Improving Fitness and Health among People with Serious Mental Illness:

A Promising Approach

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) examined if participation in a fitness and nutrition intervention together with the partnership of fitness mentor results in improvements in cardiovascular health among 133 overweight or obese adult study participants adults with serious mental illness. Participants in a one-year randomized controlled trial were provided a one-year fitness club membership combined with a health mentor who provided weekly fitness coaching and nutrition counseling through a program called In SHAPE. The mentors conducted a comprehensive lifestyle and fitness evaluation and developed personalized fitness plans using shared goal setting. In the course of the year, the mentors met with participants once a week for 45-60 minutes and provided fitness coaching and support. The control group was given a free gym membership and education but no mentoring.

The results indicated a mean baseline weight of 231.8±54.8 pounds and a mean BMI of 37.6±8.2. At 12-month follow-up, In SHAPE (N=67) compared with fitness club membership and education (N=66) was associated with three times greater fitness club attendance, twice as much participation in physical exercise, greater engagement in vigorous physical activity, and improvement in diet. Double the proportion of participants (40% versus 20%) achieved clinically significant improvement in cardiorespiratory fitness (>50 m on the six-minute walk test). Weight loss and BMI did not differ between groups. In the SHAPE participants, 49% achieved either clinically significant increased fitness or weight loss (5% or greater), and 24% achieved both clinically significant improved fitness and weight loss.
Compared to the control group, more than twice as many In SHAPE participants achieved improvements in cardiorespiratory fitness, and they achieved these early in the year and maintained them through the 12-month follow-up. In SHAPE participants had three times greater fitness club attendance, twice as much participation in physical exercise, greater engagement in vigorous physical activity, and improvement in diet.

The SHAPE participants, achieved nearly half (49%) of aclinically significant increase in their fitness level or weight loss (5% or greater), and 24% achieved both. There were no dissimilarities in weight and BMI between the 2 groups; however, almost one-third of participants from both groups achieved clinically significant weight loss.

The lead author Stephen Bartels, MD, MS, at Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, states, “These findings suggest that a mentoring approach can be effective in rapidly reducing cardiovascular mortality risk for overweight and obese individuals with serious mental illness by significantly improving fitness.” The authors concluded that having the partnership of a fitness mentor may help to overcome motivational challenges and low self-efficacy often experienced by people with serious mental illness.

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