



7 strategies for expanding access to meet every individual's mental health needs



The field of mental health faces rising demand for information, tools, services and support. Yet limited resources are available to help those who need it. As a result, the industry must evolve to find new ways to meet the mental health needs of every individual to improve health care outcomes and experiences.

Mental health disorders are complex and diverse. Treatment and care need to be individualized for each person's circumstances and environment. Some of these social drivers of health include:

- Age
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation
- Economic situation
- Physical safety
- Living situation
- Incarceration or addiction history

Culture factors can also impact how people support, accept or stigmatize mental health.

The following strategies help create an interconnected network of services. Together, they can help more people get properly diagnosed, access the support they need, and sustain their progress over time.

1. Extend self-help that delivers

People can't self-diagnose their mental health needs. But they can be guided to information that helps them understand:

- How to get an accurate assessment of psychosocial needs
- Where to access services
- What treatments and interventions may cost

Finding the right form of care with the right medical professional can be challenging. Self-help needs and goals vary by age, race, demographics and other factors. It is valuable to have tools that help a person identify goals, compare care options and understand what to expect.

Some people may find a digital app helpful for self-help and personal development. Clinicians can introduce these during a health visit. Others may not feel comfortable seeking out help or even going to see a doctor. With these individuals, it's important to make the most of any interaction – phone call, ER visit, or pharmacy or insurance conversation – to screen for mental health disorders or suggest self-help tools to try.

Self-help tools may be particularly helpful to people who are in distress or want to learn how to cope with pre-clinical signs of anxiety or depression. Many can use self-help tools to learn relaxation techniques, mindfulness or parent skills training to better deal with temper tantrums or challenges during adolescence, or learn steps to help decrease their own or a loved one's alcohol intake. Self-help tools can be the first step to preventing psychosocial issues from becoming worse.

2. Offer mental health anytime, anywhere

The urgent need for mental health care happens 24/7 and in any location. People need simple, convenient, all-hours digital access to programs and services in the home, at-work, at school and in a care environment. Support needs can cover the full spectrum of behavioral conditions from everyday stress to serious mental health or substance use disorders.

Virtual health can offer self-guided digital support, telehealth, cognitive therapy, meditation, stress management, coaching and clinical care coordination. When designing new care pathways, identify where digital solutions can close gaps, build trust and eliminate inequity, alongside and integrated with in-person care when necessary or to help reinforce learning from therapy.

Telemental health can also be an option to reduce gaps in care. Health providers and service organizations should dig deeper to understand the underlying reasons a person may not be seeing a therapist if they're experiencing mental distress. There may be cultural or religious concerns. They may have had a previous negative experience or fear the stigma associated with mental illness.

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Topics that may get to the root causes include whether there are cultural, transportation or financial issues keeping a person from seeing a mental health provider.”

Scott Beardsley

Associate Vice President, Clinical Quality, Optum Behavioral

3. Prioritize personalized care

Every individual's needs and stressors are unique. Mental and behavioral services need to be personalized to:

- The individual's whole-health picture
- Their social context
- The way they prefer to engage in care

Mental and behavioral health concerns may be linked to chronic conditions, developmental disabilities or social isolation, for example.

Another component to consider includes the severity of an individual's mental health concern and the environment within which they live. For instance, in terms of anxiety and depression, one person may have significant challenges with a poor quality of life, while another may be doing OK overall, needing extra support occasionally.

A person-centered approach considers the distinctive needs of every individual. Next, integrated physical, pharmacy and mental health pathways help people get timely access to care. This care comes full circle when it includes mental health providers, medications and holistic treatment plans built around their unique set of health factors and psychosocial needs.

Delivering on this promise will depend on a data-driven view that can be shared across the individual's care continuum. It's crucial to ensure your data can include self-reported symptoms, remote monitoring, Z-codes and P-codes and data from all providers and community partners.

4. Reach all people where they are

One way to meet people where they are is to get creative with outreach and identify the communication preferences of different populations.

Electronic record systems and machine learning can also help identify consumers at risk who may need extra outreach. For example, in the pharmacy, a preemptive conversation about the value of medication adherence may stop a future downward mental or behavioral health spiral.

Pharmacists and other professionals who serve as patient touch points can talk to them about more than just drug interactions. A brief discussion about how they are doing can uncover untreated mental or behavioral health conditions and provide an immediate, organic opportunity to connect them with care.

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We are used to talking about an individual's prescription drugs in the pharmacy, but we then say, 'Would you like to talk with someone?' We can then warm transfer them to the behavioral health phone number.”

David Beshara

Senior Vice President, Clinical Engagement, OptumRx

By adopting these strategies, health organizations show they recognize that treatments and support are as unique as the individual. And, that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to solving mental health. Engaging effectively with an individual means leveraging any opportunity where they may connect with the health system to provide support.

5. Cultivate community support

Wraparound community services are vital for supporting all individuals experiencing mental health issues. Community-based, recovery-oriented response systems can include mobile outreach teams, in-home visit programs and living-room-model respite centers. For example:

- Support groups for people and families living with mental illness can provide a facilitated, judgment-free connection with others who face similar challenges. These are often tailored by age, race, populations or condition.
- Individual placement and support programs use vocational rehabilitation counselors to help those with mental health disorders find and sustain employment.
- Justice-involved programs direct people in the justice system who have behavioral health disorders and/or intellectual and developmental disabilities to appropriate clinical and support services.

- Centralized social supports facilitate basic needs such as food and transportation programs, and safe, affordable housing.

Everyone can benefit from the support of peers, family and a caring community. Health systems and organizations can offer ways to close some of these gaps or guide individuals to these important resources.

6. Measure progress

Choosing the right measures to track improvements in mental and behavioral health where expected is essential to making real progress. The value of Measurement Informed Care is integral to how care is delivered. Continuously using a patient's data to inform clinical decisions can actively help with prevention, intervention and engaging the patient in their own care.

Improving clinical outcomes, minimizing adverse outcomes, improving medication adherence and delivering on greater access to the right care at the right time, at the right level are also primary objectives. Gauging how people are faring periodically can hint at incremental changes and help inform changes to their treatment, like adding or changing medications, or adding coaching or self-help digital tools to practice skills learned in psychotherapy.

Improved physical measures can also be a positive indicator of mental and behavioral health. People who have co-occurring medical and behavioral conditions who receive behavioral health services are more likely to get their diabetes under control, exercise, eat better and generally take care of themselves. So, while behavioral health care use may increase at a higher pace, medical utilization and spend may go down.

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We're moving the industry toward considering objective, reliable and valid self-report and symptom measurements in addition to patient and therapist agreement that the person is getting better.”

Scott Beardsley

Associate Vice President, Clinical Quality, Optum Behavioral

7. Make the mental health connection

There's a pressing need to educate and inform individuals, families and communities about recognizing mental health symptoms, removing stigma and increasing access to services. Individuals also need to have guidance and access to connect with the right level of service and support.

It's vital to make a person feel comfortable in finding the services they need. A large part of that is having a provider who can support them without making them feel stigmatized.

Health providers from all specialties can help recognize and coordinate care for mental health concerns or substance abuse issues. This includes primary care, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics and other specialty care providers.

Having conversations about mental health early and often can assist people in getting the screenings that will adequately assess their psychosocial needs. Ultimately, they will then have access to the personalized support that will set them on a successful course to achieving a mentally healthy life.

Closing

These 7 strategies employ self-help, personalized services, and community resources to create a 24/7 safety net of care and support. They recognize that the mind and body are one integrated system that nourishes and sustains the whole person.

Today, we have more understanding, tools and collective will to address the mental health needs in our communities. When employed together, these strategies can expand access and bring more healing to those in need.

Contributing experts



David Beshara
Senior Vice President, Clinical Engagement, OptumRx



Scott Beardsley, Ph.D.
Associate Vice President, Clinical Quality, Optum Behavioral



Francisca Azocar, Ph.D.
Vice President, Clinical Insights and Analytics, Optum Behavioral



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