

Mental illness and keeping well

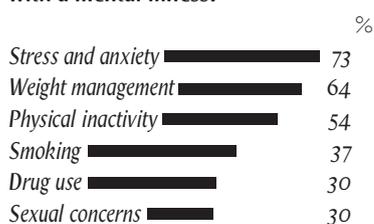
People affected by mental illness have serious concerns about their general health, are active in trying to improve it, but face significant access and cost barriers to doing so . . .

Keeping well is especially important for people affected by mental illness, because of generally poorer physical health, and because being healthier helps people to cope better.

This SANE Research Bulletin investigates the general health concerns of people with a mental illness, and what they find helpful in keeping well.

The survey was conducted in September and October 2005, using a convenience sample of 261 consumers and carers who completed a questionnaire face-to-face, by telephone or via the SANE website. The survey was intended to answer four key questions . . .

What are the main health concerns of people with a mental illness?



These concerns reflect the poor physical health of people with a mental illness. Being overweight and having a poor diet, physical inactivity and smoking are major factors contributing to the poor physical health of people with a mental illness, who have a mortality rate 2.5 times higher than the norm (Coglan, R. et al, 2001. *Duty to Care: Physical illness in people with a mental illness*. University of Western Australia).

While only 12% of respondents reported being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, six times this number expressed concern about stress and anxiety – indicating a great need for treatment and support in this area.

What do people with a mental illness do to keep well?



Most respondents had tried strategies to keep well in addition to prescribed medication. The most common strategy was counselling from a psychologist, reflecting the high level of co-morbid anxiety reported.

Over 57% of respondents had tried to be more physically active. This may reflect concerns about being overweight, associated with antipsychotic medication as a side-effect, as well as with poor diet and physical inactivity. The use of self-prescribed vitamins and alternative therapies was also high, in line with their popularity in the general population.

How effective are these strategies?



After counselling, exercise was ranked as the most helpful strategy for keeping well. This confirms the known importance of regular exercise to improving mental as well as physical health. Almost half of the sample did not exercise, however, and inactivity remained a major cause of concern for people.

While vitamins, supplements and natural therapies were tried by up to a third of respondents, these were ranked by them as the least effective.

What are the barriers to keeping well?



The majority of respondents reported that they would like to be doing more to live a healthier life. Three main factors were reported as barriers which prevented this.

Difficulty with motivation is a serious symptom-related issue for many people with a mental illness. The effect of this on long-term physical and mental health is serious, and emphasises the role of health and community support workers in actively supporting people to keep well.

Expense and difficulty with access were the other major barriers reported. The cost of visiting a psychologist for counselling or joining a gymnasium or yoga class, for example, is prohibitive for many people on a low income.

A major contributor to lack of access is the failure of many health professionals to refer people to services which promote better health. Lack of physical activity, high smoking rates, poor diet and being overweight or obese are all contributors to the high levels of diabetes, heart disease and cancer among people with a mental illness. Physical health screening should also be a part of routine treatment, so that any problems can be diagnosed and treated, as well as to encourage preventative action.

In summary

- The most common health concerns of people with a mental illness are dealing with high levels of stress and anxiety, and being overweight and physically inactive.
- Counselling and exercise are the most popular ways of trying to improve health, with significant numbers also using complementary therapies.
- Respondents found counselling and exercise most effective, and the complementary therapies least effective.
- Barriers to keeping well are symptom-related difficulty with motivation, expense, and difficulty with access (including lack of referral by health professionals).

Recommendations

1 PHYSICAL HEALTH SCREENING

Despite the acknowledged poor physical health of people with a mental illness, screening of this is not a part of routine treatment. Physical health screening needs to be integrated or coordinated with mental health treatment, to prevent as well as to treat any undiagnosed conditions such as diabetes, cancer or heart disease.

2 REFERRAL BY CLINICAL SERVICES

The most effective way to help people with a mental illness keep well is referral by health professionals to programs and services which promote an active, healthy lifestyle. Health professionals need training and support to ensure this becomes part of routine practice.

3 HEALTHY LIVING PROGRAMS

Rehabilitation programs, day centres and other resources used by people with a mental illness need support to promote healthy lifestyles. This can be done through education programs (on diet and quitting smoking, for example) through facilitating access to community resources such as gyms and swimming pools, and through their day-to-day activities (by promoting a healthy diet and regular outdoor exercise, for example).

4 ACCESS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL TREATMENTS

The Better Outcomes in Mental Health initiative allows GPs to refer people for up to 12 sessions of counselling with a psychologist, covered by Medicare. However, many people affected by mental illness do not receive these psychological treatments which could have a dramatic effect on symptoms of depression and anxiety. Action is needed to ensure these treatments are provided to all those who would benefit from them.

SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research. With thanks to the R. E. Ross Trust for supporting this initiative.

SANE Research Bulletin 2:
Mental illness and keeping well
(January 2006) ISSN 1832-8385
PDF version available at www.sane.org