

MACMHB Guest Column February 2010

The concept is not new. Being healthy is important--- eating well, exercising, avoiding tobacco products, etc. But what about the link between physical health and mental health? Did you know that sustaining good mental health can help prevent heart disease?

A study conducted at Emory University found that good mental health is just as vital to preventing cardiovascular disease as the typical healthy habits we focus on. In the study, good mental health was based on how individuals cope and function in their lives, not whether or not they are taking medications or seeking treatment, although seeking treatment when needed also is an important component of good mental health.

February is National Heart Month, making now the perfect time to take steps toward better mental health to improve your quality of life and keep your heart strong. The American Psychiatric Association reports that individuals suffering from mental health issues are two to three times more likely to die from heart disease, according to a study conducted in the United Kingdom. The numbers are stacked against those with mental health issues, making it crucial to focus on being heart-healthy both physically and mentally.

In addition to mental health treatments, the Mayo Clinic offers tips to help prevent heart disease and have a healthy lifestyle for years to come. Since some risk factors – family history or age – are out of your control, take control of those you can prevent.

- 1) Don't smoke or use tobacco products- no amount of smoking is safe. Nearly 60 percent of smokers have experienced a mental illness. Quitting smoking drops your risk of heart disease dramatically within a year.
- 2) Get active- physical activity helps reduce chances of developing conditions that strain the heart, like high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. Thirty to 60 minutes of exercise a day is recommended, but every bit helps if that is too difficult to maintain.
- 3) Maintain a heart-healthy diet- eating foods that are low in fat, cholesterol and salt reduces your risk of heart disease. Eating lots of fruits, vegetables and whole grains will also protect your heart.
- 4) Maintain a healthy weight- keeping a healthy weight is a great way to protect your heart. Being overweight forces your heart to work harder, putting you at a greater risk for heart disease. Every little bit helps. Reducing weight by just 10 percent will reduce your risk of high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes dramatically.
- 5) Get regular health screenings- it's important to make sure you're on the right track health-wise regularly. Seeing your doctor to check your progress with both your physical and mental health will be important in preventing heart problems down the road.

Your mental health and heart health go hand in hand and it's important to make them both a priority. Taking these steps to be heart-healthy will lead to a happier, longer life for years to come. The ways to prevent heart disease are there, you just have to take the steps to implement them.