



WHAT EMPLOYERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND TELEHEALTH SERVICES

Written By Julie Mueller

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mployees are more stressed than ever, but technology is making it easier for them (and their employers) to do something about it.

Addressing employee mental health issues has been a focus of concern for some time, but the lingering psychological effects of COVID-19 pandemic fatigue are raising the stakes for employers to do more.

Workers continue to report high rates of burnout, stress, substance abuse problems, financial concerns and uncertainty. In fact, more than 40% of American adults said they struggled with mental health issues stemming from the pandemic, [according to a CDC survey](#).

In the same survey, anxiety disorders were found to be three times higher than before the pandemic started, while depressive disorders multiplied by a factor of four.

Aside from the very real problems posed to the individual, untreated behavioral health issues can be a drain on an organization's bottom line, [according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness](#).

The good news is that many companies understand that to get the best from their employees, they need to create an environment that not only normalizes the need to seek out help, but encourages them to do so. One way to achieve this is by increasing access to Behavioral Telehealth Care services.

HOW BEHAVIORAL TELEHEALTH CARE IS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Increased use of telehealth services – using a phone, computer or mobile device to hold an office visit – gave individuals the freedom and flexibility to meet with their doctors from the comforts of home during the pandemic.

The rise in use of telehealth services for behavioral health in particular has been staggering, with many patients seeking behavioral health care for the first time.

[According to a report from health insurer Cigna](#), 97% of people who accessed services during the initial stay-at-home order did not have a behavioral telehealth claim prior to lockdown. Further, more than half of Americans say they are comfortable with virtual consultations replacing in-person visits.

Among the reasons cited was the fact that telehealth services provide several benefits over traditional in-person visits that make them more convenient, affordable and accessible.

BENEFITS OF BEHAVIORAL TELEHEALTH SERVICES

Easier to Schedule – Many therapists in telehealth networks are available outside of the traditional 9a.m.-5p.m. office hours, giving patients more leeway to balance health needs with other commitments. With commutes removed, it's easier to work in a telehealth visit than an office visit. Plus, many online services for behavioral health make it simple to research practitioners so you can find one with a background or specialty best suited to your needs.

Shorter Wait Times – Finding a mental health professional in your area who is available to meet in-person within a matter of minutes (let alone days or weeks) is a tall order in normal times, but even more so today. Telehealth services offer added flexibility and access to a much larger network of certified counselors, therapists and psychiatrists, making it easier to find the help you need faster.

Privacy and Confidentiality – Being able to attend sessions on your terms and in an environment that makes you the most comfortable, like your home, can help you collect your thoughts and feelings. You can speak and interact directly with your practitioner instead of having to call and schedule an appointment with the receptionist and then be surrounded by strangers in a waiting room.

Less Expensive – Because there's no need to take time off of work or drive to and park at the counseling office, your employees save more money. In fact, there are many plans available that provide behavioral health services that are completely free for employees. As an employer, you also save money because telehealth services are less expensive than office visits.



- Psychiatrist visits: average savings of \$215 per visit
- Therapist visits: average savings of \$181 per visit
- Plus additional \$62 average in direct absence costs
- Source: Teladoc Health

Treatment Success – Research shows that remote sessions with a behavioral specialist work. According to Call a Doctor Plus, more than 75% of members with depression or anxiety reported a clinically meaningful improvement after their third and fourth virtual care visits.

How to Increase Behavioral Health Care Utilization Rates (Promotion & Engagement with Your Employees is Key)

A lot of heavy lifting goes into designing strategic benefits plans, but if the services aren't used, it won't help boost the potential of your employees or help your organization save money.

So what can you do to encourage more employees to avail themselves of telehealth programs?

Normalize the Mental Health Conversation

Many people may recognize that there is a correlation between mental health and overall health and wellness. They may also recognize the benefits of counseling and offer support for those who pursue it.

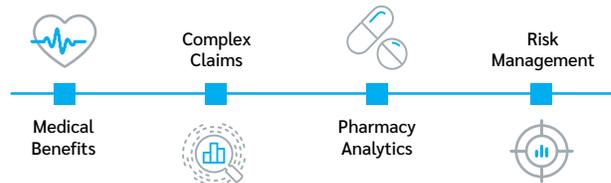
However, the perception – that there is something wrong with you when you decide to seek help – still persists. [In fact, 8 out of 10 workers say shame and stigma prevent them from seeking mental health care.](#)

For these reasons and more, mental health is still a hands-off, taboo topic of discussion in many workplaces today.



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This is where business leaders and human resource professionals can help. Making mental health a regular part of the discussion and periodically reviewing employee benefits can help to keep things top of mind and lessen the stigma around it.

The important thing is to let employees know they have an outlet – and the resources – to express how they feel that maintains their privacy and confidentiality.

Encourage Statistically Vulnerable Populations to Seek Care

Taking a closer look at your employee demographics (while maintaining confidentiality) can help you pinpoint where you may need to focus some of your outreach efforts.

Employees who are older, lack internet access or computer skills need to be considered, as they may need additional assistance or alternatives to telehealth services. Mothers, parents and unpaid caregivers were particularly stressed during the pandemic, with many experiencing adverse mental health symptoms.

In addition, certain positions within your company and others who have worked continuously throughout the pandemic may also be struggling with similar issues.

Show Employees How to Access Telehealth Services

Don't simply leave it up to your employees to discover the option for telehealth services on their own. When the time comes to review benefits, make sure to discuss the option and provide a tutorial that explains exactly what they need to do to search for care should they need it.

Ensure Confidentiality

Some employees may fear or erroneously believe that if they seek counseling to discuss a work-related problem or substance abuse issue that it will come back to haunt them.

Dispelling this myth can help inspire confidence that employees won't be at-risk of losing their job or become the subject of office gossip if they decide to pursue counseling.



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Keep the Conversation Going

Don't limit the conversation about behavioral health benefits and telehealth options to open enrollment. Aim to find ways throughout the year to provide helpful reminders in team meetings, emails and other forms of communication when it makes sense to do so. The goal here is to intentionally create an environment where talking about emotional and behavioral health is OK.

CONCLUSION

Providing access to behavioral telehealth services doesn't just help to improve the overall health of your employees. It's crucial to the health and financial wellbeing of your entire organization as well.

While the pandemic exposed an immense need for remote behavioral health, the popularity of those services isn't expected to recede any time soon. At this point, with the demand and cost benefits so apparent, taking steps to make behavioral telehealth a reality is a no-brainer for anyone involved with the health benefits selection process.

A Third Party Administrator can show you how self-funded plans with telehealth service benefits can yield cost-savings year after year. Get started by asking your broker today about the options that may be best suited for your company. ■

Julie D. Mueller is President & CEO of Custom Design Benefits. Serving in the healthcare field throughout her career she joined Custom Design Benefits in 2003, after 20 years as senior executive for a national TPA. As President and CEO, Julie leads a dynamic service-oriented organization, ready to administer your custom, self-funded benefits plans and consumer driven accounts.



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