



Mental & physical health: **a coexist**

In this paper we explore the relationship between mental and physical health, and the importance of having a holistic approach to one's wellbeing. As humans, we are complex beings made up of so many intricate systems and parts, and we need to ensure that we do not adopt a one-dimensional approach to our health. Our mental health affects our physical health, and vice-versa, so it is crucial that we give ourselves the necessary tools and knowledge on how to keep both of these in peak condition. This toolkit offers all of the information needed to understand the link between mental and physical health, as well as the various different ways in which we can ensure wellbeing in both spheres.

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Chronic stress and its effects on our health

Stress –especially chronic stress– can have a significant negative impact on a person’s physical and psychological health.

Prolonged chronic stress can contribute to physical symptoms such as high blood pressure, clogging of the arteries, and can even result in brain changes that lead to mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and addiction.

Listed below are some other physical symptoms associated with stress:

-  **Headaches and migraines**
-  **Heartburn** – Stress increases the production of stomach acid, which can cause or even worsen heartburn.
-  **Increased risk of hypertension, heart attack and stroke** – Chronic stress causes an increase in both heart rate and blood pressure, which damages the arteries and puts strain on the heart.
-  **Insomnia** – Being stressed makes it harder to fall asleep and stay asleep.
-  **Stomach cramps**
-  **Muscle tension** – Chronic stress can cause muscles in the body to become tense, leading to pain and cramping in the shoulders, neck, and head.
-  **Lowered sex-drive**
-  **Weakened immunity** – Long-term stress can weaken your immune system, leaving you vulnerable to illnesses and infections.
-  **Lower back pain** – This has been linked particularly to chronic job-related stress.

Chronic stress affects all systems of the body, from the cardiovascular system to the respiratory, digestive, and even neurological systems. That is why it is of paramount importance that we address the root causes of a person’s stress and to seek out the right treatment options for them before more serious consequences ensue.

What can be done?

There are many ways to relieve and manage stress, some of which include:

- Going to therapy or seeing a doctor (if you feel it is becoming chronic)
- Learning to manage your time more effectively
- Doing more physical exercise (e.g., walking, running, dancing, cycling, climbing stairs, doing physical chores)
- Keeping a positive attitude
- Practicing deep breathing
- Getting enough sleep
- Following a healthier diet
- Cutting down on alcohol and caffeine
- Focusing on being assertive rather than aggressive
- Making time for mindfulness and/or meditation
- Making more time for the things and people you love (i.e., your parents, spouse, children, best friends, pets, hobbies, leisure activities)

When stress begins to fall outside of the normal range (i.e., manifesting as intense, continuous, and long-lasting) it can start affecting daily functioning and quality of life. This can be damaging to personal relationships, life goals, and work performance. Employers should be conscious of their employees' mental health and be on the lookout for signs of stress, so that it can be managed appropriately before it progresses to chronic stress or other serious mental issues.



Depression: the mind-body connection

Depression is one of the most common mental disorders worldwide. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) the COVID-19 global pandemic caused depression figures to rise even higher than they were before, with findings indicating that as much as one in five people are dealing with depression. This figure is a great cause for concern, as persistent, long-term, and chronic depression can have detrimental effects both on a person's mental and physical health.



Symptoms of depression can manifest differently from one person to the next. Regardless of the symptoms, however, depression will generally affect a person's ability to perform daily activities, attend work or school, and will also influence the way in which they interact with others.

Some of the most common symptoms of depression include:

- Feelings of sadness and emptiness, also sometimes described by a person as feelings of hopelessness.
- Continuous feelings of worthlessness, guilt, or helplessness.
- A lack of energy – feeling tired all the time. For some people, small tasks like getting out of bed and showering can start to feel like too much effort.
- Irritability – a tendency to become easily frustrated or angered, even over small or insignificant issues.
- Crying spells – a person may find themselves crying frequently for no apparent reason
- Suicidal ideation – thinking about or fantasizing about death, usually to escape the feelings of emptiness, worthlessness, and emotional pain.
- Loss of appetite or overeating – some people with depression will feel less hungry when they are depressed while others will eat more food as a source of comfort.
- Social withdrawal – shutting oneself off from the world, avoiding phone-calls, social gatherings, or usual activities with friends.
- Insomnia or hypersomnia – some people will find that they struggle to fall or stay asleep, while others will find that they are sleeping more than usual and struggling to get out of bed.
- Anxiety – depression can cause a person to feel anxious all the time, leaving them with feelings of impending doom or danger, even without a justifiable reason.



To receive a diagnosis for depression a person must have experienced any five (or more) of the above-mentioned symptoms for at-least two weeks (continuously). A formal diagnosis can be made by a trained psychologist, psychiatrist, or doctor.

Once a person has received a diagnosis for depression, they need to seek out professional help in the form of psychotherapy, medication (i.e., anti-depressants), or a combination of both. If the depression is not treated and left to persist, it can lead to physical symptoms and even pose a threat to the person's health and longevity.

Physical symptoms associated with depression typically include:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  Headaches |  Joint and limb pain |
|  Fatigue |  Heart disease |
|  Back pain |  Psychomotor activity changes |
|  Insomnia |  Changes to appetite |
|  Digestive issues | |

The above-mentioned somatic symptoms can significantly affect a person's longevity and quality of life, and that is why it is crucial that they receive the help that they need to alleviate their depression.

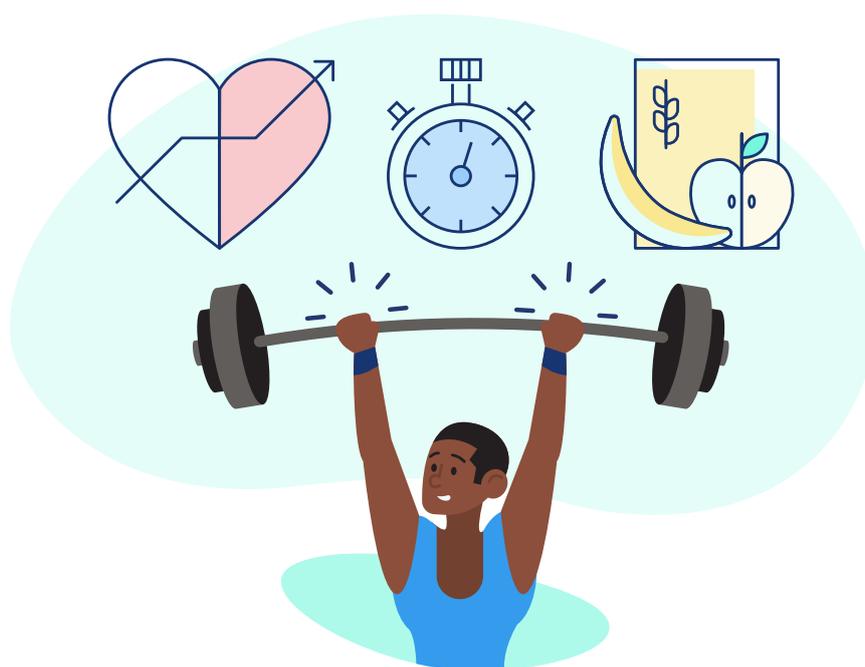
What can be done?

The link between physical pain and depression appears to be rooted in shared neurological pathways in the brain which cause the body to respond to depressive feelings and thoughts via somatic symptoms. Therefore, when depression is successfully treated with the right combination of medication and therapeutic support, both mental and physical health will improve.

Some great ways to combat depression include:

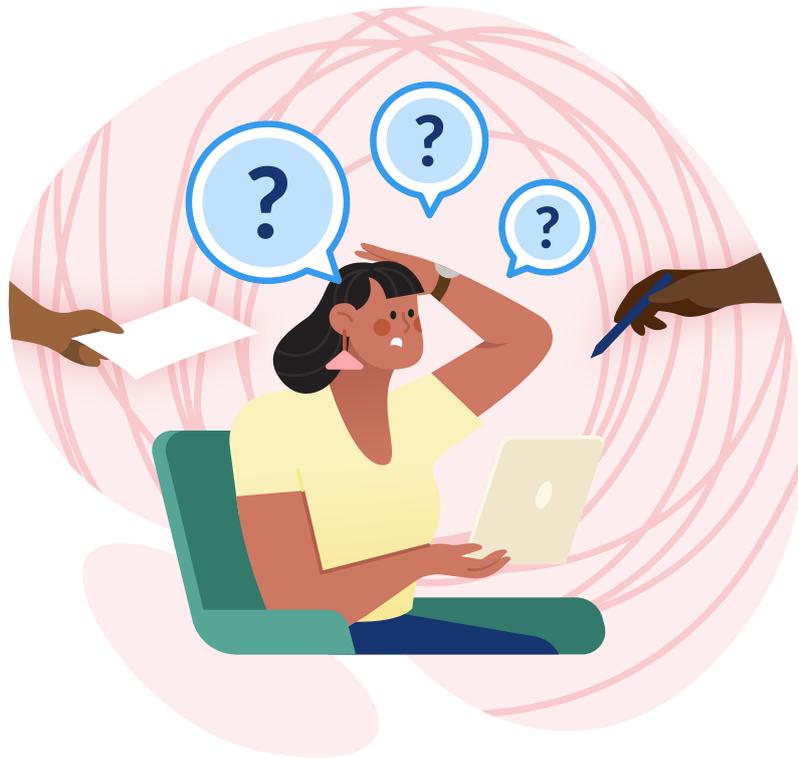
- **Going to therapy** – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, Psychodynamic Therapy, and Interpersonal Therapy have been shown to be highly effective in the treatment of depression.
- **Taking anti-depressants** – Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), paroxetine (Paxil, Pexeva), escitalopram (Lexapro), and citalopram (Celexa).
- **Getting into a routine** – this can help you stay on track and focus on the day's activities, which can help heighten one's sense of achievement and success, thereby boosting mood
- **Setting goals** – start with small, achievable goals and slowly move towards bigger ones

- **Eating healthy foods** – what goes into your gut affects the chemistry of your whole body, including your brain. Eat a balanced diet of nutritious, whole foods that release energy gradually throughout the day (i.e., low-GI, wholegrain, unprocessed, fresh foods).
- **Exercising** – physical exercise is known to boost feel-good chemicals in the body called endorphins. Exercise does not have to be strenuous; it can be as simple as taking a walk through the neighbourhood a few minutes a day.
- **Sleep enough** – too little sleep can make depression worse, so make sure you get enough. Bed-time routines can help to make this easier.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs** – long term drug use can change the neural networks in your brain and can cause (and worsen) mental health problems.
- **Make time for hobbies and things you enjoy** – when depressed, having ‘fun’ may be easier said than done. However, continuing to do things that you once enjoyed can help to maintain a sense of normalcy and help to boost your mood, even if it’s just temporarily.
- **Try something new** – trying something new alters the levels of dopamine in our bodies, which is the hormone associated with pleasure, enjoyment, and learning.
- **Be responsible for something or someone** – responsibilities help to make us feel grounded and give us a sense of accomplishment.



Let's talk about burnout

Burnout is a term that we often hear within work-related contexts, but how serious is burnout really and how can it affect our physical health?



What is Burnout?

Burnout is a three-component syndrome that arises when the body responds to prolonged, chronic stressors in one's work environment. The three main symptoms of burnout include:

 **Exhaustion** (*main symptom*)

 **Cynicism**

 **Inefficacy**

The first –and central –symptom of burnout, exhaustion, refers to the profound physical, cognitive, and emotional fatigue that prevents people from working effectively and feeling positive about what they are doing. The second, cynicism (also known as depersonalization), refers to the psychological distancing of a person from their work. The third main symptom, inefficacy, refers to the feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity.



The dangers of burnout

Recent research has found that burnout and the related concept of “vital exhaustion” increases a person’s risk for developing cardiovascular disease in as much as the other well-known risk factors including obesity, high cholesterol, and smoking. Burnout increases people’s likelihood of developing myocardial infarction (heart attack), ischemic heart disease, stroke, and sudden cardiac death. Studies also point to an increased likelihood of type II diabetes, male infertility, sleep disorders, and musculoskeletal disorders among those with the extreme physical, mental, and emotional fatigue. Burnout should, therefore, not be taken lightly, and deserves the necessary attention from companies and employers across the globe.



Research suggests that burnout’s persistence over time may arise from a vicious cycle in which its physiological effects such as increased concentrations of pro-inflammatory cytokines feed back into the brain, further contributing to an individual’s exhaustion and weariness.

Fast facts about burnout

Indeed, the giant job aggregator site, conducted a 2021 survey of 1,500 U.S. workers to determine the level of burnout exhibited by different groups of people. The subjects were picked from various age groups, had different experience levels, and worked in different industry sectors. The study also compared current findings to that of a previous, pre-pandemic study that had been conducted in January 2020.



Some of the most notable findings were:

Burnout is on the rise, with more than half (52%) of survey respondents experiencing burnout in 2021 – a significant rise compared to the 43% who said the same in Indeed’s pre-Covid-19 survey.

53% of Millennials were already burned out before the pandemic, and they remain the most affected population, with 59% experiencing burnout today. Among Gen-Zs the figure was also high, with 58% reporting burnout in 2021, compared to the 47% who said the same in 2020.

The pandemic’s toll seems more apparent among the older generation. Baby Boomers showed a 7% increase in burnout from pre-pandemic levels, and more than half (54%) of Gen-Xers reporting burnout in 2021.

Among all respondents, 80% believed that Covid-19 had impacted workplace burnout. The majority (67%) said that burnout has worsened during the pandemic.

How to Prevent and Combat Burnout

- Discuss realistic deadlines with your employer, employees, and colleagues
- Know your rights as an employee/employer and communicate your needs clearly
- Take time off from work for travel and/or relaxation
- Set clear boundaries between work and personal life (i.e., switching off devices and email notifications and other work-communications after hours)
- Make time for meditation, relaxation, and/or practice mindfulness
- Get enough sleep
- Incorporate physical exercise into your daily routine
- Ensure that you make time for leisure activities and hobbies

As we have established, burnout does not only pose serious risks to one's physical health, but also affects occupational functioning. This poses major threats to the overall productivity and output of any business or workspace, which can result in the loss of both profits and human capital.

Preventing burnout amongst employees and employers alike should thus be a top priority for all companies.



The impact of relationships on our health

Our relationships can either be the greatest source of happiness in our lives, or they can be tumultuous spaces fraught with sadness, anger, confusion, and stress.

Often, we don't think about the physical impact that a strained or toxic relationship can have on our wellbeing. We tend to notice what such a relationship is doing to us emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, but we do not always stop to think about what it is doing to our bodies and long-term health. Below are some examples of how strained relationships can affect your health.

The heart

A stressful relationship or marriage can not only leave a person feeling vulnerable, but also heartbroken – and this is said in the literal sense of the word. According to a 2020 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, women who reported moderate to severe marital strain were 2.9 times more likely to have a heart attack, require heart surgery, or die of heart disease than those who had not reported significant marital stress. This finding remained consistent even when researchers adjusted for other factors such as age, smoking habits, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and diabetes.

Inversely, findings of a study published in the *American Journal of Cardiology* in 2021 showed that marital quality and social support are especially important in the management of chronic diseases like congestive heart failure. The study found that the four-year survival rate of those with poor marriages was 36% lower than for that of patients with good marriages.

The mind

Research has shown that steady, committed relationships are good for a person's mental health, and it comes as no surprise that a difficult and strained relationship has the opposite effect. Negative behaviours, such as hostility and criticism have been linked to poorer mental health. In fact, according to a 2018 article in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, single people tend to have better mental health than those who remain in a tumultuous relationship.

Research has shown that going through too many breakups might be worse for a person's health than being single forever. A British study published in 2014 in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* found that living through multiple partnership transitions, such as divorces and separations, adversely affected women's mental health.

The rest of the body

According to a study of 276 couples presented in the 2009 American Psychosomatic Society's annual meeting, women who experienced more conflicts and disagreements in their relationships were found to have a higher risk of high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high triglycerides, and abdominal obesity, and generally had lower levels of "good" high-density lipoprotein cholesterol. Marital conflict has also been linked to immune system disruptions. According to a 1993 article in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine*, newlywed couples involved in a 30-minute heated discussion of marital problems tended to have relatively poorer immunological responses compared to couples who engaged in positive or problem-solving behaviours.





Mental health in the workplace

Now that we have a better understanding of the effects that our mental health can have on our physical health, it is time to reflect on the many reasons why mental health should be supported in the workplace.

- Employees who are suffering from physical, mental, or emotional ailments due to neglected psychological wellbeing are more likely to miss workdays, call in sick, and incur medical expenses, which is not only a burden on the medical system of their country, but also on the business or company that they work for.
- If employees are suffering from burnout, chronic stress, anxiety, depression, or any other mental health issue, their overall performance and output will likely be compromised.
- Happier and healthier employees will have higher productivity rates, a more positive outlook and approach to their work, and will yield higher quality work/services.
- Employees who feel valued and supported in the workspace will be less likely to resign or leave their company unexpectedly.
- When employees are healthy and have access to mental health resources and services, they have the opportunity to manage their time and resources better, as they are given a chance to reflect on their priorities, goals, purpose, and work-life balance more objectively.
- Employees who have access to mental health services will have more time, energy, and space to work on their goals, personal growth, and upskilling, which will be beneficial to their employer/company both short-term and in the long run.

Conclusion

Mental and physical health are – and will always be – intertwined. When we do not prioritize our mental wellbeing, our bodies may suffer, and so will our personal and professional lives. Every member of a workforce should be given a chance to improve or maintain mental wellbeing, whether they are an employee, a manager, a business owner, or an intern – every team member should be given an opportunity to thrive.

As we have established, happier and healthier team-members make for a stronger team, a better work environment, and more impressive results. For any machine to function properly, all of its parts need to work effectively.

There are many ways to ensure the promotion of mental health in the workplace. By having more open conversations about mental health and educating ourselves and our colleagues on issues relating to the topic, we can cultivate an environment where individuals are willing to seek out the support they need without hesitation or fear of stigmatization.



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