15 Secrets to Establishing a Successful Telebehavioral Health Program

Ready to Start a Telebehavioral Health Program But Not Sure Where to Begin?

These insider tips have been compiled by InSight Telepsychiatry. InSight is the leading national telepsychiatry service provider company with 15 years of experience designing and implementing customized telebehavioral health programs in a myriad of settings.

1. Enhance, Not Replace Care

Put telebehavioral health in its place. While telebehavioral health should never replace good quality, timely, in-person care, it is an excellent tool for supplementing the behavioral health needs of overstretched communities and facilities. Stress to staff and stakeholders that the intention is not to replace their jobs with remote providers, but to augment and improve their onsite services with additional care capacity.

2. Do It Appropriately

Today, there a myriad of ways to connect to people over the internet but they are not all created equal. Though non-HIPAA compliant programs like Skype are easy to use, they don't make for effective and safe telemedicine.

The same is true of non-secure email clients and sessions conducted in public spaces. Some providers offering online services don't actually have the qualifications and expertise that they say. If you offer telebehavioral health care, make sure you are doing so legally and with legitimate providers. A good rule of thumb: if the way you are practicing could look bad should you be "caught," don't do it.

3. Engage Relevant Players

Resistance to change is inevitable. Minimize naysaying by engaging all relevant parties in the telebehavioral health decision-making and program design early on. Negativity can be fueled by a fear of learning a new system or that job security is being threatened.

Everyone on your team should understand why telebehavioral is going to be beneficial and feel involved in the launch process. It takes work for everyone to communicate, meet one-another, orient to telebehavioral health and feel invested in the program. If you start engaging important persons like your IT team, medical affairs, facilitators and providers early on you are more likely to negate negative reactions.

4. Cultivate Community Buy-in

When you're beginning the process of adding a telebehavioral health program, reach out to policy makers, other health organizations, payer sources, grantors, referrals sources and receiving facilities to share your plans. By engaging your community partners early on you can develop a comprehensive, sustainable program and challenge others to think about how they too can utilize telemedicine to improve access to care.

5. Talk About the System of Care

Telepsychiatry models can be mixed and matched. A blended model of care throughout the community enables consumers to potentially access the same provider in a variety of settings; from the hospital to rehab, to an outpatient clinic to in-home follow-up. A wide system of care enables more consistent and collaborative care across a health system. When designing your program, identify ways you can increase the likelihood of developing a wider system of care.

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"There is ample clinical-based evidence that remote providers can develop sustained and meaningful relationships with consumers. My own 15 years of experience have substantiated this research. Understanding the bio-pscyho-social aspects of a consumer is not determined by the location of the provider nor the medium used to talk and interact. A trained telebehavioral health provider can adapt his approach to be effective via televideo. Technology is merely a means for establishing a connection. The development of a relationship is based on the skills and empathy of the clinician paired with the consumer's desire to connect."

-Jim Varrell, MD

6. Don't Be Afraid of The Gray Area

Telemedicine is still a budding industry. The legislative barriers of the past are breaking down every day as lawmakers, influencers and major players in the field realize the importance of this model of care.

Today licensure, credentialing and reimbursement all vary from state to state. Vigilant research and creative thinking are necessary to make your program successful and compliant with these regulations. As your program develops, use your experience to advocate for changing those gray, unclear lines guiding telebehavioral health today and turn them into non-restrictive pathways for the future.

7. Pick a Model that is Right for Your Program

Generally telebehavioral health programming is either consultative or treatment based. Consultative telepsychiatry models are based on the idea that a remote provider is there to help your onsite staff with their decision-making through things like treatment team meetings, prescription consultations and clinical observation. Consultative-based models include behavioral health integration programs and phone consultations.

Treatment based telepsychiatry models use remote providers to see consumers and offer face-to-face behavioral health treatment like psychotherapy and psychiatric evaluation. Treatment based models include crisis telepsychiatry, routine telepsychiatry and at-home models.

8. Pick a Company That is Right for Your Program

Choose a company that is able to fit your needs, that can work with you to serve your consumers and with whom you can develop a partnership. The right provider company ensures the best fit between providers and your facility and has the experience to help you develop the best telebehavioral health program you can.

9. Choose the Right Technology Platform

Traditionally, mobile televideo units are used to deliver telepsychiatric care. However, as telemedicine continues to grow and change new options are becoming available like online platforms accessed through a device that connects to the internet.

Consider how much internal support capacity you have and if you need interoperability between sites. Can you ensure a secure environment for sessions? Would in-home sessions be something you'd like to offer consumers? There are many reputable technology options and choosing the best one is a matter of your needs. Whatever you choose, pay attention to guidelines and best practices.

10. Pick the Right Remote Provider

Selecting remote providers who are a good fit for your organization is an important part of developing a long-term, sustainable telebehavioral health program. Start by defining the profile of your ideal provider.

Do you need a psychiatrist? Would an APN in collaboration with a psychiatrist work? Are there sub-specialties that you require? What personality types, languages, or scheduling constraints do you anticipate? Identify non-starters and be ready to find a middle ground between what you prefer and what's available. Rushing in to a program with a provider who is a poor fit could be very detrimental to your goals.

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11. Develop a Relationship With Your Remote Provider

Remote providers need to know almost everything your onsite providers know about the way your facility operates. Discuss clinical expectations, length of time for typical evaluations and who the onsite facilitator will be early on.

Identify the services and resources available to consumers onsite as well as who to ask if they have any questions and who to contact in an emergency. Make sure you include your remote provider on your email listserv and invite them to staff and treatment team meetings. Keep them in the loop about staff turnover and physical changes to your facility as well. All parties benefit from making sure remote providers feel a part of the team.

12. Familiarize the Remote Provider with the Community Context

What are the demographics of your community? What is it like to live in your town/county? What resources are available to consumers in your area? Are there cultural aspects like holidays, languages, lifestyles or interests that are particularly important in your community? Your remote provider needs to know these kinds of things to effectively deliver care to your consumers.

13. Proactively Develop Workflows

As your program develops, proactively design a system that works for your organization with integration being your primary goal. Consider how often you will use telebehavioral health and the means by which you'll access it. Decide who will take records and how will they be shared between sources. Identify onsite facilitators for your telebehavioral health sessions and decide how they will communicate with the remote provider.

Thinking through the processes and potential road bumps before the program launch will ensure an easier adoption.

14. Think About User Experience

Make a plan for explaining telebehavioral health to your consumers and brainstorm ways to make them feel more comfortable. Find a good space that will be designated for telemedicine conducive to successful telepsychiatry (quiet, with a door that closes).

With telebehavioral health your facility can now offer services that would have cost consumers time, money and stress they no longer have to suffer through. Highlight these benefits when you explain the way telebehavioral health works. You can also ask your consumers what would make them more comfortable and if feasible, supply it.

15. Don't Focus on the Technology

Care, not technology should be the focus of a telebehavioral health session. Conduct your orientation and training via televideo so each side can get used to what's required in advance. Typically, problems with technology are user error and can be avoided with training and practice. Work with your IT team to identify common issues early on so you don't have to rely on them later.

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