

# Behavioral Health Integration

## Why Do It?

Taking care of a person's health includes addressing mental and emotional health alongside physical health. This often means performing screenings, providing referral services and building strategic partnerships with local behavioral health organizations. But this topic also extends to fully integrating behavioral health into a practice through adding behavioral health providers to the health care team and/or co-location of physical and mental health providers within the clinic. Be sure to also check out the tip sheets on *Comprehensive Care* and *Team Based Care* for additional tips on getting started, and access tools, videos and resources on the Behavioral Health Integration Resource Library at: [www.pccpi.org/BHRL](http://www.pccpi.org/BHRL).

## Where to Start

### 1. Partnering with an outside agency or co-locating within your clinic

- a. If you are **partnering** with an outside behavioral health organization, establish a formal agreement that outlines how you will refer patients and ensure they are seen in a timely manner as well as expectations for sharing information. Engage your Referrals Coordinator or Care Coordinator to make appointments for patients before they leave the clinic, follow-up to ensure the appointment took place, and request any records of the visit. See the tip sheet on *Care Coordination* for more information.
- b. If you are **co-locating** behavioral health providers in your clinic, decide whether you will integrate them as a member of a care team, or if they will be "on call" to your teams as needed. The role of behavioral health providers varies widely based on the specific needs of clinics, with some primarily focused on provision of mental health services while others focus on providing support for chronic disease management.

***"Behavioral health is huge. I use behavioral health more specifically than most people do, I like to differentiate mental health from behavioral health. Mental health includes treating DSM 5 illness either with medication or counseling, and behavioral health is partnering with patients to achieve health behaviors to improve outcomes either related to mental health or related to physical health conditions."***

**2. Incorporate appropriate screenings** based on specific needs of your patient population, and integrate mental health monitoring as a core element of the clinic's wellness visits. PCPCH teams can become overwhelmed with the volume of new screening options and requirements. Pick the ones that make the most sense for your patients. See the tip sheet on *Comprehensive Care* for ideas.

*PCPCH tip sheets were developed from the reported experiences of recognized PCPCH's, by a Portland State University research team under contract with the Oregon Health Authority, 2016. These recommendations are not part of the official OHA technical assistance guide and are not a guarantee of program recognition. Access this Tip Sheet and other resources: <http://www.pccpi.org/search/resources>.*

**3. Train staff in soft handoffs.** Whether co-located in the clinic or available through a formal partnership and workflow, having behavioral health professionals available can make providers much more comfortable having difficult conversations with patients about topics such as suicide or depression. Ensure that your team members know how and when to bring a behavioral health provider into an in-progress visit, or how to change course if during a visit it becomes apparent that a patient would benefit from behavioral health services.

**4. Target behavioral health support** for patients who are having trouble keeping appointments, remembering their medications or care plan, struggling with depression, or whose family dynamics may be complicating the provision of care. Also consider making behavioral health a standard component of care plans for patients who must manage chronic conditions or who have complex care needs. Many clinics find that behavioral health providers greatly enhance the clinic's ability to support patients' self-care.

**5. Decide in advance how to incorporate behavioral health outcome measures.** Some clinics struggle to finance these additions to their team and documentation is an important component of long-term sustainability. See the tip sheet on *Collecting and Using Data* for help.

### Tips for Making the Most of Behavioral Health Integration

- ❖ It can initially be difficult for providers to know how to (or remember to) integrate behavioral health providers into patient visits. It is helpful to keep behavioral health providers **physically nearby and highly visible** within the clinic, keeping their presence top-of-mind and minimizing the time and difficulty of soft hand-offs.
- ❖ Recognize that meaningful behavioral health services take time, and integrating these services into the clinic's workflows may feel at cross-purposes with the increasing pressure on providers and staff to work quickly. Check out the tip sheet on *Culture and Change Management* for suggestions.
- ❖ Create workflows that allow Case Managers and Care Coordinators to refer patients to Behavioral Health Providers **without prior provider approval** if it becomes apparent in the course of their work that a patient would benefit from these services. See the tip sheet on *Team Based Care*.
- ❖ For elderly patients and those with complex and/or chronic conditions, mental health screenings can sometimes get lost in the midst of responding to more acute and urgent issues. If this is the case, **proactively schedule wellness visits** with these patients that are specifically intended to discuss and address other aspects of their health. Check out the tip sheet on *Comprehensive Care* for other ideas.
- ❖ When patients are identified who would benefit from behavioral health care but are infrequent visitors to the clinic, engage your behavioral health provider to periodically conduct **proactive phone calls** to check in with these patients about their health.

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