



UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON SCHOOL OF PHARMACY
STUDENT WRITING CLUB:

Spotlight on Mental Health: Pharmacist Roles

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Awareness around mental health concerns is becoming more common in today's society; this is due to both the increase in recognition and the increase in occurrence of mental health disorders.¹ With increased awareness, many people are becoming more comfortable discussing their mental health concerns despite persistent stigma.² A person's mental health challenges are as unique to them as their own fingerprint, which means treatment needs to be individualized, and often benefits from a multidisciplinary care approach. In refractory cases, it may take several different therapeutic avenues, including medication and non-medication trials, for a patient to find a treatment regimen that is effective for them. It is essential for treatment team members to be understanding, knowledgeable, and supportive during this process. Pharmacists can use the full range of their training and expertise to improve mental health treatment planning and access to evidence-based care. So, what exactly is the pharmacist's role in mental health?

Pharmacists play a larger role in mental healthcare than people might believe. They can aid a patient who is worried about certain side effects by providing information, discussing what to expect, and sharing how to manage side effects to improve tolerability. Pharmacists can support medication adherence by using population health tools to contact patients when their medications are due. As the most

accessible healthcare professionals to the public, pharmacists are in grocery stores, hospitals, and outpatient clinics, and they possess the knowledge to answer health-related questions. Additionally, pharmacists help facilitate the implementation of mental health services by focusing on patient accessibility and addressing mental health treatment stigma within the community.³ Many sources are available for pharmacists to help raise awareness of suicide risk and prevention, and as accessible healthcare providers, they can have a true impact on reducing suicide rates.⁴

In preparation for this publication, the authors interviewed pharmacists from various practice sites to capture their views on the complexities and importance of mental health, and what they have done to improve mental health care at their sites. These pharmacists provide insight into caring for patients with mental health concerns, how to advocate for awareness in the community, how to get involved in different settings, and how to progress as a profession in contributing to the improvement of mental health care.

Jessica DeVito and Stacy Graham

Genoa Pharmacy, Madison

With experience in long-term care initially, Jessica DeVito, PharmD and Stacy Graham, PharmD transitioned to the community setting with an emphasis on caring for patients with mental health

illnesses. The care they deliver to patients at Genoa Pharmacy takes into consideration the patient population demographic and provides services that cater to their needs. The patient population includes individuals with complex mental illnesses, and these patients may need help managing not only their medication, but their lifestyles. DeVito and Graham provide consultations, refer patients to specific programs for individualized psychotherapy, and closely monitor patients for several months to ensure treatment is adequate. Pharmacists are an integral part of the healthcare team and meet a need for both providers and patients.⁵ Additionally, DeVito and Graham collaborate with prescribers and nurses to provide high-quality, interdisciplinary care.

DeVito and Graham emphasize the importance of pharmacists enhancing their communication skills on these topics, through training on mental health; providing empathy to patients; and getting comfortable having difficult conversations with patients. They say that many patients do not want to be on medication, solely

RESOURCES TO BECOME MORE INVOLVED, SPECIALIZE, AND LEARN MORE

- College of psychiatric & neurologic pharmacists: <https://cpnp.org/>
- National Alliance on Mental health: <https://www.nami.org/Home>

WARNING SIGNS

www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Warning-Signs-and-Symptoms

- Excessive worrying or fear
- Feeling excessively sad or low
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable “highs” or feelings of euphoria
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger
- Avoiding friends and social activities
- Difficulties understanding or relating to other people
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- Changes in eating habits such as increased hunger or lack of appetite
- Changes in sex drive
- Difficulty perceiving reality (delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist in objective reality)
- Inability to perceive changes in one's own feelings, behavior or personality (“lack of insight” or anosognosia)
- Overuse of substances like alcohol or drugs
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (such as headaches, stomach aches, vague and ongoing “aches and pains”)
- Thinking about suicide
- Inability to carry out daily activities or handle daily problems and stress
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance

because of the stigma associated with it; therefore, pharmacists need to reinforce and normalize treatment, in order to improve adherence and thus overall therapeutic outcomes. Both pharmacists reiterate the need for increased mental health awareness with a focus on ending stigma.

Mark Zwaska

SSM St. Mary's Hospital, Madison

As a hospital staff pharmacist and a previous pharmacy director, Mark Zwaska, B.S., M.S. sees a need for pharmacists to be included on psychiatric units for a variety of reasons. Psychiatrists have a specialized role

as experts in behavioral medicine, and often have deep, detailed knowledge of the most commonly used groups of medications. From Zwaska's experience, pharmacists help psychiatrists provide individualized therapies to patients with comorbidities. Zwaska mentions that “patients are not in a vacuum,” and pharmacists can help bridge the gap between a patient's treatment for mental health and their treatment for other conditions.

When asked about the impact that COVID-19 has had on his patients, Zwaska highlighted that the pandemic has forced isolation on an already isolated population and has created additional barriers to treatment. With an overall young and diverse patient population, in-person therapy has still been provided at Zwaska's hospital, with individuals following social distancing guidelines. Zwaska practices in an inpatient setting, but he emphasizes the importance of understanding the resources patients will have upon discharge. For example, individuals diagnosed with a serious mental illness experience higher rates of homelessness, incarceration, victimization, and trauma.⁶ Ultimately, working in conjunction with community pharmacies and the patient is imperative for continuity of care and success outside the hospital in this population.

In Zwaska's position as an inpatient mental health pharmacist, he first and foremost focuses on getting an accurate picture of a patient's drug history. He recognizes that a patient's medication list can look very different from their current drug regimen, due to outpatient management of therapy, patient nonadherence, or a variety of other reasons. By obtaining an accurate medication list, a team of healthcare professionals including a pharmacist can work to optimize drug therapy for patients. Understanding that patients with psychiatric conditions are a unique population with their own needs is critical to providing individualized care for each patient and situation. Zwaska recommends attending rounds with the medical team if possible, while always working toward discharge for the patient. In mental healthcare, 60.7% of patients experience at least one drug-related problem during their hospitalization.⁷ Knowledge of drug-related problems, compliance, drug interactions, and a patient's own

understanding of their drug therapy is crucial.

Zwaska wants to encourage current and future pharmacists to consider the behavioral health specialty in their practice and not to be afraid of this field. He mentions that this specialty is “up and coming” and offers “an interesting social dynamic,” where patients often value independence and personal choices, while also needing support. For students, Zwaska recommends taking advantage of mental health-specific rotations, especially in the hospital setting. There is a unique added advantage to practicing in inpatient units: pharmacists have increased access to psychiatrists, allowing for collaboration and discussion of patient treatment. Most of all, he reiterates the need for more pharmacists in this specialty, and states that having a foundation in this specialty can be helpful for all pharmacists, as a patient's mental health and wellbeing is central to their overall health.

Marie Moser

William S. Middleton VA Memorial Hospital, Madison

Marie Moser, PharmD is a clinical pharmacy specialist in mental health, pain, and anticoagulation at the William S. Memorial Veterans Hospital in Madison, Wis. She has a unique role within mental health pharmacy, as she developed a new clinic within the facility focusing on the intersection of mental health and chronic pain management. In addition, Moser has a role in the transgender clinic team, developing and expanding services for Veterans who are transgender. Some of the common conditions Moser evaluates are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder (MDD), anxiety disorders, dementia/Alzheimer's, chronic low back pain, and neuropathic conditions.

As mental health conditions are often more stigmatized than physical conditions, Moser saw the opportunity to use her interpersonal skills to advocate for patients in this area. At the hospital, mental health clinical specialty pharmacists have independent prescriptive authority, which allows them to manage a panel of patients with varying diagnoses. Pharmacists in this position can bridge the gap as medication experts, and improve access to patients through executing therapeutic

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

(QPR, Mental health training, difficult conversation)

- APHA: Introduction to Mental first aid for pharmacy: <https://elearning.pharmacist.com/products/5709/introduction-to-mental-health-first-aid-for-the-pharmacy> (4.0 CE)
- Full Mental Health training: <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org>
- APHA: Townhall: Start the Conversation to Stop Suicide- <https://elearning.pharmacist.com/products/5660/townhall-start-the-conversation-to-stop-suicide> (2.0 CE)
- APHA: Community Wellness Through Depression Recovery- <https://elearning.pharmacist.com/products/5650/community-wellness-through-depression-recovery>
- Pharmacy Network Podcast: Pharmacist's Focused on Mental Health- <https://omny.fm/shows/pharmacy-podcast-network/playlists/pharmacists-focused-on-mental-health>
- Suicide prevention training: <https://qprinstitute.com/>
- **Suicide hotline #s**
 - » Walgreen's Work & Life Resource line 24/7 at 855-777-0078 or visit www.workandliferesources.net/walgreens.
 - » National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 24/7 at 800-273-8255 or the online chat at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>
 - » LGBTQ+ Crisis line at 866-488-7386
 - » Veterans Crisis Line at 866-488-7386
 - » HOPELINE Text Service, text HOPELINE to 741741
 - » <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/prevent-suicide/index.htm>

plans; ordering/reviewing laboratory values; prescribing and deprescribing medications; performing physical assessments; identifying drug-related problems; ordering consultations; and referring patients when needed.⁸

Moser describes mental health challenges as “liv[ing] in the grey” and emphasizes the importance of tailoring treatment to the patients’ needs. Moser discusses how patient-provider relationships are built

on trust, and that in order for patients to disclose trauma and past experiences associated with mental health, it takes strong motivational interviewing skills. Each patient brings new stories and complexities, so it’s essential for providers to create a trusting relationship. A study evaluating clinical pharmacy services within primary care found a 60% increase in the number of patients who reached therapeutic goals, and a 32% decrease in patients discharged to a mental health clinic, when specialized pharmacists were involved.⁹ Moser emphasizes the importance of providers and the community working together to improve mental health and therapy outcomes. To get involved with patient advocacy, she encourages others to join the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), as well as local organizations.

Casey Gallimore

Access Community Health Center, Madison

Casey Gallimore, PharmD uses her knowledge of mental health to impact the locally underserved patient population, as well as to mentor the next generation of pharmacists. At Access Community Health Center, Gallimore explains, finding out whether a patient is willing and able to take prescribed medications is one of the challenges the primary care team faces, and a place where pharmacists have an impact. Pharmacists can also play a significant role in supporting appropriate safety and efficacy monitoring when psychotropic medications are prescribed in primary care (for example, pharmacists can help ensure metabolic parameters are checked following an antipsychotic prescription). It is important to acknowledge that there are numerous external social determinants that influence someone’s mental health that medications alone cannot fix, such as homelessness, trauma, and lack of access to basic resources. As a member of the wider primary care team, Gallimore collaborates with prescribers, nurses, social workers, and psychologists to address these challenges and decrease barriers to treatment. Although she is only at Access once a week, she hopes to see pharmacists become more involved in primary care teams and be confident discussing mental health with patients. Pharmacists are essential members of the healthcare team who can have significant

positive impacts on patients’ mental health outcomes. For example, a yearlong retrospective study involving pharmacist-led medication management in a mental healthcare setting showed a mean PHQ-9 score reduction of 10 and an overall medication adherence rate of 82.9%.¹⁰

Gallimore is doing her part to break the stigma around mental illness by educating future pharmacists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison about mental health disorders and how to communicate effectively with this patient population. A 2020 study involving pharmacy students enrolled in an elective mental health first aid course resulted in improved student attitudes towards mental health and increased student strategies to manage their own mental health.¹¹ Gallimore’s advice to other pharmacists and students is to never stop learning, as the field changes quickly with new medications and therapy. She recommends keeping up with current research by registering for table of contents alert emails through JAMA Psychiatry, Medscape, and other mental health-focused journals. Pharmacists can continue to grow their knowledge in this area by attending mental health conferences and reviewing the College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists’ website. Mental health can be difficult to talk about, but pharmacists can help break down the barrier by expanding their role within care teams and having conversations with patients.

How Pharmacists Can Get Involved to Improve Patients’ Mental Health

As previously mentioned, there are many ways for pharmacists to get involved with mental health in any pharmacy practice. In this article, we’ve highlighted pharmacists from various settings, showcasing how they are helping to fight the stigma surrounding mental health conditions. To take a more active role in mental health, pharmacists can incorporate various strategies in their everyday workflow. For example, they can look for warning signs their patients may present when they come in to pick up their prescriptions. If the pharmacist is aware of patients with mental health conditions, documenting their behavior and appearance at each visit and comparing them over a few months may be beneficial for patients’

long-term care. Pharmacists can refer to the readings or online resources provided in order to expand their mental health knowledge and be of help to struggling patients. One immediate way to help patients who might be in need is posting the number of the National Suicide Prevention Hotline in a visible location. Pharmacists passionate about mental health and eager to learn more can do so by taking mental health-focused continuing education and, if they wish to specialize, working towards a board certification. By being observant and active in patients' mental health management, pharmacists can help improve patients' symptoms and quality of life.

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HANDOUTS FOR PATIENTS AND RESOURCES FOR PHARMACISTS

- <https://cpnp.org/guideline/essentials>
- <https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Mental-Health-Education/NAMI-Provider>
- <https://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Publications-Reports/Guides>
- <http://www.ncpa.co/issues/APFEB18-HeadHealth.pdf>

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