

Subject: Re: Question for NAMI News Briefs

Question: I have a sister that suffers from a severe mental illness and has been on a number of medications for it. She is at a point now where she is high functioning but faces a combination of physical ailments. Do you have any advice on how to encourage her to maintain a healthy lifestyle in the wake of some of the medication side effects such as weight gain and extreme fatigue?

Dear Sister,

Thanks you for this great question. It applies to thousands of people on psychiatric medications that have improved in their functioning level, but are now facing issues such as substantial weight gain, fatigue, sometimes diabetes mellitus and a shorter lifespan.

I would start with the key word you've mentioned: encouragement. It sounds like your sister has faced some severe mental health symptoms, and by persevering, she has improved. The same can be true for her physical health. I know it's not easy; but try to help her make it fun. Maybe you can offer to be a partner with her by setting some reasonable health and weight goals. Improving diet, substituting water instead of soda, and doing some walking together every day is a great way to start. The human body is meant to move, and the morning is the best time. Select physical activities that are enjoyable such as hiking, bicycling, yoga, Tai Chi, or stretching, depending on ability and interest level.

A morbidly obese person can do stretch exercises daily, which is a safe and good way to start and is not discouraging or competitive. The more she does this routinely, the better she will feel. Physical activity will improve joint mobility, reduce arthritis, improve circulation and will improve energy, self motivation, mood, anxiety and lifespan. Another bonus is that as physical health improves, the amount of psychiatric medication needed for maintenance can be lowered in most cases. It's a win-win. Please encourage her often. It is very true that a stronger body makes a stronger mind and vice-versa.

Tell your sister good luck and all the best,

Mike Unger, MD