Supporting the Mental Health Needs of Adolescents and Young Adults With Kidney Diseases

By Carlos Cesar Becerril Romero

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published the latest results of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey 1 year ago, it raised alarms about the mental well-being of adolescents and young adults (AYA) in the United States. The data showed that 42% of adolescents experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, a significant increase from 28% in 2011.

As pediatric nephrologists, we care for AYA with a chronic illness, including during periods of added vulnerability when they are transitioning care. Their developmental stage (2), combined with the burden of a chronic disease, may increase their susceptibility to mental health disorders. AYA with chronic kidney disease (CKD), on dialysis, or with a kidney transplant experience even higher rates of depression and anxiety compared with their healthy counterparts (3–7). AYA with chronic diseases are also engaging in more substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana, compared with AYA without a chronic illness (8). Our patients are struggling, and we must do more to help them.

Mental health disorders may exacerbate the risks of medical complications, leading to worse health outcomes. For example, depression, anxiety, and substance use are associated with medical treatment nonadherence (9, 10).

What we can do as pediatric nephrologists is recognize mental health support as treatment to improve kidney health. By including and working with our multidisciplinary team (i.e., social workers, nurses, and child life specialists), we can maximize efforts to support patients and families. We need to screen AYA with CKD regularly for early identification of psychosocial issues that may impact their care. We need to have dedicated psychosocial professionals who can support the most vulnerable patients undergoing nephrology care.

Addressing the mental health needs of patients is not an easy task. Clinicians may feel uncomfortable discussing mental health concerns, and the nephrology team may not have adequate resources to help their patients. Do not let this stop you from checking on your patients. Simply asking how they are coping can make a difference.

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References


