



# BHS A.S.S.I.T. *Spotlight*

February 2021

Your EAP is a free and confidential service, which provides assessment and short-term counseling for a variety of mental health, substance abuse and work/life related issues. To learn more about your available benefits, contact your BHS Care Coordinator at 800.245.1150.



Mental Health & Heart Disease

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## Mental Health & Heart Disease

Many of us deal with heart disease or mental health issues, so it should come as no surprise that often these conditions occur together. So is there a link between the two? There are factors that can contribute to a greater risk for both conditions individually, such as poor diet, lack of exercise and smoking. These overlapping factors have made it hard to research the link between the two conditions, however, a recent study has addressed these factors while coming to the conclusion that there might be a connection.

The study took place over four years, which started simply with a brief mental health survey given to 200,000+ people of age 45 or more who had no history of heart disease. Those who reported higher levels of depression and anxiety were much more likely to have had a stroke or heart attack compared to those who did not report those symptoms.

While these findings do not necessarily link mental health and heart disease, both may arise from the same underlying mechanisms, according to Dr. Jill Goldstein, a professor of psychiatry and medicine at Harvard Medical School.

"We have found shared causes for both illnesses that begin even before birth that are carried throughout life," Dr. Goldstein says. Stressors in pregnancy can lead to an immune or inflammatory response that can affect the fetus due to high levels of stress hormones. This can alter specific brain regions that affect both mood and heart

function. "Mental health disorders and cardiovascular problems might not just co-occur in adulthood. Instead, people may be vulnerable to both conditions over a lifetime because of their early exposures," she says.

**Take The Survey Yourself** On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being none of the time and 5 being all the time, rate the following:

During the past four weeks, about how often did you feel:

- Depressed?
- Nervous?
- So nervous that nothing could calm you down?
- Restless or fidgety?
- So restless that you could not sit still?
- Tired out for no good reason?
- That everything was an effort?
- So sad that nothing could cheer you up?
- Hopeless?
- Worthless?

Scoring: 15 or lower = low; 16-21 = moderate; 22-29 = high; 30-50 = very high

Source: [www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/the-head-heart-connection-mental-health-and-heart-disease](http://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/the-head-heart-connection-mental-health-and-heart-disease)

**If you scored high on the stress survey or would like help dealing with depression or anxiety, don't hesitate to seek advice. BHS is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling 800-245-1150.**



## Practicing Mindful Communication

Mindful communication happens when you are truly present in the moment. It involves entering a conversation with curiosity, kindness, and compassion. You listen to your conversational partner with an open, nonjudgmental heart. You speak with intention, emotional intelligence and honesty, and without harsh language or gossip-driven speech.

**Challenges of Mindful Communication** Here are just a few things that make mindful communication difficult:

- Coming to a conversation with a predetermined outcome in mind
- Hearing what you expect to hear rather than what is actually being said
- Having difficulty expressing emotions
- Lacking attention skills
- Wanting to get your own thoughts or position expressed first, instead of listening to the other person
- Getting caught up in gossip and disruptive conversations
- Forgetting to be compassionate toward the other person
- Being preoccupied with internal chatter
- Having the tendency to want to fix other people's problems instead of just listening

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, new challenges have emerged:

- E-mails and texts can lack context and emotion.
- Our masks hide non-verbal cues and our mouths. Those who are hard of hearing might struggle to understand the message.

**Practice This** First, understand why you want to improve your communication. Is the reason authentic and real, or a guise to make you "look better"? Mindful communication has the potential to bring harmony into relationships if it's genuine. At work, mindful communication can help you think on your feet, seek out information in a collaborative manner, help you resolve conflict in ways that help all parties be heard and encourage transparency about processes. All of these things will improve relationships and enhance productivity.

Second, limit distractions whenever possible—turn away from your computer, turn toward the speaker, turn off the television, put your book down and so on. Set an intention to listen attentively to someone at work and at home without interrupting, asking questions, agreeing or otherwise inserting any speech. Attempt to ONLY listen for the first 3–5 minutes of the conversation before providing feedback or asking questions. Notice what happens inside you when you just listen, and notice how the other person responds.

Finally, practice pausing before you speak. Take one deep full breath, and consider what is about to come out of your mouth before you say anything. Ask before giving someone your advice. Remember, people really just want to be heard, and not everyone is looking for answers. Always bring your empathy to every conversation.

**Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides free, confidential consultations. For more information, call Behavioral Health Services at 800-245-1150.**



## Tips for Boosting Your Self-Esteem & Confidence

**Try a new activity** You'll feel proud of yourself for trying new things. If trying something on your own seems too challenging, try inviting a friend.

**Befriend yourself** List the positive things you like about yourself.

**Celebrate your successes** Tell your friends, hang pictures or other reminders to help enjoy your accomplishments.

**Don't compare yourself to others** Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, so try focusing on your positives.

**Contribute** It's great to feel like you're contributing, whether it's simple chores at home or volunteering your time for a cause.

**Set goals** Make goals that you can realistically reach and plan how to get there.

**Forgive yourself** Learn from your mistakes and realize nobody is perfect.

**Find real friends** Surround yourself with people who like you for you and make you feel better about yourself.

**Be Assertive** Express how you feel. It can feel good to speak up for yourself (Be sure to respect others feelings though).

**Don't overly critique yourself** Try to change negative thoughts to positive ones. If you think "I'm dumb," try remembering a time you did something smart.

### Healthy Valentine Chocolate Fudge with Coconut

**Ingredients:** 3 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips · 2/3 cup fat free evaporated milk · 1 teaspoon coconut oil · 1/2 cup coconut flakes

**Directions:** Place chocolate chips, evaporated milk and coconut oil in a medium-sized, microwave-safe bowl. Microwave on high for approximately 1-1/2 minutes (the exact timing can vary slightly depending on the power and wattage of your microwave). Stir until completely smooth and well-incorporated. (Do not microwave again, just use the heat from the chocolate to continue to melt the other chips.) Once the chocolate mixture is smooth, stir in coconut flakes. Pour mixture into an ungreased 8" x 8" pan. Tap or gently shake pan to level the mixture. It will not be completely smooth on the top due to the coconut flakes. Refrigerate until solid.

