

SANE Healthy Living Guidelines

Best practice in healthy living promotion
for mental health NGOs (non-government organisations)

Good physical health is essential for everyone's wellbeing. These Guidelines describe good practice for NGOs wishing to promote and support good physical health for clients living with mental illness.

Why are NGOs important to promoting physical health?

NGOs are uniquely placed to help people improve their physical as well as mental health. The frequency of contact, collaborative nature and duration of the relationship with the client provide capacity to encourage and support long-term improvement in health behaviour. NGOs often have a relationship with a client's family and friends, and can draw on the support and encouragement that peer workers, as well as volunteers, can offer.

What can NGOs do to help improve clients' health outcomes?

The first step to improve the physical health of people with mental illness is to acknowledge that this is integral to mental health, and that physical health support is therefore an essential component of psychosocial rehabilitation and recovery services.

The next stage is to integrate promotion of good physical health into all aspects of service development and delivery so that it becomes part of everyday practice. These Guidelines outline how NGOs can build a good framework for doing this, and describe some practical ways NGOs can create an environment to help support the physical wellbeing of clients. It's also worth noting that when clients' physical health is considered, the wellbeing, job satisfaction and morale of staff can also be greatly improved.

Looking after our physical wellbeing is important for all of us, yet this is often overlooked in services for people affected by mental illness.

- People with mental illness have significantly poorer physical health than others, with life expectancy up to 20 years less than the general population. They experience far higher rates of diabetes, kidney disease, and heart and lung diseases. This is associated with a range of factors, including obesity, higher smoking rates, poor diet, and lack of exercise. These factors, in turn, may be related to the effects of mental illness, the side-effects of some medications, and poor access to good healthcare and community support.
- Improving the physical health of people with mental illness is the responsibility of everyone in the health system. This includes GPs, hospitals, mental health services, private health providers and NGOs, as well as people with a mental illness themselves.
- NGOs are especially well placed to use their unique position and skills to help improve the physical as well as mental health of clients.



How can my organisation build a good framework for physical health support?

Providing support for the physical wellbeing of clients is about more than putting up a few 'healthy eating' posters or 'no smoking' signs. It requires a systemic, coordinated approach from the organisation to ensure real changes to practice are made, and that those changes mean real improvements for clients. Organisations need to ensure a good framework is in place for this to occur. Poor access to relevant resources or expertise, limited funds to support staffing and program expenses and staff attitudes, behaviour, time and competing priorities can get in the way. A good framework can help overcome these barriers.

Key strategies for a good framework are:

- ensuring the full support and commitment of board and management by making a strong case for change
- using these Guidelines to develop a practical, evidence-based policy for your organisation
- consulting clients about their physical health needs, and how your organisation could help them address these
- appointing a coordinator to oversee the initiative
- finding out about staff attitudes and behaviours beforehand through staff surveys and forums
- preparing staff by training, personal development, official launches, making the initiative fun, and allowing plenty of time for staff to discuss any concerns
- recruiting enthusiastic staff as site champions, if your organisation operates over multiple sites

- encouraging staff to improve their own physical health, so they feel confident about the issue and can model healthy behaviours
- embedding the change, by including the policy in strategic plans, position descriptions and staff recruitment processes
- building partnerships with local health services including GPs, clinical services, community health centres and other NGOs
- tapping into existing resources and expertise by linking with relevant health organisations.

Creating a health-promoting environment

Once your organisation has built a solid framework for supporting the physical wellbeing of clients, the goal is to create a health-promoting environment for clients (and staff). That is an environment that helps people to increase control over, and to improve, their own health.

To create this environment, NGOs can:

- **Provide information on SNAP risk factors** to all staff, volunteers, peer workers, clients and their families. (The SNAP factors are defined by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners as: Smoking, Nutrition including caffeine, Alcohol and Physical activity.) Information can also be given on managing chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes.

SANE Australia has a number of factsheets, guides, podcasts and a DVD on healthy living which are suitable for staff and clients. Information resources on particular conditions are available through organisations such as Diabetes Australia and the Heart Foundation.



- **Encourage and facilitate regular physical health checks such as blood pressure and waist measurements.**

This does not mean staff conducting these checks, but rather:

- being aware of a client's state of physical health (through observation or direct enquiry) and ensuring any needs identified are addressed
 - empowering and supporting clients to ask for physical health checks at their GP or other health service
 - integrating promotion of physical health checks into normal practice, and make the monitoring of physical wellbeing by clients a regular, systematic process. Using a physical health checklist to initiate conversations about risk factors and symptoms can help with this. Formal physical health checks (at a GP or other health service) for this high-risk group are recommended every six months at least.
- **Provide a smokefree environment** and offer access to smoking cessation supports (see the *SANE Smokefree Guidelines* and other resources). Offer physical activity and healthy eating programs.
 - **Offer one-on-one and group support** to build and sustain motivation for health behaviour change, using techniques such as health coaching or The Flinders Program (for chronic illness self-management support).
 - **Develop the personal health skills of clients** including self-advocacy skills and essential basic life skills such as food shopping, cooking and budgeting. Empower clients to work effectively with a GP by helping them make an appointment, offering to go along with them to an appointment if needed, and improving their understanding of basic physical health checks.

- **Tap into peer leadership** as the shared understanding of the everyday challenges of living with a mental illness between peer worker and client means that the worker can greatly influence positive health behaviour change in clients, and act as a positive role model.
- **Involve friends and families** where possible, as their attitudes and behaviour regarding food and physical activity are important. Research has shown that most people with mental illness want support from friends and family and believe that their encouragement would help them to achieve their goals. Provide them with information about resources, programs and services and involve them in activities if appropriate.
- **Link with community and public health initiatives** such as the many government-approved public lifestyle programs aimed at people at risk of chronic conditions. Many of these are either free or low cost.
- **Acknowledge gender and cultural differences** Gender as well as cultural and religious background can influence people's health attitudes and behaviours. Ensure your organisation acknowledges these differences and makes the most of them by tailoring messages and programs accordingly.



How can we ensure sustainability?

Ensure sustainability by integrating healthy living into the organisation's everyday practice.

Many measures in these Guidelines can be implemented at little or no cost to the organisation by adapting regular practices, drawing on available resources, and linking clients with community initiatives. For example, there is little or no cost in scheduling a regular chat about physical health, or simply going for a short walk with a client rather than sitting at a café or fast food restaurant. The most important aspects of a healthy living initiative are changes to culture and attitudes.

If designated funding is required, funding sources may include the Australian and State governments, philanthropic trusts and foundations, and local government support. Fundraising events can also involve healthy living promotion and activities – such as a sponsored walk, for example.

SANE Australia

A national charity working for a better life for people affected by mental illness – through campaigning, education and research.

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The SANE Australia Mind + Body Initiative has developed a range of resources to promote health living, including:

- ▶ *The SANE DVD Kit on Healthy Living*
- ▶ *The SANE Guide to Healthy Living*
- ▶ *Healthy Living Factsheets and Podcasts*
- ▶ *The SANE Guide to a Smokefree Life (for individuals)*
- ▶ *The SANE Smokefree Kit (for organisations to run courses for clients with a mental illness)*
- ▶ *Factsheet on Smoking and Mental Illness*
- ▶ *SANE Smokefree Guidelines for NGOs*
- ▶ *SANE Smokefree Guidelines for GPs*
- ▶ *The SANE Guide to Drugs*

For more information on resources and the SANE Mind + Body Initiative, see the Projects area of www.sane.org or contact info@sane.org.

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