THE TRANSFORMATION OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Innovative Strategies for Improving Engagement, Accessibility and Equity

Onlife®
HEALTH

Introduction

Ongoing innovation continues to transform the care model for behavioral health. The development of new technology-based therapeutic tools and communication programs are impacting almost every segment of the behavioral health landscape, from mental health and substance abuse to the formation of healthy diet and exercise habits. Entrepreneurs are at the vanguard of this new age of innovation.

$1.8B

In 2020, the venture capital industry invested more than $1.8 billion in mental health startups, a threefold increase over 2019.[1]

Self-service behavioral interventions, such as mental health apps, mindfulness programs, and audio-guided meditation, are growing in popularity. The science of behavior change continues to evolve, developing new, more effective techniques in the areas of habit formation and behavior modification.

Accompanying this rapid pace of innovation is a new and growing awareness about the importance of behavioral health. Several recent events have propelled mental health into the national spotlight. The decision by Simone Biles to withdraw from certain events during the Tokyo Olympics created a new urgency about the subject, reinforcing the efforts of Michael Phelps and other celebrities who have shared their personal mental health issues and advocated for better care. In addition, cases of depression and anxiety have soared in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic, dramatically increasing the demand for mental health services.

This combination of rapid innovation, capital investment, and growing awareness are just some of the factors transforming the behavioral healthcare system. This white paper will examine three innovative strategies that can contribute significantly to this transformation by increasing engagement, improving accessibility, and providing more equitable treatment. But first, let's take a closer look at the major impact that behavioral health has on the American healthcare system and the people it serves.

The Pervasive Impact of Behavioral Health

Even before COVID-19, behavioral health issues such as depression and anxiety were widespread in the United States. In a 2019 survey, 55 percent of American adults said they experienced stress during most of the previous day, and 45 percent reported being worried or anxious. [2] Each year, more than 18 percent of American adults have an anxiety disorder, such as a panic attack, severe enough to hinder their ability to function normally. [3]

55%
of Adults
experienced stress during a typical day

VS

45%
of Adults
reported being worried or anxious

Perhaps even more telling than the pervasiveness of behavioral health issues is the profound impact they can have on a person's physical health. As but one example, stress can be a significant cause of headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, asthma and arthritis. An estimated 75 to 90 percent of all doctor's office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints, and 43 percent of adults suffer adverse health effects from stress. [4]

The Impact of COVID

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the mental health of Americans.

ADULT-REPORTED CLINICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY OR DEPRESSION

10% pre-COVID   VS   **40%** mid-2020

Worry and stress concerning COVID-19 have negatively impacted other areas of well-being, with 36 percent of Americans reporting difficulty sleeping and 32 percent having problems eating. [6] More serious behavioral health issues have also been on the rise during the pandemic, with 12 percent of adults reporting new or increased substance abuse. [7] The impact caused by the economic downturn linked to the pandemic also needs to be considered. More than 52 percent of households that have experienced job loss have reported higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to just 32 percent in households not experiencing job loss. [8]

Social distancing restrictions and concerns about gathering in crowds have increased social isolation and loneliness, with more than 66 percent of Americans reporting they have felt socially isolated during the pandemic. [9] **Studies have found that social isolation is more detrimental than obesity, creating health risks equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. [10]**
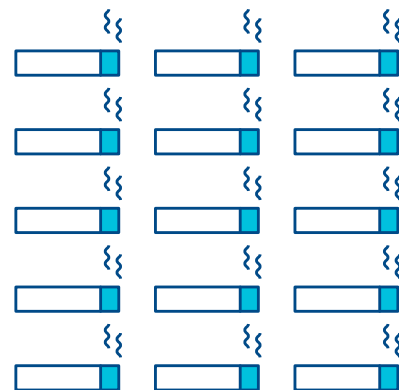
social isolation   =   smoked per day

Obstacles to Care

Despite the enormous impact of behavioral health on a person's physical health, effectively addressing the issue remains a challenge. Access to care is one major obstacle.

> There is only one health provider for every 198 people who need mental health services in the United States, and 77 percent of U.S. counties have a severe shortage of mental health providers. [11]

For 42 percent of the population, high cost and poor insurance coverage are the top barriers to accessing mental health care. [12] And if care is provided, the high cost is exacerbated by the fact that behavioral care is four to six times more likely to be provided out-of-network compared to medical or surgical care.

The Economic Consequences

The economic costs associated with behavioral health issues are considerable. Consider a recent study of 21 million insured lives. Using available health claims data, the research report classified 27 percent (5.7 million) of its study population in a Behavioral Health Group. Yet this group alone accounted for 57 percent of the total healthcare costs for the entire population. In the same study, a subgroup of insurers classified as High-Cost Behavioral constituted just 5.7 percent of the study's population, yet this group accounted for 44 percent of total healthcare costs, with the annual total healthcare costs for this subgroup topping out at more than $45,000. [13]
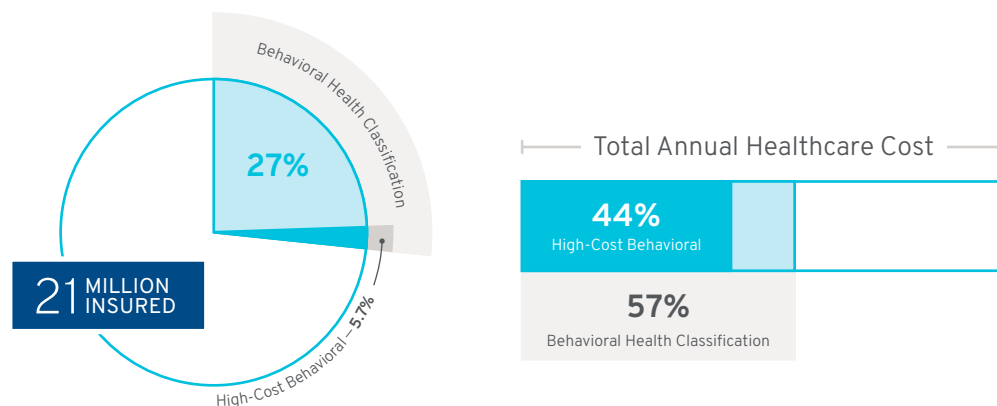
Strategies for Increasing Engagement

Having gained a deeper understanding of the economic costs and the pervasive impact of behavioral health on the nation's healthcare system, let's now look at three strategies for improving the care that people receive. And given the fact that more than half of the people with a mental health issue don't get the help they need, let's begin by considering a strategy for increasing engagement.

1   MORE EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT
Leveraging the Power of Data

2   GREATER ACCESSIBILITY
Expanding Telehealth Services

3   GREATER EQUITY
Addressing Social Determinants of Health

MORE EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Leveraging the Power of Data

Timely and effective access to health care is one of the most critical components to improving health outcomes. Behavioral health is no exception. Unfortunately, expedited care in this area of medicine is uncommon.

> Consider this rather startling fact: the average lag time between the onset of mental health symptoms and initial treatment is approximately 11 years.[14]

Bridging such an enormous gap between the onset of symptoms and their treatment requires an ability to identify behavioral health issues in their initial stages before they develop into significant medical conditions. Addressing these behaviors and symptoms early enough in the process can mitigate or even eliminate their evolution to more serious and costly health conditions.

The key to this early identification is to leverage both publicly available data and member-level data by using artificial intelligence and predictive analytics to find populations with unusually high but often unreported and undiagnosed behavioral health conditions. This type of "early-warning" system can drive preventive interventions and activate more timely referrals to the right care, producing better outcomes.

> Another vital component of such an "early-warning" system is to include questions specifically related to behavioral health and Social Determinants of Health as part of a comprehensive health assessment. Asking these questions provides a wealth of information about the multiple social and psychological factors that impact a person's well-being.

Once specific populations and individuals have been identified as high-risk for behavioral health issues, a combination of personalized behavioral healthcare resources, both virtual and in-person, can be utilized to reach out to and support people who otherwise may have been forgotten by the healthcare system. These resources can include engaging one-on-one with health coaches, nutritionists and other specialists, using mental health apps, connecting through telehealth services and accessing online educational programs and self-guided courses designed to promote healthier habits.

A recent study highlighted the economic benefits of leveraging predictive algorithms and data analytics in order to provide targeted interventions as early as possible. It found that increasing the use of preventive services, such as help for substance abuse disorders, could reduce medical costs by as much as $4.6 billion annually by avoiding unnecessary emergency room visits and hospitalizations. [15]

Expanding Telehealth Services

The use of telehealth services, such as telephone, video-conferencing and secure messaging, has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telehealth as a mode of care delivery had already been increasing in recent years. But with COVID, those numbers skyrocketed, increasing by 154 percent in the last week of March 2020. [16]

Several studies have strongly suggested that the quality of care delivered by telehealth services can be as effective as in-person care in certain situations. One study found that telehealth services reduced depression symptoms by 32 percent, anxiety symptoms by 31 percent and stress symptoms by 20 percent. [17]

Approximately 80 percent of rural areas in the United States are classified as medically under-served. These communities often suffer from a shortage of behavioral health providers, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists and counselors.

80% of rural areas

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These shortages tend to disproportionately impact Americans who are older, have lower socioeconomic status, are more reliant on public insurance, and have worse health outcomes. Expanding the use of telehealth services for behavioral health will dramatically improve the ability of providers to overcome these geographic obstacles and deliver their professional care at the point of need—wherever that might be.
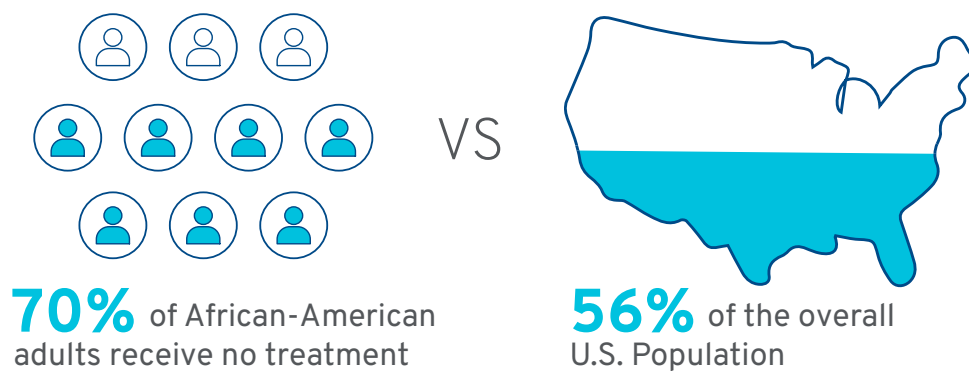
Addressing Social Determinants of Health

Health inequities refer to the differences in treatment and access to services that are rooted in social, ethnic and economic status. Factors that influence these inequities include age, gender, race, income, disability status, sexual orientation, language and geographic location.

When it comes to behavioral health, ethnic minorities have rates of disorders similar to the general population, but their access to mental health and substance abuse treatment services is substantially lower. For example, almost 70 percent of African-American adults with a mental illness receive no treatment compared to 56 percent of the overall U.S. population. [19]

Treatment of Mental Illness

70% of African-American adults receive no treatment

VS

56% of the overall U.S. Population

Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) are one of the key causes of these health inequities. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) has defined SDoH as the places where people live, learn, work and play that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes. SDoH such as poverty, unequal access to health care, lack of education, stigma and racism can drive more than 70 percent of health outcomes.

> To gain an in-depth, data-based understanding of which communities are adversely affected by SDoH, Onlife Health developed its SDoH Community-Based Index. This data-driven program and sophisticated mapping tool identifies and analyzes the SDoH in neighborhoods across the entire United States.

To create the SDoH Index, Onlife aggregated publicly available data for 18 variables in 5 categories: Community Demographics, Socioeconomic Factors, Housing and Transportation, Healthcare Quality and Exercise Opportunity. We then analyzed the data and assigned an overall SDoH Vulnerability Score from 0 (least vulnerable) to 1 (most vulnerable) for each census tract in the United States. A census tract is a small statistical subdivision of a county. Containing on average about 4,000 people, a census tract offers the most granular level of data available on a national scale to populate the SDoH Index.

The scores were then downloaded into a sophisticated visualization program that can display the percentile rankings of any census tract in the country as well as any size geographic area, such as a zip code, county, state or geographic region. The Index can also calculate the percentile ranking for combinations of complementary variables (for example, food insecurity and transportation). By leveraging the SDoH Community-Based Index, the social vulnerabilities that cause behavioral health inequities can now be identified and then addressed by connecting people in high-risk communities with the appropriate local resources that are already available.

Key Takeaways

The development of new technologies is rapidly changing the care model for behavioral health. This innovation is fueled by a significant increase in capital investment as well as a growing national awareness about the prevalence and seriousness of behavioral health issues. This paper examines three innovative strategies that can play a key role in this transformation:

1. **Increase Engagement** by using artificial intelligence and predictive analytics to identify populations with high behavioral health vulnerabilities in order to drive early interventions and activate more timely referrals to the right care, producing better outcomes.

2. **Improve Accessibility** by promoting the use of telehealth for behavioral health services, especially in regions of the country where there is a shortage of behavioral health providers.

3. **Provide More Equitable Behavioral Care** by identifying the specific communities most adversely affected by SDoH and provide the needed local resources to mitigate health inequities.

ENDNOTES

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Onlife Health, a GuideWell Company, brings end-to-end simplicity to population health and wellness. Connecting and integrating people, technology, and benefit design through our user-friendly engagement platform, we guide consumers on the "next right thing to do" in their health care journey. Our unique approach – personalized, supported, connected – drives engagement and delivers value. With its built-in agility, the Onlife platform can be quickly and easily configured and scaled to serve any market, from commercial health insurance to Medicare Advantage and Individual (ACA) lines of business.