

Role of Psychologists in Addressing the Mental and Behavioral Health Concerns of the 21st Century

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in its national health promotion and disease prevention initiative, "Healthy People 2010," has determined ten Leading Health Indicators that will be used to measure the health of the Nation in the beginning of the 21st century. As a group, the Leading Health Indicators reflect the major health concerns of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. The ten Leading Health Indicators include: physical activity, overweight and obesity, tobacco use, substance abuse, responsible sexual behavior, mental health, injury and violence, environmental quality, immunization and access to health care. Mental health is among these leading health indicators but mental and behavioral factors play a role in the other indicators as well except for access to health care. As health professionals, psychologists play a critical role in addressing the mental and behavioral health aspects of each of these indicators.

Substance Use

Substance abuse is the cause of more deaths, illnesses and disabilities than any other preventable health condition and seriously undermines America's family life, economy and public safety (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2001). Two thirds of Americans with serious substance abuse treatment needs are not being treated (DHHS Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2001).

- Psychologists possess the essential therapeutic skills for delivering treatment to substance abuse clients including empathy, good listening skills and training in evidence based methods known to curb addictive behaviors.

Tobacco Use

Nicotine dependence is associated with poorer quality of life, greater disability, and mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression according to the World Health Organization (February 2008). Tobacco use is a behavior and psychological research has contributed much to our understanding of behavior change. According to one such study, students with a lifetime diagnosis of depression or treatment for depression were 7 times as likely as other students to use tobacco (Lenz 2004).

- By assessing a client's needs, abilities or behavior using a variety of methods, including psychometric tests, interviews and direct observation of behavior, psychologists help tobacco users quit smoking.

Responsible Sexual Behavior

Risky sexual behaviors can lead to several major problems: unplanned pregnancy, HIV infection, and other sexually transmitted diseases. Many studies examine the behavioral and environmental indicators associated with risky sexual behaviors of adolescents including depression, antisocial behaviors, illicit drug or alcohol use, anxiety, suicidality, and variables related to adolescents' family, peers or friends (Biglan et al., 1990; Stiffman et al, 1995).

- Psychologists have the ability to address each of these factors associated with risky sexual behaviors and devise strategies for patients to meet the individual needs.

Injury and Violence

Injuries can have a lasting effect not only on a person's general health but also their mental and behavioral health. Injured victims may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a disorder along with traumatic brain injury (TBI) which is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst returning military personnel. Sometimes correlated with injury, violence also has a lasting impact on a person's mental health. Psychological studies show that a child who sees a parent abused is more likely to use violence as way to solving problems and subsequently more likely to abuse others. Further, childhood aggression can often predict adult violence.

- Psychologists possess the ability to devise and monitor appropriate programs of treatment, including therapy, counseling or advice, in collaboration with colleagues to assist adults and children in coping with the psychological factors associated with injury and violence.

Physical Activity

Physical activity or exercise is behavior that has been inextricably linked with better general physical health. Physical activity, however, can also have benefits for a person's mental health. According to a recent study, "People who got as little as 20 minutes per week of any physical activity were less likely than inactive people to report psychological distress." Furthermore, exercise helps people with severe depression, anxiety, or chronic mental illness (Harvard Mental Health Letter 2005).

- Psychologists possess the skills necessary to assist patients in making behavioral changes to adopt physical activity to increase their mental well-being.

Overweight and Obesity

According to a recent study, "obese people tend to see the causes of their weight problems as lying in a number of largely behavioral factors - such as a lack of physical activity and over-consumption - rather than in a family history/genetic component" (Medical News Today 2008). Understanding the interaction between the mind and the body can help people to address obesity and weight loss issues. Stress and other emotions or psychological states can often lead people to over-eat and exercise less, affecting physical health over the long-term.

- Finding ways to address these interaction issues between the mind and the body in relation to obesity, psychologists can establish lasting healthy behaviors for the nation's overweight.

Immunization

Immunizations for both children and adults can prevent the spread of serious and harmful diseases such as the measles, polio, and hepatitis. There is much fear associated with immunization, however. Adults and children may fear the immunizations themselves or parents may fear that immunizations will have adverse effects on the overall health of their children.

- Psychologists can address both parent and infant anxiety before and during the immunization process and can develop materials and informational guides on the behavioral aspect of immunization.