Coronary Heart Disease	Yes	Likely	Likely
Depression and Stroke	Likely	Likely	Likely
Depression and Diabetes	No	Maybe	Likely
Schizophrenia and Diabetes	No	No	Likely

How Can Mental Health Status Impact Physical Health Status?

Disease Factors

The symptoms of a mental illness can increase a person's risk of developing some chronic diseases. For example, depression changes:

- **Serotonin levels** (i.e., a chemical found in the brain), impacting heart function, red blood cell clotting, and the narrowing of blood vessels.
- **Cortisol levels** (i.e., a hormone involved in the stress process), increasing red blood cell clotting and causing swelling of the blood vessels.

These changes may increase a person's risk of developing coronary heart disease or having a stroke (Prince et al., 2007).

People with a mental illness might not seek help for their physical symptoms for a variety of reasons. Due to changes in thinking which result from the mental illness, they may not be aware of their symptoms, or have reduced pain sensitivity as a result of medications they're on (Robson & Gray, 2007).

Treatment Factors

The medications used to treat a mental illness may have side effects that increase a person's risk of developing some chronic diseases. For example, antipsychotic medication used to treat schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and dementia may cause weight gain and increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Robson & Gray, 2007).

Additionally, the physical health of a person with a mental illness may be neglected during the treatment process, delaying early diagnosis of a physical condition and increasing the risk of chronic disease development (Robson & Gray, 2007).

Lifestyle Factors

In general, a person with a mental illness is more likely than the general population to take part in unhealthy behaviours, which can increase their risk of developing some chronic diseases. The following table compares the risk factors for chronic disease development in people with schizophrenia to people in the general population.

Risk Factor	People with schizophrenia:
Smoking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have three times higher smoking rates than the general population. - Are heavier smokers and smoke more cigarettes daily than the general smoking population (Robson & Gray, 2007).
Physical Inactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are less physically active than the general population (Robson & Gray, 2007; Pack, 2009).
Unhealthy Eating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Eat foods with more saturated fat (e.g., fast foods) and added sugar than the general population. - Eat fewer servings of vegetables and fruit, and drink less milk than the general population (Pack, 2009).
Excess Body Weight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have higher obesity rates than the general population (Beebe, 2008). - Have higher amounts of fat stored in their upper bodies than the general population (Robson & Gray, 2007). This type of fat increases cardiovascular disease risk.

How Can Physical Health Status Impact Mental Health Status?

Disease Factors

Some physical health conditions can increase a person's risk of developing some mental illnesses. For example, having a stroke causes brain damage. This damage can result in changes in behaviour and mood or cause hallucinations, increasing this person's risk of developing a mental illness (Prince et al., 2007).

Psychological Changes

People with a physical condition may have trouble coping with the realities of their condition (e.g., decreased life span, increased pain and suffering, inability to take part in certain activities). Over time, this negative way of thinking can increase a person's risk of developing some mental illnesses. For example, having diabetes can lead to other complications (e.g., eye damage, kidney damage, sexual dysfunction). People with diabetes have to follow a strict diet and get insulin injections. An inability to effectively cope with these factors can cause a person with diabetes to develop depression (Prince et al., 2007).

As you can see, having good mental and physical health is a balancing act. It's just as important to take care of your mental health as it is to take care of your physical health. It's also important to get help right away if you have a mental illness or a physical health condition to prevent further health issues.



- Key References:
- Beebe, L.H. (2008). Obesity in schizophrenia: Screening, monitoring, and health promotion. *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 44(1), 25-31.
 - Pack, S. (2009). Poor physical health and mortality in patients with schizophrenia. *Nursing Standard*, 23(21), 41-45.
 - Prince, M., Patel, V., Saxena, S., Maj, M., Maselko, J., Philips, M.R., & Rahman, A. (2007). Global mental health 1: No health without mental health. *Lancet*, 370, 859-877.
 - Robson, D. & Gray, R. (2007). Serious mental illness and physical health problems: A discussion paper. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44, 457-466.