

Introduction

There are many benefits to behavioral health (BH) integration in pediatric specialty clinics. In particular, patients with allergic and immunologic conditions have unique anxieties and stressors that may benefit from BH support. More specifically, psychological stress can have an impact on the immune system and patients with allergic diseases may have trouble with adhering to medical treatment recommendations (Oland et al., 2018). Further, Oland et al. (2018) summarized the many interventions BH providers can support patients with allergic diseases, including: behavioral health screening and referrals, relaxation training, stress management training, coping skills training, behavioral health therapy (including cognitive-behavioral therapy, habit reversal, and exposure therapy). In consideration of the wider biopsychosocial framework, objectives for BH integration may include assessing supports and interferences, focusing on brief interventions targeting well-being and illness management, and focusing on improvement, adjustment, and quality of life of patients (Klinnert et al., 2018). Other nonpharmacological interventions might include education, behavioral change, and increased communication between the patient and provider (Clark et al., 2010). Though guidelines for behavioral health care in pediatric allergy and immunology clinics do not appear to currently exist, research supports the existence of critical BH needs with this specialty population.

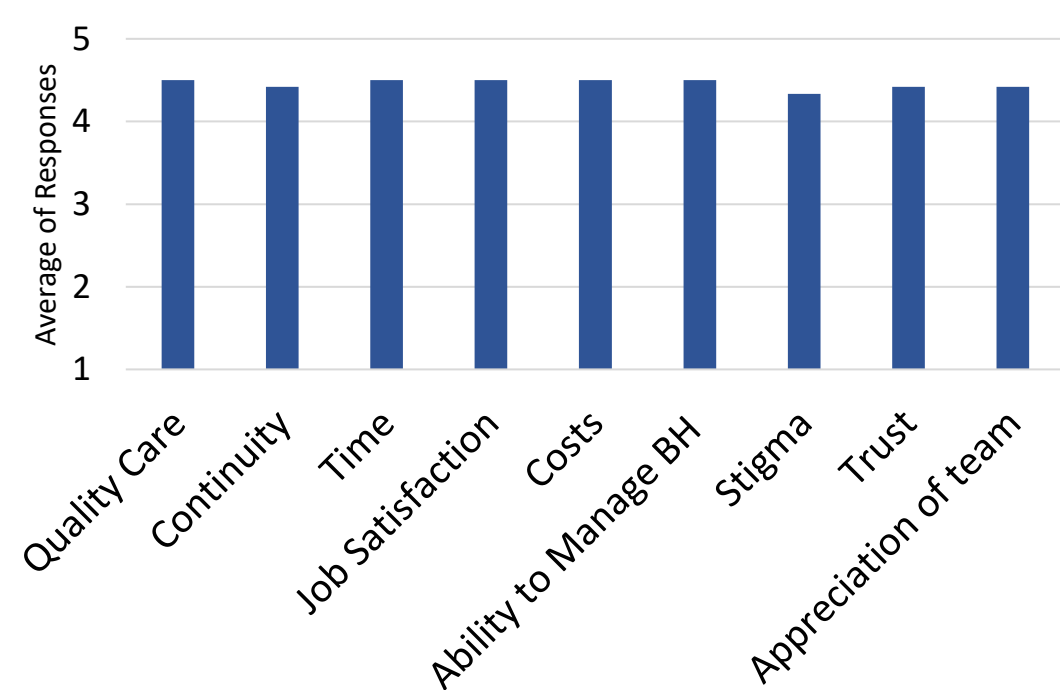
The purpose of this leadership project was to analyze needs assessment data from pediatric allergy and immunology to summarize the areas of greatest need for BH support.

Methods

This leadership project is a part of a larger needs assessment initiative throughout ambulatory specialties at Golisano Children's Hospital (the "SNAAPS", Rice et al., 2022). For the purposes of this project, responses from the Division of Pediatric Allergy and Immunology were analyzed. A total of 12 responses were collected, including 8 attending physicians, 1 nurse practitioner, 1 fellow, and 2 registered dietitians. This comprised an overall 92% response rate for the division, with only one staff member who did not respond.

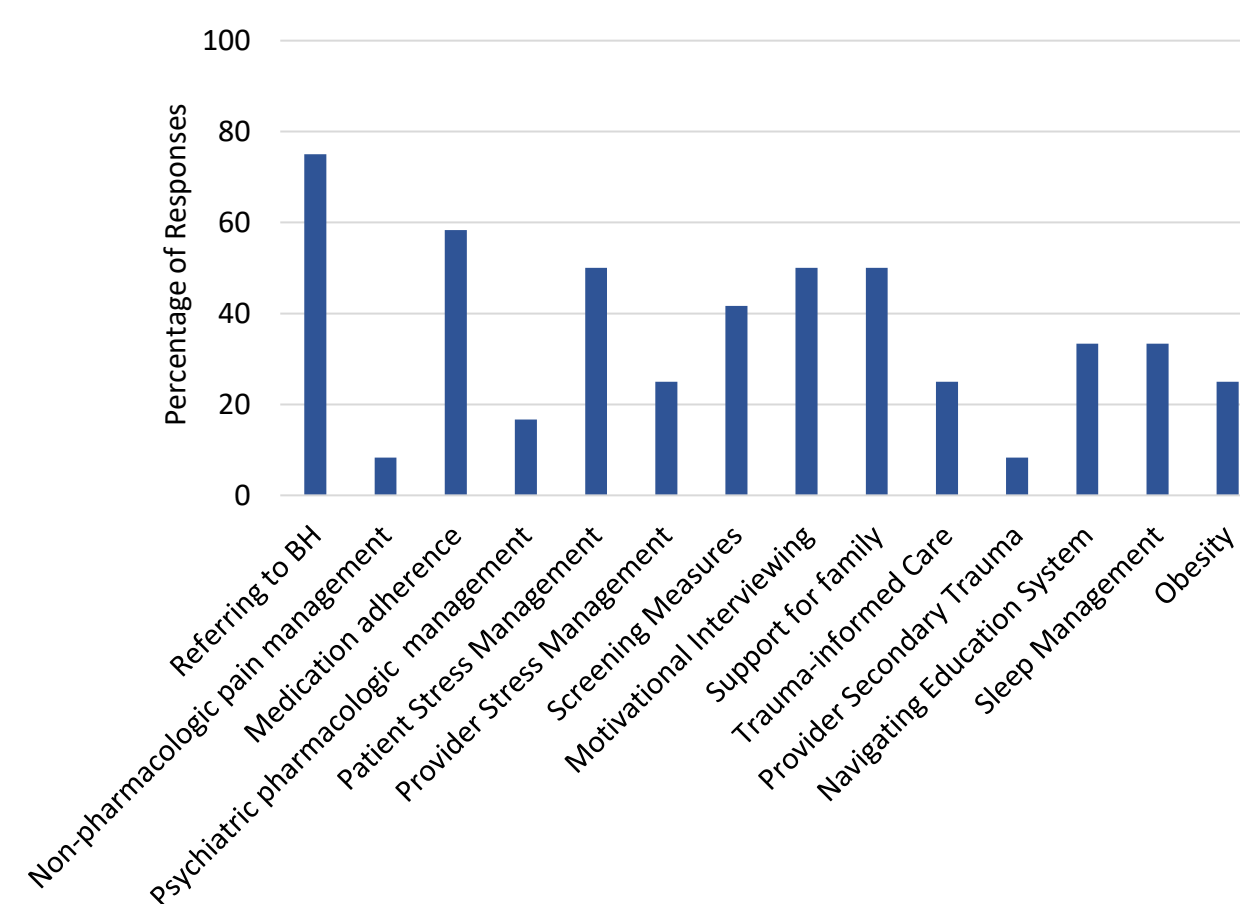
Perceived Benefits of having an Embedded BH Provider

Key:
5 – Strongly Agree
4 – Agree
3 – Neutral
2 – Disagree
1 – Strongly Disagree

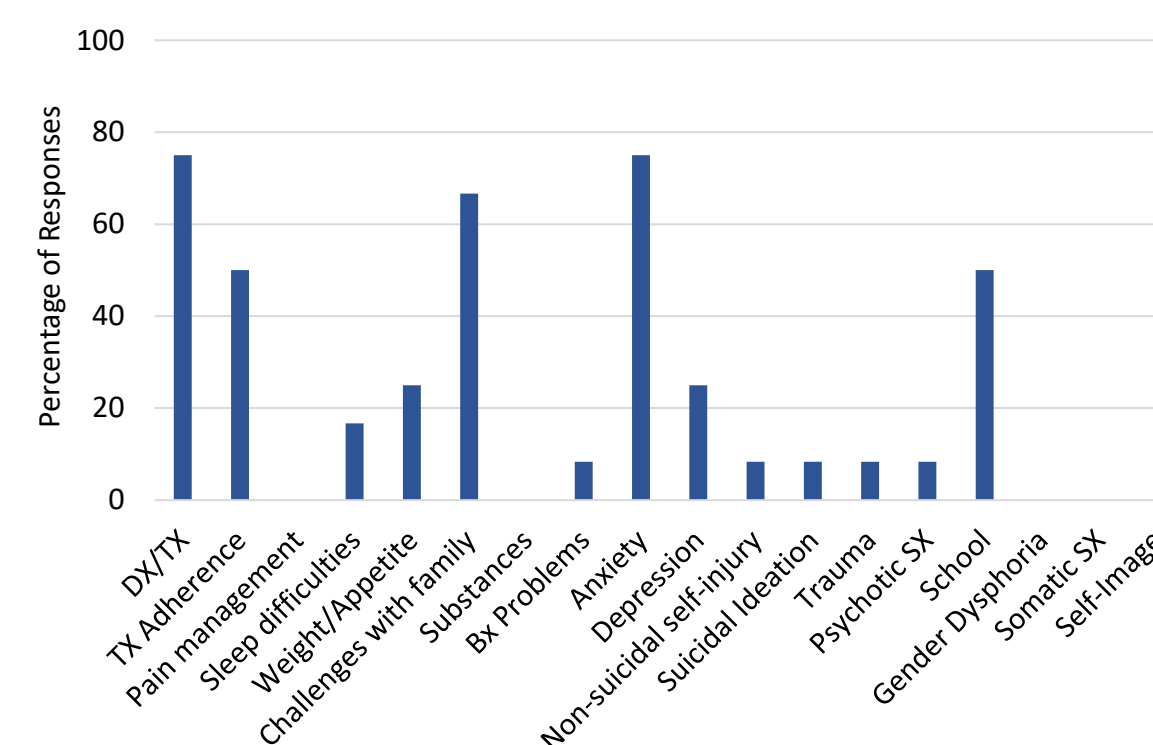


Results

Perceived Beneficial Training Topics

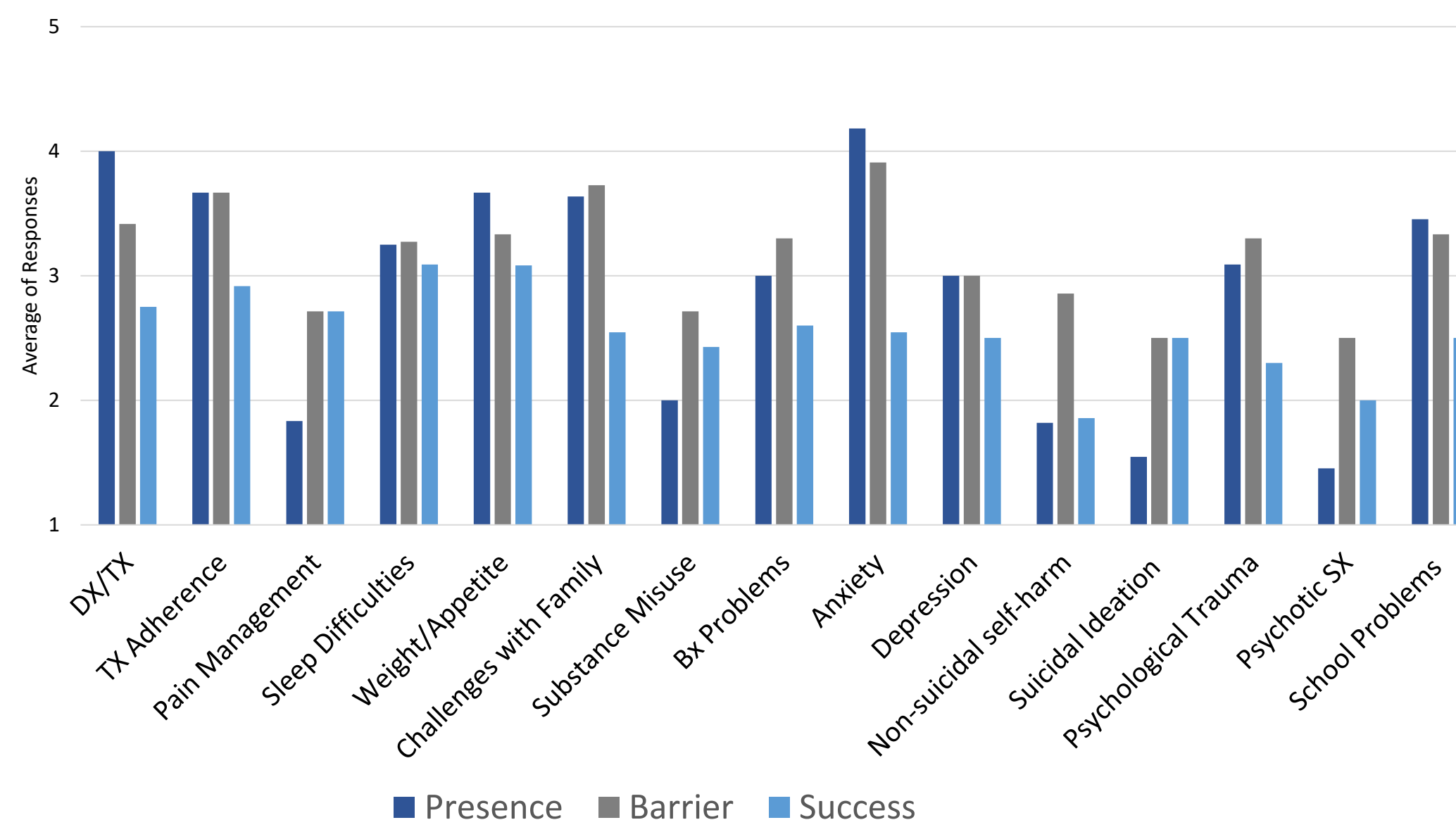


Patient Concerns Warranting Behavioral Health Consultation



Perceived Behavioral Health Topics: Presence, Barriers, and Success

Key:
5 – Very Often
4 – Often
3 – Sometimes
2 – Rarely
1 – Never



Key Take Aways: A variety of behavioral health problems present in allergy and immunology and can act as barriers to patient medical care. Allergy and immunology providers perceive that they have difficulty overcoming several behavioral health barriers to care. To combat, providers identified several trainings that could be beneficial, as well as concerns they would seek behavioral health consultation for. Behavioral health providers embedded in allergy and immunology could help alleviate barriers by providing consultation, as needed, and services for providers, patients, and families.

Qualitative Comments

Specialty providers wrote several comments in the optional comment boxes. Selected quotations represent the primary themes.

Behavioral health concerns impacting medical conditions/coping:
 "Once in awhile I will have a patient who thinks they're reacting to almost all foods, and it can be really tough for us and family to differentiate subjective symptoms that may be exacerbated by anxiety vs true allergy symptoms."
 "Post traumatic stress, fear of allergic reactions to foods, fear of eating outside of home"
 "Avoidant behaviors around food ingestion"

Improved outcomes:
 "Treating comorbidities leads to longer term satisfaction and improved outcomes"
 "The chronic diseases we treat cause stress and anxiety among patients and their families. Mental health and well-being have direct implications on outcomes for conditions like asthma and food allergy. Having an embedded, go-to person to help would be transformational"

Conclusions

There is clear enthusiasm for addressing critical BH needs in Pediatric Allergy and Immunology, with benefits to patients, their families, and medical providers. Major concerns identified in this needs assessment survey include anxiety, stress related to diagnosis and treatment, and family system challenges. Further, BH concerns create barriers to medical care that allergists and immunologists are not able to always overcome, which is where BH support may be able to assist.

Next steps: As stated, this leadership project was just one part of a larger needs assessment survey happening across the department of pediatrics, which will inform areas of future BH integration to better support our pediatric specialty teams and patient families. It would also be beneficial for a follow up on a model to address these needs in specialty clinics, such as allergy and immunology.

References

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