



*Chiropractical Season 2 Episode 11: What are a DC's obligations when it comes to patient mental health?*

[00:00:00] **Melissa Knutson:** Mental health has always been an issue in our communities, but since the pandemic, the CDC has reported that 40% of the population struggles.

[00:00:09] **Chick Herbert:** Hi. Welcome to Chiropractical. My name's Chick Herbert. Today, we're going to talk about the responsibilities chiropractors have when it comes to recognizing mental health of the patient.

[00:00:18] **Melissa Knutson:** Hello everyone. This is Melissa Knutson and today we are joined by Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli. Dr. Kris speaks on mental health and its correlation to risk. Dr. Kris is the assistant Dean at the College of Chiropractic at Logan University. She's the president of the ACA Council on Women's Health and a fellow in the International College of Chiropractors.

[00:00:43] **Melissa Knutson:** We're very excited to have her. Today, along with Mike Whitmer who join us often.

[00:00:46] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Thank you so much for having me today. I'm truly honored and grateful to be here with you talking about this really important topic that impacts all chiropractors and the practices and the patients that we serve.

[00:01:00] **Mike Whitmer:** Great to be here.

[00:01:01] **Chick Herbert:** Let's dive right in. What is the responsibility of a chiropractor when it comes to recognizing the mental health of a patient?

[00:01:09] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Thanks so much Chick. That's a really great question. As a provider, we have a very significant responsibility in identifying this for a variety of reasons. When our patients come in and they're seeking care from us as a provider, we need to make sure that we have a really



good perspective of what is going on in their entire life, whether it's physical, behavioral, mental, because all of that then translates back to how they respond to our care and what the outcome may look like. In addition, it also gives us a really good understanding of what their quality of life is.

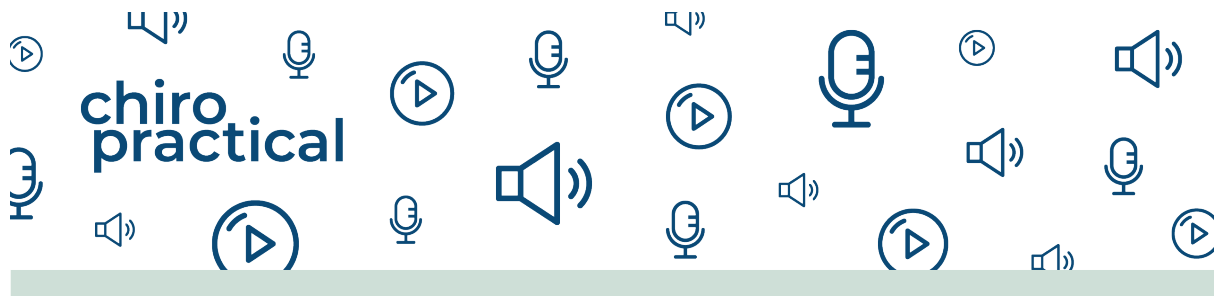
[00:01:51] **Chick Herbert:** Are chiropractors trained around mental health?

[00:01:55] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Really interesting. We are not as providers trained to be mental health specialists, but what we are trained to do is to recognize when our patients may be experiencing signs and symptoms of different mental health disorders. As a practitioner, it's our responsibility to recognize those, but then also make the appropriate referral for our patient so that they can receive care for those different conditions.

[00:02:21] **Chick Herbert:** And can you give some practical examples of how that patient may present some issues around mental.

[00:02:28] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** It's really interesting because as chiropractic practitioners, we see a variety of patients. And one of the things that we see often is patients that come to us, for instance, after a motor vehicle accident. We know that a lot of times after any sort of accident, our patient may actually be experiencing symptoms, not just physical, but remnants of that trauma.

[00:02:52] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** So when they come to us and they report some of those different symptomatology related to the trauma, specifically - recurring thoughts of the event, or maybe some new fears surrounding things that they've never been fearful before, the inability to sleep or the inability to focus. Some of the other things that we might hear from patients that already they keep having dreams or nightmares what happened during that time. Sometimes patients will talk about avoidance or they'll talk about negative changes in thoughts or mood, not feeling like they want to eat or not feeling like they want to sleep. All of those components are things that as providers, we need to be conscious of, not only with our patients telling us, but asking some of those really difficult questions, because sometimes patients don't even recognize that it's correlated back to something that they're experiencing physical.



[00:03:47] **Melissa Knutson:** It sounds like as a practitioner, we should be asking questions so we can gather this information. And then once you have this information that they are having this stress, what next? What should a chiropractor do next?

[00:04:00] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** We have to be asking the right questions. And as a practitioner, when we ask those right questions about all of the things I just discussed and going to even throw in a couple of other things that we might find on our physical exam, asking the right questions for history, but then correlating that with maybe finding rapid heart rate or the patient's having some rapid breathing or telling us that these happen at different times, we as a provider need to make that determination of, is our patient in need of something that's emergent, urgent or routine. Right. And making that differentiation of. Where do we need to refer them? Where do we need to send them are things that we need to rule out or rule in to help triage.

[00:04:41] **Mike Whitmer:** Dr. Kris, I think you bring up a fantastic point that mental health isn't really chiropractic, but it is, because the doctor's responsibility is really to do what's in the best interest of the patient. If you have a patient coming in who's struggling, the chiropractor can be somebody that really helps this patient just by asking some of these questions and then making that appropriate referral. Our frequent listeners probably know what I'm going to say next. And that is that all of these things need to be documented as well, so that if something does happen down the line, you've got that accurate record of your interaction with this patient who was struggling.

[00:05:26] **Chick Herbert:** Urgent, emergent and routine. Can you speak a little bit more about that and how that translates into an everyday patient visit?

[00:05:34] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** We talk about urgent, emergent and routine clinically. The practitioner needs to make that decision, but the patient tells us because again, patients can tell us that they feel like they're going to hurt themselves or someone else.

[00:05:45] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Right. That's emergent. When we're talking about a patient that tells us I'm really having trouble with eating and sleeping and all of those things that, that might be urgent in which they need



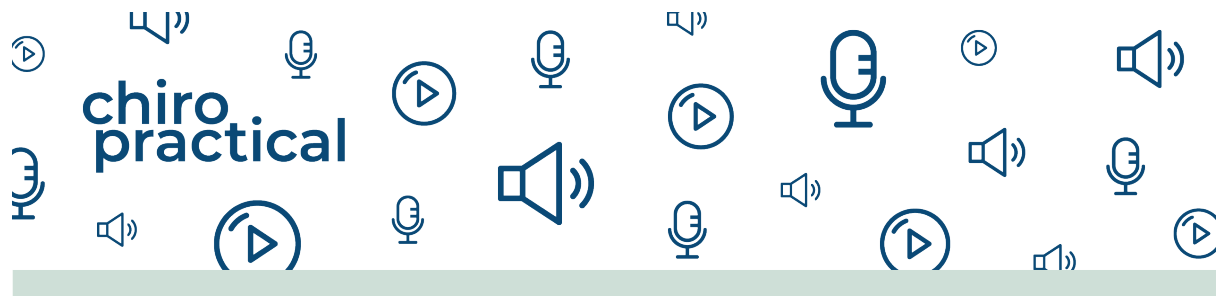
care within the next 24 hours or 48 hours. And then when we have something that's more routine where perhaps they're talking about their levels of stress and controlling levels of stress, but it hasn't had any physiological impact yet, that might be something that's more routine and can be pushed out to a provider within the next week or so. So really making that differential as the provider between what is falling into those different categories and how do we triage where the patient goes and how fast are those?

[00:06:33] **Melissa Knutson:** Are there some common red flags that a chiropractor can look for?

[00:06:37] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** There are a few things that we can look for as providers and some of the red flags or indicators that we need to be considering are when we ask her questions about, are they having feelings of sadness or emptiness and the answer with a positive affirmation. If they're telling us they have lost of interest in things, if they're telling us they have sleep disturbances, that feeling of not feeling safe, telling us that they can't control their worry or they're restless or they feel very tense all the time. Feeling fatigued, easily commented on rapid heart rate and increased sweating, and difficulty with breathing. Sometimes those things too, those are all things that, that we need to be conscious of and recognize as a red flag, as a provider.

[00:07:20] **Chick Herbert:** Dr. Kris back to asking the right questions. Some of those seem non-traditional in terms of the types of questions I might expect my chiropractor to ask me. Is that a skill or an area that you see chiropractors needing to get better at and take time to ask those types of questions? There's a lot of mental health, anxiety and issues in society today so it seems like it's even a higher probability that doctors are going to come across.

[00:07:48] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** It's interesting because we do talk in the profession about the bio-psycho-social model of care and this falls right into that category. Really asking all of the questions that surround pieces and how it affects again, the biological, the physiological and the mental health components of our patient. Interestingly enough the CDC just reported approximately 41% of the population is experiencing some sort of anxiety and depressive disorder post COVID.



[00:08:18] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** You raise a great question about really looking at where society has been in the past year, actually two years now, and really looking at how our patients have been struggling. And this much more so is on the forefront of all providers and all ages of patients that this needs to be something that we're very cognizant of.

[00:08:43] **Melissa Knutson:** Chiropractors see their patients more frequently than most other types of doctors. And so there is more of an opportunity to recognize these things and to ask some questions, to be able to help and assist. Is there anything that a chiropractor can do to help make that environment more safe so that the patients feel comfortable they're answering these questions truthfully or potentially speaking up about challenges that they?

[00:09:08] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Yeah. And I would say that Melissa, it's probably not just the practitioner. We have to remember it's the practitioner and perhaps their CA or their office staff. The environment all the way around patient centered care really has to be in tune with us and really has to make sure that they're communicating in a way that patients feel trust. They feel safe in that practice environment. They feel as though they have a choice relative to their care and they're experiencing collaborative care with that provider in those individuals, in that practice and. And the last piece also is that they're empowered. They're empowered to not only make choice, but they're empowered to get better. They're empowered to have a decision related to what they want to see happen relative to how they get better and how they respond to.

[00:10:03] **Mike Whitmer:** Melissa, you brought up a really good point and that is chiropractors see their patients more frequently than most other types of healthcare providers. And because of that relationship between the doctor and the patient is very strong. That positions the chiropractor as a key person in helping to identify mental health needs of the patient and help them get help for that if that's what's needed. Another point that I wanted to make going back to something Dr. Kris said earlier, is that yeah, you get a feel for how the patient is doing from a mental health perspective, by talking to them, asking some questions, that sort of thing.

[00:10:42] **Mike Whitmer:** But the physical examination is also really important too. Because there could be some tells within that process, that then



further informs the conversation that you're having with the patient. I encourage doctors, even if this is a patient that you've seen regularly for a long time, don't skimp on those basic clinical procedures that you have. Just because you've seen this patient frequently and for a long time, doesn't mean that their situation hasn't changed.

[00:11:18] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** And I think Mike, you bring up a really good point and one other piece that, uh, that I want to make sure based off of what you just said that practitioners are cognizant of is a lot of times patients come into us and they talk about their stress level and they talk about everything that's going on.

[00:11:36] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** And that's a really easy opening conversation. With all of our patients, even the patients we've treated forever. How are you doing and what is your stress level? And what's impacting your stress level. Again, a lot of times when we think about these things, we think about our new patients and we forget about those existing patients that we've seen for quite some time.

[00:11:57] **Chick Herbert:** Dr. Kris, it is the responsibility of the chiropractor that falls into the scope. What are the consequences if I receive feedback from a patient that is showing signs of anxiety, stress, depression, whatever it may be, and I don't act on it?

[00:12:16] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Yeah, that's a really good point Chick. One of the really big things that practitioners need to be cognizant of is their scope, right? And is the regulation in which they are licensed under and it can be different for each state.

[00:12:27] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** So practitioners really need to be cognizant of what their mandatory reporting is for each location. But the other piece of that that becomes really important for the provider is that referral process and making sure that they are referring that patient out to the appropriate provider to address their condition.

[00:12:48] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Along with something Mike said earlier, we need to make sure we're documenting that as well. Making sure





we're documenting where we're referring that patient to, and making sure that the patient has a very clear understanding of what their role is and their responsibility is.

[00:13:03] **Chick Herbert:** Yeah, I don't think Mike has ever agreed with anything a guest has set on a podcast with us other than what you just said, document. He's smiling.

[00:13:11] **Mike Whitmer:** If I ever got a tattoo, that's probably what it would say.

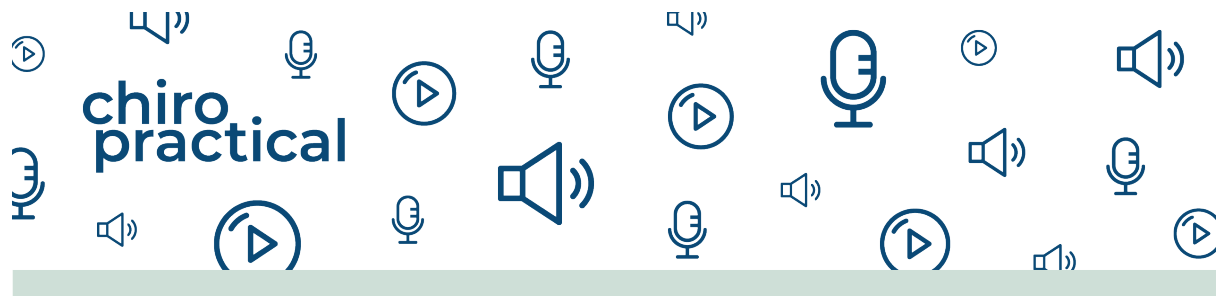
[00:13:19] **Chick Herbert:** Document. So, Dr. Kris, is there any specific demographic of patients that seem to be more prone to this?

[00:13:29] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** When we look at the literature prior to COVID, the demographics were much different. Now, when we look at the demographics of the past two years and what everybody has experienced, I think the bigger message is that don't rule it out based on any sort of age. We know that this can impact from our young children all the way up to our geriatrics as a provider, we need to make sure that we're not discriminating.

[00:13:58] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** And that we're really truly asking all of our patients that we see these same questions about their stress level and any other components related to mental health that they might be experiencing. And we talked about PTSD and we know that if the mental health condition is not diagnosed, right, it has long-term impact on how patients respond to our care.

[00:14:20] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** So that that's one big highlight of that. And the literature supports that. The other thing is we do know COVID has been an impact, but the other thing is adults with heart disease actually have a higher rate of depression. And we know that untreated depression in a patient with heart disease, that's identified can actually also negatively impact the outcome of musculoskeletal care. So there's that there's a lot here that does impact the care that they receive in the office.

[00:14:46] **Chick Herbert:** Dr. Kris, you mentioned what is the pervasiveness of mental health and how does that translate into doctors seeing patients?



[00:14:59] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** So interestingly enough, we know that approximately 40% of the adults in the US are reporting struggling with mental health and or substance abuse. A lot of this happened during the pandemic and is being reported post pandemic. One of the big things that we know about this, it talks about adults, but that could be our young adults.

[00:15:21] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** It could be our geriatric and it's coming in a variety of forms in which we are seeing this. So as a provider, knowing that this number higher than it was pre pandemic, it becomes incredibly important to us. It impacts our teenagers relative to how they focus in school and how they were taken away from some of their friends and technology became the only way of communication and our children didn't have a lot of socialization for a long period of time.

[00:15:51] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** And so they struggled in a different way. Then if you look at the parents and the caregivers. Talk about parents that were taking care of children and caregivers that maybe were taking care of parents or other family members that were older and how to deal with isolation and ways to still provide. Also looking at parents that were trying to work at home and trying to educate their children, that all of those things had lots of impact.

[00:16:13] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** And now we also look at some of the other individuals that maybe had other conditions, pre COVID, like our heart disease patients who are more prone to depression care, we went through this big pandemic, but yet they had a condition that does impact them. And it does correlate with a mental health component, at times.

[00:16:32] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** We know that all of these things largely undiagnosed can impact our patient care and really, truly the outcome. One of the big things that we talked a little bit about a car accident earlier in our patients that we do see as providers. But post-traumatic stress disorder is also very strongly correlated with a variety of different types of trauma and stress.

[00:16:56] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** We also know that is directly correlated with the outcomes of musculoskeletal care. Again, it is non-





discriminatory based on age. It is non-discriminatory based on sex or gender. And so all of those things are very important for the provider to be cognizant of.

[00:17:13] **Melissa Knutson:** I will say all of those things. There was a lot of triggers in there for me working at home while having kids go to school actually was in a car accident this week and then of the pandemic and everything that's comes after that. So I can absolutely relate. Talking about mental health can be very difficult for people and this includes chiropractors. So if a chiropractor has a patient in their office that indicates that they are struggling, what are some tips or appropriate responses that we may be able to provide them to help ease into that conversation and get the information that they need to be able to provide appropriate care.

[00:17:53] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Melissa, a really good question. The first thing that I think is very important is having respect for our patients and not being judgmental of what they tell us, but being respectful of what they have been through and what they're experiencing and being empathetic. Sometimes the best thing that a practitioner can do when a patient tells us very challenging things is to acknowledge that and recognize, I'm sorry, you've been through this or this has been really tough and I'm glad that you're here and I'm glad that you were talking about these things. We can find help if you need to provide them support and reassurance because sometimes patients really, truly do need to hear from the provider that we can provide a way to get them the help they need, want and deserve as a patient, educate them. A lot of times when patients start talking about things, when they feel things or they experience things that they've never felt before, it can be very scary.

[00:18:53] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** So as a provider, if we can give them an educational component and say, what you're feeling is very real, and here's what I'm thinking and here's again, who can help you get through. All of those things become very important for us as providers. I would say the same thing for anybody in our staff to also be very cognizant about being empathetic and respectful to the patients and what they're feeling and making sure that they are supported and have a way to also support what the provider may say to those individuals.



[00:19:25] **Mike Whitmer:** From a risk management perspective, I love your response just then. Patient communication, patient education. Those are among the most powerful risk management tools that a doctor has. And especially if you have a patient who's struggling who may be in crisis, those qualities of your interaction with your patient are going to be more important than ever. Patients want to be heard. They want some empathy. Just having that conversation in a real caring and human way can help the patient and open the door for them to get the help that they need.

[00:20:03] **Melissa Knutson:** As a human, what we all want is to be heard, to normalize these behaviors, to create a trust with empathy so that we can have these conversations.

[00:20:14] **Chick Herbert:** Dr. Kris, can you give an example and obviously confidentially with changing the names or not using the names, but how the care changed as a result of understanding the mental aspects of the patient.

[00:20:29] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Sure, Chick. It's really interesting. I had an adolescent patient that I was treating for her low back pain, and all of a sudden mom came in and was telling us that now she was also experiencing headaches and some GI dysfunction and really no good mechanism. Right?

[00:20:50] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** There wasn't anything that was highlighted that this may truly be something that was virus related or she was ill. And so really diving down deep, it turned out that the adolescent was experiencing a lot of different types of anxiety should a lot of symptoms of anxiety had a lot of components that were related to stress and she couldn't identify them.

[00:21:14] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** It became to the point where it was so overwhelming for her as an adolescent that she just didn't know. As we started talking, recognizing that the impacts from stress that she experienced, we were able to provide her a referral to get some further help outside of our office.

[00:21:31] **Chick Herbert:** And it sounds like a great intervention and getting her the resources that she needs. As we wrap up, do you have any suggestions about where our listeners can go to capture more resources on this topic?



[00:21:45] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Absolutely. I think that's incredibly important. I think all providers need to be ready. They think that they need to have all local resources readily available for when this does happen. And they're not trying to find things at the last moment.

[00:21:58] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** So looking at your county websites for mental health, referrals, and resources, sometimes there are hotlines that are available. Sometimes there are locations that are available in which patients can go and schedule an appointment. There are also national hotlines that are out there as well, that practitioners can go and find for a variety of mental health conditions.

[00:22:20] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** And so I really truly think it's important for the provider, both to look focally around home in, in their county and what's available. And then again, nationally for those individuals.

[00:22:30] **Chick Herbert:** So Dr. Kris, it's been a pleasure. Thank you for your time, for your expertise and for shedding light on a very important subject and one that is more prevalent today than I think it may have ever been in history. Great to have you. We appreciate it. Thank you so much.

[00:22:44] **Dr. Kristina Petroco-Napoli:** Thank you so much. I really appreciate it too.

[00:22:47] **Melissa Knutson:** If there's one thing that stood out to me in this episode is the importance of being ready to take care of patients with a mental health issue. We've added additional resources to our show notes, where you can find out more information. And if you are one of the 40% that struggles with a mental health issue, make sure that you're getting the care that you need.

[00:23:06] **Melissa Knutson:** As always take care and be well.