

The Peer Perspective

Self-Management and Monitoring Whole Health: The Peer Perspective **Patrick Hendry, Vice President of Peer Advocacy, Supports, and Services** **Mental Health America**

Monitoring our health is something we all need to do, whether it is getting a yearly physical or checking our blood pressure or sugar levels at home. It is especially important for people living with psychiatric disorders who may be able to increase their life expectancy when they actively participate in monitoring their overall health and begin working towards a healthy lifestyle.

Taking on the responsibility to pro-actively monitor our own health helps break the cycle of “learned helplessness.” That is what happens when a person has few or no opportunities to control their lives, such as a long-term hospitalization, crisis stabilization commitment, guardianship, and other experiences in which people are told where to live, when and what to eat, what medications to take, and how to behave. When individuals are given respect, dignity, and the right to make personal choices, this contributes to longer, healthier lives.

There are many reasons why it is so important for consumers in the mental health system to monitor their physical health.

- Many of the psychotherapeutic medications have significant side effects
- A large percentage of consumer/survivors use tobacco products
- A sedentary lifestyle
- A poor diet exacerbated by unemployment and poverty

We often talk about the need for interventions to provide people with the information they need to live a healthy life. Peer support for individuals living with whole health challenges is an effective intervention when combined with:

- Shared-decision making
- Motivational interviewing
- Activation skills: Setting meaningful goals, developing achievable action plans, building confidence, and one on one peer support

Shared experience assists peers in helping people to identify meaningful goals that bring about change. In order to effectively change the way people manage their whole health, individuals can:

- Closely examine their motivation to change
- Identify goals that overcome resistance to change
- Develop plans that provide a clear path to goal achievement
- Develop plans with a defined time for achievement
- Adjust plans to provide a high level of confidence of achievement
- Attend peer support groups and one-on-one peer support

By providing tools and support to achieve these components, peers help “activate” self-management. As individuals successfully implement action plans, confidence in achieving long-term goals increases. Sharing of experiences in support group settings provides reinforcement and new knowledge for overcoming barriers.

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PRACTICE TIPS

Physical health and wellness interventions must be tailored to address the cognitive impairment of individuals with SMI. These individuals often experience challenges in their ability to:

- Pay attention
- Process information
- Remember and recall information
- Plan and organize information

In helping individuals learn about their health and adopt new behaviors, clinicians must simplify their instruction, repeat and review, and provide written and verbal reminders as needed.

A Certified Peer Specialist in Clearwater, FL who participated in the Expert Panel Meeting to update the guidelines said, “If I go to the doctor and am given a lot of information or things to do, I am likely to get overwhelmed with it. As a result, instead of following through, I will avoid it all together. For example, when I was diagnosed with diabetes, my PCP explained it thoroughly, and then gave me a bag with at least 20 pamphlets/flyers of information. I was given a prescription for medication, an order for diabetes education, and instructions on how to get affordable testing supplies, how often to test, what the numbers should be and what to do if they are higher or lower. After the hour long visit, I got in my car, threw the bag in the back and did not think about it again until the next time I was at my PCP’s office about 6 months later. My suggestion is to give information in smaller quantities and higher frequency when possible. If more frequent appointments are not possible, then a phone call to check in or give more instruction is needed.”

There is no health without mental health. When our minds are healthy, physical health is improved. For years we have separated physical and mental health as if there is no connection between the two. When the statistics on early mortality for people with serious mental illness came out we realized that, not only is there a connection, but that the two are essential to each other.

Living with mental illness is a fact of life for millions of Americans, and the road to recovery is different for each of us. There is no single factor that moves us into recovery, it is a series of seemingly small steps that restructures our lives into a pattern that supports us and re-builds our sense of self. Taking responsibility to self-manage our health is an important stepping stone along that path to recovery. Recovery is an important component of wellness.