



FAMOUS PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS



Selma Blair

The actress is candid about the highs and lows of living with multiple sclerosis.

The Mental Toll of a Physical Illness

Whether it's an autoimmune disease, chronic illness or long-lasting COVID symptoms, physical ailments can have a negative impact on your mental health — and vice versa. Here, two experts weigh in on the effects and how you can cope.

By Stacey Winconek

As the COVID-19 pandemic rages on, experts are discovering that some people who have become ill experience lingering symptoms such as fatigue, cough, shortness of breath, headache and joint pain. COVID-19 may also cause damage to the heart, lungs and brain, according to the Mayo Clinic.

But the effects of an illness, whether it's COVID or cancer, can also extend beyond the physical. Thinking "I should feel better by now" while coping with the symptoms of a chronic condition can have an impact on mental health. On the flipside, mental health issues can also cause physical changes. Fatigue, for example, is common with depression. So, just how intertwined are physical and psychological health?

In the brain, emotional pain and physical pain are closely linked, says Aaron Corte O'Brien, LLMSW, a psychotherapist at Michigan Integrative Holistic Psychiatry in Bingham Farms. "There's a lot of overlap in the circuitry of our brain centers for physical pain and emotional pain," he says. "That can be a double whammy if you're experiencing physical pain because usually there's going to be emotional pain associated with that."

Physical health challenges can also be traumatic, especially if they appear suddenly, says Corte O'Brien, who works as a trauma therapist. "You're not prepared emotionally, you're not prepared cognitively, and that's the shock aspect with trauma," he says.

The impact on parenting

As a mom of four daughters, Dr. Lynne

Lyons, a board-certified psychiatrist and owner of Lakes Psychiatric Center in West Bloomfield Township, knows how much energy it takes to be a parent. She also knows that managing pain caused by illness saps energy, too. "Just to get up and function takes a lot of energy," Lyons says. Patients with depression use energy to get out of bed, shower and do things most of us take for granted — and that can impact how they parent.

"There's an energy drain," she says. "That bucket is constantly being drained just to exist — not even to do anything. So, when you want to dip into that energy bucket, it's already half empty because it's got leaks all over the place and by the end of the day you're already depleted [because] you didn't start with a full tank."

While parents are still ensuring that their children are getting their needs met, they are almost too drained to be engaged with their children or to feel whole, she adds. By the time you're willing to acknowledge depression, she says, "you could lose a whole grade out of your kid's life."

The long haul

For a person who struggled to breathe while sick with COVID, some slight chest tightening might lead them to think the illness is back. It's common to feel that way because "finely tuned memories are tied with sensation" and can trigger anxiety as a response, Corte O'Brien notes.

To combat these feelings, both experts say it's important to practice mindfulness,

which allows moment-to-moment awareness without judgment or belief that there is a right or wrong way to think or feel. Calm, Headspace and Stop, Breathe & Think are three apps that can help establish a mindfulness practice.

Self-care is essential, too. Create a list of self-care practices ranging from meditation to exercise to something social (a Zoom date with friends, perhaps). Give yourself five or six options to choose from, Corte O'Brien suggests, and select one to do each day.

Finding support is key, Lyons notes. For some, that could be a disease-specific support group. For others, working with a psychotherapist or the use of prescribed medication can help. If you're having suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-8255, Lyons adds.

"It is very difficult when you have medical conditions that are already chronic and are difficult and then you add depression in there or anxiety or trauma and it just makes it even harder," Lyons says. "You were already trying to do everything under water where it was already so difficult, and now you put lead weights on too. And now you just feel like you're drowning just to get through the day."

The daily struggle can be challenging, so help and hope are crucial. "Hope is so essential, and I think that's such an essential thing right now in our society," she says. "People need hope."

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

There are millions of people in the United States who suffer from autoimmune diseases. And in this pandemic year, there have been countless cases of COVID-19. While one is a life-long disease, the other has the potential for leaving long-term impacts on a person's physical health. Both can cause anxiety, depression and other mental health struggles. In fact, there is overlap between physical health and mental health, and it can be hard for an individual to cope.

Fortunately, there's help and hope. In this installment of Opening Minds, Ending Stigma, we offer insight on the connection and advice for coping. We hope you find the information helpful and share this with others who are suffering.



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