



# INTEGRATED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH & PRIMARY CARE: AN OVERVIEW

**Integrating behavioral health and primary care** is an emerging approach in the way we deliver health care. It is a core feature of the advanced patient-centered medical home. This approach is sometimes called “behavioral health integration,” “integrated care,” “collaborative care,” or “primary care behavioral health.” **In this overview, we call it “integrated behavioral health.”** No matter what it’s called, the goal is the same: better health for the whole person.

Integrated behavioral health uses a team of medical and behavioral health clinicians working in a collaborative way to address problems identified during primary care visits. Primary care and behavioral health clinicians work together with patients and families to address mental health concerns, substance use problems, and behaviors that affect physical health.

**This overview is for health care professionals who want to learn more about using an integrated behavioral health approach in their practice.** Primary care, mental health, and substance use clinicians, clinical and office support staff, quality improvement specialists, and health care administrators can use this information to get familiar with the topic and find resources to get started.

## WHAT IS ADDRESSED IN INTEGRATED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH?

Primary care and behavioral health clinicians work together with patients and families to address **behavioral health issues** that come up during primary care visits. These issues may include:

- Mental health problems.
- Substance use problems.
- Behaviors that contribute to chronic health conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or high blood pressure.
- Stressful life situations or crises.
- Stress-related physical symptoms.
- Regular use of primary health care services while avoiding unnecessary use of emergency departments, urgent care, or hospitals.

Integrated behavioral health uses a **patient-centered, whole-person** approach. Patients and family members are partners in making decisions about their health care. The practice has a system in place for providers to develop a care plan with a patient, share it with the care team that includes medical and behavioral health clinicians who treat the patient, and follow up with the patient to track his or her progress.

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Evidence shows that people bring their behavioral health needs with them to the primary care setting. Primary care providers are often the first to see signs of behavioral health issues. Integrating behavioral health with primary care allows patients to start addressing those issues in a place where they already have relationships and feel comfortable. It brings together behavioral health and medical care, and helps providers establish effective relationships across specialties and practices.

Integrated behavioral health responds to ongoing changes in the health care system, as rising costs and concerns about quality of care have led to wider use of the patient-centered medical home model.

A growing body of research shows how far reaching the benefits can be—on health, costs, and patient experience. Here are some ways **patients, primary care providers, and employers** can benefit:

- Patients with chronic health conditions are more likely to have behavioral health concerns, too. They often don't improve until the behavioral health concerns are addressed.
- Patients like the convenience of "one-stop shopping." Whether their problem is emotional or physical or both, there is no wrong door.
- Primary care providers appreciate having someone with behavioral health expertise available to help with problems physicians aren't well trained to address.
- When patients get behavioral health care, long-term medical cost savings often more than offset the cost of providing mental health treatment.
- Many patients referred to other places for behavioral health treatment do not follow up.
- When mental health and substance use disorders are addressed, work-related productivity improves.

The **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)** is leading the way to advance the integration of behavioral health and primary care. The **AHRQ Academy** is a national resource that connects health professionals with the research, guidance, tools, and information to deliver comprehensive, integrated behavioral health care. Here are some ways to get started:

- **Complete the Integration Self-Assessment Checklist.** Use this 37-question checklist to see if your practice is ready to begin integration and how to customize the approach for your setting. It takes about 10 minutes to complete. You can do it online or download a version to print.  
[integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/playbook/integrating-behavioral-health-and-ambulatory-care-self-assessment-checklist](https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/playbook/integrating-behavioral-health-and-ambulatory-care-self-assessment-checklist)
- **Explore the Playbook.** The Playbook is an online guide to help practices and health systems transition to an integrated model. It offers tips, resources, and real-world examples.  
[integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/playbook/about-playbook](https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/playbook/about-playbook)
- **Use the Lexicon.** The Lexicon defines integrated behavioral health and provides a framework for the things practices must do to adopt the model. The shared framework allows integrated practices across the country to be compared, assessed, researched, and rewarded. It was developed by consensus of more than 20 leaders in the field.  
[integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/lexicon](https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/lexicon)

## WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM INTEGRATED BEHAVIORAL HEALTH?

## HOW CAN MY PRACTICE GET STARTED?