

## IT'S ALL CONNECTED: FASCIA & MENTAL HEALTH

*Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC*

May is Mental Health Awareness Month – a great reminder to prioritize and talk about mental health.

When we think of mental health, we tend to focus on what's going on in our heads – our feelings and thoughts, not our bodies. But mental health doesn't just stay in our minds. It deeply affects our bodies as well.

Poor mental health has been linked to a higher risk of heart disease, chronic inflammation, high blood pressure, digestive problems, and insulin resistance among others.

While stress, anxiety, and depression can contribute to the risk of chronic disease, they can also manifest as physical pain. We've all experienced tight shoulders and neck when we're stressed and anxious. What's going on? Our emotional state can be reflected in our body in many ways, including through our fascia.

### What is Fascia?

You might be familiar with fascia if you've ever had plantar fasciitis, a painful foot condition. But our fascia is much more than just in our feet. It's a connective tissue network – a web that wraps around every organ, muscle, and joint. Fascia is one of the body's largest sensory organs as well, it interacts with our nervous system and tells us where we are in space, as well as sensing pain. Think of it as a Spider-Man suit made of mostly collagen that covers your entire body from the tip of your big toe to the top of your head and coordinates your movements. When fascia is healthy, it is flexible, supple, and glides easily. But under chronic stress or as we age, it can become dry, stiff, and less flexible.

### Mind, Body, Fascia – What's the Connection?

Let's say you're really stressed. Not just an occasional stress, but a waking up at 3:00 am every night kind of stress. Our body starts to hold that trauma and stress – literally. Stress, whether physical or emotional, can cause fascia to tighten and constrict, leading to pain, decreased mobility, and stiffness. Fascinatingly, research suggests it's a two-way street! Stress and trauma can lead to constricted fascia, and tight fascia can also lead to decreased emotional states.

When our fascia is unhealthy, instead of gliding it becomes sticky and clumpy leading to restrictions and adhesions like muscle knots.

### What Contributes to Unhealthy Fascia?

In addition to stress, other culprits include:

- A sedentary lifestyle
- Poor posture
- Dehydration
- Muscle overuse or injury
- A diet high in ultra-processed foods
- Inadequate sleep

But the good news? Small shifts can make a meaningful difference. You don't need hours in your day to start feeling better in mind AND body.

### Seven Things You Can Do Today!

1. **Prioritize Stress Management.** Once you realize that those nagging aches and pains might be related to stress and anxiety, it's one more reason to take mental health seriously.

Here are a few of proven techniques:

- Mindfulness practices like meditation or deep breathing
- Gratitude journaling



- Social support – spending time with friends and loved ones
- Seek professional help – therapy can be a game changer!

2. **Join a walking challenge.** Walking is one of the simplest and most powerful things you can do for your health. It's accessible to everyone, free, and provides so many benefits. Walking, especially in natural environments, has been shown to decrease anxiety and depression.
3. **Sign up for a class.** We tend to make better decisions for our future selves, and if you have something scheduled on the calendar you are more likely to do it! What appeals to you? Whether it's yoga, which helps release tight fascia, or something more high-energy like a spin or dance class, the key is to find something that you enjoy. Multiple studies confirm that consistent exercise has a similar effect to a low-dose antidepressant!
4. **Move a little more throughout the day, every day!** Don't limit movement to one workout – our bodies aren't designed to be still for hours at a time. Five minutes of stretching a lunch. A family walk after dinner (great for digestion and blood sugar control!). Stand, stretch, and do some squats between meetings.
5. **Stay Hydrated.** Fascia needs water to work properly, as does our brain! Keep a water bottle nearby and sip throughout the day. Herbal teas, hot or cold, as well as fruits and vegetables, can also support hydration. Another benefit? They provide antioxidants and phytochemicals, as well! Vitamin C is especially crucial for collagen formation, so add in some strawberries, citrus, and bell peppers.
6. **Try myofascial release.** This can be done with a professional massage, but you can also do it at home with foam rollers and lacrosse balls.
7. **Consider acupuncture.** It can calm the nervous system with the release of endorphins, as well as help with pain.

## Final Thoughts

Your body and your mind are always in conversation. By taking care of your body, you can improve your mental health, as well!

## SELF-MYOFASCIAL RELEASE EXERCISES

Using a foam roller regularly can increase flexibility and function while reducing inflammation and muscle soreness. These exercises can also be done on the front of thighs, calves, glutes, and upper back. Start gently and focus on your breath as you work through tight spots.

### Hamstring (back of thigh)

1. Sit on the floor and place a foam roller underneath your legs, just above your knees.
2. Relax your legs.
3. Use your hands to lift yourself up and roll back and forth on the backs of your thighs, from the beginning of your glutes to above the knees.
4. Go very slowly and roll for at least 30 seconds.
5. When you find a sore spot, stop and hold for at least 30 seconds until you feel the muscles relax.

If you want to read more about how our bodies hold on to stress, the book *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk, MD, is a great place to start.

## What will you do to take care of your fascia?



*Heidi Roth, RD, LDN is a Registered/Licensed Dietitian, Health Coach and nutrition expert with a passion for health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BS in Nutrition and Dietetics.*

