Mental health issues are some of the most confusing and overlooked health problems today. Roughly 18% of Americans ages 18 and up experienced some form of mental health issue in the last year and over 8% of adults had a substance use disorder. Mental Health issues and addictions are problems that affect us all, and the best way to prevent or treat these illnesses is with early screening and treatment. According to the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration, up to 90% of individuals who could benefit from mental health and addictions counseling do not seek treatment.

The correlation of these problems is something that is often overlooked. It is not unusual for those struggling with mental health issues to also have a substance abuse problem. Conversely, over half of the people with a substance abuse problem may have also have a mental health diagnosis.

Research supports the efficacy of outpatient counseling when it integrates both mental health and substance misuse assessment and treatment. Even if someone does not have a co-occurring substance misuse disorder, but are being treated for depression, anxiety, stress management, PTSD, or relationship issues, it helps to screen for any history of substance misuse.

Individuals concerned about their use of alcohol/drugs and/or mental health issues should consult their physician and/or a counselor licensed in both mental health and addictions.

Fortunately, there are ways to help prevent the onset and development of mental health and substance misuse disorders. Stress that is not properly managed is related to a number of chronic health issues including anxiety, insomnia, muscle tension, hypertension, gastrointestinal issues and alcohol/drug misuse.

Some ways that you may be able to better manage stress:

1. Alcohol/drugs: Abstain/reduce your use of alcohol to less than one drink a day for women, and less than 2 drinks a day for men.

2. Supportive, compassionate connections: Establish and maintain these connections with individuals (and pets!).

3. Natural environments: Environmental stressors including excessive noise, crowding, and lack of green spaces have been demonstrated to increase psychophysiological symptoms of stress.

4. Physical exercise: This is one of the best ways to reduce stress (please consult with your physician before beginning an exercise regimen).

5. Deep breathing, mindful meditation: Research supports the efficacy of exercises which help reduce emotional reactivity and improve one’s ability to respond as opposed to react to stressors.

6. Effective communication: Communicating one’s thoughts and feelings can relieve stress. It is especially important to convey difficult feelings, not be passive or repress feelings, or alternatively become aggressive and offend others.

7. Challenge the automatic negative thoughts: Move beyond automatic negative thoughts (ANTS) and limiting self-beliefs by actively challenging the negative narrative you may be repriming about yourself. Try using humor and self-acceptance to challenge the inner critic.

This is only a partial listing and of course, individuals may have their own stress management techniques.

Prevention is the operative word in healthcare. By improving one’s ability to manage stress and addressing risks associated with mental health and substance misuse early on, the better chance we have at improving individual and family overall health and well-being.

Michael Edwards, M.A., LCPC, LAC, is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and Licensed Addiction Counselor, at North Valley Hospital Behavioral Health, licensed to treat both mental health and addictions. He sees individuals for depression, anxiety, stress management, PTSD, addictions and for marriage/couples counseling. For more information please call 862-1030 or go online at www.NVBehavioralHealth.org.