

Mental Health and the School System

Presenting Problem:

A participating PCP requested a consultation from WI CPCP regarding a 17-year-old female patient being treated for depression and anxiety with escitalopram. At today's appointment, the patient reported significant improvement in her symptoms since her escitalopram dose was increased to 20mg/day and she began psychotherapy last month. However, she expressed distress over her current grades, which have dropped due to missed school days and incomplete assignments during her recent symptoms. She feels she does not have enough time to catch up before the semester ends. The PCP seeks advice on how to assist the patient at this point.

Consultant's Response:

It is encouraging to hear that the combination of psychotherapy and escitalopram is alleviating the patient's depressive and anxious symptoms! The best course of action is to continue psychotherapy until the therapist deems it unnecessary and to maintain the medication for approximately 12 months after symptom resolution, followed by a gradual taper to assess ongoing need.

As symptoms improve, it is important to evaluate the impact on the patient's overall functioning during the peak of her symptoms.

- **Psychotherapy** can aid in rebuilding self-esteem and mending strained relationships with family or friends.
- **Academic Difficulties:** If the patient's poor grades are due to physical or mental illness, such as depression, and she attends public school, she may qualify for interventions or accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan.
 - For example, her teachers could review her missing or incomplete assignments and tests to reduce the workload needed to demonstrate mastery of the required material and earn credits.

Note that private schools are not obligated to provide special education services. However, private school students can still undergo an IEP/504 Plan assessment through their public school district, and many private schools may offer accommodations voluntarily.

Teaching Points:

1. **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):** This law ensures that students with disabilities affecting their ability to learn receive a free, appropriate public education (FAPE).
2. **IDEA Disability Categories:** These include two core concepts: (1) a physical or mental condition that (2) adversely affects access, engagement, and progress in age- or grade-level general education instruction, environments, and other activities.
 - a. **IEP:** For students whose disability interferes with their ability to fully benefit from the general education curriculum, necessitating specialized instruction. An IEP serves as a written contract requiring the school district to provide FAPE.
 - i. *Example:* A student with a reading disability receives one-on-one reading instruction.

- b. **504 Plan:** Provides accommodations and related services to enable access to the general curriculum without modifying content, methodology, or performance criteria.

Potential Indications for Referral for an IEP/504 Plan:

- Poor grades or attendance
- Problems with memory or attention
- Difficulty with classroom activities (writing, reading, math)
- Behavior problems (acting out, defiance)
- Social or emotional problems
- Speech and language problems (poor vocabulary, sentence structure, pronunciation)

Referral Process for PCPs:

1. **Identify and Document:** Recognize signs that may indicate the need for an IEP or 504 Plan. Document any observations and concerns related to the patient's academic performance and behavior.
2. **Communicate with the School:** Reach out to the school's special education coordinator or counselor to discuss the patient's needs. Provide any relevant medical documentation that supports the need for accommodation.
3. **Support the Family:** Guide the patient's family through requesting an evaluation for an IEP or 504 Plan. Explain their rights under IDEA and the importance of advocating for their child's educational needs.
4. **Follow-up:** Monitor the patient's progress, and communicate with the school and family. Adjust treatment plans to support the patient's mental health and academic success.

Template Letter for PCPs:

Dear Principal **[Name]**,

I have been working with your student, **[Student's Name]**, for **[duration]**, and I am writing out of concern for their lack of academic progress/social struggles in the school setting. Per the child and family, **[Student's Name]** has struggled with **[issues such as anxiety, depression, attention, behavioral outbursts]**, which may be contributing to their **[low grades, frequent absences, office referrals]**. I wonder if an assessment could be considered through the 504/IEP process to identify and implement accommodations for any qualifying factors interfering with **[Student's Name]**'s academic progress.

Sincerely,
[Your Name], MD/DO/APNP/PA

Conclusion:

Addressing the intersection of mental health and academic performance is crucial for the overall well-being of adolescent patients. By recognizing the impact of mental health on education and advocating for appropriate accommodations, PCPs can play a vital role in supporting their patients' academic and personal growth.