



Health Observances Highlight Links Between Depression, Disease and Disability

By Michael Golinkoff, PhD, MBA, National Clinical Director for Aetna Behavioral Health

October abounds with health observances, including National Disability Employment Awareness Month, Depression Screening Day (October 8th) and Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

It is fitting that they fall in the same month because there is a clear link between physical and mental health. When illness also leads to depression, it can be even more difficult for employees to get back on their feet and back to work.



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- **Charity Alert:** Aetna Works with CUREchief Foundation to distribute head scarves
- **Product Corner:** Aetna lauds passage of Mental Health Parity Act

People on disability leave who develop depression are often out of work longer than those who do not have depression.

Aetna developed its Medical/Psychiatric (MedPsych) program to screen members with chronic conditions for depression. Nurse case managers work with members to help them understand depression and learn coping skills.

When depression and medical issues are treated together, patients have better outcomes. (Learn more in the Case Studies below)

Case Studies

Aetna nurses help members overcome depression and return to work

I would like to share two case studies to highlight how addressing depression can help people get back to work faster, and regain their personal and professional lives.

Heart patient learns new coping skills

The first conversation Terri Driscoll, RN, had with a member four months ago was very different from the one she had with her last week.

"When we first spoke, she was soft-spoken and withdrawn," said Driscoll, a MedPsych case manager with Aetna. "This had been a very independent woman. She suffered a sudden, severe heart attack. For the first time in her life she had to ask for help."

The 60-year-old professional woman faced drastic changes in her life that are common for patients recovering from a severe heart attack. Also common was the depression she experienced. Working full-time in a high-energy job was her life; now she was home, often alone, and aware that her old ways of coping were no longer an option.

"There is a feeling that they have lost part of themselves," Driscoll said. "They are not able to use the same coping tools like exercise. They may start eating poorly. Along with the fear of dying and having to take medications with side effects, this can all lead to depression."

The American Heart Association estimates that 15 to 20 percent of those who have had heart attacks develop depression. Driscoll helped this member create a recovery plan that included the following strategies:

- Get up and follow a daily routine.
- Learn new coping skills through counseling and a depression support group.
- Take medication as prescribed.
- Interact more with people other than family.
- Select activities to support health and recovery (healthy diet, walking each day).

"We spoke last week," Driscoll said. "She has improved significantly since that first conversation. She has lost 40 pounds and is now motivated to stay on a healthy course. What's more, even though the American Heart Association cites coronary heart disease as the leading cause of premature, permanent disability, this woman should not be one of those statistics. She is on track to return to work at the end of the year."

Breast cancer patient finds an advocate

Harald Petrini, a licensed professional counselor and senior care manager with MedPsych, introduced himself in Spanish to a new Aetna member he was helping.

"She was a newly diagnosed breast cancer patient suffering from depression," Petrini said. "I knew that speaking to her in her native language would help put her at ease."

The 50-year-old woman worked 55 to 60 hours a week at several jobs. She found herself depressed and angry after her breast cancer biopsy surgery was delayed. As the days passed, her concern over her abnormal mammogram spiraled into depression. She said it was difficult to concentrate at work and even to speak with people. She had also put on 20 pounds from overeating as a way of coping.

"Having a professional to talk to helped with her feelings of isolation," said Petrini. "Family and friends don't always know what to say. They often don't say anything, which can make things worse."

Depression is common in women diagnosed with breast cancer. A study published in the British Medical Journal in March 2005 found that almost half of women with early breast cancer also experienced depression, anxiety or both in the first year after diagnosis.

Thanks to a positive medical diagnosis, this woman's medical outlook is good and that helped lift her depression. In one month's time, she reported a weight loss of almost seven pounds and her energy and concentration at work are much improved.

Website of the Month

The Reawakening Center

[The Reawakening Center](#) is an easy-to-use website from Aetna Behavioral Health for people with depression. Visitors can take a self-test to find out their risk of depression. They can also learn how to identify signs of depression. Online coaching tools offer help to overcome depression and make decisions about treatment.

There is also an online library with helpful articles on a host of topics including:

- The difference between depression and sadness
- The one-two punch of depression and illness
- Antidepressant medications
- Types of therapy
- Depression after giving birth
- An Olympic champion's story of overcoming depression

CHARITY ALERT: CUREchief® Foundation

Aetna employees and the Aetna Foundation are working with the CUREchief® Foundation to recognize National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Throughout October, visitors to www.aetna.com can send a free handmade CUREchief (head scarf) to a friend, family member or organization to help those with cancer and other medical conditions that result in hair loss. Aetna employees help sew the head scarves and package them with messages of hope. Aetna is proud to fund part of their distribution as well.

Product Corner: Aetna Cheers First Anniversary of Mental Health Parity Law

This month marks the first anniversary of passage of mental health parity legislation. The new law will begin to take effect as health plans renew for the coming year.

Aetna has been a long-time supporter of mental health parity. We know that when the brain and body are treated together people achieve better outcomes. That recognition was the basis of Aetna's development of its MedPsych program in 2003.

Mental health parity means that health plans offer the same level of coverage for mental illness and substance abuse disorders as they do for medical care. Bringing coverage for mental health on par with coverage for physical health has been a big step forward. Aetna is proud to have championed this goal for many years.

The value of mental health coverage can be seen in the results Aetna has achieved with its integrated approach. Members enrolled in the MedPsych program report an improvement in their quality of life and a reduction in work and social limitations. Results of a two-year analysis continue to demonstrate improved health outcomes for members.

The MedPsych program is available for all fully-insured customers.