

THE MIND-HEART CONNECTION: 3 WAYS YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND HEART HEALTH ARE RELATED

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February is Heart Health Month. Many of you may be aware of keeping your heart healthy through daily habits like nutrition and exercise, but did you know that your mental health can have a significant influence on your heart health, and vice versa? You're probably familiar with the mind-body connection, but what about the mind-heart connection? Let's explore the relationship between mental health and heart health, and what we can do to optimize our health.

Chronic Mental Health Conditions Increase Risk of Heart Disease

Mental health conditions such as stress, depression, anxiety, and PTSD can lead to greater heart health issues if left unaddressed and untreated. Chronic mental health conditions can lead to increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, reduced blood flow to the heart, irregular heart rhythm, and increased levels of cortisol leading to an increase in inflammation. These physiological changes can lead to metabolic disease and heart disease. Plus, our overall immunity can be weakened. Common types of heart disease that can occur due to extreme stress or negative mental health include heart attack and stroke.

There is also some evidence that suggests medications prescribed to treat mental health disorders may increase risk of heart disease. Always discuss with your doctor any potential health risks before starting any new medications or changing medications.

Cardiac Events Causing Mental Health Disorders

Experiencing a significant cardiac event such as heart failure, stroke, or heart attack can lead to mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD. These mental health conditions can result after an acute cardiac event due to pain, fear, or financial problems related to the event. It's important to discuss with your doctor any physical or mental changes you may be experiencing following a significant cardiac event. Even if there has been no history of a cardiac event, it's still good to discuss your mental health with your doctor in addition to your physical health.

Negative Coping Mechanisms

Dealing with negative mental health or extreme stress can often lead to negative coping mechanisms. This can include smoking, alcohol, substance abuse, or non-compliance with medications. Perhaps it means not getting enough sleep or little to no physical activity in your days. You may not be drinking enough water, or perhaps you are overeating and choosing foods that are higher in saturated fats, added sugars, and empty calories instead of nourishing foods. Not only can these actions worsen negative mental health symptoms, but they can also take a toll on your heart health as well.

What You Can Do to Address your Mental Health and Heart Health

It's important to tune into yourself and be proactive with your health. If something feels off mentally or physically, it's important to address it as soon as possible. Keep up with regular doctor appointments and schedule an annual physical to know your numbers related to heart health and your personal risk factors. Are you aware how your family history plays a role in your personal health? Be familiar with your health and mental health benefits such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) so you know your options.





5 Ways You Can Improve Your Mental Health for Heart Health

1. Choose Mood-Boosting Foods: Consuming more foods such as fruits, vegetables, healthy fats (like those found in fatty fish, nuts, seeds, and oils), and high fiber foods like beans, grains, and legumes have not only been shown to help reduce risk of depression and help to better manage stress, but also play a significant role in our heart health such as lowering blood pressure and cholesterol.

TIP! Aim to incorporate as many of these mood boosting foods into your meals and snacks as you can every day. Work with a Registered Dietitian to help create a healthy eating plan.

2. Move Your Body & Take Breaks: Movement isn't just important for the body — it's key for the mind as well. Exercise and movement in your day has been shown to help release mood-boosting hormones that lower symptoms and risk of anxiety and depression. Exercise also helps to manage weight, reduce blood pressure, and strengthens the heart while helping to reduce risk factors related to heart disease.

TIP! Aim for 30 minutes of movement in your day and select activities that can help increase your heart rate.

3. Practice Mindfulness: Mindfulness helps to keep thoughts at bay and allows us to only focus on what is happening in the present moment. Mindfulness has been shown to not only be powerful in reducing symptoms related to depression and anxiety, but can also have positive effects on your heart health like helping to reduce blood pressure.

TIP! Start small with a daily mindfulness practice for just 2-3 minutes. This can include breathing exercises, meditation, journaling, or even coloring books.

4. Get Quality Sleep: Sleep plays an important role in our overall health and longevity. Mental health conditions can often disrupt sleep, and poor sleep can lead to increased risk factors for heart disease. In fact, practicing mindfulness as discussed above can also help you get a good night's sleep. The goal is to get 7-9 hours of quality sleep per night, and ideally go to bed and wake up around the same time daily.

TIP! Disconnect from all electronics at least 1 hour before bedtime. Find calming activities to do instead that are relaxing to help fall asleep quickly and restfully.

5. Manage Stress & Take Breaks: There are many ways we can manage stress in our days. One place to start is making sure you are taking breaks in your day. This can help to promote more movement by not sitting at your desk for hours at a time, and also helps to clear the mind, as well. Setting boundaries in your day around your schedule and availability can help to promote more work/life balance and help to make our days feel less overwhelming. Communication about how you're feeling is important for managing stress. This can include talking to friends, family, colleagues, or even professionals.

TIP! Utilizing EAP benefits can be a great first step to managing your stress, mental health, and heart health.

What are some ways you can make your mental health and heart health a priority, not just during Heart Health Month, but all year long?



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