

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple a Day, Lake Region Healthcare's health and wellness show, where we feature news and information that you can use to live a healthier life.

I'm Katie Johnson, your host, and my guest today is Dr Carmen Schnurer. She is a pediatrician here at Lake Region Healthcare, and she's agreed to join me today to talk about children's mental health.

Good morning, Dr. Schnurer.

Dr. Schnurer: Hi. Good Morning Katie. Thank you so much for inviting me, especially for a such a good topic. It's my passion. I love talking about mental health.

Katie Johnson: I remembered that from when we first interviewed you, when you first came, and I hear more and more on this topic every day, and really wanted to bring you back and just dive into the topic a little bit deeper, and help our listeners with the children in their lives, whether they know that the children are struggling with mental health or whether it's giving them some morning signs to watch for. I think it's important that we're all just really proactive and educated on this topic.

So, maybe we can talk about warning signs first. What are some of the typical early warning signs that a child might be struggling with their mental health?

Dr. Schnurer: Sure, sure. It is very important and it is important to understand that mental health in childhood basically means reaching the developmental and emotional milestones in children and learning healthy social skills, and for them to learn how to cope with those feelings when there is a problem. It's something that we all have to work on as a community, as you know, parents and health care provider, and it's a growing epidemic. Every day we have more kids struggling with mental health disorder. And a lot of parents question, why is that happening and why is so common nowadays?

So, a lot of that has to do with having lack of resources and not being able to diagnose the condition on time. So, I think you guys have something going on really good here, because a lot of parents face a lot of challenge when kids don't have access to the healthcare provider. One of the biggest problems that they have is that they have to commute long distances to get access to a doctor that can prescribe or can diagnose the disorders. And you have it here, so you have it right here, and there's so many resources in the community as well. So, I'm happy that I came to a place where we can provide that, because I think mental health is one of the most important things. Because as much as we care about physical health, I think mental health is the one that can lead a child to have more problems in the future.

We all want the same, we want kids to be successful, we want them to be able to accomplish what they want in life. And I know parents want the same, so it is

important to diagnose them on time and to make sure that we know how to look for those signs.

And going back to your question, and I'm sorry, as far as the as the symptoms-

Katie Johnson: No, that's a great introduction. Very, very appropriate.

Dr. Schnurer: So, as far as the symptoms, the symptoms will depend a lot in the age of the child, and like if he's a young kid, so you can see that they usually can have struggle either playing or speech delays, and those are the ones that we call developmental disorders. So it can start as soon as the child is very little.

Then, eventually, if they it's a child between 18 month old or three years old, so you see that parents, they usually, it's okay for them to cry when they're away from parents, but if you see that seven year old is doing that, then that might be a flag for you for a child to have some separation anxiety.

Also, when you see that a kid is afraid of being away from the parents for too long. If they have extreme fears to certain things, like, for example, having fears to specific things like dogs, bogs. If it's too much, anything in excess, it should raise a flag for you.

When you know teenagers, that they worry a lot about the future, about things happening to them, so that could be another sign. There's also physical symptoms, like when kids have a lot of the heart pounding, extreme headaches, constant stomach pain. A lot of time it doesn't have to do with anything physical, but it can be a mental health disorder behind it, and children know how to hide those disorders very, very well.

So it's for us as parents and physicians to kind of screen that, and to see if it's becoming a problem or if it's just, you know, that a child is trying to manipulate the environment as well.

Katie Johnson: Right.

Dr. Schnurer: But, that's why it's important to go hand-in-hand with a good doctor that can screen those disorders.

Katie Johnson: Right. And summertime is a time that is typically when we have kids in either for their camp or, you know, summer camp or sports physical as they're getting ready for fall sports, or just easier to come in for their well child visit, because school is out. So, I would imagine this as a time, a good time to have that conversation with your pediatrician or with your doctor as you're having these appointments for kids anyway.

Dr. Schnurer: And that is correct. I think any time that you have a wellness visit with your doctor, it is really important to screen all of that. Because, as I said before, even a young child that is having a developmental disorder, that can raise a flag for us that in the future, he might be prone to have mental health disorders.

So also, like you said, during the screening times, I always say that wellness visits can be even more important than the regular visits that you come for sickness, because that's the time that the pediatrician takes in all to screen all of those issues that usually get shoveled under the rug. You know what I mean?

Katie Johnson: Right, right.

Dr. Schnurer: In a society that we live nowadays, where a lot of parents can be confused with the topic and think, you know, "My child is slow, my child is this, is that," no, no, no. It has nothing to do with that.

Your child could be a perfectly normal adult in the future if we give them the right resources. But it's up to us as parents and as a physician to help that child to thrive.

Katie Johnson: And we use a couple of tools here to identify anxiety and depression in particular, and I wanted to mention those. They're called the GAD-7 and the PHQ-9.

Dr. Schnurer: Correct.

Katie Johnson: What can you tell me about those tools and how you use them?

Dr. Schnurer: They're so good, because they're so easy. It's just few questions that help us as doctors to screen when there is a problem. Like I said before, kids in general, they're very good at hiding things, and it's not until you ask the question when they are willing to answer those. And a lot of time, you know, parents, we just don't ask those questions because we don't think our kids can be struggling.

Katie Johnson: Right.

Dr. Schnurer: But, when we see them, and we ask the question, and they say, "Yes, there's a problem," so we can just sit down and talk to the parents to see if there's anything we can do even before it becomes a problem. And then, once there is a big problem, so we can also see it through those screening questions and see if we can help the child before it's too late. Because it's really sad to see a child trying to hurt themselves when there's help, when there's people that are willing to help them through to feel better.

Katie Johnson: Right, right. So these tools, we actually have links to both of those on our website. Is that something that parents could use, either have their children fill them out before they come in, perhaps? Or, how could parents use those tools?

Dr. Schnurer: They can, and it will help a lot during the visit if they come with them, but then not necessarily have to do it.

Katie Johnson: Sure, sure.

Dr. Schnurer: We provide them every time they come anyways. When we have teenagers, we have it. We made it as a protocol just because of the high incidence that we have of mental health disorders. So we thought that it's a good idea to make it as a protocol of the visit. But if the parents want to do it, hey, you might as well just use them. We have them there. It's free, doesn't cost anything, and it's going to help your child to be successful if we ever find something.

Katie Johnson: Right. Let's talk about some ways that parents, guardians, teachers, we talk about all of those adult role models that are in a child's life. What can we do to nurture good mental health?

Dr. Schnurer: That's a good question. Well, you know, this is teamwork. It's not only about taking the kid to the doctor. It's not only about parents having good strategies. I think, as parents, we all want to give a healthy environment to our children, so they can grow in a healthy environment. Preventing violence, especially violence has been linked to most of the mental health disorders. When a child grow up in an environment that they see a lot of violence, they're going to be violent at school as well. The teachers, if they see a child that is struggling in any ways, to please reach out to us. Don't be afraid. There's no harm with saying and speaking out loud. You can save a life, and a child is a mirror of what is going on in the house.

So, if they can just refer those children to us, they can make a big difference in the child's life. When they go to Grandma, to Grandpa, a lot of time, you know, kids express their emotions through play and games, and if you see that he's being too rough or violence is expressed there, so there's always a flag.

You know, as a society, we all want to make sure that we are kind of protective of our environment and protecting people, protecting children against violence is the key for any good community. And we have all of that here. We have churches, we have so many resources that we can use to make this town a very healthy town, and I have seen that is very proactive in that. So, I think this is a great community.

Doctors, for us, you know, to make sure that we are always here, that we are here for people to know that we are willing to help and that we are here to help.

So, I think those are little things that we can do all together. But it's not only, it's not just one, it's a teamwork.

Katie Johnson: Right.

Dr. Schnurer: So, we all have to work together. That's why I keep reinforcing, so just, it's teamwork, let's work together in this to help our children.

Katie Johnson: Maybe where the term, "It takes a village," came from. Right?

Dr. Schnurer: Oh, yes.

Katie Johnson: Right. What can you tell us about the prevalence of depression in children?

Dr. Schnurer: It is so prevalent nowadays. The CDC has said that actually one of every five children in the United States have suffered some kind of mental health issue. And that is also an economy problem, because it costs the government and all of us together approximately like \$247 billion in 2007. So, the CDC also said that kids between three to 17 years old, 9.4% of our kids have been diagnosed with ADHD, and only 78% of them has been treated. So, it just make us think that probably people are not, they're still not that aware that there's help for those children.

There's also like 7.4% of the children in the United States that suffer from some type of anxiety, and 3.2%, which is like 1.9 million children in the United States, that suffer from some type of depression. So it's a growing epidemic now.

Katie Johnson: Yes.

Dr. Schnurer: So, we really need to be aware of that, because it's really happening and it's really causing a lot of problems in our youth.

Katie Johnson: You mentioned self-harm a little bit, which has is a very troubling topic, and of course leads us to the question of suicide. Talk a little bit about the risk of suicide or preventing suicide in our youth and what we can do in that area.

Dr. Schnurer: Well, you know, suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. And it's actually the second leading cause of death in people between the age of 10 years old to 34 years old.

So it is ... you know, suicide means trying to die from hurting yourself. And it's nowadays is very common. And a lot of time, you know, has a lot to do with the overwhelming feelings of those disorders not being treated or being treated incorrectly. So, it is really important also that when parents take their children to be helped, to make sure that they're getting the right help, and that they're going to somebody that is really qualified to do that.

But you know, it is a growing epidemic, and we all have to be aware. Don't be afraid of asking anybody at any time, "How do you feel?" You don't know how much of a difference you can make in somebody. A lot of times you see people smiling all the time on the street, but inside they're dying. So don't be afraid of asking, ask, "How do you feel? Are you feeling okay?"

And also the school, again, I'm going to put a little bit on the school, but maybe we can come up with some type of ways of preventing bullying. Bullying is very big stressor nowadays, and it's a sign of violence. So I think we need to also make bullying awareness in our kids. So in that way, because some people might react different to different things, and what is good for you might not be good for me and vice versa. So, we all have to be aware that there is not only physical violence, that the mental violence can be even worse and it can send somebody to commit suicide very easy. So, when it's good for us to be aware of that.

Katie Johnson: Right. And we oftentimes have done programs where we remind people of the suicide prevention hotline, the suicide resources locally, and we'll point people to those on our website with this program as well. I think more than anything, what this conversation to me really brings to light again is the importance of those regular well child visits all the way up until your child is 18. Those are covered by insurance, right?

Dr. Schnurer: Yes.

Katie Johnson: And there is so much value in seeing a pediatrician or a doctor when your child isn't sick.

Dr. Schnurer: It is true, and as I say all the time, I say to parents, you know, wellness visit, that's not just immunizations. Immunizations can be the icing on the cake, but it doesn't mean that you're coming here for shots.

Katie Johnson: Right.

Dr. Schnurer: I mean, if you want to go for shots, you'll do something else. But really, what wellness visit means is physical and mental wellness, and what we go over in those few minutes that we spend with parents, it can change the life of a child forever.

Katie Johnson: Right.

Dr. Schnurer: So, it is really important to make sure that your child is seen for the wellness visit all the time.

Katie Johnson: Right.

Dr. Schnurer: And what is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Katie Johnson: Right. And, just a reminder again that GAD-7 and PHQ-9, those screenings for anxiety and for depression are done at every well child visit here at Lake Region Healthcare and they are available on our website. Just go to LRHC.org and look in the pediatrician's link, and you will find those there along with more information about children's mental health.

Dr. Schnurer, anything else you'd like our listeners to know this morning on this important topic?

Dr. Schnurer: I think I say a lot, but basically, you know what I want to leave out there is for all of us to be aware, and to work as a good community, and to use the services that we provide. Just for parents, you know, to please, please be aware and not to try to put those things under the rug, like I say.

And not to be afraid that it happens. It's real. Mental health is a disorder. It's not just something that a child makes up, or it's not something that if you want, you can handle it on your own. It is medical and it needs treatment. So please, please everybody be aware. Teachers, their main, main, you know, I always throw it on school. Please be aware of that, and don't feel bad sending those kids to us and letting the parents know. I'm pretty sure the parents will appreciate that too.

Katie Johnson: Absolutely. And I appreciate you and the time you've taken to talk about this important topic with us today.

Dr. Carmen Schnurer, a pediatrician at Lake Region Healthcare. My guest today helping shed some light on children's mental health issues with us this morning. Thank you, Dr. Schnurer.

Dr. Schnurer: Thank you, Katie, again for the invitation.

Katie Johnson: Carmen Schnurer and Katie Johnson on Apple a Day today, reminding you there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day.