

Obesity & Mental Health

Q&A WITH CHARLES NGUYEN, MD



Q. How are obesity and mental health connected?

Many patients with depression are overweight, and many with obesity are at an increased risk of developing a mental health condition. Additionally, medications for one disease may end up impacting the other. For example, medications that treat mental health conditions can prevent patients from feeling full, causing weight gain. That's why disease management goes both ways.

“Patients should address **each** condition.”



Q. Do patients feel judged for treating mental health or obesity?

While stigma has decreased for both obesity and mental health conditions, it still exists.

Weight bias can worsen mental health problems. It's important to raise awareness about the seriousness of both conditions so patients feel supported and encouraged to seek treatment.

Q. What are the benefits of treating obesity and mental health holistically?

Obesity affects every part of the body. Many serious conditions, including heart disease, cancer and dementia, are related to obesity. That's why healthy lifestyle choices—paired with cognitive behavioral therapy and medication—are important for managing both conditions. Managing just one condition or the other isn't effective.

The health care system benefits too. Obesity costs Americans more than \$1.4 trillion per year. Effectively treating both conditions can improve life for patients and bring down overall health care costs.

Q. What keeps patients from accessing treatment?

Obesity was declared a disease over a decade ago, but many health plans still view it as a cosmetic issue. This means coverage for treatment is limited, and patients are stuck fighting for the treatment their provider prescribed. This can be discouraging for both patients and clinicians.

Q. What can be done?

Health plans must start treating obesity as the chronic disease that it is. This involves educating clinicians, policymakers and health plans about the seriousness of obesity. It also means increasing coverage of new, innovative treatments.

At the same time, they must ensure that all forms of mental health treatment are covered. Increased coverage of medications for both conditions will allow patients to take control of their health.



“A **patient-centered approach** can help patients manage both conditions.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Nguyen, MD, is a psychiatrist in California. He is author of *The Thinsulin Program*, a book on the mind-body connection behind obesity and weight loss.



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