Don't forget mental health in New Year's resolutions

Improving physical health can benefit mental well-being

By Melanie Dallas, LPC

One of people's most common New Year's resolutions is to get healthier. Although this can often take the form of vowing to lose weight, the behaviors associated with weight loss – eating less fat, more fruits and vegetables, and increasing physical activity – help improve overall health as well.

But as much as we want to improve our physical health, one area that is often overlooked is mental health. A growing body of research suggests there is an important relationship between the body and mind – and that being physically healthy can have the added benefit of improving mental well-being.

One of the most common – but often overlooked – factors that can impact health is stress. Although not all stress is bad, the negative effects of too much stress can be substantial over time. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, continued strain on the body from routine stress may lead to both physical and mental health problems, including heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, but also depression and anxiety disorders.

Other studies have found people living with chronic physical conditions can experience emotional stress and chronic pain, which are both associated with developing depression and anxiety. In fact, the Canadian Mental Health Association found people living with chronic physical health conditions experience depression and anxiety at twice the rate of the general population.

But while poor physical health can have a negative impact on mental health, the good news is the opposite is also true. And if you have vowed to improve your physical fitness in the New Year, you may notice mental health benefits as well.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that regular physical activity can reduce the risk of depression, while also helping to keep thinking, learning and judgement skills sharp as people age. Although people will gain the most benefit from exercising three to five times a week for 30 to 60 minutes, research has found there is a health benefit – physical and mental – to almost any type of physical activity. Even something as simple as walking can enhance your mood.

Doctors have known for years that physical activity stimulates the production of chemicals in the brain called endorphins, which help relieve stress and improve mood. In addition to these and other benefits of exercise (such as losing weight and reducing the risk of heart disease, diabetes and some types of cancer), physical activity can help people feel better about themselves, boosting confidence and self-esteem.

Other behaviors known to enhance physical health can also have a positive impact on mental well-being. For example, eating nutritious food, not smoking or using drugs (including not drinking alcohol to excess) and getting enough sleep can help improve mood and mental functioning while also reducing the risk of serious chronic disease.

Of course, there are many factors that can impact mental health – including heredity, trauma, brain injury and addiction, among others – and not all are preventable. Nor does living a healthy lifestyle guarantee an individual will never have mental illness. Still, good physical health may help reduce the risk of mental illness, help alleviate symptoms and is an important part of mental health recovery. That's why doctors treating mental illness almost always recommend exercise as part of an individual's recovery plan.

Ultimately, your mind and body are connected on many levels – and being truly healthy includes both physical and mental health. If you are concerned you might be dealing with emotional or mental health issues, talk to your doctor or a local mental health clinic as soon as you can – because research also suggests that mental health issues can have a negative impact on physical health.

Best wishes for a happy and mentally healthy New Year!