Health behaviours in people with severe mental illness across four countries –
comparison with normative sample

Natalie Parletta¹, Dorota Zarnowiecki¹, Yousef Aljeesh², Bernhard T Baune³

¹School of Population Health, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia
²Faculty of Nursing, Islamic University, Gaza, Palestinian Authority
³Department of Psychiatry, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

Background: Physical health is inextricably linked with mental health. Accordingly, people with severe mental illness (SMI) have poorer physical health and higher all-cause mortality than the general population. We investigated various health-related lifestyle factors in people with SMI across four countries and compared with a normative sample.

Methods: Demographic and health behaviour data were collected from N=697 people with mental illness in Germany (n=387), Middle East (n=200), London (n=67) and Australia (n=43). Data analysis was conducted using one-sample t-tests with N=666 people who had substance abuse disorder (n=224), schizophrenia (n=158), mood disorders (n=227) and somatoform disorders (n=63). The General Health Behaviour Questionnaire included behaviours and knowledge related to nutrition, physical activity, alcohol, smoking, medication, sleep, and general wellbeing and life satisfaction. The normative sample was derived from a German population (N=495).

Results: The whole sample had significantly lower intake of healthy foods/drinks (p<.001) and higher intake of unhealthy foods (p<.001), no significant difference in exercise levels or alcohol, smoked less cigarettes, had less hours sleep per night (p<.001) and reported more sleep problems (p<.001). They reported significantly reduced life satisfaction (p<.001), wellbeing (p<.001), and higher dissatisfaction with the perceived impact of their problems on their health (p<.001). Their knowledge regarding the impact of lifestyle on health was significantly lower for nutrition (p<.001), physical activity (p<.001), and smoking (p<.001).

Conclusions: Health-related lifestyle factors and education present an important and empowering target for primary care of people with enduring mental illness. Targeting people at risk for mental illness also presents an opportunity for prevention. Further research needs to identify the degree to which these lifestyle factors contribute directly to poor mental health in this population.