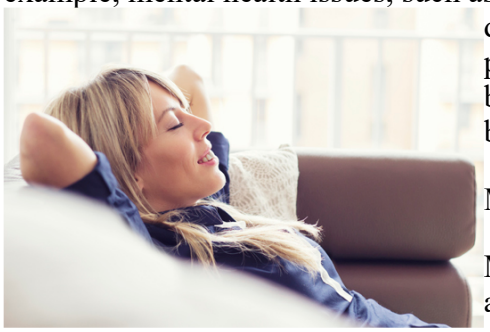
Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Mental and physical health: making the connection

An increasing number of studies are highlighting the link between mental and physical health. For example, mental health issues, such as depression, can increase the risk of developing diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Similarly, a person suffering from a chronic physical condition is more likely to experience depression, either because of the stress related to living with their condition or because of the medications used to treat it.



Mental illness → physical pain

Mental illnesses not only increase certain health risks, but they can also have physical symptoms of their own. In fact, 65 percent of depressed people also experience:

- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Muscle aches and joint pain
- Exhaustion and fatigue
- Back pain

It's been reported that more than 20 percent of adults with low back pain have symptoms of clinical depression. The exact relationship between depression and low back pain is not well understood, but individuals who suffer from low back pain and depression commonly experience insomnia, fatigue and poor physical fitness. These symptoms only aggravate the physical pain and depression.

Depression is a common mental illness worldwide, affecting more than 350 million people. More women than men suffer from the illness, and in Canada research has shown that women with depression are 80 percent more likely to experience heart disease than women without depression. Similarly, people with mental illnesses have up to three times greater likelihood of having a stroke.

Physical illness → mental pain

Just as people with a mental illness can experience physical pain, people with a physical illness, such as diabetes, can experience mental symptoms, such as anxiety. According to the Canadian Diabetes Association, "the biological impact of high blood sugar levels is also associated with the development of depression." If the depression is left untreated, the individual is less likely to follow medical directions to control their blood sugar, worsening their mental and physical health.

People living with other chronic physical complaints – cancer, arthritis and asthma -- also face greater mental health challenges than the general population. So to successfully manage our health we need to keep both our body and mind in balance.

Finding the balance

How do we find this balance? Because what we do to the body affects the mind and vice versa, we need to take care of both body and mind at the same time. For example, a poor diet is a risk factor for many

chronic illnesses and can contribute to weight gain. But a poor diet can also deprive the brain of glucose and the other nutrients that control mood – which can exacerbate depression. And when we're depressed, we're less likely to care about our physical health, which can further damage our mental health. This circularity can lead to a dangerous downward spiral, both physically and mentally.

Before we can make a change to improve our physical health, such as quitting smoking or losing weight, we need to understand *why* we smoke or overeat. Do we smoke to ease anxiety? Is our overeating linked to our emotions? While understanding alone is insufficient to effect behavioural change, recognizing vulnerabilities or needs – and finding healthier ways to meet them – can be valuable in making successful changes. And, at the same time, if we are trying to improve our mental health, we need to consider physical issues. Are we depressed because of the medication we're taking to control our asthma? What role is our diabetes playing?

Not understanding that link between physical and mental health is one reason why so many of us fail in our attempts to make better lifestyle choices. If you're having trouble getting started, contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). The professional advice and services available with your EFAP will help you make the connection between your mind, your behaviour and your body, and increase your probability of making healthy changes.

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