

Statement from the Australian Physiotherapy Association on formalising the role of physiotherapy in mental health care

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) calls for enhanced engagement between mental health services, general practice, and physiotherapy to address and improve physical activity, mobility, exercise, and pain relief for patients and health care consumers.

Introduction

The overarching goal of physiotherapy is to improve health, and physiotherapists know first-hand the reciprocal relationship between physical and mental health.

The APA supports the World Physiotherapy definition of health as defined in the World Health Organization (WHO) Constitution of 1948 “as a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. There is no health without mental health.

Physiotherapists work with their patients to reduce their physical suffering, which reduces psychological suffering; and through their diagnosis, treatment and patient management, they also reduce psychological suffering which reduces physical suffering.

There is therefore an urgent need to acknowledge and formalise the role of physiotherapy in mental health care. In bringing physiotherapy to the team, the APA calls for a national funding commitment to expand access to mental health care to facilitate multidisciplinary care. This includes expanding funding through Medicare access to private physiotherapy—recognising the benefit of physiotherapy-led interventions in chronic pain and physical ill-health.

Physiotherapists are recognised worldwide as experts in aspects of physical health care. Physiotherapists are highly qualified to work with people to develop, maintain and restore maximum movement and functional ability throughout the lifespan. Physiotherapists assist in supporting people to be more physically active, which supports their psychological health.

Physiotherapists are often called on to provide specific psychological support to their patients, although the health system does not formally recognise their vital role and expertise in prescribing individualised exercise programs which can improve mood, promote wellbeing and address co-morbidities associated with mental health diagnoses.

Australia’s mental health care system is failing to provide the holistic care patients need.

All Australians with mental health issues should have access to appropriate and professional mental health care based on their individual circumstances and needs. This includes access to allied health services that support people across the whole continuum of care.

According to PainAustralia, major depression is the most common mental health condition associated with chronic pain, with among 30 to 40 per cent of people with a diagnosed mental health condition also presenting for treatment for chronic pain.

Almost a third of Australian adults experiencing severe or very severe pain have high levels of psychological distress, estimated to be around three times the rate of those with mild pain, and six times the rate of those with no pain.

One in five Australian adults with severe or very severe pain experiences depression or other types of mood disorders.¹

Mental illness and chronic pain place significant burdens on individuals and the Australian health care system. Untreated, or inappropriately treated, pain can be a factor in mental ill-health. Any person with reduced or poor physical mobility, loss of function or experiencing chronic pain is less able to participate in aspects of life, including work, social activities, exercise and travel.

The role of Physiotherapists in Mental Health

Physiotherapists who work in mental health include clinicians, researchers, academics educators, and those who work in management, policy, advocacy and other areas. They work across a wide range of clinical settings including acute mental health-care, community mental health care, aged care, occupational health, refugee and immigrant health care, chronic pain environments, musculoskeletal health, chronic conditions including inpatient and rehabilitation, disability, injury including sporting injuries, veteran populations and with other at risk populations.

In their daily practice, physiotherapists will treat patients with a range of mental illnesses, psychological and emotional distress, pain, disability, physical illnesses including chronic conditions, injury and trauma.

The principles guiding physiotherapists in mental health include:

- Holistic care/person-centred care/ whole person care
- Biopsychosocial model of care
- Lived experience
- Cultural and linguistic diversity
- Cultural sensitivity
- Reconciliation
- Trauma focused care
- Recovery

Physiotherapists work with psychologically informed physiotherapy approaches, and physical and psychological treatment approaches.

Interventions used by physiotherapists include: physical activity, exercise, movement, sensory and body awareness (yoga and mindfulness), relaxation and breathing techniques, manual therapy and touch, health promotion and lifestyle education, health and pain education, behaviour change methods, social prescribing, active listening, psychological support and assistance in overcoming barriers to engagement.

Physiotherapists are supported by trainings such as Mental Health First Aid, Psychological First Aid and Community Gatekeeper Trainings.

“Physiotherapy in mental health aims to optimise wellbeing and empower the individual by promoting functional movement, movement awareness, physical activity and exercises, bringing together physical and mental aspects.”

International Organisation for Physical Therapists in Mental Health (IOPTMH)

Recommendations

The APA calls for:

1. Physiotherapists are recognised and included as valued participants of multidisciplinary mental health care.
2. Physiotherapists are employed in mental health services, recognising that holistic health care involves physical and mental health diagnosis, treatment and management.
3. Investment in education across the mental health sector to raise understanding of the important role of physiotherapy in recognising, assessing and treating many physical illnesses and painful conditions.
4. Public awareness campaigns on the positive impact improving physical health can have on mental health problems.
5. National leadership to ensure chronic pain and physical ill-health is recognised as a condition and should be included in Medicare subsidised treatments.
6. Independent evaluation of programs and funding in mental health and pain management to better direct funding and resources to meet individual needs.
7. PHNs are resourced to have the organisational capacity to support greater collaboration between primary health care providers in managing mental illness and pain.

Position summary

Physiotherapy-led mental health care

Physiotherapists confront mental illness every day, and our members report what is widely known across the health system—which is that patients confide in their health practitioner and seek help for physical and mental health problems.

Physiotherapists are qualified and trained to work with people who have mental illness across all health settings, including hospitals, aged care facilities, disability services, and private practice. They are trained in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary care, but Australia's mental health system limits this care by not properly investing in, and promoting, team-based care.

Physiotherapists work in both urban and rural environments, providing essential care in regional and remote areas where access to allied health and medical services is limited.

The APA supports best practice in managing physical pain that contributes to mental distress. Best practice involves multidisciplinary, coordinated, quality care. Physiotherapy is part of the suite of health care services that can improve mental health, and relieve the mental distress caused by chronic pain through improvements in managing and treating physical health.

“The mental health care system is failing Australians. As physiotherapists, we see components of mental health in every patient’s story. Currently, when patients reach out, every door is the wrong door for them. To unlock the keys to recovery, we need to work towards an *every door is the right door* health care system.”

Scott Willis, APA National President

Policy solutions

Transformational change is required if we are to strengthen the care provided to Australians with mental health issues.

1. Individuals with mental health problems need access to a wide range of interventions that encompasses person-centred care, and physical, social and mental wellbeing.

We need to shift our thinking towards a wellness approach to help individuals get the best out of life. This is a fundamental shift towards collaborative care that empowers—it is care that is personalised, coordinated and enabling.

2. There is a need to extend treatment options to establish accessible community-based alternatives to hospital treatment.

In mental health care, there is clear evidence that current treatment models do not adequately support the complex challenges with alternative out of hospital treatment models more conducive to supporting this priority cohort.

3. Expand the multidisciplinary mental health team offering diverse skills and expertise.

A properly funded and managed health system would see coordinated multidisciplinary and across sector teams that include general practitioners, psychiatrists, paediatricians and mental health nurses working alongside allied health practitioners (physiotherapists, psychologist, social workers, occupational therapists, counsellors, peer workers and drug, alcohol and gambling counsellors).

4. Funders must also be enabled to make key shifts in mental health care service provision.

Stronger support is needed for collaborative care models commissioned by Primary Health Networks (PHNs). These types of multidisciplinary models are accepted internationally as delivering higher-quality health care and better outcome measures. PHNs need to be more engaged and work collaboratively with the allied health sector on innovative models that address mental health treatment from both mental and physical perspectives.

5. Formalise the role of physiotherapy in addressing the physical wellbeing of people with mental health conditions from across the lifespan.

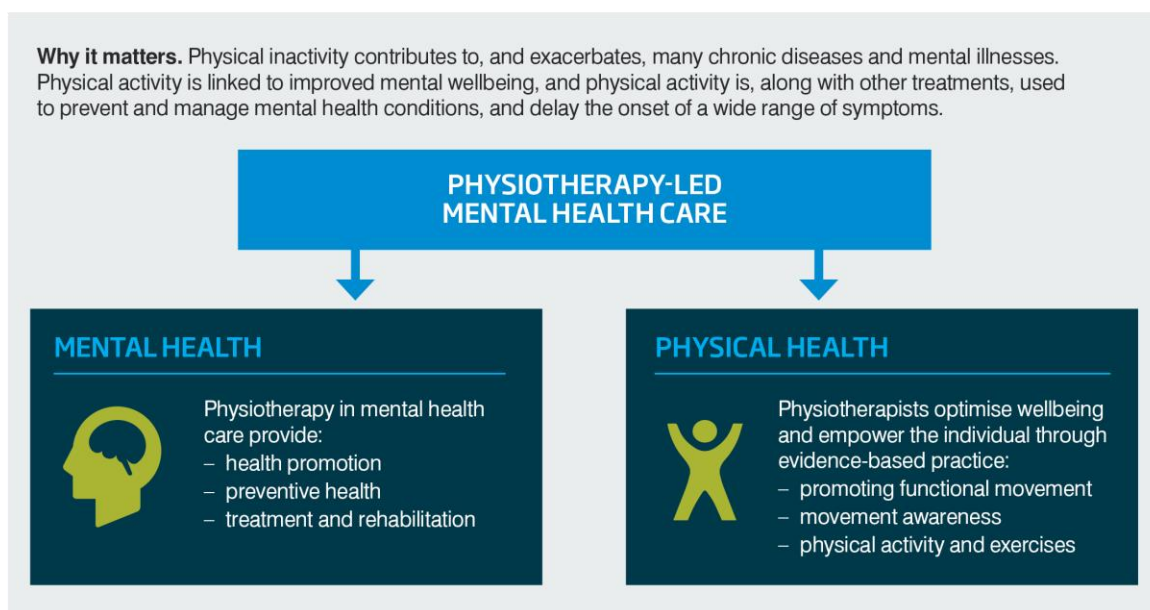
The physiotherapy workforce is well positioned to deliver this care. In enabling service shifts, we can help build a resilient, educated community. A highly pain-literate community will produce more effective health outcomes and reduce the demand on already stretched services.

Conclusion

We know that by enhancing physical health, we also promote mental wellbeing. It's time to unlock these benefits by formalising physiotherapy as part of the multidisciplinary team through Medicare access to private physiotherapy.

BRINGING TOGETHER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Why it matters. Physical inactivity contributes to, and exacerbates, many chronic diseases and mental illnesses. Physical activity is linked to improved mental wellbeing, and physical activity is, along with other treatments, used to prevent and manage mental health conditions, and delay the onset of a wide range of symptoms.



Source: Australians for Mental Health Fixing a Broken System. Available at: <http://www.australiansformentalhealth.org.au>

ⁱ <https://www.painaustralia.org.au/media-document/blog-1/blog-2020/blog-2019/what-you-need-to-know-about-pain-and-mental-health-in-australia>