

The Explosion of Virtual Health in the Field of Mental Health

This year has been an incredibly difficult and stressful one due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and for those of us in the United States, the pressures have only been exacerbated by ongoing incidents of racial injustice and political turmoil. These circumstances have all placed an enormous amount of pressure on those who already deal with mental health issues and have driven a significant demand for greater telehealth services. The providers in the telehealth space have seen a record increase in mental health treatment services since the pandemic began as patients are faced with a variety of mental health crisis situations. Isolation, job loss, loneliness, and anxiety have all added pressure to a healthcare system that was already struggling to manage mental health conditions.

As the need for mental health support services continues to grow, providers have pivoted very quickly and realized they could do clinical work in the mental health and addiction space without exposing their patients to risk. In addition to providers embracing telehealth, the use of chatbots, apps, and digital cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs act as adjuncts to clinician-based virtual care — allowing access at any time. Employers, as well, are dealing with an overstressed labor force, and the use of chatbots and virtual care may be preferable for employees given the perceived stigmatization of mental health and the potential fear they may have of losing a promotion or raise.

Telemental Health

“Telemental health” could become the new norm for mental health treatment. In fact, in Canada, Teladoc Health recently announced the launch of Mental Health Care, a new telemedicine service enabling employees to obtain convenient, stigma-free access to psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists from the convenience of their phone, web, or mobile app. The company commissioned a study in which half of Canadian respondents reported that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their mental health.¹

In addition to overall mental health issues being on the rise, there are growing mental health issues attributed to the COVID-19

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pandemic within targeted segments of the population. For example, according to Teladoc data, alcohol and substance abuse is on the rise in women. Mental health visits have increased significantly more for men. Older patients utilizing virtual mental healthcare has also increased. Gen Z and millennials are dealing with rising anxiety disorders. And sleep-related problems are on the rise, as well, across all audiences.

All of these issues have led to an array of service providers working to help manage the issues. The providers are offering a range of services — from texting, to apps, to on-line care. Ginger is one example of a service company that is offering text-based mental health coaching, teletherapy, and psychiatry. The group has reported a notable increase in utilization of mental health coaching services, virtual therapy, and psychiatry compared to pre-COVID-19 averages.

Ontrak (formerly Catasys), a leading AI and technology-enabled healthcare company, is one of the fastest-growing companies in North America, according to Deloitte's Technology Fast 500™.² The company is a prime example of the benefit of virtual health for the “care-avoidant” population, a demographic that includes those with mental health conditions, including addiction. Ontrak integrates evidence-based psychosocial and medical interventions, delivered either in person or via telehealth. They also offer care coaching and in-market community care coordinators who address the social and environmental determinants of health, including loneliness.

Ontrak recently announced that the volume of evidence now pointing to a surge in mental health conditions may still underestimate the severity of the mental health crisis. Mr. Terren Peizer, Chairman and CEO of

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Ontrak, recently stated in a company press release, “There is now a preponderance of evidence that the mental health crisis in the country has overtaken our company estimates. We had previously attributed 30% to 35% of total medical spend to the high cost group, when the reality is now alarmingly higher.”³

Establishing Confidence and Comfort

In the future, the move to “telemental health” will only continue to grow as providers and patients gain more confidence and comfort using these new and emerging technologies to help manage chronic conditions. Companies that have yet to fully invest in providing and supporting telehealth offerings would be wise to commit now, as the expectations for patient care are being set in the COVID-19 era and those who aren't already on board risk losing people to companies that fully embrace the flexibility telehealth provides. ^{PV}

Notes:

¹ <https://teladochealth.com/newsroom/press/release/teladoc-health-launches-mental-health-telemedicine-service/>

² <https://catasys.com/press-releases.html?qmodStoryID=7015540503342354>

³ <https://catasys.com/press-releases.html?qmodStoryID=5045999336054555>

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