

Building Healthier Futures: The Role of PCPs in Promoting Mental Wellness

Presenting Challenge:

In honor of Mental Health Awareness Month, this case highlights the critical role primary care providers (PCPs) play in promoting mental health as part of normal development.

A PCP consulted the WI CPCP on a 15-year-old boy who presented with increased withdrawal from family, irritability, and unusual instances of aggressive behaviors at home and school. The patient's family attempted to initiate psychotherapy, but the patient refused to continue after a couple of sessions. The patient also did not want to consider medication. The family expressed significant concern regarding the patient's worsening symptoms, was unsure of how to proceed, and scheduled an appointment with the PCP. The PCP contacted the WI CPCP to discuss how to help patients who refuse mental health treatment.

Consultant's Response:

Assess Safety as a Normal Component of Primary Care

- Risk Assessment: Consider using either the Ask Suicide-Screening Questions (ASQ) via the [Youth ASQ Toolkit](#) or the [Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale \(C-SSRS\)](#) to screen for suicidality and initiate an appropriate safety plan if necessary.
- Additional training for providers on [Counseling on Access to Lethal Means \(CALM\)](#) reduction can promote compassionate and destigmatized conversations with patients and families to enhance safety.

Understand Patient Experiences

- Once safety is assured, invite patients to talk about what they notice in their mood and behavior, their goals for their health and wellness, and their concerns regarding treatment options.
- Screening tools such as the [Patient Health Questionnaire \(PHQ-9\)](#) can help patients develop awareness of depressive symptoms. Additionally, sometimes, behavioral concerns can reflect underlying anxiety in youth, and an anxiety screening tool such as the [Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders \(SCARED\)](#) can be helpful (scoring aide found [here](#)).

Normalize Mental Health Promotion Strategies

- Emphasize respect for patient goals, which may include building competence, autonomy, and self-confidence as a part of adolescent development.
- Place mental health strategies in the context of understanding the brain and body's response to stress and how bolstering mental health can help patients attain their goals.
- Encourage patients to talk with their therapist about their own preferred focus areas.
- [Motivational Interviewing \(MI\)](#) techniques can help structure these conversations with patients.

Recommend Formal and Informal Mental Health Resources

- Encourage patients to reconsider therapy and/or medication if they are willing.

- Offer well-vetted online options that provide strategies which patients and families could utilize privately or in coordination with a mental health provider. Examples include the following:
 - [Child Mind Institute](#)
 - [HelpGuide.org](#)
 - [American Academy of Pediatrics \(Depression\)](#)
 - [American Academy of Pediatrics \(Stress Management\)](#)

Outcome:

In this case, the patient denied suicidal ideation. He did screen positive for depression on the PHQ-9 and acknowledged feeling more irritable and frustrated in the context of increased school stress. The patient explained that he did not want to go to a therapist because he thought that would make him seem incompetent. The patient responded favorably when the PCP talked about how the progression to adulthood involves learning effective stress management skills. The patient agreed that these could help him achieve his goals of greater competence and self-confidence at school. At the end of the conversation, the patient shared that he was more willing to talk with his therapist about specific, action-oriented techniques that fit with his goals. The patient and family also accepted the online resources provided by the PCP. Although the patient and family preferred to focus on therapy for now, they agreed to follow up with the PCP in a couple of weeks to provide an update and perhaps consider a medication if symptoms worsened.