

A man with a beard, wearing a grey jacket over a white t-shirt, is looking down at a silver smartphone he is holding with both hands. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting.

PYMNTS.com

MARCH 2022

# The Digital Care **Connection:**

**HOW TELEHEALTH AND DIGITAL  
PAYMENTS CAN EXPAND  
MENTAL HEALTHCARE ACCESS**

The Digital Care Connection Report, a PYMNTS report, examines how payments experiences impact consumers' medical choices and loyalty to healthcare providers.

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# The Digital Care Connection:

## HOW TELEHEALTH AND DIGITAL PAYMENTS CAN EXPAND MENTAL HEALTHCARE ACCESS

Digital innovations spiked in popularity across all sectors during the past two years as consumers and organizations sought to minimize the health risks associated with direct contact. In the medical field, telecommunications technologies took many formerly in-person interactions with providers online, though many patients and providers openly hoped to revert to the status quo once public health conditions permit. In our comprehensive research of telemedicine developments and patient

preferences, one use case stood out for its particularly high adoption: mental health. Our findings suggest that in this sphere, telemedicine is not a stop-gap temporarily patching holes in care but rather a key technology that can improve access to treatment now and in the future.

Telemedicine has remade the mental health landscape, as millions of Americans now consult therapists and psychiatrists online rather than in physical offices. The number of people in need of mental health

## **THREE IN FIVE PATIENTS WHO INTERACTED WITH A BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PRACTITIONER IN THE LAST YEAR DID SO DIGITALLY.**

treatment has swelled during the pandemic, with nearly one-third of United States adults saying they have experienced symptoms of anxiety or depression.<sup>1</sup> PYMNTS' data finds that three in five patients who interacted with a behavioral health practitioner in the last year did so digitally — a share that significantly outpaces the shares of patients digitally accessing any other type of healthcare.<sup>2</sup> Telehealth technologies have not removed all barriers to care, though: Financing remains a key issue for some U.S. patients, especially the uninsured.

Many U.S. patients want digital mental healthcare options that make it easy to obtain care in private and convenient ways. Our data also finds that they want their mental

health providers to offer tools to make it easier to pay for healthcare services, such as cost estimates before appointments and financing options that enable them to pay out-of-pocket costs with an affordable payment plan.

The Digital Care Connection: How Telehealth And Digital Payments Can Expand Mental Healthcare Access is based on the findings of a survey of 3,546 adult American consumers regarding their preferences and perceptions of health services delivered online. This Playbook explores how healthcare providers can expand their audience by offering potential patients the support they need.

This is what we learned.

1. Author unknown. Mental Health and Substance Use State Fact Sheets. Kaiser Family Foundation. 2021. <https://www.kff.org/statedata/mental-health-and-substance-use-state-fact-sheets/>. Accessed January 2022.
2. The Digital Care Connection: How Telehealth And Digital Payments Can Expand Mental Healthcare Access. PYMNTS.com. 2022.

# The New Normal

**THE TELEMEDICINE REVOLUTION IS INCREASING THE NEED FOR AND IMPORTANCE OF SIMPLIFIED DIGITAL PAYMENTS.**

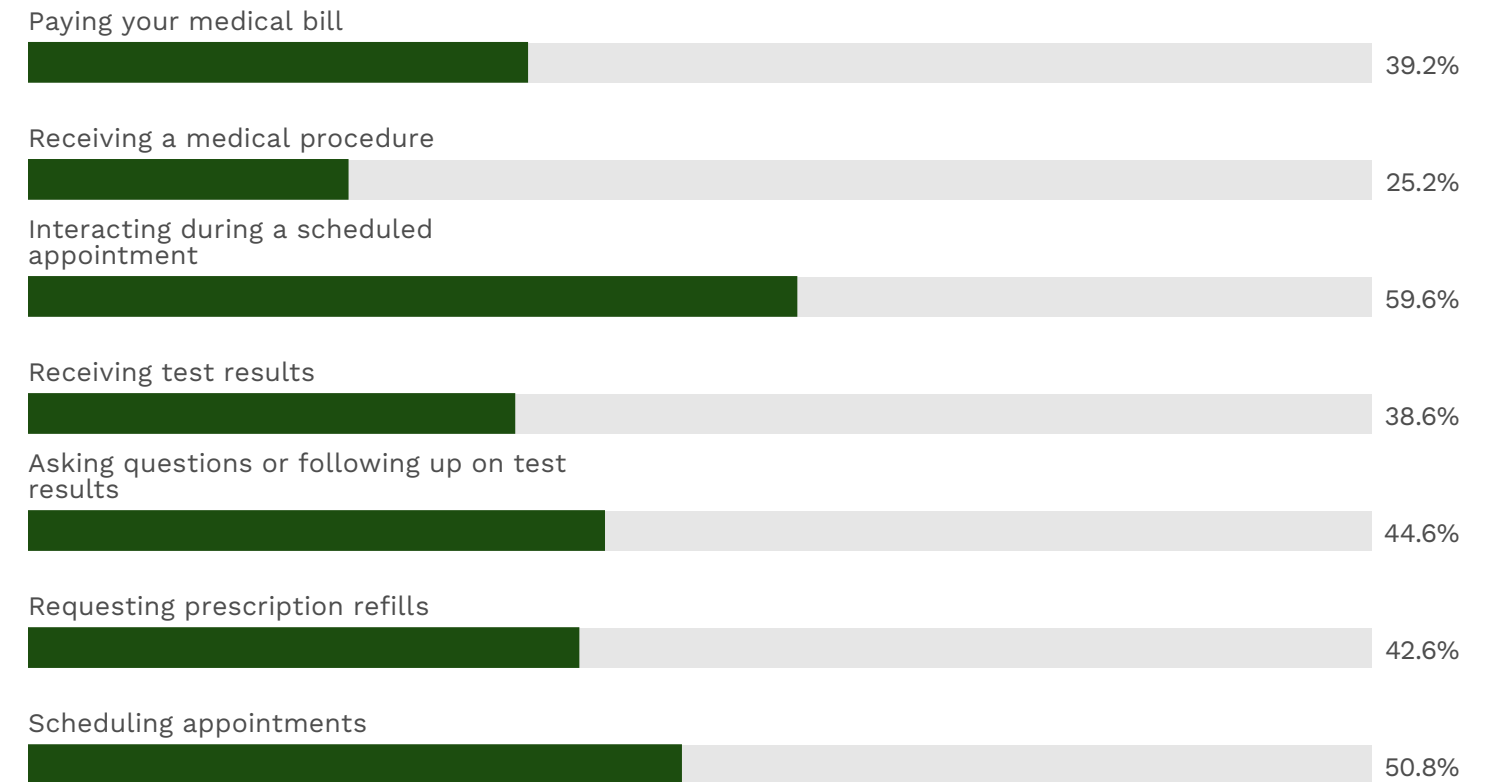
Though many patients seeking general care have now used telemedicine, usage is particularly high for mental health. PYMNTS' research reveals that 60% of patients receiving mental health care are using telemedicine tools to consult with their specialists.<sup>3</sup> That share even exceeds the shares of patients who use digital tools to make appointments (51%), get prescription refills (43%) or pay bills (39%).<sup>4</sup>

Our data shows that 37% of all patients use videoconferencing and telehealth services to seek medical advice, including about behavioral health, more now than they did before the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Mental health practitioners are far less reliant on physical touch than chiropractors, dentists or other specialists, and many functions of behavioral health appointments can be fully replicated in a digital

**FIGURE 1:**  
Activities that patients perform digitally

**SHARE OF CONSUMERS WHO RECEIVED MENTAL HEALTH CARE WHO PERFORMED SELECT TASKS DIGITALLY**



Source: PYMNTS.com  
The Digital Care Connection

setting, explaining why telehealth adoption is so high in this sphere.

Online appointments make mental health treatments more accessible for many patients, but some still find the logistics of their care to be a challenge, including

finding a practitioner and paying for care. As previously mentioned, though three out of five patients seek mental health care consults with their behavioral health specialists digitally, just two in five pay bills in this manner.

3. The Digital Care Connection: How Telehealth And Digital Payments Can Expand Mental Healthcare Access. PYMNTS.com. 2022.

4. Ibid.

5. The Payment Cure: How Improving Billing Experiences Impacts Patient Loyalty. PYMNTS.com. 2021. <https://www.pymnts.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/PYMNTS-The-Payment-Cure-September-2021.pdf>. Accessed January 2022.

# The Insurance Gap

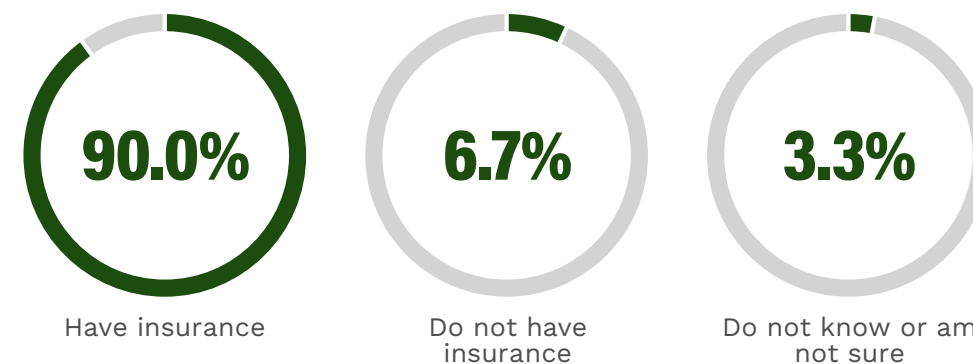
**MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS AFFECT ALL TYPES OF CONSUMERS, YET INSURED PATIENTS ARE NEARLY TWO AND A HALF TIMES MORE LIKELY TO SPEAK WITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SPECIALISTS THAN UNINSURED PATIENTS.**

Telehealth has been a boon to patients, offering a wider range of specialists to choose from and removing geography from the equation. Though many Americans have begun using online telehealth services for mental wellness, some insurance companies reduced their coverage of these services as states began terminating special rules surrounding telehealth and the pandemic. As such restrictions lessen, many specialists are being encouraged to return to seeing patients in person.<sup>6</sup>

Across the U.S., states are making decisions regarding whether or not to continue telehealth, and it can be very contentious. For example, a telehealth expansion bill passed through the New Jersey State House unanimously in 2021, but it sat on the governor's desk, unsigned, for more than two months, putting residents' healthcare access at risk.<sup>7</sup> Whether patients can pay for their care often has a very real bearing on whether they will pursue treatment.

6. Weiner, S. What happens to telemedicine after COVID-19?. Association of American Medical Colleges. 2021. <https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/what-happens-telemedicine-after-covid-19>. Accessed January 2022.  
 7. Biryukov, N. Telehealth bill in jeopardy over cost concerns. New Jersey Monitor. 2021. <https://newjerseymonitor.com/2021/09/02/telehealth-bill-in-jeopardy-over-cost-concerns/>. Accessed January 2022.

**FIGURE 2:**  
Health insurance ownership  
**SHARE OF CONSUMERS WHO HAVE SELECT INSURANCE STATUSES**



Source: PYMNTS.com  
The Digital Care Connection

Insurance is a crucial factor that impacts patients' ability to receive care. PYMNTS' research finds that while 15% of patients with insurance have sought behavioral health specialists' services in the last year, just 6% of uninsured patients have done the same. The size of this gap underscores how critical insurance coverage can be.

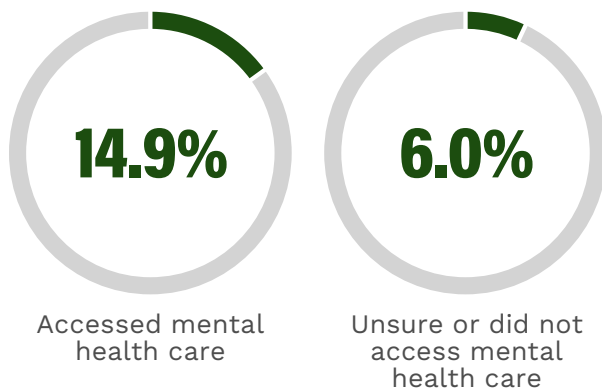
Unfortunately, having insurance is not a silver bullet. Though PYMNTS' research finds that 90% of patients carry health insurance, policies frequently do not cover entire bills. PYMNTS' research also finds that insured patients spend an average of

\$794 on healthcare visits each year on top of their healthcare premiums.<sup>8</sup> Even when consumers have health insurance, however, their preferred mental health professionals might not accept their policies, causing further problems. Of the one-third of patients who have avoided needed appointments or treatments, 11% said the most important reason they did so was that their insurance would not cover it, while an additional 5% said the most important reason was they did not trust their insurance to cover it.<sup>9</sup>

8. The Payment Cure: How Improving Billing Experiences Impacts Patient Loyalty. PYMNTS.com. 2021. <https://www.pymnts.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/PYMNTS-The-Payment-Cure-September-2021.pdf>. Accessed January 2022.  
 9. Ibid.

**FIGURE 3:**  
Insurance's effect on healthcare access

SHARE OF PATIENTS WITH OR WITHOUT INSURANCE WHO ACCESSED MENTAL HEALTH CARE

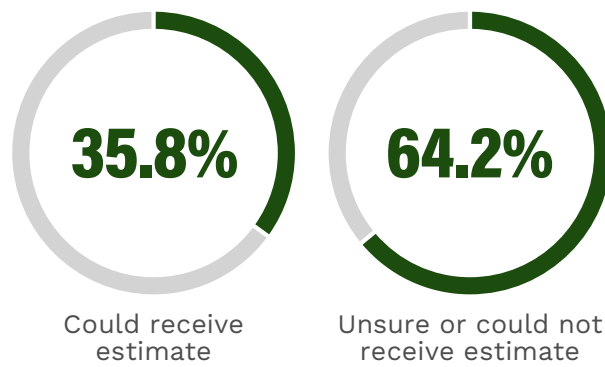


An issue endemic to many in the mental health space is that many providers operate outside the health insurance system, making them out-of-network providers. For example, just 56% of psychiatrists accept commercial health insurance.<sup>10</sup>

A clear projection of costs before treatment would greatly benefit patients deciding if they can afford mental health services, but

**FIGURE 4:**  
Cost estimate accessibility

SHARE OF PATIENTS WHO SAW A BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SPECIALIST WHO COULD OR COULD NOT RECEIVE A COST ESTIMATE BEFORE CARE WAS PROVIDED



Source: PYMNTS.com  
The Digital Care Connection

such estimates are uncommon. PYMNTS' research finds that just 36% of mental health patients could get an accurate cost estimate for their treatments before receiving services.



10. Leonhardt, M. What you need to know about the cost and accessibility of mental healthcare in America. CNBC.com. 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/05/10/cost-and-accessibility-of-mental-health-care-in-america.html>. Accessed January 2022.

# THREE WAYS REMOTE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES CAN IMPROVE ACCESS TO CARE

One of the greatest benefits of telehealth is its ability to grant care to those who otherwise may not be able to access necessary services. Whether for reasons of privacy, geography or ability to pay, remote care opens up options for patients that mental health professionals might otherwise not see.

## STAMPING OUT STIGMA

Some patients may not feel comfortable seeing a clinician in person, particularly those who live in rural areas or small towns. They may have concerns about being seen entering a mental health professional's office or worry about another person overhearing their intimate concerns or experiences. A study published in 2021 by the Mental Health Million Project reported that 21% of respondents avoided getting mental health care due to concerns about stigma and fears of other people learning they had received these services.<sup>11</sup> Telehealth removes concerns relating to seeking care in public. Digital services mean there is no office where patients can be observed entering or exiting, and patients have complete control of who can hear their conversations. The treatment is as private or public as the patient wants.

## BRIDGING DISTANCE

Many areas have very few mental health professionals, and patient access can be threatened as a result. As many as 65% of nonmetropolitan counties lack a single psychiatrist, and more than 60% of rural Americans reside in an area with a shortage of mental health providers.<sup>12</sup> The costs of childcare, taking time off work to obtain treatment and traveling to offices significantly drive up the cost of mental health care — and that even presumes patients have access to their own transportation. A lack of reliable transportation can put mental health services further out of reach. Telehealth removes some of these barriers, allowing patients to log on from anywhere to talk face-to-face with a mental health provider — even those who practice hundreds of miles away.

## OFFERING PAYMENT OPTIONS

Making payments for care can be confusing for many patients, especially those already uncomfortable with the social stigma attached to mental health services or flustered by traveling to receive care. Dealing with complicated copays and hard-to-understand insurance coverage rules can overwhelm patients. PYMNTS' research finds that telehealth consumers will use payment alternatives offered to them and that the primary inhibitor to payment plan usage is a lack of consumer awareness. Nearly half of patients do not know whether their providers offer payment plans or third-party financing options.<sup>13</sup>

11. Author unknown. Mental Health Has Bigger Challenges Than Stigma. Sapien Lab. 2021. <https://mentalstateoftheworld.report/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Rapid-Report-2021-Help-Seeking.pdf>. Accessed January 2022.

12. Morales D; Barksdale C; Beckel-Mitchener A. A call to action to address rural mental health disparities. Journal of Clinical and Translational Science. 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7681156/>. Accessed January 2022.

13. The Digital Care Connection: How Telehealth And Digital Payments Can Expand Mental Healthcare Access. PYMNTS.com. 2022.

# Making A Plan

**THE MAIN INHIBITOR TO PAYMENT PLAN USAGE IS LACK OF AWARENESS – MORE THAN HALF OF PATIENTS WHO WERE OFFERED PAYMENT PLANS USED THEM.**

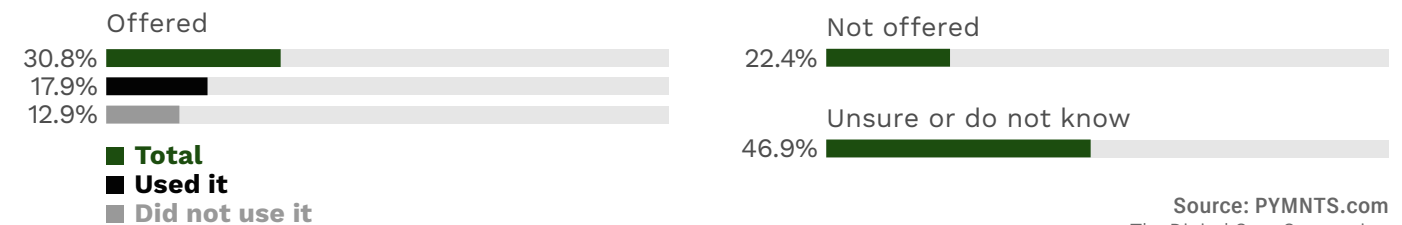
One solution to the high one-time costs evident in consumers’ lives is the installment payment model, which has gained popularity for retail purchases. Patients’ unawareness that similar interest-free payment plans may be available for their healthcare expenditures is a significant barrier to care, as the threat of high costs without estimates can discourage those attempting to connect with mental health practitioners. This lack of awareness is common: Our data shows that 47% of patients are “unsure” or “do not know” if their providers offer payment

plans. Education about payment options is therefore paramount.

PYMNTS’ research finds that of the 31% of patients who were aware and certain that their providers offered these financing solutions, more than half used them.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, 26% of consumers reported being “very” or “extremely” interested in using payment plans or third-party financing for future healthcare expenditures.<sup>15</sup> The relatively high rates of adoption and demand confirms what many would suspect: Patients feel more comfortable accessing

**FIGURE 5:** Consumers’ awareness of payment plans

**SHARE OF CONSUMERS WHO WERE AWARE OF, UNAWARE OF, OFFERED AND NOT OFFERED PAYMENT PLANS OR THIRD-PARTY FINANCING OPTIONS FOR THEIR MOST RECENT HEALTHCARE SERVICES**



Source: PYMNTS.com  
The Digital Care Connection

healthcare when they know there is flexibility baked into the process.

Respondents shared that these tools helped them live responsibly. Many patients PYMNTS surveyed said that these payment plans allowed them to stick to their budgets and continue paying other bills rather than defaulting on them. The next most popular reasons for interest in these plans concern financial unpredictability: the bill being higher than expected (an outcome particularly likely if cost estimates are not accessible), the bill coming at a time when patients are low on funds (hardly an unlikely

outcome given recent economic developments) and the bill not being covered by insurance.<sup>16</sup> These payment plans are not merely sweeteners that help patients select certain providers — these products may keep some patients from having to make the hard decision between receiving treatment and meeting other financial responsibilities.

14. The Digital Care Connection: How Telehealth And Digital Payments Can Expand Mental Healthcare Access. PYMNTS.com. 2022.

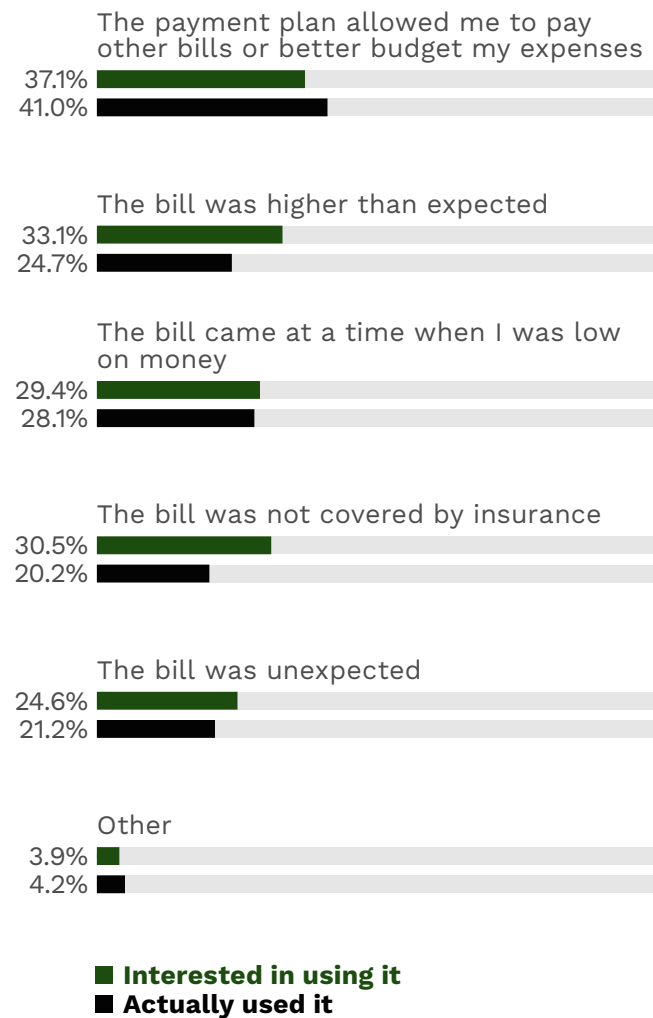
15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.



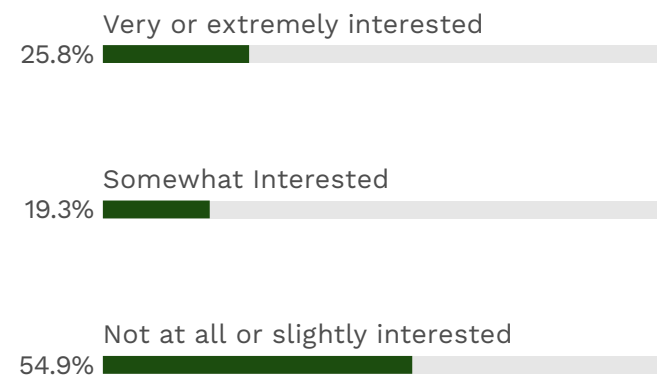
**FIGURE 6:**  
Consumers' usage of payment plans for healthcare expenses

**SHARE OF CONSUMERS WHO CHOSE SELECT REASONS FOR USING OR BEING INTERESTED IN USING PAYMENT PLANS OR THIRD-PARTY FINANCING, BY USAGE STATUS**



**FIGURE 7:**  
Consumers' interest in payment plans

**SHARE OF CONSUMERS WHO EXPRESSED VARYING LEVELS OF INTEREST IN USING PAYMENT PLANS OR THIRD-PARTY FINANCING OPTIONS FOR FUTURE HEALTHCARE VISITS**



Source: PYMNTS.com  
The Digital Care Connection

# HOW TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH ACCESSIBILITY VIA TELEHEALTH AND DIGITAL PAYMENTS

## PROVIDE CLEAR ESTIMATES AND PRICE TRANSPARENCY.

No one likes surprises, and that goes double for patients who might already have mixed feelings about their care. Providers need to ensure patients can get a complete view of what they can expect to pay for their telehealth services and know upfront what insurance will cover rather than possibly getting surprised by a bill.

## DELIVER FLEXIBLE PAYMENT OPTIONS, INCLUDING PAYMENT PLANS.

Not giving patients options that allow them to pay puts them at risk for skipping or delaying treatments. Providers should present patients with flexible payment

options in addition to transparent estimates regarding the cost of their care.

## MAXIMIZE CONVENIENCE TO MAXIMIZE ACCESSIBILITY.

Providers should ensure that patients who wish to access mental health services do not feel discouraged or turned away at any step of the process. The private nature of telehealth allows these patients to be discreet about their treatments, and digital technologies can empower patients to access behavioral health services from the comfort of their own homes.

Most mental health patients want a greater number of options when deciding the specifics of their treatments, and that principle is also true for how they will pay for these services. Many mental health services providers have not yet created telehealth-ready payment options, however, and this is where working with an experienced healthcare financing partner can help. Following are three features providers should consider when evaluating healthcare financing partners.

#### **RAPID PAYMENT PROCESSING CAPABILITIES**

Unpredictable or lengthy payment receipt times may be as damaging to providers' finances as nonpayment, and most patients seeking mental health care do not pay digitally, despite digital payments' popularity.

#### **PAYMENT FLEXIBILITY AND INSTALLMENT PAYMENT OPTIONS**

Patients are most willing to use services that are customizable to their needs. Providers must look for partners that offer a wide range of installment payment options, especially those that enable patients to adjust their payment periods as needed.

#### **THE ABILITY TO CONNECT WITH NEW AUDIENCES**

A user-friendly financing option is ideal; finding a partner to help providers present their practices to new audiences is even better. Providers need to select financing partners that have earned the trust of the audiences they wish to reach.

# Conclusion

The events of the past two years have fostered a telemedicine revolution across all facets of healthcare, but this digital shift has become particularly relevant for mental health patients and providers. Three out of five patients who sought mental health care interacted with their behavioral health specialists digitally, greatly exceeding the corresponding shares for all other types of specialists we measured. Unfortunately, the payments options these patients are offered are not keeping pace, as cost estimates are still relatively hard to come by, and many patients do not know if payment plans are offered, even though most would use them if they could. These shortcomings particularly impact the uninsured, who are far less likely to access mental health care than insured individuals. Telehealth innovations have removed some of the barriers to accessing this critical care, however, and

providers that educate patients on flexible payment options, increase transparency about the cost of care and leverage digital innovations in more facets of the healthcare process will be best positioned to connect patients with the specialists and treatment they need.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This Playbook was based on insights from a survey of 3,546 complete responses from a census-balanced sample of adult American consumers with a median age of 48. Approximately 32% of respondents held college degrees, and respondents' income distribution was as follows: 33% earned less than \$50,000 annually, 31% earned between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and 36% earned more than \$100,000.



# About

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