Mental Health as a Chronic Illness

- Results from a National Poll -

The Harvard Forums on Health, a project of Harvard University's Interfaculty Program for Health Systems Improvement, commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA) to conduct this survey of people with chronic conditions, including mental health conditions, about the care and treatment they receive. This national survey of 432 Americans age 18 and older who report they have a mental health condition (n=151) or some other chronic health condition (n=281) was conducted October 25 through November 2, 2003. (See How This Survey Was Conducted for details.)

The main findings include:

- People living with mental health conditions are more critical than those with other chronic conditions of the care available to them. A four-in-ten plurality of those with mental health conditions say people with such conditions receive fair or poor care and treatment from the healthcare community. Among those who have been hospitalized in recent years, people with mental health conditions are more critical of their hospital care than those with other chronic conditions, such as asthma or diabetes.

- Those with chronic mental health conditions report more problems with access to care than those with other chronic conditions. For example, they are more likely to say they have had to wait weeks or months to see doctors. They are also more likely to report incidences of being unable to get medications or see specialists they needed because of insurance coverage or cost issues.

- Those living with mental health conditions are also more likely than those with other chronic ailments to report that their condition has negative effects on their worklife. Moreover, they are more likely to feel that society is not supportive of those with their condition, and to say they have been made to feel embarrassed or ashamed of their condition.

- Despite having had more problems with access to drugs and doctors, on the whole those with mental and other chronic conditions report comparable levels of insurance coverage. Among those with insurance, seven in ten of those with
mental (71%) and predominantly physical (70%) chronic conditions report that their insurance covers all or most of the cost of treating their condition.

These and other survey results can be found in detail on the following pages.
FINDINGS IN DETAIL

People living with mental health conditions are more critical of their care than those with other chronic conditions.

When individuals living with chronic conditions are asked about how the healthcare community cares for people with their particular condition, those with mental health conditions are more critical than those with other chronic health conditions. As Figure One shows, four in ten (41%) of those with a mental health condition say the healthcare community does a fair or poor job. By comparison, only one in six (17%) of those with predominantly physical chronic illnesses – such as heart disease or diabetes – say the community does a fair or poor job. Only a third (33%) of those with a mental health condition say the healthcare community does an excellent or very good job compared with half (49%) of those with another chronic ailment.

A similar, if somewhat less stark, pattern emerges when people are asked about the care they personally are getting for their condition. As Figure Two shows, among those with mental health conditions who are currently under treatment, almost a quarter (22%) judge the care they are receiving fair or poor. Among those with other chronic medical conditions, only one in ten (9%) find their care so deficient. Conversely, half of those with a mental health condition (51%) rate their care excellent or very good, compared with over two-thirds (69%) of those with predominantly physical conditions.
Those with chronic mental health conditions report more problems with access to care than those with chronic physical conditions.

More than four in ten (44%) of those with mental health conditions report having had to wait weeks or months to see a doctor or some other health care professional, or for a treatment they needed for the condition in question. (Figure Three) By comparison, only a quarter (27%) of those with other chronic health problems report this has happened to them.

Similarly, four in ten (41%) people with mental health conditions report not being able to get a medication they needed because their insurance would not cover the cost, their co-pay was too high or, in the case of those who lack health insurance, because they could not afford the drug in question. Only a quarter (23%) of those with other chronic medical conditions report having had this problem.

Lastly, over a third of those with mental health conditions (37%) say there have been instances when they were unable to see a doctor or other health care professional, or get a treatment they needed, for their condition because their insurance would not cover the cost, their co-pay was too high or, in the case of the uninsured, they could not afford it. Less than a quarter (22%) of those with chronic conditions such as heart disease or diabetes report having had this experience.

Those with mental health conditions report less communication between the physicians who care for them.

When asked about communication among the doctors they see, people with mental health conditions are less likely to report that the doctors they see communicate with each other. Among those who see more than one doctor, six in ten mental health patients (61%) say their doctors talk to each other at least sometimes, including four in ten (39%) who believe there is a lot of communication. One in five (20%) report there is no communication between the physicians who care for them. By comparison, three-quarters (78%) of those with other chronic illness report their various doctors talk to each other at least sometime and half (48%) believe these exchanges happen a lot. Only seven percent say there is no communication.
Among those who have had recent hospitals stays, those with mental health conditions were less satisfied with their stay than those with other chronic health ailments.

One in five of those with mental (22%) and other chronic (20%) conditions report having had a hospital stay related to their condition within the last five years, but they have very different feelings about the experience. Less than a third of those hospitalized with a mental health condition (30%) say the care and treatment they received in the hospital was excellent or very good; a quarter (24%) report it was fair or poor. By comparison, almost three-quarters (73%) of those who were hospitalized for a predominantly physical ailment say the treatment they received was excellent or very good, including almost half (46%) who say it was excellent. Just one in ten (9%) rate their care fair or poor.

Those with chronic mental and physical conditions also have very different opinions on the appropriateness of the length of their hospital stay. Over a third (36%) of mental health patients felt they were sent home from the hospital prematurely compared with fewer than one in ten (7%) patients with other chronic illnesses.

Those with chronic mental health conditions tend to feel the effects on the job, and in society.

Those with mental health (44%) and other chronic health (46%) conditions are equally likely to report that they currently work outside the home. However, those with mental health conditions are much more likely to report that their condition impacts negatively on their work life. As Figure Five shows, over half (54%) of those with a mental health condition say it has had at least some negative effects.
on their work life. Just three in ten (30%) report that they have experienced no negative effects. By comparison, a six-in-ten majority (62%) of those with other chronic ailments report that their condition has not negatively affected them in the work place at all.

Among those who are not working outside the home, three in ten (30%) of those with a mental health condition report that they are not employed because their condition makes it difficult for them to work. Fewer than one in ten (7%) of those with other chronic conditions report that their illness is the reason they are not employed.

These findings also suggest that those with mental health conditions still suffer from stigma and are made to feel embarrassed or ashamed of their condition. Almost six in ten (57%) of those with mental health conditions feel people are generally supportive of those with mental health conditions. However, over a third feel people are generally not supportive (35%) of those with their condition including one in seven (14%) who feel people are very unsupportive. Conversely, those with chronic physical ailments overwhelmingly feel that society is supportive (83%) rather than unsupportive (6%). Similarly, a third (33%) of those with mental health conditions feel they are often (11%) or sometimes (22%) made to feel embarrassed or ashamed of their condition. Almost none (3%) of those with physical conditions feel this way.

*These data offer some evidence of parity in insurance coverage for mental and other chronic conditions.*

Those with mental and other chronic conditions are about equally likely to report being insured (82%, 86% respectively). Among those with insurance, those with mental and predominantly physical conditions report that their insurance coverage is comparable. (Figure Six) Seven in ten of those with mental (71%) and physical (70%) chronic conditions report that their insurance covers all or most of the cost of treating their condition. Fewer than one in 10 in either group (9% mental, 7% physical) reports that their insurance pays hardly any or none of the costs.

![Figure Six: How much of the cost of treating your condition does your insurance pay for? Based on those who are insured](chart.png)
**How This Survey Was Conducted**

The survey was conducted by telephone from October 25 through November 2, 2003 using a random digit dial (RDD) sample.

Potential participants were asked if they had any of the following six conditions:

1) asthma,
2) diabetes,
3) depression or any other mental or emotional health condition,
4) emphysema,
5) heart disease, and
6) high blood pressure.

Those who said they had any of these conditions were eligible to participate in the survey. All participants who said they had depression or any other mental or emotional health condition were asked questions about their care and treatment for that condition. Those who said they did not have depression or any other mental or emotional health condition were asked questions about one of the five physical conditions. If people had more than one of the five physical conditions, the condition they were asked about was selected at random from among those they reported they have.

Altogether 432 Americans age 18 and older were interviewed. This included 151 who report they have a mental health condition and were asked about that condition, and 281 who have and were asked about other, physical health conditions.

The margin of error for those with mental health conditions is plus or minus 9 percentage points. The margin of error for those with physical health conditions is plus or minus 6 percentage points.

Note that the sample size of this survey is smaller than some conventional surveys. We wanted to reach this specialized population and still use a random methodology but were bound by cost and time constraints. This survey is a preliminary, broad look at the perceptions and experiences of people with mental health conditions and how these differ from the perceptions and experiences of people with other chronic health conditions.