

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS: EXERCISE AND DIET TO THE RESCUE?

BY

OGUNYANWO, O. OLU Ph.D.

Centre For General Studies

Ogun State College Of Health Technology Ilese-Ijebu, Nigeria.

ABSTRACT

Mental disorders are assuming a wider dimension in the developed as well as the developing countries. Depression and other forms of mental health disorders have a large impact on the quality of life of millions of individuals worldwide. The problem is aggravated by a multiple and interacting socio- psychological and biological factors. The risks for acquiring or developing mental disorders is associated with poverty, insecurity, violence; physical ill health, lack of education, low income, substance abuse, gender violence etc. The major thrust of the paper lies in shedding more light on the common forms of mental disorders. It identifies the various self-help options available the patient with mental disorder and the mentally fit. The paper also exhaustively discussed the role diet and exercise regime can play as strategies for mitigating mental disorders, increasing the feeling of happiness and ultimately ensure a sound mind in a sound body.

INTRODUCTION

There is no health without mental health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health, as "a state of complete physical, mental, social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO 2001 pl). Mental health is more than the absence of mental illness; it is vital to individuals, families and societies. Mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make contribution to his or her community (WHO 2001 a).

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Mental health has been described as multifaceted with six dimensions: affective, behavioural, cognitive, socio-political, spiritual and psychological (Tudor 1996). The Health Education Authority (1997) defines mental health as 'the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a fundamental believe in our own and others' dignity and worth.

DETERMINANTS OF MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is determined by social economic and environmental factors. Anthony (2004) argued that mental health and mental illness are determined by a multiple and interacting socio-psychological and biological factors, just as health and illness in general. He pointed out that risks to mental illness both for developed and developing countries are associated with indicators of poverty, including low level of education, poor housing and low income. In some societies factors such as insecurity, hopelessness, rapid social change, risks of violence and physical ill-health. Other factors according to him are mental health problems linked to behaviour which interact to intensify their effects on behaviour and well being; such as substance abuse, violence, abuse of women and children, and other health

problems such as heart diseases, depression, anxiety, problem of unemployment, low income, limited education, stressful works, gender discrimination, unhealthy lifestyles and human right violations.

CONCEPT OF MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health refers to a person's ability to enjoy life and to attain a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience. According to Medilexicon's Medical Dictionary quoted by Medical News Today (2009), mental health is emotional, behavioural and social maturity or normally; the absence of a mental or behavioural disorder; a state of psychological well-being in which one has achieved a satisfactory integration of ones instinctual drives, acceptable to both ones self and ones social milieu: and appropriate balance of love, work and leisure pursuits.

Ratcliff (1962) reported that we live in a "hurry-up" world and we are subjecting ourselves to too many stresses. We hurry, constantly and hurry incessantly and our glands attempt to adjust to the constant demand of stress. They pour excess hormones to keep the body going.

Nevertheless, in the end we break down. Arteries deteriorate, blood pressure rises, and heart disease develops and arthritis strikes.

Apart from physical breakdown, mental breakdown may result. Cottrell (1950) defines mental breakdown as the breakdown in ones ability to live 'up to a high level of ones capacities in accordance with the reality of the situation, as viewed by others, to meet ordinary stress of life without developing limiting symptoms and to make decisions and assume responsibilities appropriate to one's age.

Murchison (1984) also opined that the mentally healthy person is one who treats others as individuals, who is flexible under internal or external stress, who obtains pleasure from many sources, who sees and accepts self-limitations to fulfil personal needs in doing productive tasks.

THE COMMON FORMS OF MENTAL DISORDERS

Among others, this includes

- **Anxiety Disorders** these are most common group of mental disorders. The sufferer, have a severe fear or anxiety which is linked to certain objects or situations, examples which include:

- **Panic Disorders**- the person experiences sudden paralysing tremor or imminent disasters.
- **Phobia**- may include simple phobias- disproportionate fear of objects, social-phobias fear of being subjected to the judgement of others and agoraphobia-dread of situations where getting away or breaking free may be difficult.
- **OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder)**: Constant stressful thoughts (obsessions) and a powerful urge to perform repetitive acts e.g. constant hand washing.
- **PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder)**: this can occur after somebody has been through a traumatic event - something horrible and scary that the person thinks that his/her life and other people's lives are in danger.

- **Mood Disorders** - These are known as affective or depressive disorders, Patients with these illnesses share disturbances or mood changes, generally involving either mania (elation) or depressive mood disorders include:

Major depression: the sufferer is no longer interested in and does not enjoy activities and events previously

pleasurable to him with prolonged period of sadness.

- **Bipolar disorder:** known as maniac-depressive illness, or maniac depression. The sufferers oscillate from episodes of euphoria (mania) and depression (despair).
- **Dysthymia:** - mild chronic depression patient has a chronic feeling of being ill or lack of interest in activities, once pleasurable to him.
- **SAD - (Seasoned Affective Disorder)** - a type of major depression, usually triggered by lack of daylight.
- **Schizophrenia disorders** - whether or not schizophrenia is a single disorder or a group of related illness has yet to be fully determined. The sufferer has thoughts that appear fragmented and finds it hard to process information. It has positive and negative symptoms. Negative such as withdrawal syndrome, lack of motivation and a flat or inappropriate mood.

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

According to medical news today - www.earthhouse.org (2009) a number

of ways are open to people with mental health problems which include, dealing with the conditions either by receiving treatment or through other means. This is so because, what works for one person may not work for another. This is especially the case with mental health.

Medical news today (2009) pointed out that some strategies or treatment are more successful when combined with others as the patient with chronic mental disorder may draw on different options at different stages in his life. The majority of experts say that the well-informed patient is probably the best judge of what treatment suits him better. It is crucial however, that healthcare professionals be aware of these:

SELF HELP IS NECESSARY

There are a lot people with mental health problems can do, to improve their mental health. Among others, these include alterations in life style, which may include a better diet, lower alcohol and illegal drug consumption, exercise and getting enough sleep can make enormous differences to a mental health patient's mental health. (Medical News Today 2009) The significance of exercise and diet as elements among other strategies of dealing with mental health problems are now examined.

EXERCISE AND MENTAL HEALTH

Exercise and mental health go hand in hand; this is because it is difficult to separate the mind's activities from that of the body. They play off and support each other in the mind-body interaction. Physical health or exercise influences how the brain functions. These influences may affect the function of both the mind-to-body and body-to-mind directions of the link (Evans & Burghard, 2008).

Exercise is comparable to road repair on a two opposing lanes both with potholes. Fixing one without the other makes the journey on the unkempt side bumpy and miserable. Exercise and physical activities must be made to work on the two sides of the road to benefit the two-way communication between the brain and the body. In essence, it is safe to say that mental health (MH) exists in the brain, where the individual perceives, interprets, and acts on interpretations. It makes sense to keep the brain healthy, by taking it for a walk, or a run, or to the gym or out to mow the lawn even (Evans & Burghardt 2008). That exercise brings oxygen and blood to the brain and more little blood vessels are created which bring more nutrients and oxygen to the neurons the better those neurons are nurtured and the more

effective one is, in interpretation of sensory data and ultimately in mental health. Evans et al. (2008) submit that exercise is the most important factor in increasing the recently discovered capacities of the human brain-neurogenesis and neuroplasticity. The former, they posited, described the brain's ability to grow new neuron daily and the latter, describes brain's amazing capacity to link neurons in new networks. Evans et al. pointed out that if a person fails to exercise and challenge those new neurons daily, they may lead to Alzheimer's disease.

Judith Easton, as quoted by Panning (2000) noted that one reason for the feeling of well being that are generated during and after exercise is the release of endorphins. These chemicals released by the brain, she posited are the body's natural painkillers and can lead to an increase in feelings of happiness.

Exercise leads to an increase in energy and to better sleeping patterns, which may also explain why it is so helpful to people with depression, feeling youthful, joyful and the pleasure of being in one's body are very beneficial. People should take time out to exercise, instead of seeing exercise as being punitive. It

should be seen as an affirmation of living and a function to maintain wellness (Easton 2000).

Researchers at Duke University as reported by Panning (2000) studied people suffering from depression for 4 months and found that 60% of the participants who exercised for 30 minutes three times a week overcame their depression without using antidepressant medication. This according to the report is the same percentage rate as for those who only used medication in their treatment for depression.

DIET AND MENTAL HEALTH

Seymour, (2000) reported that the link between a person's diet and his mental health is becoming more and more relevant, as the Mental Health Foundation evidence suggests that a healthy diet is instrumental in the treatment and prevention of mental disorders such as depression, schizophrenia and attention depicting hyperactivity disorder. Seymour stated further that studies have shown that treatment, by utilizing nutrients such, as zinc, vitamins B1, B2 and C, see greater relief of symptoms in people with mental disorders.

Diet and mental health are "inextricably linked" especially in the prevention of low mood and depression, according to the mental health foundation, quoted in <http://www.tescodicts.com> 2009. The report pointed out that the cost of treating mental health cases in the UK has now reached almost £100 billion a year. With many patients being unaware of the natural benefits of food as well as its impact on short and long term mental health, the evidence indicates that food plays an important contributing role in the development, management and prevention of specific mental health problems. Studies have shown that illness such as depression, ADHA (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and Alzheimer's disease are all affected by diet and nutrition. Experts recommend that a diet rich in vitamin D and omega - 3 fatty acids is good for boosting low mood and symptoms of mental illness.

Capra (2007) in a work on Recent advances in the diet and mental health said that as biological and medical sciences progress, the role of nutrition is recognised 'more and more to be fundamental to mental health and not simply in the traditional view of vitamins and mineral deficiencies, weight loss or

recreational programme. She pointed out that in the area of mental health, there have been major changes in our understanding of how nutrition affects the body at the cellular levels through to our knowledge of the composition of foods and the effect of diet on health to management regimens utilizing diet therapies.

The report reveals that in terms of mechanism, we now have better understanding of the role of nutrients and photochemical generally and specifically. This has identified role such as omega-3 fatty acids with respect to brain chemistry, the effects of pressor amines on mood, folic acid on the aging process among others.

Capra (2007) posted that there is considerable support for the concept that better nutrition and increased intake of some nutrients are advantageous. According to her, "psychiatric agriculture" is a new term that has appeared. It is the hypothesis that globalisation and change in traditional diets affects mental health of communities in transition. Nutrition management of mental health has also changed. Stress can be moderated by nutrition, as can some form of disordered

thinking. Newer nutrition therapies for eating disorders have also proven very advantageous.

CONCLUSION

It is important for people to 'exercise regularly as it boost confidence, contribute to psychological health and well being. Exercise is a preventive or well-being activity that helps prevent physical and emotional problems.

The evidence is growing and becoming more compelling, that diet can play a role in the care and treatment of people with mental disorder. The integrated approach for dealing with mental health problem must be considered, which recognises the inter play of biological, psychological, social and environmental factor, with diet and exercise in the centre of it all.

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