

Meeting Patients Where They Are with the Power of Telebehavioral Health

By Monika Roots

Recently, I was presenting at a meeting with a large group of Teladoc clients including benefit managers and healthcare professionals. I asked the audience members to raise their hand if they knew someone affected by mental illness. The response was astounding. Nearly everyone in the room had their hand up. This reiterated for me the significant need for mental health care; it demands our attention. The medical literature statistics tell us that 1 in 4 people have a need for behavioral health treatment. I believe it's at least this high. But the imperativeness for which we should focus on mental health is clearly not the question, as evident by the prevalence of hands in the room. The question is how can we reach those in need.

Stigma and Autonomy as Key Barriers

Two age-old barriers to mental health care still exist, which is why today 56% of American adults with a mental illness do not receive treatment, according to Mental Health America.

Stigma is the number one barrier that patients face, and according to the CDC, while 57% of all adults surveyed felt that individuals are compassionate and sympathetic to those with mental illness, only 25% of adults with mental health symptoms believed that people are caring and sympathetic to them. In addition to conditions like depression, which despite their prevalence still carry significant stigma, others such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (one of Teladoc's top 5 diagnoses) can leave patients frozen by fear, as well, thus making access to treatment even more challenging.

Second to stigma, autonomy is a major barrier to accessing treatment. This means that if a patient does not have agency or control over how they receive their care, they are likely to not seek it out at all. Traditional mental health treatment is facilitated at the doctor's office, creating the need to travel and schedule an appointment, and the sterile feeling of an office can be a barrier to the patient sharing their innermost thoughts and feelings. The ability to easily access and control their care needs provides a level of certainty and trust that is especially helpful for their treatment and perhaps lacking in their environment.

Telemedicine Meets Patients Where They Are

With telebehavioral health we are overcoming these barriers and meeting the patient where they are – in the comfort of one’s home, on the terms defined by the individual – so that a patient who is only ready to talk but maybe not ready for a face-to-face visit can have a feasible way to receive care.

Telemedicine is an especially relevant option for patients with PTSD. These patients have symptoms including avoidance and they tend to be fairly reclusive and stay away from life situations that are triggering.

The examples of the benefit are vast. A patient suffering with PTSD took phone visits with a therapist from the closet, literally hiding from loved ones, uncomfortable and ashamed to admit to seeking help. Another patient brought herself to seek help via phone because the face-to-face visit was too overwhelming. After five sessions and becoming more comfortable with the process, she did a video visit with me and was relieved that I was just a regular woman on the other end of the line, wanting to help.

The Need to Raise Awareness

In the midst of Mental Health Awareness month and on the cusp of PTSD Awareness month, it’s important to take advantage of this time to spread the word that help is out there, and just a phone call or video chat away.

Help is available from a wide array of clinicians who are specialized master’s level therapists, PhD level psychotherapists and psychiatrists with certification in various needs including:

- Family issues/Parenting techniques for behavioral issues
- Alcohol/substance abuse
- Chronic diseases
- Cognitive therapy
- Eating disorders

Via telemedicine, providers can help patients explore the right treatment options, get matched with the right clinician, and get their initial visit scheduled in as little as 10 minutes compared to average wait times that can span weeks to months for a traditional office visit.

Help is available. The need is significant. Every day that I can connect with someone via telebehavioral health is incredibly gratifying. Whether it’s a mom struggling to cope with day-to-day anxiety, or the isolated neighbor who, unbeknownst to all, is battling PTSD, meeting these individuals where they are and providing the care they need to get through their day a little easier is why we got into the practice of behavioral health. Telemedicine is bridging the gaps in care and improving the health and wellbeing of patients in need across the country.