



Pick Your Path to Health

Mental and Physical Health

Here's a question for you: How is your general health?

Now let's get more specific. Would you say your *physical health* is excellent, good, fair, or poor?

Okay, that was pretty simple.

Now what about the state of your *mental health*? Is depression, anxiety, or stress affecting your mood on a regular basis? Would you rate your mental health as excellent, good, fair, or poor?

Your *general health* is a combination of your physical and mental well-being. If you're like most people, you probably only considered your physical health when we posed the "How is your general health" question to you initially. But really, to come up with a truly accurate assessment of your general health, you should consider how you are doing physically *and* mentally. This is especially important for women who suffer from some forms of mental illness at higher rates than men.

Mental health eludes many

Achieving and maintaining good mental health can be challenging for any woman. Some studies show, however, that it may be even more challenging for African Americans. "The prevalence of mental disorders is estimated to be higher among African Americans than among whites," according to *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. While more research is needed, the Surgeon General cites the following barriers facing African Americans:

- African Americans, more than most other groups, tend to deny the threat of mental illness and strive to overcome mental health problems through self-reliance and determination.
- African Americans minimize the significance of stress in their lives and try to prevail on their own.
- Cultural traditions or religious beliefs may sometimes keep someone from seeking mental health services; African Americans, for example, may seek guidance from a member of the clergy when faced with personal difficulties.

- African Americans more often voice a general mistrust of health care professionals; this is likely due to the long history of overdiagnosis of schizophrenia and underdiagnosis of depression among African Americans.

Poor mental health affects physical health

"Some studies show that negative mental states impair our immune function while our positive state enhances it," says Phyllis Greenberger, President and CEO of the Society for Women's Health Research, a national advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., that seeks to improve the health of women through research.

This is important for women to know because they are affected twice as often as men by most forms of depression and anxiety disorders and nine times as often by eating disorders, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

Poor mental health can manifest itself in a multitude of ways depending on the illness. For depression, symptoms include ongoing sadness and anxiety, irritability, thoughts of death or suicide, lack of energy, feelings of helplessness, and/or eating and weight problems. Those suffering from anxiety show signs of chronic, exaggerated worry and tension and often expect the worst even when there are no signs of trouble.

Addressing mental health problems, when they exist, is absolutely critical to helping you achieve the healthy body-mind balance you seek.

Getting help

Too often, people are afraid of seeking mental health treatment out of fear of the unknown or due to society's stigma of mental health issues. Help is available, though, and more than at any time in our history, treatments are proving quite effective in bringing relief to those suffering from mental health disorders. If you or someone you love is combating a mental health problem, consider the following:

- Mental disorders and mental health problems affect people of all social classes and backgrounds.
- Mental health is fundamental to your overall health.
- Mental disorders are real health conditions that can be treated.

Next time your doctor asks you about your health, make sure you discuss both your physical and mental health. Seeking happiness and satisfaction with life can put you on a path to better overall health, and that is no small achievement.

To learn more about mental health, visit the Women's Mental Health Consortium at www.nimh.nih.gov/wmhc/index.cfm or call NIMH Public Inquiries at (301) 443-4513.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."