

Jeff Bernhard:

I'm Jeff Bernhard, President of Commercial Markets at Highmark. Welcome back to Hitting a Higher Mark. In this podcast, we're going to explore topics that are transforming how healthcare is delivered, used, and paid for. Today, we will be discussing mental and behavioral health issues and their impact on children, adolescents, and young adults. We have three special guests here with me today from Allegheny Health Network to expand on this important topic. I'd like to welcome Dr. Alicia Kaplan, who is a psychiatry specialist, Dr. Doug Henry, vice president of Allegheny Health Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Institute, and Dr. Tania Kannadan, who works in child and adolescent psychiatry. Thank you all for joining me on this podcast. Now, let's get started.

So, Ed, I'm going to start off with you. The coronavirus pandemic has triggered a rise in mental health and behavioral health issues across the general population here in the United States. How has the pandemic specifically impacted mental health in children, adolescents, and young adults?

Doug Henry:

Okay, thanks. So, it's impacted kids perhaps the most, and one of the reasons is that children's brains are hardwired to move towards one another, to be social. Kids are programmed and very naturally gravitate towards one another. So, when kids don't have the opportunity for face-to-face education and to be physically with one another, that alone causes stress. And really, Jeff, that's just the tip of the iceberg, because a lot of stress related to fear of the illness.

Jeff Bernhard:

Anybody else want to add to that?

Tania Kannadan:

School is not just for education. It is such a huge part of their lives that has been taken away from them, and what has been given to them is subpar, the virtual, the hybrid, the in-person, that little mishmash of things. So, it's really impacting their self-esteem. It's worsening depression and anxiety.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thank you. And Dr. Kaplan, so let's talk about you obviously see young adults, so you start at 18, correct?

Alicia Kaplan:

That's right.

Jeff Bernhard:

So let's start with like an 18-year-old. So what can parents do or teachers or college professors, what can they do to identify or address signs that someone is having a difficult time dealing with the stressors of what's going on now and potentially may have mental health or behavioral health issues?

Alicia Kaplan:

Right. So the young adults, starting at 18, they are in a unique period of time in life, because that's when they're getting more independence, but also learning to maneuver life and uncertainty, and that is where anxiety disorders and the pandemic stress is heightening this and making it more intense, as well as depression. I think that it's definitely a combined efforts, so parents, whether they're living with the adolescents at this point or whether they're away at school. That's where it's different people taking a look at them, whether it's their roommate, their parents, their college professor, their RA if they're in college, or a roommate if they're not in school, but looking at their behavior. Changes in behavior are very important. Their appearance. If they appear to be withdrawn or not taking care of themselves, like even activities of daily, living such as bathing and getting dressed, as well as are they going to class? Are they showing up for work, as well as sadness? So, I think that this is definitely a combined approach and keeping our eye on those young adults.

Jeff Bernhard:

It's a difficult thing if you sense that your child or a child's friend is depressed or anxious. Sometimes there's a stigma associated with it, so how do you engage as a parent? Is the first sign to reach out to a counselor, to talk to your child first? What would you suggest?

Alicia Kaplan:

I think starting out with your child and creating an open environment, just to let them know that you're checking in, that you were their age once, and that this is common in adjusting with life. I think that things are on a spectrum, and it's hard sometimes for a parent to know how bad it is, and sometimes kids that age feel more comfortable telling a good friend than they will tell their parents. So that's where I think it's important to engage ... Sometimes it's the primary care doctor's the first way to get in with a psychologist or a psychiatrist, but I think that parents have to pay attention, really, to what. They're the best in knowing their child, so if there's a big change, and especially with decreased social connections, then that that's a main problem.

Jeff Bernhard:

So, Dr. Kannadan, would you say for younger children, elementary, junior high school, would you say most of the people that are referred in are referred in from teachers guidance counselors, or is it from parents or a split?

Tania Kannadan:

Mainly parents at the start at this pandemic, we are seeing a lot more parents noticing behavioral changes like Dr. Kaplan was talking about in their kids: increase in irritability, increase in tantrums. The younger kids, they're pretty much an open book, so whatever they're feeling, whatever they're going through, they're going to just let you know for the most part. So a lot of what I hear is they're having a lot more tantrums, they're unable to have any frustration tolerance, they're very irritable, and then you'll notice sleep changes, appetite changes. Most of the kids love school. They're not engaging in their schoolwork like they used to, so there is a change in their behavior that's pretty noticeable.

Tania Kannadan:

What we're also seeing, the high school and the middle school kids, you will see those changes, but the elementary school kids, one of the biggest things that we're seeing or I'm seeing really is kids who are terrified of the illness, like Dr. Henry had talked about. They're so worried that they're going to kill their grandparents, that they're going to bring this home and they are going to give it to their families, and so there's a lot more crying spells and a lot of, like, "I don't want to go outside. I don't want to go to my friend's house." They don't even want to socialize, because they're so scared that they're going to be the reason that their family gets COVID and eventually dies.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thank you. And Dr. Kaplan, so what can both adults and children, how can we work together to de-stigmatize people getting treatment for mental health or behavioral health disorders? I've been around a little while, and I think it's certainly different than it was 10, 15 years ago, which is a good thing, but would you say we still have a ways to go?

Alicia Kaplan:

I think things are definitely getting better, but we do have a ways to go. I think I've always talked about it with my patients and their families about that treating the mind is like treating any other part of the body. We wouldn't even think twice to get a thyroid treated or blood pressure or diabetes, and mental health is the same thing. Treating depression or an anxiety disorder is a real medical illness, and there's a lot of great treatments. I also talk about that patients often have physical symptoms of anxiety or depression before it's manifested by worry or other emotions or obsessions. So sometimes it's helpful for people to know that having a stomach problem or chest pain or headaches can be a manifestation of anxiety or depression, so I really talk about the brain and the body being connected. I think the more that we talk about this, the less stigma there is, and it's more socially accepted.

Jeff Bernhard:

I agree. So I guess there's ... We don't have time to go through all the treatments. There's certainly various treatments for young adults, adolescents these days. So from each of you, I'd just like to ask her a quick, a few words. If someone listening to this wants to know where they get help for a loved one that they suspect may be having some issues with behavioral health or mental health issues, where's the first step they go? Who do they reach out to first? So Dr. Henry, let's start with you.

Doug Henry:

In general, a call to your pediatrician or your primary care provider is a really good place to start and get a referral to someone that they know and trust that's either a psychiatrist or a psychologist who can evaluate the individual and then provide treatment recommendations.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Kannadan?

Tania Kannadan:

So since I deal with a lot of younger kids, parents are very skeptical about reaching out for treatment sometimes, so on their own, if they would like, some of the other resources are Imagination Press. It's basically imagination without the I. That website has publications, books, children's books on all variety of psychiatric topics, and it's written from as young as age two, all the way to 18, and that's a great resource for different diagnoses. So parents can reach out and read those books to kids about not feeling alone if you're anxious or depressed, so that's a great one.

Tania Kannadan:

And then I also always recommend Booster Buddy is an app. It's a free app that middle school and high schoolers can use. They like it. If there are medications, it'll remind them to take their medications, but they can also, if they're feeling anxious, it will kind of go through an algorithm for you to kind of help you with coping skills. So those are two, aside from getting with someone while you're at home, while you're waiting to get in to see someone, those are two things that I think would be helpful for parents and kids.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. Dr. Kaplan?

Alicia Kaplan:

I often talk about the ADAA, which is the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, and I'm a treatment provider for the ADAA. Its website provides a lot of facts and statistics about anxiety disorders and depression, a lot of information for parents and adolescents to view. And in addition to that, there's a list of community providers that they can put their zip code in for therapists and psychiatrists that work in those conditions, so I think that could be really helpful.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thank you. That's all the time we have today. My advice from my own experience is don't wait. If you suspect things, talk to somebody and seek help. It's not going to hurt to seek help and find out that there's no issue, right? It's better to be safe.

Jeff Bernhard:

During this critical time, it is vital to recognize and address signs of these disorders in the younger population to ensure they receive the proper attention and care. Please reference the description of the show for important resources for how did they get help if you or a loved one are suffering from a mental illness. To listen to an extended video version of this interview, visit us at youtube.com/HighmarkInc. That's youtube.com/HighmarkInc. The link of this show will be in the description box.

So I'm Jeff Bernhard, and thanks for listening to another episode of Hitting a Higher Mark.