



Enhancing Telemedicine to Improve Patient Access and Healthcare Delivery

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the healthcare system to evolve quickly to meet the urgent needs of patients. One of the most immediate changes has been in the implementation of telemedicine – accessing healthcare professionals remotely, via phone or internet. While these changes have come about due to tragic circumstances, this modernization of the healthcare delivery system should endure beyond COVID-19 to help improve the standard of care for people well into the future.

The pandemic has created challenging circumstances for those seeking healthcare. Physical distancing and shelter-in-place measures have prevented many from accessing healthcare, loss of employment has made the cost of basic treatment unaffordable for some, and some patients are choosing to forgo care rather than place themselves in a potentially high-risk setting by visiting a doctor's office or hospital. In this environment, healthcare access and quality-of-care issues have been magnified. In particular, those living in rural areas, those with conditions that leave them vulnerable and in fear of leaving their homes, and those living with substance use disorders and serious mental illness are often directly impacted by the primary and secondary effects of the pandemic. While it is too early to discern long-term trends at this point, some recent statistics have emerged:

- A recent [survey](#) published in JAMA found that alcohol consumption overall increased 14 percent since before the pandemic in 2019, and heavy drinking among women was up 41 percent.
- A [study](#) of 3,000 workers in the U.S. showed that 1 in 3 people said they are more likely to drink in isolation
- Another [report](#) found that 47% of adults who are sheltering in place say the pandemic has negatively affected their mental health and 21% say it has had a “major negative impact”
- A federal emergency hotline for people in emotional distress [registered](#) a more than 1,000% increase in April compared with the same period last year.

At Alkermes, we are focused on addressing the needs of people living with serious mental illness and substance use disorders – communities for whom the long-acting medicines we develop are well-suited during a time when it is difficult to make frequent office visits due to physical distancing. But we know that prescription medications are only one aspect of patient need. True patient-centered care takes a comprehensive/holistic approach, including consideration of the appropriate medicine for the patient and accounting for the psychological, environmental, and behavioral factors that affect outcomes. This is where telemedicine, specifically telepsychiatry, may play a role.

Alkermes recently [fielded a survey](#) in partnership with the Harris Poll to help us understand how people view the use of telepsychiatry during and after the pandemic. The survey found that 27 percent of U.S. adults surveyed were currently using telepsychiatry services for mental health care. Among these current users, 62 percent agreed* that they would not be able to get the care they needed without telepsychiatry, and 67 percent agreed* that telepsychiatry helped them maintain their treatment regimen, including taking their medication and accessing other support services. And 74 percent of the respondents who indicated that they were currently using telepsychiatry reported being interested in continuing to use these services after the coronavirus pandemic.

In-person care should always remain a critical component of psychiatric care, but in the instances where there are barriers to access, the option of telepsychiatry may broaden the pool of people able to access care. However, to maximize the opportunity, there are some aspects to telemedicine that require attention. Individuals need to have access to a computer or other internet-connected device, and a secure, private setting where they can feel comfortable speaking openly across an unfamiliar medium. Importantly, no aspect of healthcare should be diminished due to the introduction of telehealth—quality, compassionate, patient-centric care should always be tailored for the individual patient, along with the appropriate behavioral and social supports. This is of particular importance for patients who are receiving medication-assisted treatment or other physician-administered medications.

Telepsychiatry can open a world of possibilities for patients – saving time, enabling people to access medical professionals outside of their immediate geographic area, and removing the need for transportation. To that end, it is important that states support continuing the regulatory and statutory changes prompted by COVID-19 to make them permanent. Specifically, states should act to:

- **Ensure Patient Choice:** Prioritize and protect patient choice for remote or in-person care delivery, and update existing telehealth programs and regulations to ensure the treatment decision for telehealth or in-person visits remains between the provider and patient, with access to physician-administered medicines such as long-acting injectable medications and medication-assisted treatment options.
- **Maximize Access and Quality:** Establish that telehealth should maximize patient access to mental health and substance use disorder services, remove restrictions of geographic locations of patients, ensure telehealth services are reimbursed at parity with in-person rates, and support continuity of treatment and positive patient outcomes in telehealth.
- **Invest in Infrastructure:** Address challenges in delivering and accessing quality telehealth services and in promoting continuity and coordination of care, such as infrastructure to ensure broadband access, particularly in rural areas; technologies for behavioral health providers to allow for integration of telehealth platforms with EHRs; and programs that allow patients with limited financial means to access telehealth delivery.

If state and federal licensing requirements can accommodate this shift, insurers enable adequate reimbursement models, and regulators examine the digital platforms and HIPAA concerns to institute the right form of the currently-relaxed regulations, the benefit to patients and to the standard of healthcare delivery could have far-reaching and positive economic and societal impacts.

** “Agree” percentages represent a net, or sum, of the proportion of respondents who selected “somewhat agree” and those who selected “strongly agree” in response to the question asked. Please refer to [this link](#) for details of the methodology and full survey results*