Deciding treatment strategies

Antipsychotic medications have different side effect profiles and may be associated with weight gain and diabetes. Medication should be reviewed for people with mental illness who have one or more features of metabolic syndrome (obesity, insulin resistance, high blood pressure and raised lipid profiles).

Decisions about medication selection or switch must take into consideration an individual's overall needs, including efficacy in managing symptoms, side effects and in some cases cost and availability. People with mental illness are experts about their symptoms and what makes them feel better or worse. Along with their family / caregiver where appropriate, they should be as involved as possible in these decisions.

Sources of support

Family members, friends and caregivers can be an excellent source of insight and support for people with mental illness. Have individuals ask their friends and family for observations about their unhealthy and healthy behaviours, and what hassles and life events affected their decisions. Insights can be used to help develop the person's healthy living plan.

Friends and family can also help put healthy strategies into action. For example, they could join an individual on a daily walk, accompany them during grocery shopping, or locate resources for healthy living such as a good recipe book or route for a walk.

Supervisors of group-living facilities should understand the issues related to metabolic syndrome and incorporate healthy living into meal planning and resident discussions.

Professional support may also play a role. People with mental illness can be referred to a nutritionist or dietician, and professional assistance is recommended for substance abuse (smoking, alcohol, drugs). Wellness programmes within community clinics are another potential source of support. In all cases, a simple approach works best.

The World Federation for Mental Health has members in over 100 countries on six continents and is an accredited consultant to the United Nations and several of its specialised agencies. For more information visit www.wfmh.org.

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Body & mind

Metabolic Syndrome and Mental Health
Information for Mental Health Practitioners

To ensure the physical well-being of people experiencing mental illness there needs to be meaningful collaboration between health professionals, family and caregivers and the individuals concerned.

What is metabolic syndrome?

Metabolic syndrome is a group of risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including obesity, hypertension, impaired glucose tolerance and dyslipidemia.

Recent research shows people with mental illness have an increased risk of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, so metabolic syndrome is a particular concern in these individuals.

Information and education

An important way of preventing metabolic syndrome is physical health monitoring combined with individual responsibility for physical health.

As a primary support for people with mental illness, mental health practitioners are ideally placed to make them aware of metabolic syndrome and help them to understand the importance of attending monitoring sessions with their doctor.

At the same time, people with mental illness should be encouraged to take an interest in their physical health. This can be achieved by emphasising that healthy behaviours, such as eating a balanced diet, being physically active and not smoking, help prevent metabolic syndrome and may increase energy and contribute to an improved sense of total well-being.

Involving people with mental illness

People can have upsetting experiences when trying to change unhealthy habits and may have strong beliefs that healthy behaviours are too difficult, not helpful or even harmful to them.

Any practitioner offering guidance on physical health to a person with mental illness should avoid directly challenging their health beliefs, or lecturing about their lifestyle choices. Instead, try to remain neutral and understand the person's point of view. Encourage them to develop a new perspective on past experiences and avoid self-blame.

Even if individuals think they cannot change bad habits, or do not need or want to lead healthy a lifestyle, they will often acknowledge that other people benefit from healthy behaviour. It can help to talk about healthy behaviour from this point of view.

Identify how behaviours affect health

Help people with mental illness reach their own conclusions about the effects of their lifestyle and encourage them to be active in maintaining their physical health.

Ask them to identify what unhealthy behaviours they might have, and the effects of these behaviours in the past. Help them see the link between their behaviour and their health, as well as their sense of well-being.

Empower individuals

Understand that particularly if individuals are depressed or experiencing negative symptoms of schizophrenia, they may find it hard to imagine that healthy behaviours could be helpful. In these situations, encourage them to keep an open mind, and give healthy behaviours a try "just to see what happens".

Identify what healthy behaviours they have tried, and whether or not they were helpful. Show an appreciation of an individual's experience and concerns, and convey confidence that they can develop healthy habits in the long term.

Plan for healthy living

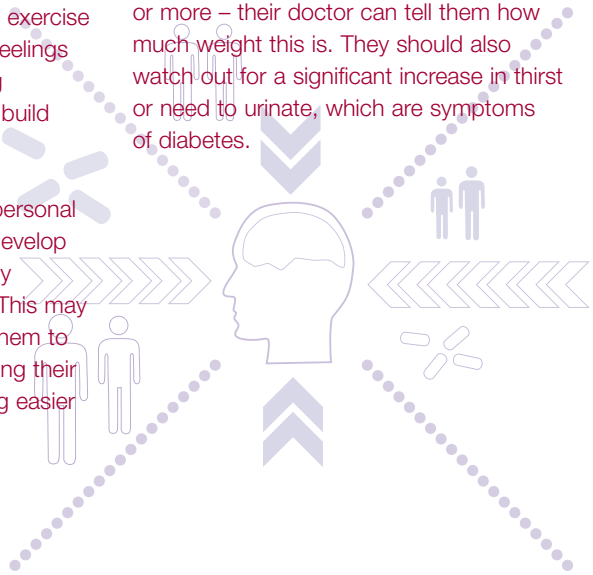
Focusing on personal goals can motivate individuals to change. Common goals for people with mental illness include decreasing symptoms of mental illness, increasing independent living, and improving relationships. Explore whether healthy behaviour could help achieve one of their goals. For example, could exercise help reduce stress and promote feelings of well-being, or could scheduling healthy activities with others help build relationships?

Work with individuals to make a personal plan for a healthier lifestyle, and develop strategies for incorporating healthy behaviour into their daily routine. This may mean finding ways of reminding them to make healthy choices, or simplifying their lifestyle plan to make healthy living easier to fit into their routine.

Help them develop a healthy living plan which:

- Sets reasonable expectations - does not try to do too much or too little.
- Includes activities that are meaningful to the person.
- Makes the most of supportive relationships.
- Avoids situations where people might criticize them.
- Suits their talents and strengths.

Monitoring and self-monitoring

A medical professional should carefully monitor metabolic syndrome risk factors (obesity, insulin resistance, high blood pressure and raised lipid profiles) in people with mental illness.

Individuals should also be encouraged to monitor their own health. This could be as simple as telling their doctor if they have to do their belt up on a different notch, or reporting a change in their weight of 5% or more – their doctor can tell them how much weight this is. They should also watch out for a significant increase in thirst or need to urinate, which are symptoms of diabetes.