

# Making the Mind/Body Connection

*Understanding the connection between physical symptoms and mental health issues is critical to getting the help you need.*

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*Mental health plays a huge role in our overall well-being. Just as good mental health positively affects our physical health, poor mental health can take a toll on our physical wellbeing. What most of us do not know is that mental health issues often show up as physical or physiological symptoms. Mental health issues, including stress, mood, and anxiety disorders, left unidentified and untreated, can cause immeasurable suffering. Building awareness around the connection between mental health issues and physical symptoms is key to diagnosis, treatment, and healing.*

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Our mental and physical well-being are inextricably linked. Taking care of ourselves requires seeking help for our symptoms when they show up. When we're not feeling optimal, and when our symptoms become problematic and troubling, we seek the help of a doctor. Most often our first point of contact when we are seeking help is our family doctor or a general practitioner.

## ***How mental health issues manifest as physical symptoms***

Mental health issues can show up as physical symptoms in many ways. According to a 2008 report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information, people with symptoms of depression experience three times as many chronic physical conditions as the general population. And according to a Government of Canada 2006 study, Canadians with chronic physical conditions have twice the likelihood of also experiencing a mood or anxiety disorder when compared to those without a chronic physical condition.

Depression, chronic stress, and anxiety can manifest as sleep issues, including insomnia and sleep apnea. They can also show up as muscle tension and soreness, chronic fatigue, or as gastrointestinal issues, like stomach pain, loss of appetite, abdominal distress, or digestive irregularity. Trauma and stress can trigger autoimmune disorders, like psoriasis and arthritis, to name a few. Common

symptoms of a panic attack might include a racing heart rate, nausea, chills, shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, or numbness. Often, individuals in the throes of a panic attack report feeling as though they are having a heart attack, or they are near death.

## ***The undeniable connection***

During the research phase of my doctoral thesis, I interviewed hundreds of patients in primary-care waiting rooms, and examined mental-health diagnoses undetected by physicians. The results were astounding. Over 50 percent of patients with Major Depressive Disorder, 87 percent with Bipolar Disorder, and 73 percent with Panic Disorder had struggled with unidentified mental-health conditions. Further, as paper records were the convention at the time, we also weighed and measured the thickness of patient medical records and found that the heavier and thicker a patient's file, the more likely that patient was suffering from an undiagnosed mental health issue.

## ***Connecting the dots for our own self-care***

Most often, when we are unwell and seeking relief for our physical symptoms, our first line of treatment is a visit to our doctor. But often, due to the tremendous time constraints during primary-care visits, many physicians do not have a chance to get the full picture of the stressors and other factors at play in our lives.

Due to a lack of understanding of the possible connection between physical symptoms and mental health issues, many patients do not believe that their life situation is in any way relevant to their symptoms. As a result, their doctor might put them through a battery of tests, and ultimately miss an opportunity to diagnose a potential underlying mental health issue and provide proper treatment.

This is where an understanding of the mind/body connection can make a world of difference. When we understand how mental health issues can show up as physical symptoms, we can provide concise and relevant information to healthcare professionals, and become better advocates for ourselves when seeking relief for our symptoms. Here's an example: If I were in the midst of a prolonged period of on-the-job stress, and experiencing sleeplessness, a loss of appetite, and abdominal distress, rather than endure a battery of time-consuming and costly medical tests, bringing my current stress level and life situation to my doctor's attention during an appointment could lead to a quicker diagnosis and treatment protocol. When we can connect the dots between our physical symptoms and underlying stressors and other factors at play, we can become a more proactive partner in our care.

### **A more proactive approach**

In my clinical practice, I stress the importance of awareness of the interconnection between my patients' problems and their physical symptoms, persistent negative thoughts, and maladaptive behaviors or lifestyle habits. When you become aware of the possible connection between your physical symptoms and your mental health, you can

better advocate for yourself. You can assume a more active role in your care by speaking up about any factors that could be contributing to your symptoms. The more your physician knows, the better they too will be able to connect the dots and possibly realize that your physical symptoms are actually caused by mental health underlying conditions.

You can take a more active role in your health care visits. Ask questions. Tell your doctor what is happening in your life, especially when you are going through times of trouble, like grief, a divorce, or an unusually stressful time. If you feel you would like to seek the help of a mental health professional, ask for a referral. Your doctor is there to help, and the more we can advocate for ourselves, the sooner we will receive the help we need.

### **Connecting the dots!**

*When seeking treatment for your symptoms, it is important to understand the interconnection between physical symptoms and mental health concerns:*

- **Be aware** of the ways that mental health issues can manifest as physical symptoms
- **Make sure** your doctor knows what's happening in your life
- **Seek** the help you need when you realize you need it. Do not play wait-and-see with your symptoms
- **Communicate** any life challenging circumstances with your doctor you feel may be impacting your health
- **Request** a referral to a mental health specialist if you feel you need it. They can often provide both accurate assessments and follow up with a helpful treatment plan



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*About the author*

*Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021. <https://www.drmonicavermani.com/>*

*Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>*

