The impact of Covid-19 & Lockdown on the Physical Health Outcomes of people with Severe Mental Illness

Equally Well is an initiative which seeks to promote and support collaborative action to improve physical health among people with a mental illness. It is hosted in the UK by Centre for Mental Health in partnership with Rethink Mental Illness, the Chair of the Clinical Group and Chair of the Expert by Experience group along with our growing membership. All decisions are made jointly between these groups to ensure that everything we do is informed by people with extensive lived and professional experience.

It is for this reason that Emma who is the project manager for Equally Well UK will be presenting with Kevin James, Chair of the Expert by Experience Group.

While COVID-19 is dominating our lives, it’s easy to neglect other health issues or to feel there isn’t help available. Equally Well UK created a co-produced short guide for people with severe mental illnesses on practical ways to protect and support physical health during this uncertain and unsettling time. We worked with experts by experience and clinical professionals to create the resource with support from NHS England/NHS Improvement.

Maintaining physical health is now much harder than before, but it has never been more important. Physical activity, stopping smoking and eating a healthy diet can help you feel better emotionally and mentally during this time. Likewise, looking after our mental health makes it a lot easier to take care of our physical health.

While physical health checks might be postponed or adapted, it is still critical that we all continue to address our wider health as usual, making use of resources, such as our GP surgeries and mental health teams to maintain and optimise our health. The guide is broken down into sections offering some practical ideas and sharing links to resources to help people living with a severe mental illness to look after their physical health within the constraints of the current situation. We have included some key ideas and tips based on existing research and our discussions with experts by experience and professionals.

We have heard such a mix of experiences when it comes to the physical health checks and have relayed these back to colleagues at NHSE/I to work out how we can help improve the checks and make sure they are not just a tick-box exercise. The checks need to go beyond, such as supporting someone with a tailored smoking sensation programme as well as tailored screening programmes like trauma informed screening. The Equally Well UK Expert by Experience members have also worked with Rethink Mental Illness on their Physical Health Check toolkit.