

Mind Your Health

The Interrelated Impact of Mental Health and Chronic Illness



Introduction

As the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to resonate, mental health conditions like depression and anxiety – which grew globally by about **25%** in 2020 alone – remain a large and burdensome challenge to individuals (and society). For those who are also battling a chronic health condition, this can complicate their ability to manage their care. Depression and anxiety may contribute to poorer outcomes for chronic conditions and vice versa, we posited. Further, we wanted to explore ways to help mitigate these effects.

Sharecare conducted qualitative and quantitative research, surveying thousands of consumers and hundreds of physicians in 2022 and again in 2023, and conducting focus groups of patients with several types of chronic conditions in 2023.

Research Goals

- Quantify the pervasiveness of depression or anxiety in those with chronic conditions
- Understand the impact and implications of concomitant depression or anxiety and chronic conditions
- Investigate the unmet need, openness, and potential efficacy of mental-health interventions to combat this impact



Background

Depression and Anxiety are Pervasive... and Undiagnosed

We know that mental-health issues are a significant problem in society, but much of it remains hidden, and this is even worse for people with chronic conditions.



“We’ve found that depression and anxiety remain not only pervasive, but vastly undiagnosed. This is especially worrying for people who are dealing with a chronic illness, because the statistics – already bleak for the general population – are far worse for them. Their depression and anxiety are likelier to remain undiagnosed, and both patients and their physicians agree that it has a direct impact on how well their chronic conditions are managed.”

– Jud Brewer, MD, PhD, Chief Medical Officer, Sharecare.

Depression incidence among patients with chronic disease vs. the U.S. overall incidence rate

5X
Higher

2X
Higher

Anxiety incidence among patients with chronic disease vs. the U.S. overall incidence rate

More than twice as many people in our survey qualified for a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, based on common diagnostic screening tools, than had received a diagnosis.

Survey respondents who qualified for a diagnosis of depression or anxiety

69%

Yet only

31%

Survey respondents who were diagnosed



Background

Depression and Anxiety are Pervasive... and Undiagnosed

For people with chronic conditions, depression and anxiety are even more pervasive AND even more underdiagnosed.

Chronic condition and diagnosed with depression or anxiety	39%
No chronic condition and diagnosed with depression or anxiety	16%
Chronic Condition who reported symptoms that would qualify them as having any mild depression or anxiety	60%
No chronic condition who reported symptoms that would qualify them as having any mild depression or anxiety	35%

Our physician survey reflected this information, as doctors estimated that, among their patients with chronic conditions, **40%** also suffered from depression or anxiety.

“ How am I going to pay for my next round of medicine? ”

- Type 2 diabetes patient

“ We’re all going through it, but we’re each going through it differently, so we can relate and sympathize, but what you deal with mentally and physically: it’s just hell. ”

- Crohn’s disease patient

“ Mentally, it’s debilitating at times. ”

- Psoriasis patient

“ You can ring a bell. Your scars can get better. You can go back to work. But it doesn’t end. It’s still part of you. ”

- Breast cancer patient

Condition Control

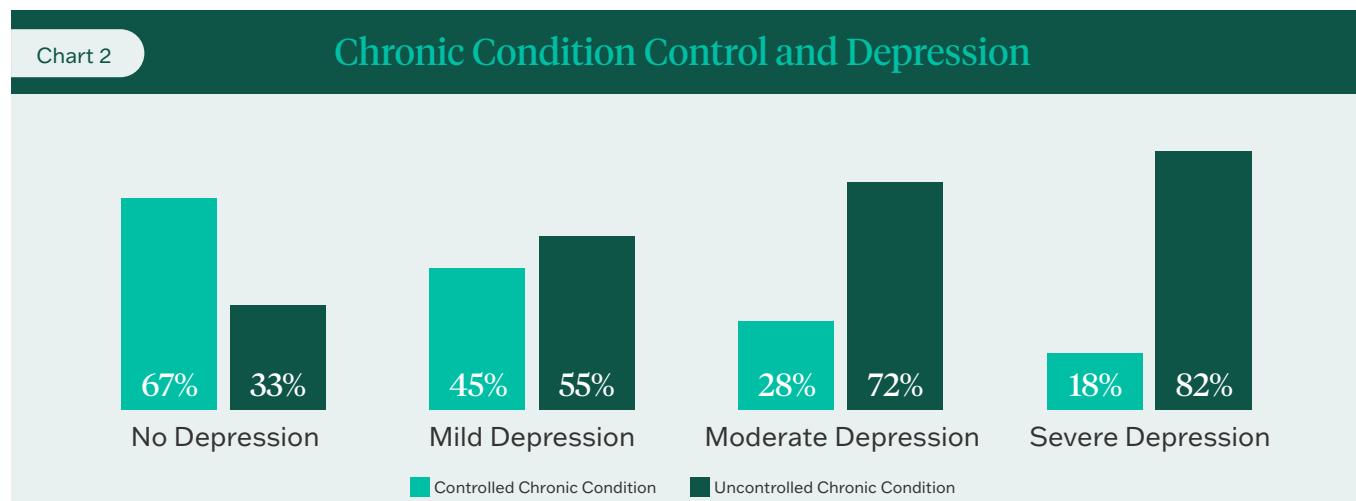
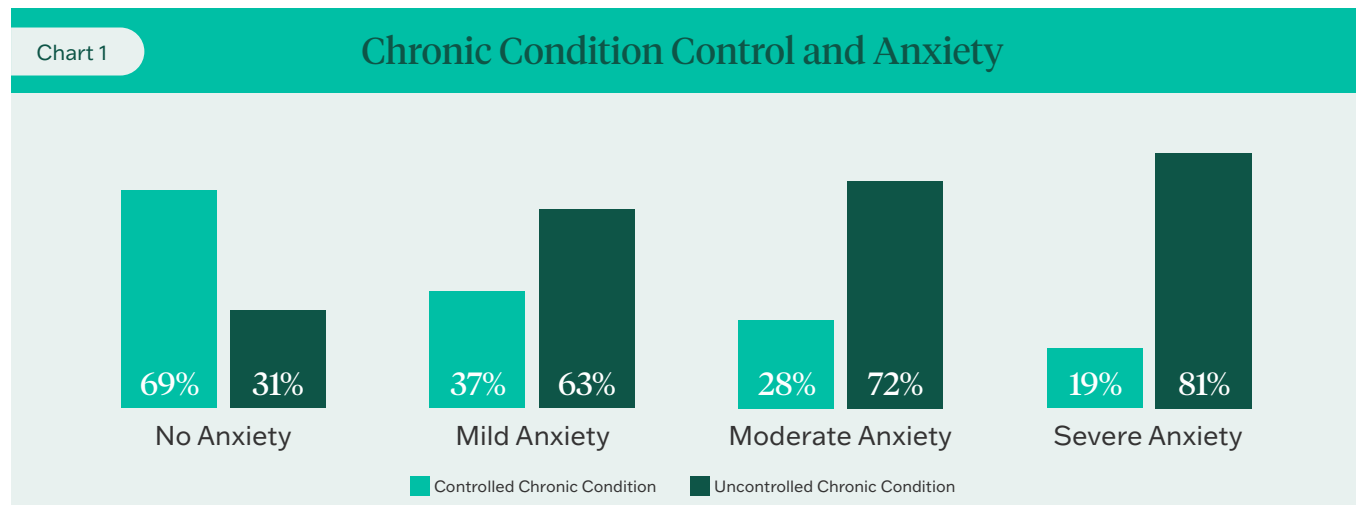
Negative Effect on Outcomes

Mental health issues have a demonstrably negative effect on outcomes in chronic conditions. It makes sense that adding more than one health problem to someone's plate will have negative consequences. And indeed, it was immediately apparent that depression or anxiety affect chronic conditions – a logical conclusion borne out by data.

The effects are complex, but the negative impact is clear.

Whether a person with a chronic condition was then diagnosed with depression or anxiety, or whether it happened the other way around, our survey found that, in both cases, **42%** of people said that the management of the first-diagnosed condition suffered.

When chronic condition patients struggle with their mental health, they struggle to manage their other conditions.



Condition Control

Negative Effect on Outcomes

Among respondents with chronic conditions, half said their condition was under control and half said it wasn't. Among those who had depression or anxiety, only **31%** said their condition was under control, and **69%** said their condition was not.



This can take a variety of forms, from the straightforward to the subtle. In one example, while **62%** of all those with a chronic condition said that they worked to eat a healthy diet, only **42%** of those who also had depression or anxiety agreed.

“When I am anxious or depressed, I do not exercise, and I eat worse.”

- Type 2 diabetes patient

“Having bad anxiety takes me to a place where I cannot focus on myself.”

- Psoriasis patient

And the connection is linear. Our data demonstrated that, the worse a person's depression or anxiety was, the more likely their chronic condition was to be uncontrolled. For example, while nearly **7 in 10** chronic condition sufferers without depression or anxiety have their chronic condition in control, only **2 in 10** of those with severe depression or anxiety do. See Chart 1 and Chart 2.



“If I am stressed or anxious, my body gets run down, and I have no energy to do what needs to be done.”

- Ulcerative colitis patient

“There's a trigger, and a domino effect. It's like a landslide and an avalanche.”

- Crohn's disease patient

The Cycle

Chronic Illness and the Mind-Body Connection

Doctors (and patients) agree that treating chronic conditions properly requires addressing depression and anxiety.

Responses from the physician survey confirmed the patient experience. Some **87%** of physicians agreed that, when a patient suffers from depression, anxiety, or stress, it interferes with good disease management for their other chronic health conditions.

Patients agreed, volunteering examples of times that, for instance, stress or bad mental health had led to a flare-up of their psoriasis or Crohn's disease, or a spike in their blood sugar. For patients, depression and anxiety can cause an inability to lead a healthy life in accordance with their care team's recommendations or follow recommended treatment plans.

They shared their experiences of the downward spiral: a mental-health strain would lead to negative health consequences, which would further strain their mental health, causing even further decline in the management of their chronic condition.

The worry about that spiral can itself be a trigger, and can be isolating, "hanging over you like a black cloud." "Is this what I'm going to deal with for the rest of my life? When will I get my life back? When will things be taken away from me again? Why do I have to deal with this?"



“When patients have exacerbation of their chronic health condition, it also tends to make their mental health conditions harder to control, and vice versa.”

– Cardiologist

“This is where it has to go: the symbiotic relationship between the mind and the body. Everything is connected. You have to understand that.”

– Crohn's disease patient

Physician Response

Lack of Focus on Mental Health



Despite the prevalence of depression and anxiety among chronic condition sufferers, many doctors feel they don't have the time or resources to address their patients' mental health at every visit.

In our survey, only **61%** of primary care physicians, and only **35%** of specialists, brought up mental health at every visit.

And, as our focus groups noted, even the common terminology of treatment can have negative mental-health connotations. As one patient put it, "The term they use is, 'you failed the drug.' No. The drug failed; I didn't fail it. The drug didn't work for me. But it puts another negative thing on you – one more thing to add to the bag of crazy in your brain."

“ Appointment time is limited and is mostly used to address chronic non-mental health problems. I also feel like a don't have a lot of good resources that are covered by insurance to offer my patients. ”

– Primary care physician

“ Your oncologist asks how you're feeling physically. Your surgeon wants to see your scars. You need them to be more holistic. ”

– Breast cancer patient

“ Discussions for mental health are far more time-consuming than most medical conditions. ”

– Primary care physician

Digital Tools

Useful and Helpful for Condition Management

Fortunately, simple digital offerings can help, by facilitating communication, relaxation, and mindfulness. In our 2023 survey, physicians expressed strong belief in the usefulness of all types of digital tools they were asked about. This included tools that would facilitate better communication between themselves and patients; videos and apps to support relaxation, mindfulness, meditation apps; and educational materials, both on their chronic condition, as well as on meditation and mindfulness. Patients – especially patients with anxiety or depression – largely agreed.

Physician: Perceived Usefulness of Digital Tools	Primary Care	Specialist
Tools to help patients better communicate with their healthcare team (you)	89%	86%
Articles with information about the health benefits of meditation and mindfulness that you could provide these patients	71%	68%

Patient: Perceived Usefulness of Digital Tools	Chronic condition	Chronic condition with comorbid anxiety or depression
Tools to help me have better conversations with my healthcare team	55%	69%
Articles with information about the health benefits of mindfulness and meditation	45%	52%

Both physicians and patients agree that resources to help with depression and anxiety, including mindfulness techniques, are important.

Physicians	84%	agree mindfulness can help lead to better health outcomes
	85%	agree reducing anxiety through mindfulness would benefit patients with chronic conditions
Patients	80%	with depression or anxiety agree mental health and physical health are connected
	68%	with a chronic condition and depression or anxiety agree mindfulness can help manage their mental health

Digital Tools

Useful and Helpful, but Underutilized

While both patients and physicians agree that mindfulness tools offer hope against depression and anxiety, they remain underutilized.

While **46%** of patients with a chronic condition were interested in digital management tools, only **21%** were currently using them. This suggests a large unmet need.

The patients in our focus group agreed, saying that mental health symptoms should be asked about more often by healthcare providers, and suggesting that more and more varied resources should be offered to patients, especially at the time of initial diagnosis. But, they noted, it needs to be done with a real understanding of their condition. “When someone tells me to do yoga, but right now just sitting hurts, I know they mean well, but...” one patient said resignedly.

However, it can’t only just be an overly-simple check-box action: “here’s your pamphlet” – or, “Fill out the form. How do you feel? Smiley? Not smiley?”



One patient, a firefighter, explained that their service had created a video featuring firefighters who were cancer survivors, for others with the condition. Providing advice and encouragement from a place of empathy and understanding made a difference, they pointed out:

“It’s somebody you can connect with.”

At present, patients said, mental health connections to their chronic condition were not always easy to find.

“Mental health conditions should be right there with all of the other symptoms and side effects. It’s as real as problems with your feet, or your eyes, that we hear much more about.”



The Tools are Proven

The Hunger is There

This is where we come in – “we” being not only Sharecare, but all healthcare platforms, content outlets, and care professionals.

We now have evidence – conclusive and mounting – that mindfulness tools are helpful, accepted, and sought after to help patients – particularly those with chronic conditions – battle depression and anxiety. This will not only reduce the effects of those conditions themselves, but help them to better manage their chronic conditions. And so, this isn’t a fight for only mental-health professionals. It’s for all of us who are working to help patients.



Meditation and mindfulness programs (such as mindfulness-based stress reduction, developed in 1979) have repeatedly clinically demonstrated an ability to reduce depression and anxiety in tens of thousands of patients – and, of course, are based on teachings and practices rooted in antiquity.

National surveys saw meditation triple in popularity between 2012-2017, and pop culture seems to have only grown its profile in the intervening years.

The zeitgeist has changed, and 20th-century taboos around discussing mental-health issues, or disease concerns, have lessened.

“ You do have to be honest or brave about it, but this is the post-COVID world, where disease is mainstream, so you might as well talk about what’s going on with you. ”

– Ulcerative colitis patient

“ Maybe even 10 years ago, there was stigma, but I think things are open now, and talking about your disease is a much more common thing. People are more aware so it’s not weird. And speaking about mental health is encouraged. ”

– Type 2 diabetes patient

It's Time to Act

We believe it's incumbent on all healthcare – and healthcare content – providers to be doing more to provide mental-health resources, and mindfulness tools, in conjunction with any health content.

Sharecare's Mind Your Health research and content initiatives are part of our commitment to this (as is our clinically-demonstrated Unwinding Anxiety app, named for the book by Sharecare CMO and neuroscientist Jud Brewer, MD, PhD). In the Mind Your Health initiative, meditation and mindfulness content is paired with chronic-condition content across the Sharecare platform.

Together, we can help patients to better manage their health – all of their health.

Mind Your Health

VIDEO
Mind Your Health: Anxiety, Depression, and Psoriasis
One small study reported 84% of psoriasis patients had psychiatric comorbidities.

ARTICLE
Can Meditation Help You Better Manage Psoriasis?
How meditation may help people with psoriasis cope with stress and improve symptoms.

VIDEO
8 Minute Meditation for Psoriasis
Stress can often be the cause of psoriasis flare-ups. Take a few calming minutes for yourself with this beginner's meditation session.

Did You Know?
84% of Psoriasis patients notice their symptoms get worse with prolonged stress.
*American Medical Health for Chronic Condition Management Survey, n=3,891

sharecare

Survey respondents said things like:
"Too much stress makes my psoriasis worse."

8-MINUTE MEDITATION FOR PSORIASIS



“While we found that both patients and physicians see the help that mindfulness tool can offer in reversing this downward spiral, they remain underutilized. We believe they're critical and that healthcare professionals and platforms have a responsibility to focus on these critical components of chronic disease care.

– Jud Brewer, MD, PhD, Chief Medical Officer, Sharecare.

Sharecare is the leading digital health company that helps people – no matter where they are in their health journey – unify and manage all their health in one place. Our comprehensive and data-driven virtual health platform is designed to help people, providers, employers, health plans, government organizations, and communities optimize individual and population-wide well-being by driving positive behavior change. Driven by our philosophy that we are all together better, at Sharecare, we are committed to supporting each individual through the lens of their personal health and making high-quality care more accessible and affordable for everyone.



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