

Keywords: behavioral health integration

Problem: Research indicates behavioral health integration (BHI) improves patient outcomes. However, BHI is a new concept, and many clinicians feel ill-equipped to serve patients in this capacity. According to the CDC, 1 in 3 pediatricians report inadequate BH training. They understand the need for integration but need support.

Solution: According to the American Medical Association (AMA), the BHI Compendium guides physicians on integrating behavioral health services. This article overviews the 8 building blocks essential to BHI, per the report.

Behavioral Health Integration: 8 Building Blocks for Success

Suicide death rates for children ages 10 - 24 increased 47% from 2009 -2018. Approximately 20% of adults in the U.S. experience significant substance use disorder (SUD) or mental health conditions. These individuals need accessible behavioral health (BH) services. Social stigmas, elevated mental health rates and limited resources restrict effective treatment. Many go without essential behavioral health services. Consequently, individuals, families and communities suffer.

Incorporating BH services into primary care is a widely accepted solution. This strategy aims to combat the mismatch of needs and resources. However, behavioral health integration (BHI) is a new concept. Many clinicians feel ill-equipped to serve patients in this capacity. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 3 pediatricians report inadequate BH training. They understand the need for integration but need support with implementation. The BHI Compendium, presented by the American Medical Association (AMA), guides physicians in integrating behavioral health services into primary care. This article overviews the eight building blocks essential to BHI, per the report.

Key Takeaways

- The rise in mental health rates and limited BH services require new strategies. BHI is a widely accepted solution to this prevalent problem.
- BHI helps clinicians achieve the Quadruple Aim. This holistic approach improves patient experience and provider well-being. It has been shown to produce positive patient outcomes and reduce medical costs.
- BHI requires PCPs to utilize routine BH assessments and an integrated team approach. In doing so, they shift toward an effective, holistic strategy to mental health.
- Unnecessary referrals and inefficient workflow systems frustrate patients, postponing timely treatment.

- Data tracking, family engagement and systematic follow-up ensure patients receive the necessary support and resources.

Why is behavioral health integration necessary?

According to the American Psychological Association, BHI is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each practice chooses the best model for their team and specific patient population. Regardless of how a clinic implements integration, some BHI benefits include:

- Improved patient and clinician experience
- Improved access to services
- Improved engagement
- Improved adherence to
- Improved outcomes
- Reduced medical expenses
- Reduced wait time for mental health services
- Reduced preventable inpatient hospitalizations and emergency visits

Change is challenging for everyone. Resources like the **Behavioral Health Integration Compendium help clinics and physicians shift toward holistic BH services**. Keep reading to learn about the eight foundational building blocks of successful integration.

#1 Established routine

It is easy for providers and patients to dismiss mental health concerns. Therefore, **routine behavioral health assessments are foundational for adult and pediatric BHI**. Clinicians should systematically offer age-appropriate screening and timely feedback. Patient engagement improves with compassionate communication and same-day access to BH services. Patient-centered scheduling also helps individuals implement recommended therapies.

#2 Integrated team

Behavioral health is complex, and team integration is vital. Effective BH services depend on interprofessional collaboration. **An integrated team improves engagement rates and clinician effectiveness**. This approach requires everyone to commit to a culture of teamwork, authentic communication and a unified treatment plan. Well-established roles are essential for efficient and effective results.

#3 Collaboration

The entire care team cannot attend every patient meeting. Therefore, **thorough information sharing is essential**. In-person and digital collaboration helps ensure that patients, physicians

and specialty service providers can access health information and care plans. This strategy improves coordination, builds trust and promotes engagement.

#4 Specialty service protocols

Prioritizing access to specialty services reduces unnecessary referrals and ineffective coordination. Clinicians need straightforward referral processes for patients requiring specialty services. Consequently, patients are more likely to receive treatment when physicians follow established protocols. Individuals can **promptly access on-site or virtual psychiatric services**.

#5 Designated workflow

Physical appearance alone is not a clear indicator for identifying mental health illnesses. Incorporating BH assessments into the **standard workflow helps clinicians identify at-risk populations**. Routine, age-appropriate screening becomes the norm. At-risk individuals receive further evaluation, BH services, more follow-up or heightened surveillance.

#6 Objective tracking and treatment

With evidence-based tracking and enhanced follow-up, providers can provide personalized interventions. **Quantifiable symptom rating scales help clinicians objectively evaluate progress and recommend therapies**. Goal-setting and self-management tools should be included when appropriate.

#7 Patient and family engagement

Patients are not islands. They are parents, siblings, employees and friends. That is why patient and family engagement is so important. Patients often feel overwhelmed by medical questions and decisions. They may want to share decision-making responsibilities. Family and caregivers are vital resources, reducing stress and decision fatigue. **Clinicians positively influence outcomes and adherence by engaging all team members**. This strategy promotes self-advocacy, personal commitment and at-home support.

#8 Evaluation of effectiveness

Evaluating effectiveness is essential for all specialties and systems. Providers should **utilize data and metrics to assess therapy progress and adjust interventions**. Objective data helps define evidence-based goals and systematically track engagement. With regular evaluation, providers can fine-tune therapies and improve patient outcomes.

Improving BH services with an integrated approach

Research indicates that BHI improves patient outcomes. However, integrating BH services into primary practice can take time and effort. Behavioral health integration benefits the individual, family and community. **Family physicians are vital to the success of BHI.**

We understand that change is challenging. Our hospital is here to help. We deliver accessible, compassionate behavioral health services you can depend on. As your partner in care, you can count on us. Click the “Refer” button to get started today.

Resources

“Behavioral Health Integration Fact Sheet.” American Psychological Association, 2022, Behavioral Health Integration Fact Sheet.

“Behavioral Health Integration Compendium.” American Medical Association: The BHI Collaborative, 2024, Behavioral Health Integration Compendium | AMA.

“Behavioral Health Integration.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2023, Behavioral Health Integration.