

Life with Gracie: Your mental health might be impacting your physical well-being

Health

By [Gracie Bonds Staples](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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GRACIEBONDSSTAPLES/gstaples@ajc. Marly Santana (left) says unresolved mental health issues are often the root cause of the physical ailments women like Maria Guadalupe suffer. Santana is a counselor at Mercy Care's Buford Highway clinic, where Guadalupe is a patient. GRACIE BONDS STAPLES / GSTAPLES@AJC.COM

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In a conference room that doubles as a classroom at Mercy Care's Buford Highway clinic, a 38-year-old mother of six remembers the verbal and physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her ex-husband and weeps.

When Maria Guadalupe finally mustered the courage in 2001 to report him to police, **the emotional damage from years of domestic violence had already started to manifest.**

Guadalupe suffered frequent headaches. She could not sleep. She couldn't will her mind to stop.

Despite all the signs, it would take 13 years for the Brookhaven mother to finally get help, and she has doctors at Mercy Care to thank.

Soon after she had surgery to remove her appendix in 2013, doctors there noticed Guadalupe seemed depressed and recommended she get counseling.



GRACIEBONDSSTAPLES/gstaples@ajc.
Years after the symptoms manifested themselves, doctors at Mercy Care diagnosed Maria Guadalupe (right) with depression. The 38-year-old mother is a beneficiary of a \$20,000 grant award that allows the Buford Highway clinic to continue providing care. Marly Santana (pictured with her) is a behavioral health specialist at Mercy Care.

“I’m a lot better now,” she said. **“Being able to talk about it has really helped.”**

We’ve been hearing for years that there is no health without mental health. Even with no medical degree, you’d have to be blind to not see the strong correlation between stress and health and vice versa.

The people at Mercy Care get it.

Mental health has long been at the center of the primary care and wraparound services the nonprofit provides to Atlanta’s working poor and uninsured. Thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the Atlanta Women’s Foundation, Mercy Care will continue to provide a group treatment approach that has led Hispanic and lower-income women like Guadalupe to understand the impact stress, depression and past traumatic experiences have on their physical health. **The group sessions provide a safe and supportive environment** for developing coping skills and learning how to control chronic health conditions.

“With a Women’s Foundation Grant in 2015, we estimated serving 60 women but hit that milestone halfway through,” said Anitra Walker, director of clinic operations. “At the end of 12 months, we had served 178 women, the majority of which were not only better able to understand and manage behavioral issues but also their chronic conditions.”

More than 40 million American adults — almost 20 percent of the adult American population — will deal with mental illness this year.

Individuals living with serious mental illness face an increased risk of having chronic medical conditions. Adults in the U.S. living with serious mental illness die on average 25 years earlier than others, largely due to treatable medical conditions.

The American Psychiatric Association estimates that integrating the mental and physical health care systems could save up to \$48 billion a year.

Marly Santana, a behavioral health specialist at Mercy Care, said she sees four to six patients a day whose mental health is the root cause of their physical health. Physical problems, for instance, often interfere with the diagnosis, assessment and treatment of depression, the most common complaint.

Because many of them are undocumented, Santana said they face a multitude of barriers, including language, an inability to navigate the system and high unemployment. Limited knowledge and stigma surrounding mental health conditions within the community can also be deterrents to seeking care.

“Establishing rapport and addressing cultural resistance to getting help took a team approach,” Walker said.

Mercy Care also reassigned Spanish-speaking medical assistants to help patients with forms when the behavioral health nurse was busy with patients. And if needed, they provided MARTA and gas cards to group participants without reliable transportation to the clinic.

Now, here’s the really big news. Patients won’t have to endure the cramped quarters they’ve gotten used to at the Buford Highway clinic much longer.

Early next year, Mercy Care will open in a new 45,000-square-foot facility adjacent to the Chamblee MARTA station. There, they will grow the program to integrate therapeutic activities like yoga, offer classes at night to accommodate more working women and provide an educational children’s group while women attend class.

But they need volunteers. If you’re interested, contact Nicole Smith at nsmith2@mercyatlanta.org or 678-843-8510.



Each week, Gracie Bonds Staples will bring you a perspective on life in the Atlanta area. Life with Gracie runs online Tuesday, Thursday and alternating Fridays.