



Early recognition of behavioral health needs

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Behavioral/mental health is an important part of one's overall health status and includes emotional and cognitive well-being. Variations in one's ability to function well at home, work, and/or school may be early signs of concern. In addition, relationships with others may become problematic, and the ability to "fit in" appropriately in any community-type setting(s) may also present significant interpersonal issues that need to be addressed. Most often, disorders manifest in changes in mood, thoughts, and/or behavior that results in stress and the inability to function in social and work settings. Psychological manifestations may also make everyday life difficult for those with these types of disorders, which can range from mild to severe and temporary (such as situational) or become persistent over time.

Mental Health America (MHA) endorses "universal screening for potential mental health problems for the same reasons and in the same settings that screenings have long been mandated for potential physical health problems, like vision and hearing. MHA believes that early identification of mental health and substance abuse issues should occur where and when young people are most likely to present concerns, such as in school."¹ In order for this to take place, teachers, nurses, and administrative leadership, as well as community health practitioners, need to be informed and supported in early identification of behavioral health needs.

Assessment for behavioral health needs

A family history or prior patient history of mental health issues or drug/alcohol abuse often places a person in a high-risk category for future care needs. During the initial and periodic ongoing assessments, these potential issues should be evaluated.

Common signs that may be exhibited in a person with these types of distress may include:

- Prolonged sadness
- Excessive fatigue
- Unexplained somnolence
- Signs of self-harm or neglect of appearance and cleanliness
- Weight gain or loss
- Missing appointments or time from school
- Unexplained frequent absences from work
- Gastrointestinal symptoms unrelated to physical illness
- Frequent headaches
- Irritability
- Financial difficulties
- Self-isolation
- Other unexplained personality changes

Common behavioral health issues requiring treatment

Behavioral health problems affect 20 percent of young people and about two-thirds of those are not getting appropriate help. Research shows that effective treatment can reduce the risk of involvement with the justice system and can improve outcomes as adults.²

During assessments, potential issues should be evaluated. Disorders that may be identified include:

- Drug or alcohol abuse (5.5 percent)
- Major depression (11 percent)
- Severe depression (7 percent)
- Recent cigarette dependence (2.8 percent)
- Bipolar disorder (3 percent)
- Eating disorders (2.7 percent)³

Research cited in a data brief by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2018 indicated that from 2012-2014 an approximate annual average of 30 million physician office visits related to mental health, by patients age 18 and over. Overall, the mental health visit rate for that same age group was 12.5 percent.⁴

Medical/psychological treatment is needed for a history of and diagnoses made related to anxiety, substance abuse, bipolar disorder, psychoses, and significant depression, among others.

Barriers to early identification and care

Unfortunately, many people, including some healthcare workers, do not understand behavioral/mental health issues. There is often still a stigma related to these conditions. This can cause certain people in need to avoid seeking care or delaying treatment, especially in the case of men and minorities. Primary care providers may not be well informed about the preferred methodologies to screen for and treat behavioral health needs. Referrals to specific resources that may be able to help might not be well known or readily available.

In some parts of the country, access to behavioral healthcare may be limited due to:

- Physical distance
- Lack of transportation
- Insurance coverage issues
- The out-of-pocket cost of care
- Insufficient mental health clinics and inpatient beds
- Lack of available convenient outpatient urgent/acute care that may result in people going to emergency departments (EDs) and urgent care centers (UCCs)

Privacy and confidentiality must be maintained in any discussion of behavioral health assessment findings and the treatment that may result, including what may arise in the healthcare workplace. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) applies to all medical and mental health information. Violations of HIPAA are often met with heavy penalties and fines. Therefore, such discussions should be kept strictly on a "need to know" basis. These kinds of matters should never be discussed in any public places. In addition, people with behavioral health issues should always be treated with kindness, dignity, and respect.

Benefits of early detection of behavioral health needs and interventions

Fortunately, with early detection, most of these aforementioned types of conditions respond well to treatment. However, left untreated, some may become chronic illnesses which may be more difficult to manage and may have adverse effects on a person's life.

Failure to treat depression can result in suicide.

Recognizing and treating behavioral health needs early can:

- Prevent an escalation
- Minimize the length of time of the suffering
- Facilitate the return to a normal level of functioning sooner
- Reduce the chance of long-term disability

Treatment options

Depending upon the location and situation a person is in at the time of identification of mental health-related issues, treatment options that can be considered include:

- Evaluation and care by a primary physician
- Referral from primary care physicians, EDs, UCCs, or other healthcare workers such as a psychologist, psychiatric social worker, or psychiatrist
- Outpatient counseling
- Inpatient care in a psychiatric facility in severe cases
- A combination of several of the above services in the short or long term

In order for there to be any value in the early detection of behavioral health issues, resources must be available in communities to assure effective treatment.

Risk-management considerations

In healthcare, early detection of behavioral health needs in co-workers, as well as providers, contractors, students, and leaders, is of critical importance. No one is immune from the possibility of having or developing such conditions. The continual stressors associated with working in healthcare over time, including staffing shortages, long hours, off shifts, and recently the related fears and additional demands of the Coronavirus pandemic and/or other emergencies, may contribute to intensifying behavioral health conditions.

Delivering quality care can be difficult even on a good day. Should a healthcare worker of any type exhibit signs of having mental health-related issues, efforts should be made immediately to discreetly and respectfully address the situation. To not do so would most likely make matters worse by allowing the suffering to continue and increase the chance of providing a less than optimal quality of patient care. In some cases, this may be awkward or difficult, but a resolution should be pursued as soon as the need is identified. The situation should not be permitted to get out of control, possibly causing harm to a patient or another person involved.

If a good relationship exists with the one exhibiting signs or symptoms, an effort should be made to pursue a casual conversation to see if the person will open up and seek help. If that approach is not effective, it may be best to reach out privately and confidentially to a person that both parties trust and respect, to

² Position Statement 41: Early Identification of Mental Health Issues in Young People, Mental Health America, Alexandria, VA, September 18, 2016, p.3.

³ Position Statement 41: Early Identification of Mental Health Issues in Young People, Mental Health America, Alexandria, VA, September 18, 2016, p.4.

⁴ Cherry, Donald M.S., et al. *Mental Health-related Physician Office Visits by Adults Aged 18 and Over: United States, 2012-2014*, "NCHS Data Brief No. 311", June 2018, p.5. p.2.

seek guidance. When these efforts are unsuccessful and/or there is a danger of harm to a patient or others, immediately notify a supervisor. It is critical that behavioral health issues be addressed in a positive, helpful manner as soon as possible to assure no harm results to anyone.

According to the CDC, there are more than 40,000 suicides annually in the United States. Suicide is the number one mental health risk. It is also the most common reason for malpractice lawsuits against psychiatrists. It is estimated that 50–80 percent of psychiatrists will have at least one patient commit suicide while under their care. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in those aged 18–24 and is overall the 10th leading cause of death in the United States.⁵

Should an adverse patient care event occur due to unaddressed behavioral health issues, all parties' privacy and confidentiality must be maintained. All review activities and findings should be addressed promptly and protected as part of the quality assurance/quality improvement/patient safety program. Only those with a need to know should be included in these review activities. Follow-up should assure that any behavioral health conditions are resolved prior to the healthcare worker returning to work. The risk manager should promptly notify legal counsel and assure that all relevant communications and documentation related to the occurrence are protected under attorney-client privilege.

Summary

In healthcare, it is especially important to continually evaluate behaviors of patients, visitors, staff, and providers, along with the environmental conditions and circumstances. When indicated, it will be necessary to act to minimize the chance of injury and losses to individuals, as well as the facility. This includes the possibility of:

- Physical and/or emotional harm
- Injuries to individuals
- Property damage
- Reputational and or financial loss to the organization
- Adverse impact on accreditation status
- Negative effects on licensure

Therefore, it is essential that every employee and healthcare provider be formally educated (in orientation and on a periodic basis) related to signs that may identify behavioral health concerns and the need for treatment. In the case of an employee or provider, the person at risk should be removed from work for evaluation and treatment by a physician before returning to work. In the case of patients, the treating physician/provider should be advised promptly. Should obvious signs be observed in visitors, contractors, students, or others, indicating possible mental health disorders or significant emotional distress, the supervisor and security should be notified immediately. Should the matter escalate, efforts should be made to de-escalate the situation, as appropriate, until assistance arrives. A calm demeanor can often minimize or resolve

aggression or frustration, thereby effectively managing such an event and preventing harm to others or damage to the facility. Every effort should be made to anticipate these types of scenarios to the extent possible.

References

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⁵ Marcus, Judith T, MD, Medical Director of Behavioral Health, Legacy Health System, Oregon, *OSHRM presentation: Risk Management Challenges in Behavioral Health*, May 13, 2016.

