

Psychosocial Barriers to Health – How to Solve the Hidden Factors That Keep People from Being Healthy

What Prevents Us from Being Healthy?

It's safe to say that no one strives to be unhealthy. Yet, 85 percent of chronic illnesses and diseases are caused by environmental outside factors – not genetics.¹ As fast-food becomes less popular, smoking rates drop to the lowest levels ever seen², and yoga studios seemingly pop up on every street corner, why are chronic illnesses steadily increasing in America?³ Perhaps there is more to the factors that determine our health than we may think.

A group of all different kinds of people can try their hardest to be healthy, but not everyone finds success. The factors that prevent a healthy mental, emotional, social, and spiritual state are defined as psychosocial barriers to health.⁴ These factors not only influence or exacerbate a general unhealthy way of living but also negatively affect our physical health. It's extremely important to make sure that these psychosocial barriers to health are managed to obtain the practice of a joyful, content state of living.⁵ When your mind is content and happy, your body tends to follow.

To name a few, ignorance, mental illness, addiction, and fear are some of the psychosocial blocks that prevent people from being their healthiest. These barriers crumble when we spark the question, "*Why?*" Why do we smoke a pack of cigarettes a day? Why do we binge eat? Why do we avoid the gym like the plague? If you find yourself feeling discontent, unhappy with your professional or family life, and more anxious than you'd like to be,⁶ there could be some psychosocial barriers affecting your health and well-being.

¹ <https://kresserinstitute.com/importance-health-coaches-combating-chronic-disease/>

² <https://www.webmd.com/smoking-cessation/news/20181108/us-smoking-rates-hit-record-low>

³ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27512968>

⁴ https://www.lahc.edu/classes/pe/health/health11media/Health_11_Chapter_2_Psychosocial-PDF.pdf

⁵ <https://tidsskriftet.no/2001/06/kronikk/livskvalitet-som-psykisk-velvaere>

⁶ Ibid

Fear, Anxiety, and Stress

Fear and anxiety play a major role in dictating our actions and decisions, which can impact our lives dramatically. 40 percent of people experience persistent stress or excessive anxiety in their daily lives.⁷ Here are a few examples as to how fear, anxiety, and stress act as a barrier, preventing healthy living.

- Avoiding a physical, a dental exam, or something similar due to fear of having potential health problems presents itself as a psychosocial barrier. Feeling too insecure to ask a doctor to look at something could make potential illness/disease worse in the future. Going to the doctors should not feel like a daunting chore; but rather a therapeutic experience.
- Imagine being recently diagnosed with diabetes and having a fear of needles. To maintain control of blood glucose levels, it is a necessity to self-administer insulin. Completely avoiding the injections will cause adverse health effects. Being able to self-administer injections should be celebrated - but doing so with high levels of stress presents health risks.
- Stress from taking care of young children and elderly parents on top of managing career/work life can cause a person to find themselves, and their health, of low importance.

Depression

Depression is a big psychosocial barrier in America, for nearly 17.3 million of us have or currently suffer from it.⁸ Depression takes a toll on our psychosocial health, as well as our working and personal lives.

- Part of psychosocial wellbeing is taking care of yourself by doing healthy things, even if they aren't very enjoyable. Not being able to practice self-care poses as a psychosocial barrier. Some studies present a neurobiological reason as to why depressed individuals struggle with self-care. Depression is associated with frontal lobe dysfunction, which is the part of the brain that is responsible for things like

⁷ <https://adaa.org/workplace-stress-anxiety-disorders-survey>

⁸ <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression.shtml>

problem solving, judgment, and reasoning.⁹ Not taking medicine, eating poorly, and sleeping too much or too little prevents us from being healthy.

- Depression doesn't only affect the person who is suffering from it. On its own, depression causes employers to lose \$44 billion every year from sick days and a prominent lack of productivity.¹⁰

Ignorance or Lack of Education

Having enough information about health, wellness, self-care, and psychosocial barriers themselves are important so we can recognize them in our own lives. How can you be your healthiest self if you've never been taught how? How do you manage mental health, when you don't know what mental health even is?

- Understanding symptoms and personal health risks are necessary to have good health. If someone is experiencing symptoms of stroke or heart attack and they do not recognize those symptoms, it may be too late to get help. People should also know what illnesses and diseases they have a greater risk for, so they have the option to implement lifestyle changes before it's too late.
- Tobacco has been grown in America before America was even created. We didn't know how harmful smoking cigarettes was until the late 1900s. Using this information, we can infer that e-cigarettes cannot be safe either. The CDC claims that E-cigarettes can contain harmful substances like ultrafine particles that deeply penetrate the lungs, flavorings linked to lung diseases, unstable organic compounds, carcinogens, and even heavy metals like lead, nickel, and tin.¹¹ It's extremely important to learn about substances that we are ingesting before we determine if it is a good idea to do so or not.
- There is a lot of stigma revolving around mental health. Some still do not believe that mental illnesses are real, physical, illnesses. This could serve as a barrier if someone is mentally ill and is experiencing symptoms they do not recognize or understand. They will not know that they need help, or they may not even want

⁹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/two-takes-depression/201702/why-self-care-is-hard-depressed-individuals>

¹⁰ <https://www.webmd.com/depression/news/20030617/depression-affects-work-productivity>

¹¹ https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/basic_information/e-cigarettes/Quick-Facts-on-the-Risks-of-E-cigarettes-for-Kids-Teens-and-Young-Adults.html

help. If they were educated in mental health and could connect their experiences to what they've learned, this barrier could be eliminated.

Addiction

Being addicted to drugs, alcohol, or other substances serves as a psychosocial barrier to health for numerous reasons. Addiction is often extremely difficult to defeat on your own. It has the power to manipulate your thoughts and destroy lives, exhausting mental and physical health along the way.

- Addiction affects the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that deals with executive functioning. If addiction continues long enough to where this part of the brain becomes affected, then an individual will not be able to understand how their behavior is problematic. Therefore, it would be easy to change a normal, healthy, daily routine for one that is a relentless pursuit to find pleasure, deriving from the substance or other means.¹²
- Drug abuse affects those who are taking the drug and those around them, too. Some ways drug abuse in your environment can negatively influence your life include; poor diet, poor sleep schedule, worsened decision-making skills, and impulsivity. The risk for violence, injury and trauma are also increased;¹³ all things that put your health at risk.
- When all your time and energy is spent on using and on the hunt for substances and money, there will not be much time or energy left to practice self-care. Similarly, if money becomes scarce from buying drugs, healthy foods and environments have great potential to become too expensive.

¹² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/addiction>

¹³ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/health-consequences-drug-misuse>

The Challenge

Only 20% of those who practice bad psychosocial behaviors want to change for the better.¹⁴ WellSpark can help this 20%, but our goal is to help 100% of members, even the other 80% who may not even recognize their self-destructive behavior. Psychosocial determinants of health are so prevalent today, and they will only be getting more and more popular as the country's rates of mental and physical illness increase.¹⁵ The environment that psychosocial barriers create in one's life has the potential to leak into all other areas of life. Having stress can later cause anxiety and depression, which in some cases can even evolve into self-medicating or substance-abuse – which are kinds of psychosocial determinants of health. That's why it's important to tackle psychosocial issues as soon as they are understood or become present. The main challenge is figuring out how to eliminate the psychosocial barriers that are so present in our society.

There are not many resources to help eliminate psychosocial barriers to health for those who are in need. Doctors, nurses, and other health professionals should be asking how your mental health is during check-ups. But, care management processes provided to doctors for patients with depression, a popular psychosocial barrier, were utilized at a much lower rate compared to other chronic illnesses – which may indicate that health care practices are not well equipped to treat depression as a chronic illness due to the historical separation of mind and body.¹⁶ If all doctors and hospitals could implement this strategy of treating the patient rather than just the disease, there is a chance we all can manage our health better¹⁷ and give a solution to those of us who are in need.

Mental illness and poor psychosocial health negatively impact the body's physical health, which is something most people are unaware of. According to the University of Minnesota's Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality and Healing, having too much fear, stress, or anxiety can weaken the immune system and cause damage to the cardiovascular system, digestive system, and even the reproductive system. Complications include ulcers, irritable bowel

¹⁴ <https://uk.humankinetics.com/blogs/excerpts/psychosocial-barriers-must-be-considered-when-designing-wellness-programs-for-older-adults>

¹⁵ <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27512968>

¹⁶ <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2015.1068>

¹⁷ <https://www.craigslist.com/health-pulse/northwell-partners-startup-part-social-determinants-strategy>

syndrome, decreased fertility, accelerated aging, and premature death.¹⁸ On top of debilitating effects on self-care, depression's physical effects on the body include joint pain, limb pain, back pain, gastrointestinal problems, fatigue, psychomotor activity changes, and appetite changes.¹⁹ Even long-term addiction can put you at risk for physical conditions like cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, and lung disease.²⁰ Psychosocial conditions do not just prevent you from being happy and healthy – not managing them can put you at risk for chronic conditions.

The Solution

Life improves when well-being solutions spark results. WellSpark Health goes further than traditional health management programs by fixating on unlocking psychosocial barriers and identifying engaging solutions to treat the whole patient; mind and body. Behavior diagnostic tools, such as psychosocial determinant interviewing with health coaches, allow us to provide tailored education, motivation, and support to successfully guide our members to a place of contentment.

Our behavior diagnostic tool implemented through Silver Fern Healthcare allows us to create digital clinical reports on member's personal psychosocial and self-management issues to treat the person as effectively as possible. We use the best care structures and processes to improve health status, and our model is proven to advance effectiveness, care quality, patient outcomes, and high levels of satisfaction.²¹ Some specific psychosocial features include diabetes emotional distress management, poor sleep management, cognitive functioning, and physical pain management.

Our health coaches are a key component in reducing psychosocial barriers in one's life. Health coaches use tools like habit formation and reversal, motivational interviewing, and positive psychology which allow the patient to advance to a healthy lifestyle. They act as an ally, by instilling confidence and self-awareness while teaching members how to be their

¹⁸ <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/impact-fear-and-anxiety>

¹⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC486942/>

²⁰ <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/addiction-health>

²¹ <https://www.silverfernhealthcare.com/solutions.html>

own health advocates. It is proven that health coaches are effective when dealing with diseases/illnesses such as diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.²²

We provide a plethora of solutions for businesses, municipalities, and individual consumers through early disease detection, health education and coaching, chronic condition self-management, and much more. We are with you on your entire journey towards psychosocial and physical well-being.

Workplace Solutions

Psychosocial barriers to health don't just appear in or affect our personal lives. More than 66% of Americans are unhappy at work²³ – that's why WellSpark focuses on care in businesses and municipalities. We spend nearly 90,000 hours out of our whole lives working,²⁴ so if your workplace isn't a positive environment for your mind and body, it can be detrimental to your health. Psychosocial stressors triggered from work, like depression, anxiety, fear, and burnout can cause weight gain, increased amount of doctors' appointments, higher rates of absenteeism, disrupted family life, poor or worsened mental health, and increase your risk for chronic conditions.²⁵ WellSpark aims to make the workplace a healthier environment by identifying psychosocial determinants. This method pinpoints the factors that prevent wellness in the workplace and will slowly implement psychosocial barrier disruption techniques through self-management.

Most companies are required to provide Employee Assistance Programs to their employees, but many do not utilize them. The top four reasons employees do not use EAP services are caused by psychosocial barriers themselves; questions of confidentiality, fear of stigma, fear of their boss, and a lack of information.²⁶ With a wellness program like WellSpark, these barriers are eliminated. Having an EAP within an employee wellness program allows us to provide beneficial resources like one-on-one health coaches, which eliminates the difficult process of sifting through services with an EAP. There is no need to contemplate asking for

²² <https://kresserinstitute.com/importance-health-coaches-combating-chronic-disease/>

²³ <https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/workplace-wellness>

²⁴ <https://www.gettysburg.edu/news/stories?id=79db7b34-630c-4f49-ad32-4ab9ea48e72b&pageTitle=1%2F3+of+your+life+is+spent+at+work>

²⁵ <https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/workplace-wellness>

²⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-act-violence/201402/why-dont-employees-use-eap-services>

help or dreading the process of doing so because, with WellSpark, help is more convenient and accessible than ever for employees.

In companies that have standard wellness programs, there is evidence of lessened chronic disease factors and evidence of reduced costs. Companies saved 565 dollars per employee and even got back between two to four dollars per one dollar spent on the wellness program.²⁷ Healthier and happier employees thrive. When the body and mind are centered, and psychosocial barriers are managed, employees are more reliable and more pleasant – and that shows in their work. Standard wellness programs increase productivity by 12 to 20 percent.²⁸ Through early detection of diseases, chronic condition self-management, psychosocial determinant identification, and health education/coaching, imagine what WellSpark could do to improve your business’s culture, health, finances, and productivity.

On Your Own

Even outside of work, WellSpark is with you every step of the way towards wellness. We provide a multitude of tailored programs to influence a healthier life in and outside of your work environment, as psychosocial issues can seem to trickle into and out of personal and work life. WellSpark manages whole-person health, with many solutions on how to improve psychosocial wellbeing on a day to day basis. WellSpark allows you to perform at your best in your personal life and work life.

Psychosocial and social determinants can sometimes prevent people from being able to drive. Perhaps a medication might prohibit you to get on the road, or you might be too frightened to get behind the wheel. WellSpark can identify barriers that can prevent you from driving by providing members with different transit methods, like the bus, taxi, or train. Connecting WellSpark members with transportation services eliminate psychosocial barriers like fear and could help ease countless social determinants of health.

If applicable, WellSpark can provide you with resources to join a support group. Support groups are an excellent way to connect with others who are facing the same problems as you. They do a great job of enforcing community support for a handful of psychosocial issues. In a case study, support groups for cancer patients who experienced psychosocial

²⁷ <https://health.gov/news/blog/2017/05/five-reasons-employee-wellness-is-worth-the-investment/>

²⁸ <https://www.americanmentalwellness.org/prevention/healthy-employees/>

barriers have been proven to reduce illness progression and even death.²⁹ Outcomes of support groups are increased confidence, an increased sense of control, improved coping mechanisms, and improved communication with people and medical staff.³⁰ WellSpark can help provide information about specific support groups based on the member's case and will follow up with its effectiveness and often holds members accountable for deciding not to go. This helps eliminate the psychosocial barriers of mental illness.

Adults who have a higher educational status live healthier and longer lives, compared to those who are less educated.³¹ In this case, WellSpark's health coaches provide educational services themselves, but can also direct members to educational seminars regarding health issues. Education seminars are a great tool when newly diagnosed with illness or disease. They can even instill a new motivation to pursue life goals and ignite enthusiasm to be better, which ultimately leads to increased fulfillment of goals in all areas of your life.³² With WellSpark's help in locating relevant topics close to you, education seminars would help prevent the psychosocial barrier of ignorance, and/or a lack of education.

Behavioral therapy is considered extremely effective in treating a range of psychosocial issues – approximately three out of four people who enter therapy experience benefits from treatment.³³ It's evident that simply speaking to someone about psychosocial barriers is very important. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, there are a few different psychosocial treatments, such as psychotherapy, psychoeducation, psychosocial rehabilitation, assertive community treatment, supported employment, and case management.³⁴ Talking to someone might seem confusing and frightening, but with WellSpark, the process becomes more manageable by matching members with therapists who fit their needs.

Ignite Your Spark with Wellspark Health.

As society and the physical world around us progresses, our health care system needs to evolve as well. Today, America is suffering from mental and emotional distress more than it has ever before. Even worse, America is also lacking in adequate treatment of said

²⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK4017/>

³⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK4017/>

³¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5880718/>

³² <https://education.seattlepi.com/benefits-attending-seminars-1929.html>

³³ <https://www.healthline.com/health/behavioral-therapy#effectiveness>

³⁴ <https://www.nami.org/learn-more/treatment/psychosocial-treatments>

distress.³⁵ Psychosocial barriers to health, like depression, stress, anxiety, fear, ignorance, and addiction, are increasingly on the rise. As psychosocial barriers continue to prevent us from being our healthiest, chronic conditions and physical ailments begin to emerge. If we could eliminate, or even just manage, the psychosocial barriers to our health, chronic conditions would slow. The great news is, we can.

WellSpark health is fighting chronic disease and is helping empower and engage employees to live healthy lives. Join us as we SparkLife, SparkChange, and SparkResults towards a life of well-being.

³⁵ <https://www.health.com/depression/8-million-americans-psychological-distress>