



## Ask A Health Care Professional The Importance of Mental and Behavioral Health

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The term behavioral health is often used interchangeably with mental health but is a broader term that encompasses our well-being, our thoughts, biology, interaction with others, functioning in society, and our behavior. Good mental health is optimum functioning of the brain, which affects our emotions, behaviors and our thoughts. Everything we do and consume can affect the brain.

### Your body and your brain

As an internist and a psychiatrist, I often state that the head is connected to the body. Not only is there the obvious physical connection that includes a network of nerves physically connecting the body to the brain, but there are also hormones and neurotransmitters connecting the body and brain. Our biome — the bacteria, viruses, and fungi that live within and on our body — ties both the body and brain together through their production of hormones and neurotransmitters.

### Physical health and behavioral health are connected

The relationship between physical health and behavioral health is profound and bidirectional. When one falters, so

does the other. Diabetes and heart disease are two of the most robustly studied areas demonstrating strong bidirectional influences. For example, those with heart disease often suffer with depression and anxiety, and those with depression and anxiety develop heart disease at far greater rates than those who don't. This is why issues with behavioral health must be identified and addressed along with treatment of physical issues. Talk honestly with your health care provider about how you are feeling, not just physically but emotionally and cognitively as well.

### Behavioral health wellness

Given the importance of good behavioral health, how do we maintain it? The activities you do to maintain physical wellness also promote behavioral health wellness. For example, multiple studies have shown that exercise can be helpful for easing depression and anxiety. Likewise, a plant-based, whole food diet has both behavioral health benefits and physical health benefits. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and unprocessed foods help feed the portion of the biome that is associated with wellness while simple sugars and processed foods are associated with the proliferation of bacteria associated with depression, anxiety, heart disease, obesity, and diabetes. Consumption of alcohol has direct effects on the

body, brain, and our biome. If you drink, moderation is key.

### Social connections enhance wellness

We are social beings, and getting out and enjoying activities with friends helps our wellness. Social connections are one of our strongest indicators of resilience connected to longevity. Often, as we get older making new friends can feel difficult. Joining a place of worship, senior center, volunteering, or joining a group or club that caters to your interests can help with meeting friends. Be open to friends of different ages. They can introduce us to interests we might not find otherwise, and learning something new can be quite helpful in keeping the brain healthy and active.

Whatever your state of health, paying attention and attending to both your physical and behavioral health will help you to live your best life.



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