



Telemental Health: Virtually Expanding Access to Care

In response to the COVID pandemic, providers began to increase the availability of virtual mental health services to ensure that people retained access to care. With this shift came rapid implementation and use of tele-mental health. This included both video and telephonic care by mental health treating providers and practices.

A recent 2020 Telehealth survey conducted by the American Psychiatric Association shows that before the COVID-19 epidemic, 64% of psychiatrists surveyed reported that they were seeing 0% of their patients via telehealth. Two months into the COVID public health emergency, that number jumped up to 85% of psychiatrists seeing more than 75% of their caseload via telehealth (1). Data like this suggests that implementation of tele-mental health is not only possible, but imperative for the future of healthcare.

What is Telemental Health Care?

Mental health support, counseling, or care delivered by a treating provider - including a psychiatrist, therapist, or counselor - through either a video conferencing platform or phone call.

- Video: care is provided through a HIPAA compliant, video-conferencing technology platform.
- Phone: care is provided through a HIPAA compliant, phone call/conferencing platform.

Types of care that can be provided through a telemental health appointment:

- Evaluation: Assessment and diagnosis of a person's mental health status.
- Treatment: Providing care and therapies, including counseling and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).
- Medication Management: Monitoring impact, adjusting medications and dosages, and refilling medication prescriptions.

Benefits of Telemental Health Care (Why Do People Like it?):

- **Improves people's experience:** Allows people to receive affordable care in their home or a space that is convenient and comfortable for them.
- **Diminishes stigma related to receiving mental health care:** Eliminates the need for people to physically visit a mental health facility or practice, reducing the stigma associated with receiving mental health care.
- **Increases access to effective, timely mental health and substance use care:** Removes the geographical accessibility components often associated with people finding and seeing a provider. Additionally, many providers can see more patients in a day than they would otherwise in a conventional office setting.
- **Saves time for both the provider and patient:** Eliminates the normal travel and wait time associated with in-person appointments.
- **Decreases "no show" appointments:** Removes the burden of travel time and possible conflicts in schedule that causes people to miss their appointments when they do not have to leave their house or office to receive care.

Sustaining Momentum: What Can You Do?

Changes have been made across many levels to ensure mental health care is accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes include, the federal government making rapid regulatory changes, health plans reimbursing for both telephonic and video-based care, and mental health providers setting up virtual practices. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that these efforts will be sustained post-pandemic. To support people continuing to receive mental health care, employers should continue to work with their health plans on these issues:

- Verifying that health plans and providers continue to offer employees a choice in the modality of care delivery, including virtually, by phone, or in a traditional office setting, as people may wish to continue to receive care virtually in the future
- Reimbursing treating health care providers at comparable rates whether care is delivered virtually or in an office setting
- Ensuring that care delivered by phone and video is reimbursed at a rate on par with comparable telehealth care delivered by other medical professionals
- Confirming that services provided virtually or by phone are of the same quality as those delivered in-person and request that providers use measurement-based care and report on outcomes achieved, like depression and anxiety symptom reduction or remission.

Learn more about strategies to improve access to mental health care from Right Direction Guide: [Improving Access to Care](#)

Learn more from the Center for Workplace Mental Health's Guide: [Employee Mental Health & Well-being During & Beyond COVID-19](#)

Reference

1. 2020 APA Telehealth Survey: <https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/Telepsychiatry/APA-Telehealth-Survey-2020.pdf>