Learning disability and mental health

By Lynne Pearce

Essential facts
Learning disabilities affect about 1.5 million people in the UK. The prevalence of mental health problems is considerably higher for those with learning disabilities than for the general population; estimates suggest 30-50% of adults are affected.

What’s new
In January, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published new quality standards on the prevention, assessment and management of mental health problems in those with a learning disability. Recommendations include: annual health checks to encompass a mental health review; those with a serious mental illness being allocated a key worker; and psychological interventions tailored to the individual.

Signs/symptoms
Identifying mental health issues in those with a learning disability can be hard. Symptoms can be attributed to learning disabilities or a physical problem, rather than their mental health. It’s important to understand what is normal; a change in behaviour can be an indicator. This may include: expressing sadness, anger, fear or confusion; disturbed sleep; eating more or less; less concerned with hygiene; withdrawal from activities and relationships; reduced ability to focus; and stomach pain or headaches.

Causes/risk factors
Some specific mental health conditions are more common in those with learning disabilities, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Anxiety disorders are common among people with autism. Several factors contribute to a higher risk. These include poor self-image; difficulty expressing emotions; reduced social networks; being economically disadvantaged; genetic conditions, such as Down’s syndrome; and physical problems.

How you can help your patient
Ensuring that everyone with a learning disability has an annual review of their physical and mental health is everyone’s business, not just those who work in the field. Most areas have a liaison nurse who can help those in GP practices keep up to date with their skills in working with this group of vulnerable patients.

Find out more
NICE quality standard
Learning disabilities: identifying and managing mental health problems (2017)
nice.org.uk/guidance/qs142

National Autistic Society
Mental health and autism
tinyurl.com/NAT-autism

Mental Health Foundation
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

RCNi articles
Learning Disability Practice
learningdisabilitypractice.com
Mental Health Practice
mentalhealthpractice.com
Using video technology to manage mental health (2014)
rcni.com/video-health
Identifying depression early (2010)
journals.rcni.com/r/identifying-depression

EXPERT COMMENT

Sharon Jeffreys
NHS South West Lincolnshire CCG chief commissioning manager for mental health, learning disabilities and autism

‘The new emphasis on annual health checks also including a mental health review sounds quite obvious, but I think it’s timely and is going to be a changing point for people.
‘The standards also recognise the skills and experience of nurses working in mental health and learning disability, as they can be involved in carrying out this work.
‘Everyone can play their part in making sure patients with a learning disability have their yearly review.

‘Physical and mental health screening make such an impact, as we can recognise any problems much sooner and begin to treat them.
‘Anecdotally, we know that those who have a health check when they are not poorly feel much less scared and anxious about seeking help when they are unwell.
‘Many things we take for granted can be much more frightening for those with a learning disability.’