

Dr. Teresa Lovins Mental Health Month 2024

What role do family physicians play in providing mental health care?

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So family physicians by nature of their degree and residency treat the whole patient. So we look at both the physical portion of the patient as well as the mental portion as well as the spiritual portion and we connect them all together.

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So we are the, the physician that does the first line care and we'd look at the whole body. So when we are looking to be a part of their health care, we want to include the mental health as an as a condition that we look at.

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Well, I think it's important that that patients realize that family physicians are the go-to place for their care, so why not start there for their mental health.

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I know that one out of five patients has issues with mental health across their lifetime, so a family physician is the perfect place to get that treated and to be taken care of.

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They can take care of those patients that are teenagers, they can take care of those patients that are older patients.

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So it's very important that you establish a good relationship with your family doctor and have a family doctor so that they can take care of your whole health, including your mental health.

How do family physicians screen for mental health concerns and guide patients through treatment options?

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So family physicians have access to some really common scales that can help us identify mental health issues. We screen with just simple questions. Are there things in your life that you enjoy? Are there things that bring you down?

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But there's specific scales that we can use. They include several that look for both anxiety as well as depression.

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And so if we have a patient who is having some difficulty expressing what's going on, sometimes doing a Screener, a written Screener can help them identify exactly what symptoms they're having and where they go. And so the family physician uses those to help them make that diagnosis.

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Family physicians diagnose about 40% of mental health illness in in their practice. So, it's a lot of the care that we give to patients and so we can initiate treatment for those patients.

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In a lot of cases, the family physician is the only doctor that the patient needs to see. Sometimes we add in a behavioral health therapist, but rarely family physicians will refer on to the psychiatrist,

which are the doctors that specialize in mental health issues. But for the most part, family physicians can do the job.

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They can diagnose and they can treat and they can follow the patient and make sure that they're getting better. And so they guide them by their visits in the office. 2:55

Mental health can be a sensitive subject. How can family physicians encourage patients to talk about and address their mental health?

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Well, I think any time that a physician has a patient who is hesitant to discuss sensitive issues that the physician needs to explain to them how important it is to know their full history, their full health picture. And that's going to help make sure that we keep them healthy overall.

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So if the physician and the patient have a good relationship, hopefully they wouldn't feel that difficulty in expressing those symptoms.

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I always tell patients when they when they do break down and cry, to me that makes me feel good because it means they feel comfortable with me.

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And so if you feel comfortable with your physician, you should be able to express your mental health issues that you might be having.

What is your message to anyone who needs mental health care but doesn't know where to start?

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So I think the first thing is find your family doctor, find your primary care physician, talk to them, find out, you know, what kind of diagnosis might be happening to you.

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There's so many treatment options, medications as well as therapies. And so you just need to make that first step and call the office and make your appointment. 4:10

Physicians need to take care of their own mental health as well. How do you encourage other physicians to prioritize their own well-being?

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I know that burnout has been an issue for physicians since COVID. And so it's very important that physicians look at themselves, look internally what's going on for them, what can they do to improve things for themselves.

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And if that means going to see another physician so that you can be treated for any kind of anxiety or depression, that's very appropriate. You just need to get out there and do it. Don't be, don't be worried about the stigma. The stigma needs to go away.

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By being open about it, we'll get rid of that stigma and allow us that opportunity to find something that we love and continue to be practicing in medicine.