Making Anxiety Screenings Routine

From child care and finances to social situations or the uncertainty of a pandemic, life comes with worries – both big and small. For some, these worries easily come and go, but for others daily concerns become crippling, in the form of chronic anxiety.

According to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) Nearly 42% of adults reported experiencing anxiety or depression in February 2021, up from about 36% in August 2020. Many experts believe that while the jump in anxiety cases is concerning, some cases are still going unreported or undiagnosed.

The USPSTF is proposing new guidance that all patients under the age of 65 be screened for anxiety during visits to clinics and doctors' offices. The panel found that screening tools, some as simple as a quick survey, are effective in identifying anxiety at its early stages among adults in that age range.

Dr. Ralph Velazquez is the chief medical officer for OSF HealthCare. He says mental health screenings like this have been a successful tool in OSF's arsenal for more than a decade.

*****SOT*****
Dr. Ralph Velazquez, OSF HealthCare Chief Medical Officer
"We've known these problems have existed for a long time. We know the screening tools have been validated in multiple venues for a number of years. I think it's part of our commitment to value based care and to understand we take care of the continuum of care for patients throughout their entire life. So as they're struggling, we're going to be in contact with them. We have to help them throughout these episodes." (:23)

Anxiety disorders can be life altering for those who suffer through them, causing major events like panic attacks, or manifesting in other physical ways like fatigue or sleep issues or chronic low energy. Despite how common anxiety issues are, however, for some adults there is still a stigma attached to talking about mental health issues.

October is National Depression and Mental Health Screening Month – an observance designed to help erase that stigma. It's a movement Dr. Velazquez says has already started in the young adult population.

*****SOT*****
Dr. Ralph Velazquez, OSF HealthCare Chief Medical Officer
"Maybe the younger population is teaching us how to do that. As we get older, they're giving us cues and giving us nudges, to go in for help. And some of them are demonstrating it by going in for the help themselves if they need it and showing the benefits of their treatment." (:20)

But after it is determined help is needed, what happens next? A primary care physician could refer a patient to behavioral health, but in some parts of the country behavioral health professionals are hard to come by. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), more than 150 million people live in federally designated mental health professional shortage areas.

Dr. Velazquez says that while OSF HealthCare has a robust behavioral health presence, providers are finding innovative ways to make sure patients receive the care they need.

*****SOT*****
Dr. Ralph Velazquez, OSF HealthCare Chief Medical Officer
"One other thing OSF has introduced is using online behavioral health solutions to help with this, do some cognitive behavioral therapy using your phone, using a tablet, things along those lines. So recognizing there may not be as many resources as we'd like. We have to look at other alternatives to help patients who are struggling." (:25)

One of those digital solutions is OSF Silver Cloud. The free mental health digital support tool is available in communities served by OSF.

OSF HealthCare also offers free behavioral health navigation services to help understand all resources available in your area.

The USPSTF is accepting public comments on its draft recommendation on anxiety screening until mid-October. You can find the panel's full recommendations, along with links to studies and opportunities to provide feedback on the USPSTF's website.