

The Mind-Body Connection: Protecting your mental wellness when facing physical health conditions

Mental and physical health are closely linked—one often affects the other. Physical health problems can lead to mental health challenges, which in turn can lead to or worsen physical health problems—a cycle that may be hard to break.

How a chronic condition can affect how you feel emotionally

A chronic condition, one that is defined as persistent or otherwise long-lasting in its effects, can negatively impact your mental health. It is always stressful to receive and then, manage a diagnosis like cancer, diabetes, or hypertension. There may also be physical symptoms such as pain, fatigue, or nausea caused by the illness itself or by the treatments. These can all affect how you feel and function emotionally.

Acute conditions can also affect you emotionally

Illnesses do not have to be chronic to trigger mental health challenges. An acute illness or injury can also affect your mental health, even though they may not last long. For example:

- Back, head, or stomach pain may keep you from participating in your favourite activities and hobbies.
- A broken arm may keep you from daily routines, such as preparing healthy meals or completing household chores.
- A heart attack may lead to feelings of fear or anxiety, especially if you are alone.
- A virus, like a stomach bug or flu, can wreak havoc on your mood.

Ways to protect your mental health when experiencing a physical condition

It may be impossible to speed up the healing process or to cure a chronic condition, but there are ways you can reduce the impact on your mental health and wellbeing.

Sleep. If you have trouble getting the recommended 7 to 8 hours of sleep, here are a few tips that may help:

- Go to sleep and wake up around the same time each day, even on weekends.
- Keep a bedtime routine, for example, reading a relaxing book, taking a shower, or listening to a meditation.
- Make your bedroom a “no electronics” zone.
- Keep active, but avoid vigorous exercise within a few hours of bedtime, as this can disrupt sleep.

- Limit caffeine to several hours before bedtime.
- Avoid alcohol before bed, as it affects how deeply you sleep.
- Avoid or reduce smoking, as it interferes with sleep quality.

Diet. What you eat and how often you eat may be even more important than ever when you are managing a health condition, are ill, or injured. Eating healthy foods is essential for your body to function properly and to heal. If your condition is affected by your diet, as it is with diabetes or high blood pressure, there is an even greater need to eat well. Canada's [food guide](#) is a good place to learn key facts about what constitutes a healthy diet.

Exercise. The word “exercise” can evoke thoughts of spending hours at a gym or running a 10K, but exercise does not have to be that disciplined or intense. Many forms of physical activity helps promote a healthy body and a healthy mind. Even people who have physical limitations, such as back pain or a broken limb, can find safe and realistic ways to add movement into their day. Some activities may include:

- walking
- gardening
- dancing
- chair yoga
- strength training using resistance bands
- using the stairs instead of the elevator

Laughter. Laughter is some of the best and most enjoyable medicine around for maintaining the health of the mind and the body. When you laugh, it triggers a series of positive physiological responses: your heart rate goes up, blood circulation to the brain and body improves, and muscles become more relaxed. It can stimulate the release of endorphins—chemicals which boost your mood and act as natural painkillers—helping you feel more positive and calmer.

Taking care of your physical health is an important part of taking care of your mental health. Understanding the link between physical and mental health lets us know that making the best lifestyle choices we can, may lead to improved mental and physical wellbeing.

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