



There is no health without mental health

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

It seems that we look at mental health and physical health as two entirely different entities. But the two are so intimately interwoven that what happens in one area deeply affects the other.

In 1999, U. S. Surgeon General David Satcher went on the record as the first Surgeon General to issue a report on mental health and mental illness.

At the time he stated, “There is no health without mental health.”

This was not an empty proposition at the time. There were reams of research to support it and, to the present day, the research continues to support the intimate connection between our mental health and our physical health.

First, our physical well-being depends deeply on our mental well-being. There are dozens of examples. Here are a few, as reported in the World Federation for Mental Health report titled, “Mental Health and Chronic Physical Illnesses:

- Major depressive disorder is a risk factor in the development of coronary heart disease. Individuals with depression are more likely to experience an adverse cardiac event such as a heart attack or blood clots. Depression has proven to be such a risk factor in cardiac disease that the American Heart Association has recommended that all cardiac patients be screened for depression.
- People who survive heart attacks but suffer from major depression have a 3-4 times greater risk of dying within six months than those who do not suffer from depression.
- People who have both diabetes and depression have more severe symptoms of both diseases, higher rates of work disability and use more medical services than those who have diabetes alone.
- Death rates are as much as 25% higher in cancer patients who felt depressed and 39% higher in cancer patients who received a diagnosis of depression.
- Individuals with a chronic history of anxiety are 30% more likely to be obese than those who have not been diagnosed with anxiety.

The opposite is also true. Not only is our physical health dependent upon our mental health but our mental health depends upon our physical well-being. Consider how you would feel if you had just suffered a heart attack or if you were diagnosed with diabetes or cancer. You would more likely be depressed and, depending upon how severe the physical illness, you might struggle with your depression for a while.

In fact, research shows that 20% of patients with heart disease develop depression, 25% of people with diabetes develop depression, and half of cancer patients develop depression. This finding is hardly surprising. But what is unfortunate is that many of these folks do not get treatment for the depression, which typically results in poorer outcomes for the primary medical condition.

Furthermore, as demonstrated in some of the examples above, your chances of recovery from the physical illness are reduced by any severe and prolonged depression. Not a good scenario!

In other words, if you don't deal with the mental health symptoms, your physical illness most likely becomes worse.

Why Integrated Care Makes Sense

Presently there's a push in healthcare by federal and state governments to combine the treatment for mental and physical health. This is called "integrated care."

Research shows that medical interventions used in the treatment of physical illnesses have high success rates. Similarly, research shows that mental health interventions work successfully in the treatment of mental health disorders.

But when you put the two together, you create the most positive outcomes for patients. In other words, by combining both mental health and medical interventions, it's as if there's a synergistic effect. With integrated care, patients are more likely to improve on both fronts.

Two thousand years ago, the Romans had a saying about health, "Sound mind, sound body." Not one or the other, but both together. This still rings true today. The two go hand in hand.

It's a win-win situation as we phase in integrated care in the healthcare field. The medical and mental health interventions will work better when they work together. And the ultimate winner is the patient.

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