

Healthy minds and bodies go hand in hand

**“Moving Grays Harbor”
By Maryann Welch**

Our body is an amazing machine when you stop to think about it. What other machine do you know of that can process food, answer the phone, go to the grocery store, ride a bike and walk the dog – and all at the same time!! Yes, we ask a lot of our body and minds and there are times when we all have to wonder how we made it through a particularly busy week, month or year. Multi-tasking and the stresses of daily life can take its toll on us to the point that it may affect both our physical and mental health. I am continually learning that how I feel mentally has a lot to do with what I accomplish or my level of activity on any given day. In reflecting on May as national Mental Health Month I realize that the words “mental health” can have a vastly different meaning to different people. One thing, however, that remains true across the spectrum of mental health is that physical health and mental health go hand-in-hand and they can each have a positive or negative effect on the other.

Mental health is something that most people don't even think about. Sure, we all have days that we might feel like we are “in a funk” or “a little blah”, but we usually snap out of it rather quickly. Have you ever had one of those days when you just didn't feel like doing any thing but laying around the house? So, if you did lie around the house, how did you feel? I bet you still felt “blah” by the end of the day. What happened if you made yourself go do

something – walk around the block, go to the gym or even visit with a friend? I bet you started to feel a little bit better about the day, right? When we do things that we enjoy or we are active, we produce a chemical (endorphins) that helps lift our mood. I know there are times that I have to convince myself that I should not skip my workout even though “I am really tired today” (how many of you have used that one?). So, after trying to talk myself out of skipping, I usually don't and I always feel much better (mental health) after I am through with my exercise session (physical health).

So, that was just one simple scenario where mental health and physical health go hand-in-hand. But what about people we know who deal with poor mental or poor physical health on a daily basis? The fix for them is rarely as simple as “just do it”, but the more you understand about the connection, the more you can move toward being your own best advocate or even be better enabled to help others live with a mental illness. I spoke with Becky Kellas, the Mental Health Manager here at the Public Health and Social Services Department, about this very issue. She agrees that exercise is beneficial across the spectrum of mental illness from mild depression to major mental illness. “Regular exercise can often relieve a mild depression without the need for anti-depressant medication” Becky shares, “and exercise can also help prevent the weight gain or other side effects that often accompany the use of medications used to treat mental illness.”

Another worry for people affected by mental illness is *Metabolic Syndrome*. This syndrome consists of high blood pressure, diabetes and high cholesterol and is a serious side-effect for people taking atypical antipsychotic medications. Although all these

conditions can affect people who do not suffer from mental illness, they tend to affect individuals with serious mental illnesses at a higher rate than the general population.

The good news is that, like all individuals who suffer from diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, regular exercise can help manage the syndrome and should be an important part of an individual's wellness and recovery plan. Encourage anyone you know who may struggle with mental illness to join you in doing something active. Go for a walk in an environment that suits them (the beach, your own neighborhood, pick a favorite trail) or put in an exercise video and do it together. There are many ways to encourage and support others in becoming more physically active in their daily lives. When faced with serious consequences for inactivity, I'm sure we all would be thankful for a little support and encouragement from our family and friends.

As for me, I feel fortunate that I am able to ward off any bad days or grumpy moods with a little bit of physical activity. Whether it's walking, spinning, yoga or a good session of gardening, my mood is always improved. I challenge you to nourish your own mental health this month – find an activity that you enjoy and you'll be well on your way to a better state of mental and physical health.

Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the public health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.