

Be Well Aware – Health Article



The Mental and Physical Connection

When discussing fitness and wellness, images of exercising and cooking/eating nutritious foods are often the first to come to mind. What individuals often forget about is the mental aspect of wellness. Furthermore, what goes even more unnoticed is the fact that mental health and physical health are inexorably connected. This very connection between mental and physical health, as it turns out, is a two-way street; one can easily affect the other in both positive and negative ways. Let's take a deeper look at this connection.

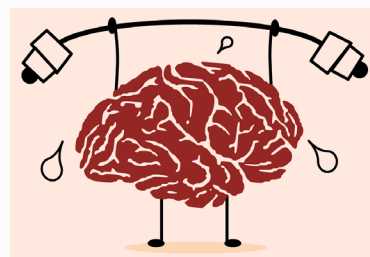
Heart Disease

Most of us are aware that poor diet and exercise can contribute to heart disease, but what about our mental health? As it turns out, this may also play a part in developing heart disease. In fact, mood disorders, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and chronic stress have all been shown to affect individual's cardiac reactivity. This can manifest as increasing heart rate and blood pressure, reduced blood flow to the heart, and heightened levels of cortisol. Over time this may lead to a buildup of calcium in the arteries, metabolic disease, and heart disease.

Even given the extent of the previously mentioned connect between mental health and heart disease, It's important to remember that this can be combated by regularly participating in cardiovascular exercise, while also maintaining a healthy diet.

Heart Disease; The Reverse is also True

Although the status of one's mental health may negatively affect physical health, it can also affect it in a positive way. In fact, there have been studies that found those with positive psychological health were more likely to have other health factors linked to a lower risk of developing cardiovascular disease. These health factors included lower blood pressure, better glucose control, less inflammation, and lower levels of cholesterol. By taking the time to look after your mental health, you're also taking time to improve your physical health.



Improved Mental Wellbeing through Exercise

In the previous section we talked about how mental health affects heart disease, for better or for worse. Now let's talk a bit about how physical activity can help promote positive mental health. For starters, it has been long demonstrated that regular exercise helps facilitate the release of "feel good chemicals" such as endorphins and serotonin. The release of these chemicals leads to a subsequent improvement in one's mood. Additionally, the more consistent you are with physical exercise, the more consistent this mental and body-high tends to be.

However, the opposite can also be true. Those who regularly engage in exercise may feel bogged down, tired, and lethargic if they engage in a prolonged period of inactivity.

With that being said, the mental benefits of exercise aren't only "feel good chemicals." It is also believed that the improved blood flow you gain through exercise also applies to blood flow in the brain. This translates to more clear-headed thinking, an increase in the size of your hippocampus (the part of the brain responsible for memory), and increased connections between nerve cells in the brain. That, combined with the increase in size of the hippocampus, may help to improve memory and protect the

brain from injury. Lastly, there's evidence to suggest that the increased insulin sensitivity gained through exercise helps the brain to utilize glucose more efficiently, allowing it to easily tap into the energy it needs.

Activities to Boost Mental and Physical Health

Try completing any of the following activities that contribute towards your mental and physical health!

- Meditate for 15 minutes
- Listen to an audio book on the treadmill or exercise bike
- Attempt puzzles such as word searches, crossword, and Sudoku
- Perform three 10-minute bursts of exercise throughout the day
- Make a list of 10 things you're grateful for
- Practice Yoga, or any other mobility-based flexibility training



References:

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<https://newsroom.heart.org/news/mental-health-is-important-to-overall-health-and-heart-disease-prevention-and-treatment#:~:text=People%20with%20positive%20psychological%20health,less%20inflammation%3B%20and>

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