

Linking physical and mental health care... it makes sense



FOR PEOPLE WHO USE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Physical health and mental health are linked, so it makes sense to link physical and mental health care.

What does physical health have to do with mental health?

There is a substantial amount of research that tells us that physical health and mental health are critically linked. If you feel well physically you often feel better mentally, and sometimes the symptoms of a physical illness can suggest a mental illness where one doesn't exist.

This means it's important that people with a mental illness or disorder receive good quality physical as well as mental health care. If you are a user or consumer of mental health services, it makes sense for mental health services to consider both your physical and mental health when providing care for you.

Linking physical and mental health care in this way will have real benefits for consumers, including:

- Identifying and treating physical health issues for consumers earlier, meaning consumers recover quicker
- Recognising side effects from medication in consumers more easily, so that action can be taken immediately to lessen them
- Improving the general health and wellbeing of consumers, which is likely to improve their overall quality of life
- Reducing the number of consumers with a physical illness being misdiagnosed as having a mental illness.

What physical health care can I expect to receive from my mental health service?

People with a mental illness have the right to expect health care that's in line with the care provided to the general population.

Mental health services have an important responsibility to ensure that the consumers involved with their service have access to such health care by:

- Supporting consumers to receive a physical health examination
- Ruling out any physical causes for their mental illness or disorder
- Carefully considering how any treatment the consumer receives for their mental illness will affect their physical health
- Putting consumers in contact with a GP or other health providers for health reviews or tests
- Ensuring care plans for consumers address mental as well as physical health needs and any ongoing health issues
- Helping consumers to attend activities and giving them information that will improve their physical health and wellbeing.

Area Mental Health Services in NSW have a responsibility to ensure the consumers who use their service have access to physical as well as mental health care.

What can I do to improve my own physical health?

As a consumer, you need to be an active participant in your own physical health care. You can do this by:

- Having a regular GP
- Getting regular physical health examinations
- Asking for help from your mental health service to make and attend physical health appointments
- Giving consent for the mental health service to contact your GP or other health providers so they can work together to address your physical health concerns
- Asking questions about your physical health diagnosis to ensure you understand both the complaint and the treatment
- Sharing information about your physical health with your family or carer so they can give you practical and emotional support
- Reading information about health and nutrition and making changes to your diet and exercise routine
- Taking part in healthy lifestyle programs or activities that will help you to make better choices, such as giving up smoking.



Need more information?

- ✓ Speak to your local mental health service
- ✓ See your regular GP
- ✓ For culturally and linguistically relevant mental health information or to order a copy of this information sheet contact the Transcultural Mental Health Centre by phone on 1800 64 89 11 or via their website at www.dhi.health.nsw.gov.au/tmhc

Further information regarding the responsibilities of services in relation to physical health care is available within the NSW Health brochure *Physical health care – what to expect from your Mental Health Service*.

The NSW Health Policy Directive PD2009_027 *Physical Health Care within Mental Health Services* provides clear direction regarding the actions mental health services must take so that consumers receive adequate physical health care. Information and advice to help mental health services meet their obligations is provided in the NSW Health *Physical Health Care of Mental Health Consumers Guidelines (GL2009_007)*.

Where does my GP fit in?

GPs have a vital role to play in helping you as a consumer to improve your physical health and are considered an essential part of your care team.

As the GP is often the first person someone with a mental illness or disorder will contact for help, they have the opportunity to identify and treat physical health issues for consumers early. GPs can also provide information and advice to you, and your family and carers if you consent to this, regarding your physical health and what steps you could take to improve your health.

If you have a regular GP, you should share your GP's contact information with your mental health service so they can work together to help you address any health concerns you may have. Your consent will be sought before any contact is made with your GP or other health providers, such as your dentist or specialist. Mental health services will be looking at ways to get to know the GPs in their local area so that they can work in partnership to address the physical health of consumers in their care.

If you don't have a regular GP, you should talk to your mental health service as they may be able to link you with a local GP that has experience with, or an interest in, mental illness. This might make it easier for you to discuss your physical health issues with them.

What information will be shared between my GP and the mental health service I'm involved with?

So that your physical health needs can be properly addressed, it's important that the mental health service you're involved with knows about any physical health issues you may have. Without this information, the service may find it difficult to make sure you get the best care and treatment. It's also important for your GP, if you have one, to be kept up to date about the status of your mental health. This will help them to make the right diagnosis of any physical illness you may have and prescribe medication that won't interfere with any medication you might be taking for your mental illness.

However, your GP and your mental health service are bound by confidentiality requirements, which means that the confidentiality of your clinical records and personal information is protected. Mental health services have particular obligations to uphold this protection under the *Mental Health Act 2007* and the *Health Records and Information Privacy Act 2002*.

While the requirements of these Acts allow for information in connection with the further treatment of a consumer to be exchanged, respect for confidentiality of personal information acquired by service providers, such as your GP and mental health service, in the course of providing you with treatment will be given the highest priority.

Additionally, whenever necessary, your consent will be sought to be able to share information about your health.