

Physical vulnerability

The relationship between serious mental illness and physical health

The vast majority of people with serious mental illness have physical illness comorbidities (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2016). A serious mental illness is defined as a diagnosable disorder which results in functional impairment that substantially interferes with major life activities. In previous literature, this includes schizophrenia and other psychoses, bipolar disorder, severe anxiety and depression.

In Australia, people with a serious mental illness die 20 years earlier on average than the population's average life expectancy (Roberts, Lockett, Bagnall, Maylea, & Hopwood, 2018). Similar estimates are reported in the USA (Olson, Gerhard, Huang, Crystal, & Stroup, 2015) and Europe (Erlangsen et al., 2017). The life expectancy gap between people living with a serious mental illness and the rest of the population is growing in Australia (Lawrence, Hancock, & Kisely, 2013). People in Australia with a serious mental illness are two times more likely to die early and three times more likely if they live in rural communities (Roberts et al., 2018).

The major causes of early death for Australians with serious mental illness are cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, cancer and diabetes (Roberts et al., 2018). For every one person with a mental illness that dies by suicide, ten die prematurely due to the aforementioned health problems (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). A 2010 report indicates that for people living with psychotic illness, one quarter reported physical health as one of the biggest challenges (Morgan et al., 2011).

Barriers to good physical health in people living with serious mental illness

People with serious mental illness have greater exposure to known risk factors – lower socioeconomic status, high rates of smoking, alcohol and other drug use, sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrition, unemployment and poverty. For example, people with serious mental illness are twice as likely to use tobacco as the general population, to smoke more on average

and are less likely to quit smoking (World Health Organization, 2018). Additionally, mental illness can make people withdrawn and sedentary and reduce a person's ability to actively manage their own condition (DiMatteo, Lepper, & Croghan, 2000).

Diagnostic overshadowing occurs in specialist mental health services; that is, physical illness is either seen as part of the mental health condition, and therefore is not diagnosed and treated, or priority is given to reducing the symptoms of the mental illness and the physical health problems are deemed of secondary importance. People with serious mental illness experience delayed cancer diagnosis and detection of cardiovascular disease, relative to the general population (Cunningham, Sarfati, Stanley, Peterson, & Collings, 2015; Hayes, Marston, Walters, King, & Osborn, 2017).

Antipsychotic medications can cause side effects such as weight gain and changes to blood sugar regulation that often lead to life shortening illnesses such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Studies with young people with first episode psychosis indicate that antipsychotic medication often leads to significant weight gain and metabolic side effects as early as within 12 weeks (Pérez-Iglesias et al., 2014). There is a need for balance between managing the debilitating symptoms of mental illness, and looking after overall physical health (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2015).

In spite of having worse health, individuals with serious mental illness typically have reduced access to and quality of health care, due to financial barriers, stigma and discrimination (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2015). People with a mental illness do not get sufficient access to programs to help them stop smoking, exercise or lose weight (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2015). There is often a lack of integrated policy addressing the treatment and management of comorbid mental and physical ill health (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2015) and mental health staff sometimes do not feel confident in providing physical health care (The Lancet, 2013).

The cost of physical disability and serious mental illness

Individuals with a serious mental illness who are experiencing poor physical health have higher levels of ongoing disability, reduced workforce participation/productivity, a greater likelihood of poverty and reduced life expectancy (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2015). At the societal level, serious mental illness affects a small proportion of the Australian population, but has a disproportionate impact on the national health system and economy (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2016). The annual cost of comorbidities associated with premature death in those with serious mental illness has been estimated at A\$15 billion (0.9% of GDP) in 2014 (Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, 2016).

Equally well initiative

The National Consensus Statement, Equally Well has been launched to improve the physical health of people living with mental illness in Australia (National Mental Health Commission, 2016). This statement emphasises the right of people experiencing mental illness to experience equity in health care. Equally Well aims to (1) promote awareness of physical health for those experiencing mental illness and to facilitate collaboration; (2) share examples of good practice in this sphere; and (3) provide resources to improve the physical health of people living with mental illness.

Recommendations for mental health clinicians to enhance consumer physical health

There is much that can be done to improve the physical health and increase the life

expectancy of people with serious mental illness.

- Undertake training on recognition of acute physical illness and management of long-term physical conditions (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2016).
- Undertake regular assessments of the physical health needs of people with serious mental illnesses (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2016).
- Use nationally available data/local data on the mortality of people with serious mental illness in the local area to develop a strategy to address the causes of death of people with serious mental illness (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2016).
- Discuss physical health topics with consumers and carers (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2016).
- Facilitate collaborative working between consumers, carers and clinicians (Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, 2016).
- Address tobacco cessation with consumers, if applicable (World Health Organization, 2015) [see Queensland Government 'Smoking Cessation Clinical Pathway' (listed under 'Resources') below.]
- Promote evidence-based lifestyle interventions to address health behaviours such as diet and physical activity (World Health Organization, 2015). Interventions should be tailored to account for motivational and cognitive challenges in this population. This could include social support strategies and cues in the environment (e.g. smartphone reminders) (McGinty, Baller, Azrin, Juliano-Bult, & Daumit, 2016).

The figure below (see next page) presents a graphic of a systemic approach to improve the physical health of people with mental illnesses.

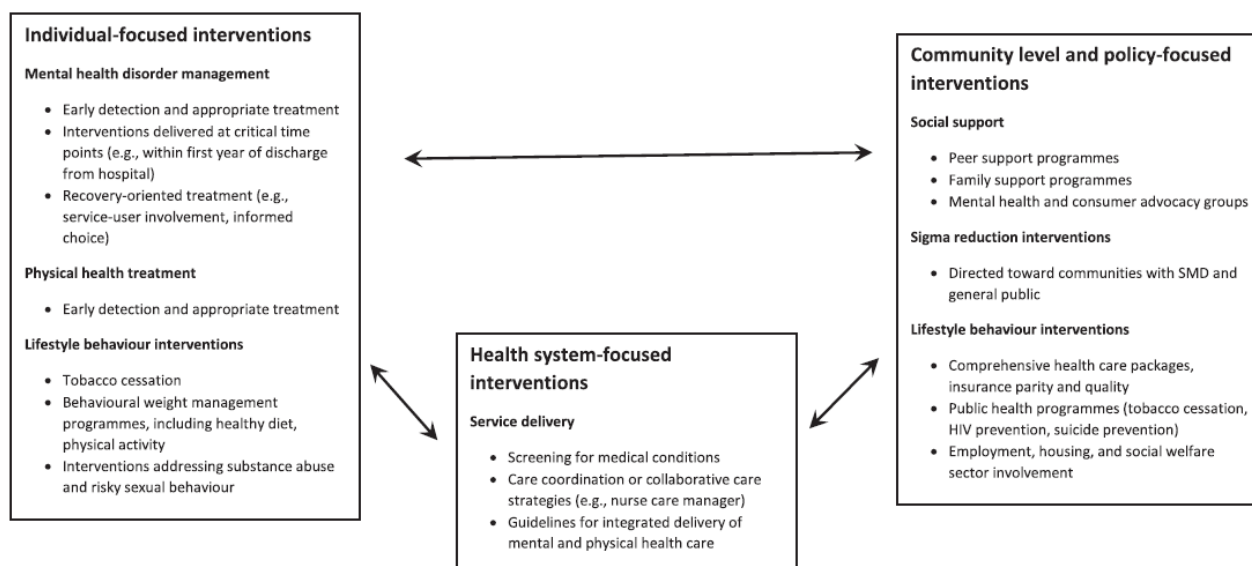


Figure 1. World Health Organization model to conceptualise and structure interventions to improve the physical health of people diagnosed with mental illness (Liu et al., 2017).

Note: SMD = serious mental disorder

Resources

For clinicians

Queensland Health 'Smoking Cessation Clinical Pathway' and information (QH staff access only)
<https://qheps.health.qld.gov.au/caru/networks/respiratory/smoking-cessation>

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) report on the physical health of people with mental illness
<https://www.ranzcp.org/files/resources/reports/keeping-body-and-mind-together.aspx>

For everyone

Equally Well <https://www.equallywell.org.au/>

Side effects of antipsychotic medication
<https://www.yourhealthinmind.org/treatments-medication/antipsychotic-medication>

Side effects of antidepressant medication
<https://www.yourhealthinmind.org/treatments-medication/antidepressant-medication>

Physical health and mental illness tip sheet (RANZCP)
<https://www.yourhealthinmind.org/getmedia/10e892b8-621c-4926-94fc-32047ac68f12/Physical-health-YHIM.pdf.aspx?ext=.pdf>

Heart Foundation <https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/> for information on cardio vascular disease, being physically active, achieving a healthy weight and eating healthy.

Diabetes Australia <https://www.diabetesaustralia.com.au/> for information on diabetes prevention, physical health and maintaining healthy lifestyle.

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