
Exploring links between diabetes and depression

Dr. Briana Mezuk probes how mental health and physical health are related, and how people must develop healthy ways to react to stress



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Some people may think mental health and physical health are completely unrelated, but in fact, they are closely linked, says Dr. Briana Mezuk, a researcher and professor at VCU.

She has devoted years of her career to exploring the various connections between physical health disorders and mental health disorders. In her research, Mezuk also focuses on racial disparities in certain chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes and on how economic conditions contribute to overall health.

‘In this country, there are substantial racial disparity in nearly every (physical) health condition you could think of,’ says Dr. Briana Mezuk.



Dr. Briana Mezuk

Mezuk recently was awarded a grant from the C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research at VCU to study the relationship between diabetes and depression. In that research, she will observe how people respond to stress.

“It’s important for doctors especially to know that health is really a developmental process,” said Mezuk, who views a person’s health as comprehensive and multifaceted. One facet of health that she has researched involves race.

“One of the interesting things about mental and physical health is that in this country, there are substantial racial disparity in nearly every (physical) health condition you could think of,” Mezuk said. In particular, there are glaring physical health disparities between African-Americans and white Americans.

Reducing those disparities is a focus of Mezuk’s research.

African Americans, for example, are more likely than whites to suffer from conditions such as diabetes.

But such disparities are not evident in mental health. Mezuk noted that African-Americans are less likely than whites to develop mental health disorders such as depression.

Genetics doesn’t explain the health disparities, or lack thereof. So what does?

One explanation may involve how people react to stress. Mental stress affects different people in different ways.

According to Mezuk, human beings aren’t too different from other animals in this regard. In lab settings, when an animal is stressed out, it

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will often turn to a “self-regulatory behavior” to relieve that stress. While coping with situations is often seen as something entirely mental, how we self-regulate can have a big impact on our physical health.

“We all do all these things – we all drink or eat when we’re stressed – but what’s important is that we be cognizant of that,” Mezuk said. Bad coping mechanisms to stress can add up to poor health over long periods of time, though the reverse is true for good coping mechanisms.

Mezuk wants to change the conversation. She believes that helping people find healthy ways to cope with stress may prevent chronic conditions like diabetes.

Mezuk, whose background is in epidemiology, isn’t doing this alone. She is working with professionals from various fields, including psychologists, health economists and endocrinologists. She knows that multiple perspectives are needed.

“If we can have a much more holistic approach to health, that opens up a door to behaviors and understanding why people do the things they do,” Mezuk said. •



Needles for insulin, a glucose monitor and metformin – common items for a person living with diabetes.