



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

Psychologists in Integrated Primary Care: Enhancing Access, Outcomes, and System Efficiency

RETHINKING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH INTEGRATION IN PRIMARY CARE

[Developed by the Integrated Primary Care Advisory Group](#)



As health systems continue to evolve toward more coordinated, patient-centered care, the integration of behavioral health into primary care settings has emerged as a practical and evidence-based approach. The Primary Care Behavioral Health (PCBH) model places licensed psychologists—functioning as Behavioral Health Consultants (BHCs)—within primary care teams to support prevention, early intervention, and treatment across the lifespan.

This model is designed to tailor care to each patient's needs, reduce barriers to care, and improve outcomes through timely, team-based support.

WHAT PSYCHOLOGISTS BRING TO PRIMARY CARE TEAMS

- Embedding psychologists into primary care helps reduce long wait times and increases engagement, especially in rural and underserved communities.²
- Children and families benefit from earlier screening, more timely behavioral health visits, and access to evidence-based care.⁴
- Integrated care models have shown flexibility⁵ during crises like COVID-19,⁶ helping maintain continuity of behavioral health services.⁷

SUPPORTING COST-EFFECTIVE CARE DELIVERY

- Studies show that integrating psychologists can reduce annual per-patient costs⁸ and lower emergency department⁹⁻¹⁰ and inpatient utilization.¹¹

- In pediatric settings, PCBH has demonstrated a positive return on investment through reduced medical costs.¹²
- Primary care clinicians report improved efficiency, with more patients seen per day and increased revenue when psychologists are part of the care team.¹³

STRENGTHENING THE HEALTH SYSTEM

- Collaboration with psychologists can alleviate health care clinician burnout¹⁴ and improve care coordination.¹⁵
- Integrated behavioral health programs have led to measurable improvements in early identification, symptom reduction,¹⁶ and patient satisfaction.^{3,17}
- Integrated behavioral health services are particularly impactful in diverse populations¹⁸⁻²⁰ and specialized programs, such as women's health,²¹ perinatal care,²² and chronic disease management.²³⁻²⁵

ENHANCING HEALTH OUTCOMES

- PCBH contributes to improved physical and behavioral health outcomes,²⁶ including better diabetes management,²⁷ reduced insomnia,²⁸⁻²⁹ and increased tobacco cessation.³⁰
- Patients report reduced distress,³¹ improved functioning,³²⁻³⁴ and sustained benefits across a range of behavioral health conditions,³¹ including Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.³⁵
- Integration supports adherence to medical treatment,^{17,27} and supports sustained participation in care.^{1,17}

MOVING FORWARD

Health systems exploring ways to improve access, reduce costs, and enhance outcomes can benefit from integrating psychologists into primary care teams. The evidence base continues to grow, pointing to meaningful advantages for patients, clinicians, and the broader health system. Rather than a one-size-fits-all solution, PCBH offers a flexible framework that can be adapted to meet the unique needs of each clinical setting. As organizations consider next steps in behavioral health integration, psychologists are well-positioned to contribute to a more responsive and effective model of care.

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