

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH TOGETHER: NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES AND MENTAL HEALTH IN SOUTH ASIA

Bilal Ahmad Khan^{1,2}

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, International Islamic University, Islamabad

² Institute of Public Health and Social Sciences, Khyber Medical University, Peshawar

This editorial may be cited as: Khan BA. Mental and physical health together: non-communicable diseases and mental health in South Asia. *Ann Allied Health Sci.* 2023;9(1):1-2.

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health are major public health challenges in South Asia. According to the WHO, NCDs account for about 60% of deaths in the region, and mental health disorders affect approximately 7.5% of the population.¹ These health issues are complex and interrelated, with one often exacerbating the other. In many cases, the prevalence of NCDs and mental health disorders in South Asia is linked to lifestyle factors.² In addition, poverty and lack of access to healthcare, contribute to the burden of these diseases.³ One of the major challenges in addressing NCDs and mental health in South Asia is the lack of awareness and stigma associated with these conditions. Many people in the region do not seek medical help for mental health issues due to shame and fear of discrimination.⁴ Similarly, there is often a lack of understanding about the importance of healthy lifestyle choices and the prevention and management of NCDs.

To address these challenges, it is essential to prioritize investment in healthcare infrastructure and human resources. This includes increasing the availability and accessibility of mental health services and primary healthcare, as well as investing in health education and awareness programs.² Governments and policymakers in the region must also prioritize the implementation of policies to promote healthy lifestyles, such as taxation on tobacco and alcohol products, and regulations on unhealthy food products.³

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH TOGETHER

NCDs are the leading cause of morbidity and mortality. According to the WHO, NCDs accounted for 71% of global deaths in 2019.⁵ South Asia is no exception to this trend. However,

the link between mental and physical health in the context of NCDs has often been overlooked in this region. NCDs are a significant burden in South Asia, with a prevalence of 60-80% among adults.⁵ NCDs are largely preventable. However, mental health is also an important risk factor for NCDs, with depression and anxiety being the most common mental health disorders in the region. Mental and physical health are interconnected and should be addressed together. Poor mental health can lead to physical health problems, and vice versa. For example, depression and anxiety increase the risk of NCDs such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. Additionally, NCDs can also lead to poor mental health outcomes. It is essential to address mental and physical health together in the context of NCDs to achieve better health outcomes.

Research has shown that mental and physical health are interconnected, with one often affecting the other. Conversely, mental health disorders can lead to physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach pain, and fatigue.⁶ Exercise improves mental health as it releases endorphins, which are chemicals that promote feelings of happiness and euphoria. It also helps to reduce stress and improve cognitive function, leading to better overall mental health.⁷ The stigma about mental health can prevent people from taking help, leading to increased suffering and poorer health outcomes. Addressing the stigma surrounding mental health is crucial to promoting overall well-being. This involves challenging negative attitudes and perceptions towards mental health issues, promoting education and awareness, and providing resources and support for those who are struggling.⁷

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLISTIC CARE

Holistic care is an approach that considers the entire person and addresses both their mental and physical health needs and that one cannot be adequately addressed without addressing the other. Holistic care involves a team-based approach that includes healthcare professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers, alongside medical professionals. An integrated care approach that addresses both mental and physical health is essential to improving health outcomes in South Asia. Integrated care involves the coordination of healthcare services across different providers and settings. In the context of NCDs, integrated care can include the provision of mental health services as part of routine care for NCDs. This approach can improve the quality of care and reduce the burden of NCDs in the region. Healthcare providers have a crucial role in addressing both mental and physical health in the context of NCDs. They can assist in identifying mental health disorders in patients with NCDs and providing appropriate treatment. Additionally, healthcare providers can also provide support and education to individuals with NCDs to improve their mental and physical health outcomes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PREVENTION

Prevention is key to reducing the burden of NCDs in South Asia. A comprehensive approach that includes the promotion of healthy lifestyles, screening, and early detection of NCDs, and the provision of appropriate treatment is necessary to prevent NCDs. Additionally, addressing risk factors for both mental and physical health, such as unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, is crucial to prevent NCDs and improving overall health outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, mental and physical health are deeply interconnected, and addressing one requires addressing the other. Holistic care that considers the entire person is crucial to promoting overall well-being. Addressing stigma is also crucial to ensure that people take help without fear of judgment or discrimination. As the link between mental and physical health is essential in the context of NCDs in South Asia. Mental health

is an important risk factor for NCDs, and poor mental health outcomes can also result from NCDs. The stigma surrounding mental health in the region can prevent individuals from seeking help, making it crucial to address this issue. An integrated care approach that addresses both mental and physical health is necessary to improve health outcomes in the region. Healthcare providers have a crucial role in identifying mental health disorders and providing appropriate treatment. Prevention is key to reducing the burden of NCDs in the region, and a comprehensive approach that includes the promotion of healthy lifestyles and early detection of NCDs is necessary to achieve this goal. It is time to address mental and physical health together in the context of NCDs in South Asia to achieve better health outcomes for all.

REFERENCES

1. Noncommunicable diseases (NCD) country profiles. World Health Organization (2018).
2. Sathyanarayana Rao, T. S., Andrade, C. & Menezes, R. G. The challenges of mental health care in developing countries: A critical review. (2019).
3. National Research Council, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, Committee on Population & Panel on Policy Research and Data Needs to Meet the Challenge of Aging in Asia. Aging in Asia: Findings from New and Emerging Data Initiatives. (National Academies Press, 2012).
4. Patel, V. et al. The Lancet Commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *Lancet* 392, 1553–1598 (2018).
5. Noncommunicable diseases. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>.
6. Stress symptoms: Effects on your body and behavior. Mayo Clinic <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-symptoms/art-20050987> (2021).
7. Mandolesi, L. et al. Effects of Physical Exercise on Cognitive Functioning and Wellbeing: Biological and Psychological Benefits. *Front. Psychol.* 9, 509 (2018).