Why Chronic Illness Hits Harder Mentally Than We Often Realize

By Robert Kurui, BSc Medical Psychology

When we think about chronic illnesses like kidney disease, diabetes, or heart conditions, we often focus on the physical symptoms: pain, fatigue, medication routines, and hospital visits. But what's often overlooked is the psychological toll these conditions take-especially on young people and adolescents.

During my clinical and research experience, I witnessed firsthand how patients battling chronic kidney disease struggled not just with dialysis schedules or strict diets, but with anxiety, low mood, social isolation, and even identity loss. Adolescents, in particular, often feel a deep disconnect from their peers, questioning why their bodies can't "just be normal."

The Mind-Body Connection Is Real

Science shows us that mental health and physical health are closely linked. Chronic illness can disrupt sleep, strain family dynamics, and lead to feelings of helplessness. Over time, this can fuel depression, emotional withdrawal, or even self-stigma-where a person starts to believe they're a burden or less capable than others.

What Can Help?

- Early mental health support: Screening for anxiety or depression in young patients is crucial.

- Support groups: Knowing others share your struggles can reduce shame and boost resilience.

- Therapeutic tools: Approaches like CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) can help patients reframe negative thoughts and regain a sense of control.

Why This Matters

Healing isn't just about treating the body-it's about supporting the whole person. When we ignore the mental health side of chronic illness, we risk delaying recovery, worsening outcomes, and leaving patients feeling unseen.