

How to Remove Roadblocks to Accessing Behavioral Health

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Executive summary

The stresses that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a dramatic increase in demand for behavioral health services. To make a difficult situation worse, staffing and mental health provider shortages along with the dramatic rise in these needed services made it harder to begin or continue behavioral therapy – no in-person groups, no in-office counseling, no face-to-face check-ins. Even as the pandemic winds down, consumers continue to struggle to easily access behavioral health care.

For patients and their families, it is often unclear how and where to initiate access to behavioral health. Behavioral health providers need to achieve greater visibility – and greater accessibility – in order to help patients locate and connect quickly with a professional, and begin receiving much-needed help.

This ebook will explore digital health solutions for overcoming common roadblocks in the patient access journey towards timely behavioral health care.

57%

of those who either personally or had an immediate family member access mental health care during the pandemic said accessing care was difficult to find the right care for their needs.

64%

Some two thirds (64%) of Americans report feeling anxious, **yet only one in six (14%) households have accessed mental health care** as a result of the pandemic.

Source: America's Mental Health COVID-19 Pulse Study[1]

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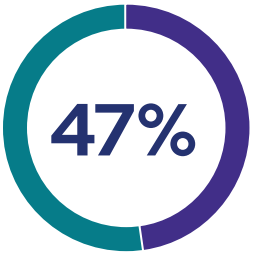
Finding a provider

Barrier: Staying in-network

Traditionally, behavioral health coverage is more narrowly limited than other areas of specialized medicine. This provider bottleneck can lead to higher costs for patients. The National Council for Behavioral Health reports that 42% of patients see high cost and limited insurance coverage as their main barriers to accessing mental health care.[2] Inaccurate provider listings may also lead patients to out-of-network providers. According to a study published by *Health Affairs*, inaccuracies in provider directories mean that patients are six times more likely to see an out-of-network provider for behavioral health than for other specialties.[3]

Solution: Connect with payors so patients can search for providers and schedule appointments via their health plans

This approach is popular with consumers and effective at matching patients to in-network providers. According to an Optum Digital Scheduling survey, 47% of consumers search for providers via health plan websites and apps.[4] Payors also see high member usage of their provider search tools. Optum, the largest behavioral health provider network in the U.S., attracts some 129,000 visits per month from consumers browsing its provider directory.



47% of consumers search for providers via health plan websites and apps.[4]

129K

The Optum provider directory receives an average 129,000 visits per month from consumers looking for behavioral health providers.*

*Optum internal data, 2021.



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Barrier: Long wait times

Patients who are experiencing a crisis often cannot wait for care. They need to be able to find providers with immediate or near-immediate availability. One survey finds that "38% of patients faced a mental health appointment wait time longer than one week. This can have a severe impact on a patient who is in crisis, and cause individuals to resort to accessing higher cost, higher intensity care, with increased patient acuity as a result."[5]

Solution: Navigate patients to the soonest-possible appointment with the right provider using intelligent algorithms

When patients search for behavioral health providers online, prioritize matching them with near-term available providers in search results. Offering patients the ability to easily view a provider's open appointment slots and alternate providers with greater availability can also speed up access and increase satisfaction. According to Evernorth's Health Care in Focus report, 42% of consumers say the ability to search for appointment availability is a part of their ideal healthcare experience.[6]

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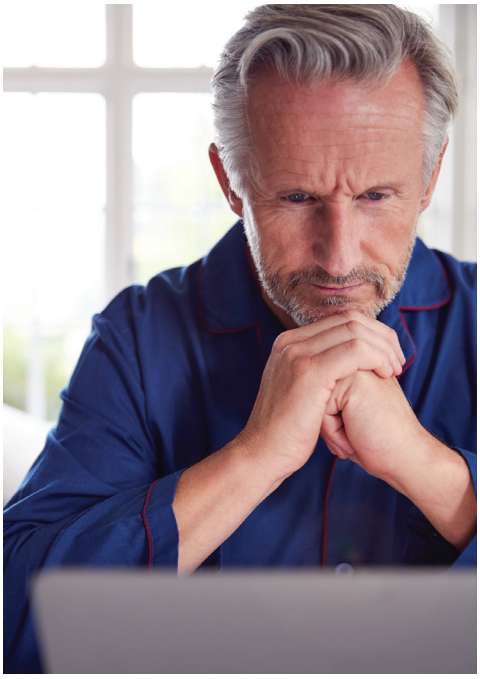
Finding a provider

Barrier: Too few providers

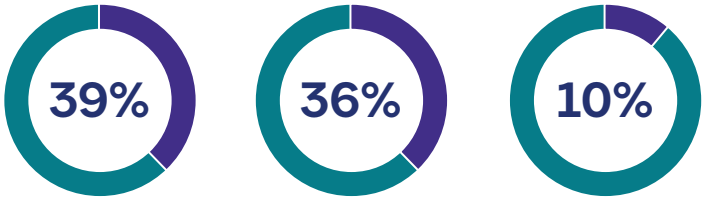
There are not enough behavioral health providers to meet current and post-pandemic demand. This results in fewer provider options for patients to choose from, and fewer available appointments for patients in need. Kaiser Family Foundation reports that the nation needs nearly 6,500 more mental health clinicians to fill the provider shortage for behavioral health.[7]

Solution: Leverage telemedicine to connect patients with more behavioral health providers

Telemedicine removes geographic barriers, helping to free up clinician time, and decrease the critical wait time from contact to care. Consumers are open to behavioral health virtual visits; according to Accenture, 81% of consumers with a behavioral health condition definitely or probably would engage in a virtual channel.[8]



54% of patients in a recent University of Michigan study stated they were likely to continue with telepsychiatry visits even after in-person visits were made available. Their top cited reasons:





Booking an appointment

Barrier: Lack of awareness

Patients need near-term care or they won't continue their journey, but they may not know where to find it. Those unable to find an available provider may later end up in an emergency room or hospital psychiatric ward, taking up needed hospital beds and increasing costs for providers, patients, and payors alike.

Solution: Schedule an appointment at discharge, before the patient leaves an inpatient care setting

Discharge offers an opportunity to connect patients with a provider they can rely upon for continuing behavioral health care. Setting a follow-up appointment at discharge improves the likelihood that the patient will visit an ambulatory setting the next time they need care, especially when follow-up visits are scheduled within the next seven days.

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Barrier: Social stigma

For patients in need of behavioral health care, it is not always clear when it's time to seek help since there's no external wound to address. A patient may need time to decide they must connect with a provider. It can be difficult for patients to call and make an appointment, since "stigma and negative perceptions associated with mental illness" are widely understood to be barriers for patients in need of behavioral health care.[10]

Solution: Online scheduling via multiple access points grants patients the choice to schedule using their preferred channel most comfortable for them

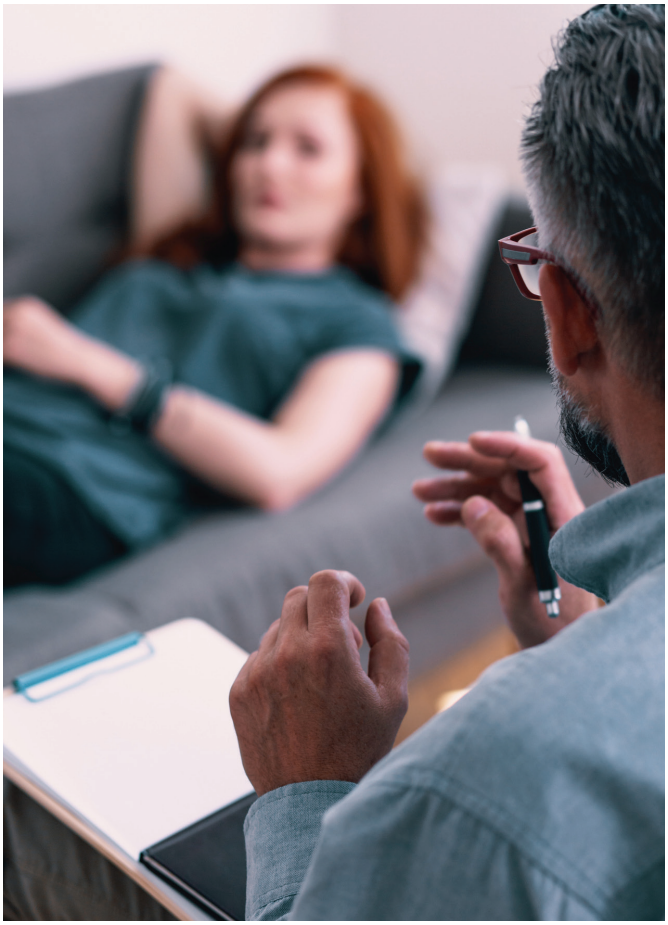
In this area of medicine, privacy is paramount to many patients. Online scheduling enables patients to approach their care journey through channels like provider websites that are more private and convenient than a phone call.

48% of consumers prefer to schedule appointments online, compared with 39% over the phone and 10% in-person.[11]



17% of respondents to a Spring Health consumer survey say the option to book mental health care appointments via their computer or smartphone would help them achieve better mental health in 2021.[12]

17% Prefer to book via computer/smartphone



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Barrier: Limited business hours

Because individual providers sometimes keep irregular hours, it can be difficult for patients to contact a provider when the office is open. An Optum survey reports 74% of consumers say that being able to schedule a healthcare appointment outside of business hours is important to them.[13]

Solution: 24/7 self-scheduling enables patients to book an appointment according to their own schedule

The freedom to self-schedule can have an emotional impact on patients, whose first breakthrough may be acknowledging that it is time to begin their journey to care. Without the pressure of speaking to a scheduler inside a certain time frame, a patient can visit the scheduling site multiple times before deciding to commit to booking treatment.



Barrier: Complex intake process

Patients who are battling stigma and stereotypes may find it daunting to confront detailed questionnaires and intake forms ahead of their appointment. Because intake is so complex, providers often must dedicate staff to conduct intake conversations with patients.

Solution: Replicate front office intake protocols in the digital space

Ensure behavioral health provider scheduling protocols are replicated during online scheduling to ensure accurate, real-time availability. Filling out this information online can put the patient more at ease, and allow staffers to confirm rather than solicit details of the patient's history and present conditions.

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Staying engaged

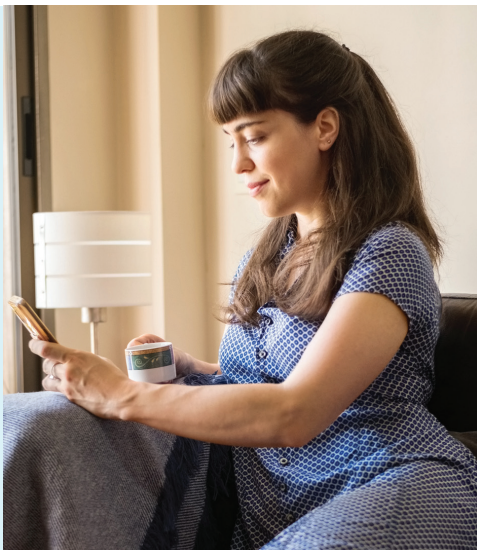
Barrier: Missed appointments

Behavioral health providers typically report high no-show rates. For patients, the cost of not showing up is initially low. However, missing appointments can lead to poorer health outcomes in the long run. For providers, no-shows are time-consuming, expensive, and disruptive to smooth, efficient patient scheduling.

Solution: Combine telehealth with automated text, phone, or email reminders

Telehealth can dramatically reduce no-shows for behavioral health providers. For example, Boston Medical Center's psychiatry department saw its former 45% no-show average drop to 15% for telehealth psychiatric services.[14] Moreover, by integrating with automated appointment reminders, providers can:

- **Lower operational costs**
- **Collect intake information ahead of the appointment**
- **Offer a reschedule button to help patients book a new appointment if they miss one**
- **Provide links and login instructions to patients ahead of their telehealth visit**



Barrier: Dropping out of care

Encouraging behavioral health patients to follow their care plans is vital to preventing them from abandoning treatment. According to NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, 70% of patients who drop out of behavioral health treatment do so after their first or second visit.[15] Each additional day between a patient's discharge and follow-up appointment also increases the odds of non-attendance by 4%.[16]

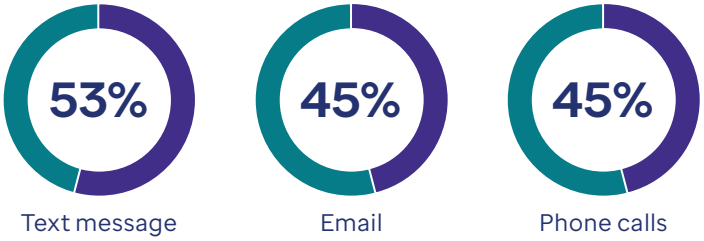
Solution: Employ pre- and post-visit digital notifications tailored to each patient's preference

Automated email and text message notifications can efficiently and effectively prompt patients to keep an appointment, schedule follow-up care, and refill prescriptions. More than half (56%) of patients prefer pre-appointment communications to be sent digitally via text message or email.

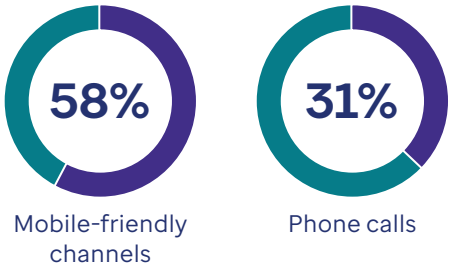
Consumer demand for digital post-visit notifications is also growing. According to a 2020 Optum consumer survey, patients showed a stronger preference for mobile-friendly channels for post-appointment communications such as text messages (53%) or email (45%). Only 45% preferred phone calls.[17]

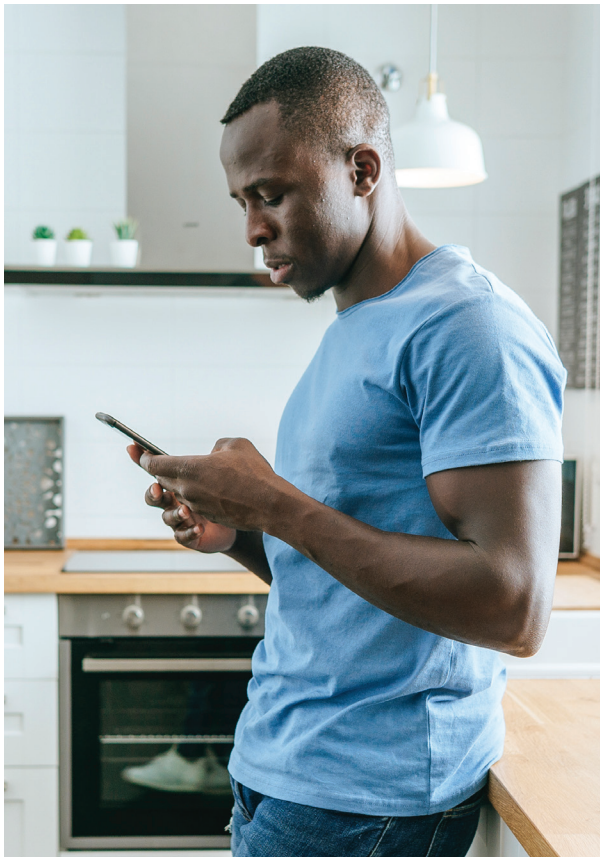
Preferred avenues by patients for post-visit notifications:

Optum 2020 Consumer Survey



Optum 2019 Consumer Survey





Optimize access to behavioral health with Optum Digital Scheduling

Click here to learn more.

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