



# 5 ways to help members find the behavioral health care they need

As some members struggle for access, plan sponsors can help guide them to quality, affordable care.



# Introduction

Behavioral health concerns – including stress, depression, anxiety, alcohol and substance use – are on the rise.<sup>1</sup> In fact, more than 1 in 4 individuals have quit a job because of their mental health, while 1 in 5 say their organization doesn't do enough for their mental health.<sup>2</sup>

Given these trends, the stakes couldn't be higher for plan sponsors. When individuals and their family members experience emotional distress – which may manifest as sleep problems, aches and pains, and low motivation – it may affect their quality of life and lead to lateness, missed days at work, lower work quality, safety-related mishaps and the need for medical care.

Optum provides a behavioral health strategy designed to help individuals find resources and support across a comprehensive continuum of care. It includes the promotion of general well-being and treatment of conditions.

## Plan sponsors can help members find behavioral health care by:



Promoting virtual care to help improve access to providers



Building a benefits strategy that includes a full continuum of care



Offering a guided experience to support individuals and their families



Reducing stigma, especially for at-risk populations



Reinforcing the connection between physical and behavioral health

# Promote virtual care to help improve access to providers

Evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the demand for behavioral health care for years to come, and people will continue to have a growing need for faster, easier access to mental health support.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. currently only fulfills 27% of its total need for mental health professionals – and a shortage of at least 245,000 behavioral health providers is projected by 2025.<sup>4</sup>

Innovative and effective digital tools, including virtual care solutions, are designed to help meet the needs of individuals and improve access to care. The pandemic created momentum around virtual care, including virtual therapy, that continues to build. In fact, 77% of plan sponsors plan to offer mental health support, including through virtual care and digital tools.<sup>5</sup>

More than half of U.S. adults are likely to use virtual tools for behavioral health needs. Providers are seeing 50-175 times more patients virtually than they have before.<sup>6</sup>

Offering virtual care options may also reduce the stigma surrounding seeking mental health support. Stigma tends to prevent older adults from seeking care versus younger adults who are generally more accepting of mental health care. Stigma is also more prevalent in some historically underrepresented and minoritized groups.<sup>5</sup>



**88%**

increase in telehealth visits in 2023<sup>7</sup>



**<5 days**

wait time for first appointment<sup>8</sup>

Optum behavioral health network<sup>9</sup>



**377K+**

providers



**169K+**

virtual providers

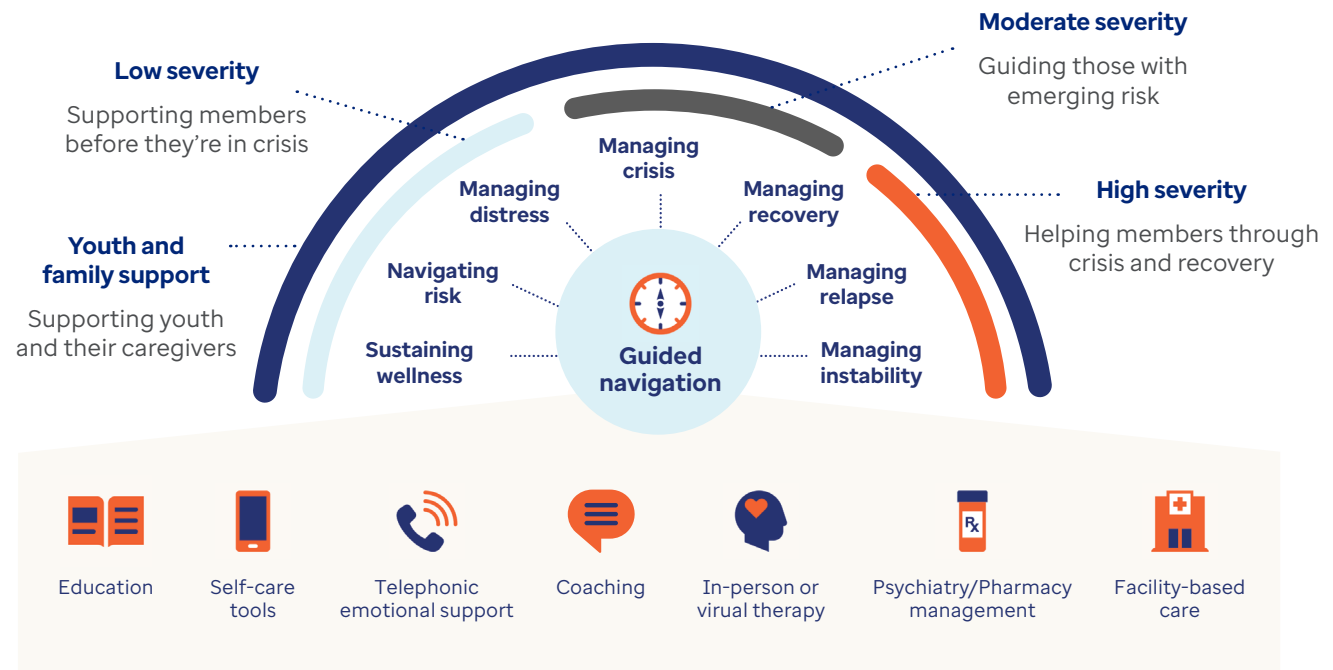
# Build a benefits strategy that includes a full continuum of care

Optum provides comprehensive support across the continuum of individual needs, from digital self-help tools to facility-based care. This model helps individuals take preventive measures to maintain their mental health and overall well-being similar to physical health. As with other aspects of well-being, the focus of plan sponsors' efforts should move from reactive to preventive.<sup>10</sup>

Because people don't always know they have behavioral health benefits and services, Optum helps create awareness by promoting it during

open enrollment, onboarding and throughout the year. This helps encourage the idea of getting care sooner, often before an individual knows they need help.

Solutions such as online education, self-help apps or coaching help equip individuals with the tools they need to manage stress, burnout and anxiety. In addition, members have access to therapy or psychiatric treatment that may require medication or facility-based care.



# Offer a guided member experience to support individuals and their families

Low behavioral health literacy remains a challenge for many people. They don't often recognize brand names for tools and resources or have a clear understanding of what terms like coaching mean when related to their mental health care.<sup>11</sup>

---

With Optum, members can begin their journey through an employee assistance program, primary care physician, care advocate or online resource. Through each of these resources, members are guided to an evidence-based recommendation, based on their individual mental health care needs.

Predictive tools also help identify individuals who may need behavioral health support.

Pulling from data such as diagnostic codes and utilization patterns, individuals are segmented based on their conditions – both the level of severity and stability – as well as their ability to engage. This information is then used to support advocates and make program suggestions when members login to their benefits site.

For those without a behavioral health diagnosis or utilization of services, an evidence-based prediction can be made on their level of risk based on social determinants of health data. These are two of the most critical factors that put a member at risk of developing or having an untreated behavioral health condition.



# Reduce stigma, especially for at-risk populations

In recent years, the impact of mental health has grown, especially among women, teens and historically underrepresented and minoritized racial groups.<sup>5</sup> Plan sponsors can help address this with targeted campaigns to highlight available resources and services, such as virtual care, that help reduce stigma.

In addition, people from these groups may not seek or receive mental health support often. For example, among adults with moderate or severe anxiety or depression, 64% of white adults received mental health services compared to 47% of Black adults and 60% of Hispanic adults.<sup>12</sup> They also are more likely to seek and use support from a provider who shares their background, as they feel more

comfortable and understood. Yet, currently, the majority of American Psychological Association members are white.<sup>13</sup>

To address these gaps, the Optum plan supports and offers access to culturally competent care via:

- Cultural competency training for providers in our network
- Offering provider search criteria for ethnicity, gender and language
- Scholarships for child psychiatrists and providers from diverse backgrounds
- Strategic recruitment of specialty providers

## Help reduce stigma by avoiding language that could potentially hurt or inadvertently discourage someone from seeking mental health treatment.

Don't use	Suggested use
Words that may reinforce stereotypes and minimize the importance of understanding mental health conditions	Specific and empathetic language
A mental health condition to define the person	"Someone who lives with a mental health condition" or "someone who is affected by a mental health condition"
The disease to describe the person	A person-first approach such as "a person living with schizophrenia" or "someone diagnosed with schizophrenia"

# Reinforce the connection between physical and behavioral health

Optum claims data show members with comorbid conditions have claims costs that are, on average, twice that of members with medical conditions.<sup>14</sup> People with a mental health condition also experience higher morbidity and mortality rates compared to those without – mostly from untreated and preventable chronic physical conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension and diabetes.<sup>15</sup>

Integrated medical and behavioral benefits can address the full spectrum of health and well-being to provide whole-person care. When behavioral, medical and pharmacy benefits are integrated, there's a single point of contact for a member with a mental health condition who also has a chronic health condition. The integration of these benefits creates a more seamless experience with a single carrier. It also helps reduce total cost of care for plan sponsors.<sup>16</sup>

In an average group plan population<sup>16</sup>:



**14%** of members experience both medical and behavioral conditions

=



**28%** of the total cost of care

# Plan for future behavioral health needs

History has shown that the mental health impact of disasters, global unrest and conflict outlasts the physical impact suggesting today's mental health need will continue.<sup>3</sup> The challenges in the behavioral health landscape call on all stakeholders – including private and public insurers, care providers, plan sponsors and government policymakers – to innovate to better serve the behavioral health needs of everyone. Insurers can leverage data to forge new relationships with members, allowing for preventive interventions to address behavioral health needs.<sup>17</sup>

Through data-driven solutions, Optum works with plan sponsors to help identify gaps in care. For example, behavioral health claims utilization based on location, age, gender and other measures helps organizations proactively identify and outreach when a member may need mental health support to prevent a higher, more costly level of care.





# Learn more



Contact your Optum representative or visit [optum.com/behavioralhealth](https://optum.com/behavioralhealth).

1. World Health Organization. [Mental health](#).
2. Mason K. [Survey: More than 1 in 4 have quit a job because of their mental health](#). JobSage. April 1, 2022.
3. Kaiser Family Foundation. [The implications of COVID-19 for mental health and substance use](#). March 20, 2023.
4. Kaiser Family Foundation. [Mental health care health professional shortage areas](#). November 1, 2023.
5. Modern Health. [State of employee mental health in the world](#). September 7, 2022.
6. UnitedHealthcare employer and individual claims, 2020.
7. Compared to December 2022. DocASAP BH/EWS book of business, December 1, 2022–Q3 2023. Megan Essig, October 2023.
8. Wait time for members using the Optum online scheduling portal. DocASAP BH dashboard, June–September 2023. Megan Essig, October 2023.
9. SURE Network Summary Dashboard, Commercial E&I and non-E&I UBH General Networks, Q3 2023 (September 27, 2023 data). Deanna DuBois, November 2, 2023.
10. Aon. [The impact of mental and emotional health on employee wellbeing](#). June 24, 2020.
11. McKinsey & Company. [Telehealth: A quarter-trillion-dollar post-COVID-19 reality?](#) June 9, 2021.
12. Kaiser Family Foundation. [Five key findings on mental health and substance use disorders by race/ethnicity](#). September 22, 2022.
13. American Psychological Association. [Psychology's diversity problem](#). October 1, 2021.
14. Azocar F, Bargman EP, Smolskis JM, Groat TD. Enhanced methodology for estimating integrated medical-behavioral costs. Optum internal report. January 2017.
15. Low Acuity Member Testing. Optum internal presentation. February 2021.
16. Ten Eyck, Azocar, Kawamura, et al. Behavioral health total health outcomes study, 2020. Completed by Optum Health Healthcare Economics team.
17. Deloitte. [The future of behavioral health](#). January 7, 2021.

# Optum

Optum is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are the property of their respective owners. Because we are continuously improving our products and services, Optum reserves the right to change specifications without prior notice. Optum is an equal opportunity employer. Stock photos used.

© 2024 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF13309325 03/24