



Digital tools help increase access to behavioral health at a time of growing need



Virtual care and self-help apps are helping fill gaps in the behavioral health care continuum.

Health plans are providing an array of new solutions to employers that help address the broad spectrum and rising volume of behavioral health challenges. These efforts include expanding solutions to care for employees and their families, including through virtual appointments, apps and digital tools.

For example, 61% of people diagnosed with a mood disorder, such as bipolar disorder, have used behavioral virtual care for treatment.¹ Of those, 83% were satisfied using virtual care and 79% said it has made it easier for them to access care.¹

Clearing the way for members to get help is critical to meeting the mental health crisis, especially because there are so many barriers to behavioral health care, including a growing provider shortage. Others include busy schedules, cost and stigma associated with mental health conditions. Virtual care may be able to break down those barriers by providing fast, convenient and on-demand access to care—without leaving the home or workplace. Virtual care aims to streamline access to quality care for people in need, improve flexibility for both members and providers and yield outcomes comparable to in-person visits.²

“Improving access to behavioral health care is critical at all levels of severity,” says Dr. Martin H. Rosenzweig, chief medical officer of Optum Behavioral Health. “Members with faster access to behavioral health care have higher levels of engagement and better outcomes. We also want to engage with members before they enter the system in crisis.”

“One of the keys is to make sure members get the right care at the right time,” says Stacie Grassmuck, director of behavioral health product and innovation for UnitedHealthcare Employer & Individual. “Self-help tools and apps can help them do that. If self-help isn’t working, then we go to the next step.”

Another solution available to qualifying employer groups is virtual behavioral health coaching, which provides evidence-based support for those managing stress, anxiety or depression. Employees work at their own pace and have access to:

- **Structured cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques** delivered via progressive modules
- **24/7 access** to program content
- **Access to dedicated 1-on-1 coaching support** to focus on individual goals through phone, secure message or email
- **Coaches trained in evidence-based motivational interviewing** to create a personalized experience and drive adherence to programs
- **Ongoing access** to resiliency tools

The program has delivered high patient engagement and positive outcomes, including a 50% decrease in depression score, a 42% decrease in anxiety score, a 32% decrease in social anxiety score³ and a retention rate that is 15 times higher than other mental health apps.⁴

“The coaching program is built on CBT which previously was only available via live therapy sessions with a therapist. It offers employees an option in between a self-care app and outpatient therapy,” Grassmuck says. “It was important to base the program on CBT principles, which are known to produce positive outcomes for patients.”

When virtual health may help support behavioral health conditions

When employees aren't sure what support they need, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and advocates can help guide employees to appropriate, timely care across a continuum, whether it's self-care apps, virtual coaching or virtual care. In fact, 77% of employers plan to provide behavioral health support to their employees, such as virtual care and digital tools.⁵

Most EAPs offer a wide range of services, sometimes referring employees to other professionals who can offer more or extended care in particular areas. For example, the UnitedHealthcare EAP allows plan members to call specialists 24/7 at no additional cost for a confidential assessment of their situation and a referral to licensed professionals and services if needed.

EAP specialists help members manage a variety of behavioral health conditions, improve relationships at home or work, handle stress, work through emotional conditions and get legal or financial assistance.

When an employee calls an advocate, they can provide whole-person, proactive guidance across a broad number of health needs, including emotional health, clinical and complex care support, and financial and benefits.

"Navigating the system is complicated and talking with someone who understands the complexities makes a big difference," Rosenzweig says. "Virtual behavioral health care represents an opportunity to bring the care delivery model into our patients' homes, and we're equipped to help guide employees to our solutions with this option."

Leveraging technology to help remove access to barriers and improve relationships and rapport with members has the potential to help benefit everyone, including employees when they have healthier, productive employees.

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Dr. Martin H. Rosenzweig

Chief Medical Officer
Optum Behavioral Health

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¹ 2021 Mood Disorder Survey. National Alliance of Mental Illness, 2021.

² Behavioral Health Top Insights, UnitedHealth Group, 2021.

³ AbleTo's Digital+ program. Data represent mean individual percentage change in PHQ-9, GAD-7 and SPIN scores among a cohort of participants that consecutively initiated use between Jan. 1, 2020, and June 30, 2020, and completed at least 3 modules.

⁴ Comparison data is from Baumel and colleagues (2019) that examined patterns or real-world user engagement in commercially available mental health apps.

⁵ The State of Employee Mental Health in an Uncertain World. Modern Health. Survey conducted by Forrester Consulting, Sept. 2022.

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When you sign up for Virtual Behavioral Coaching, you will be asked a series of questions to ensure that this program is the right fit for you. You may be directed to another resource if your answers indicate that a different type of program may better suit your needs.

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