COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Mental Health Support

Background

- During a pandemic it is common for individuals to feel emotional unrest. Healthcare systems and various organizations are taking measures toward providing aid and guidance for individuals with existing mental health conditions as well as those experiencing enhanced emotional distress during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

- This document highlights promising practices for mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding ongoing COVID-19 operations across the country. These are practices for consideration and should not be considered guidance in any way.[1]

Key Considerations

- To prevent emotional distress during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO), numerous mental health organizations, and healthcare providers are encouraging individuals to maintain daily routines as much as possible; including taking care of basic needs and employing helpful coping strategies.

- Outpatient mental health treatment should be utilized to the greatest extent possible to limit the spread of COVID-19. Individuals should contact healthcare providers regarding telehealth or mental health services online.[2] Healthcare providers must also consider their obligations to provide effective communication access to individuals with disabilities and meaningful access for individuals with limited English proficiency.[3]

- On March 17, 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced steps to expand access to telehealth services during the COVID-19 outbreak. The HHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) provided flexibility for healthcare providers to reduce or waive beneficiary cost-sharing for telehealth visits paid by federal healthcare programs. The Centers for Medicare & and Medicaid Services (CMS) proceeded to

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[1] This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

[2] 2020 SAMHSA, Considerations for Outpatient and Substance Use Disorder Treatment Settings, https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/considerations-outpatient-mental-substance-use-disorder-treatment-settings.pdf

[3] 2020 HHS Office of Civil Rights in Action, Bulletin: Ensuring the Rights of Persons with Limited English Proficiency in Health Care During COVID-19, https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/lep-bulletin-5-15-2020-english.pdf

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expand Medicare coverage for telehealth visits. Medicare beneficiaries are able to receive a specific set of services through telehealth including mental health counseling.[4]

- Each state, tribe, or territory that had a major disaster declaration with a pending request for Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program prior to April 28 is being evaluated separately based on specific criteria. Services are provided at no cost and are available to any survivor who has been impacted in the approved states.[5], [6]

  - To protect the safety and health of all Americans, counseling services will be delivered through alternate means, including by phone, internet, and the media.[7]

Lessons Learned Related to COVID-19 and Mental Health Practices

Preventative Measures

- **Area for Improvement:** Mental health emergencies may increase as a result of a disruption in client support and ongoing treatment.[8]

  - **Mitigating Action/Resource:** In case of a dangerous or life-threatening mental health crisis, always dial 911 immediately. Request that Crisis Intervention Team officers respond if available.[9]

- **Area for Improvement:** Mental health practices may experience staff shortages due to workers quarantined, avoiding exposure, or caring for ill family members.[10]

  - **Mitigating Action/Resource:** Identify alternative ways to serve clients including telephone or web-based appointments and/or transferring clients to other providers using mutual aid agreements.

- **Potential Best Practice:** Mental health providers can incorporate approaches for screening for COVID-19 symptoms prior to arrival if offering in-person appointments.[11]

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[4] 2020 HHS, Secretary Azar Announces Historic Expansion of Telehealth Access to Combat COVID-19, https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2020/03/17/secretary-azar-announces-historic-expansion-of-telehealth-access-to-combat-covid-19.html
[5] 2020 Congressional Research Service, Stafford Act Declarations for COVID-19 FAQ, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46326
[6] 2020 FEMA, FEMA Administrator Authority to Approve Crisis Counseling During Coronavirus, https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2020/05/02/fema-administrator-authority-approve-crisis-counseling-during-coronavirus
[7] 2020 National Low Income Housing Coalition, Working with FEMA to Address COVID-19 Housing and Homelessness, https://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/COVID-19_FEMA-Toolkit.pdf
[8] 2017 SAMHSA TAP 34, Disaster Planning Handbook for Behavioral Health Treatment Program, https://www.samhsa.gov/node/669993
[9] 2020 NAMI, National Resource Directory, https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Images/FactSheets/NAMINationalResourceDirectory.pdf
[10] 2017 SAMHSA TAP 34, Disaster Planning Handbook for Behavioral Health Treatment Program, https://store.samhsa.gov/product/TAP-34-Disaster-Planning-Handbook-for-Behavioral-Health-Treatment-Programs/SMA13-4779
[11] 2020 National Council for Behavioral Health, Best Practices for Telehealth During COIVD-19 Public Health Emergency, https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Telehealth_Best_Practices.pdf?daf=375ateTbd56

- **Potential Best Practice:** As part of wellness planning, patients can contact pharmacies to determine if they provide delivery services or longer supplies for prescription medication.[12]

- **Potential Best Practice:** The WHO advises the general population to avoid watching, reading, or listening to news that causes them to feel anxious or distressed; seek information at specific times once or twice a day to learn practical steps to prepare plans and protect loved ones. Gather information from authoritative health sources that help distinguish facts from rumors.[13]

Isolation and Support Groups

- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Distress Helpline provides 24/7, 365-day-a-year crisis counseling and support before, during and after disasters and refer individuals to local-related resources for follow-up care and support.[14]

  - **Call 1-800-985-5900 or text TalkWithUs to 66746.** This hotline is a toll-free, multilingual and confidential crises support service available for all residents in the United States and its territories.

  - Spanish Speakers can **call 1-800-985-5990** and press "2". From the 50 States, **text Hablanos to 66746**; from Puerto Rico, **text Hablanos to 1-787-339-2663**.

  - Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals can text TalkWithUs to 66746 and/or use preferred relay service to call the Disaster Helpline at 1-800-985-5990 or TTY 1-800-846-8517

- **Potential Best Practice:** The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) encourages individuals to check-in with at-risk loved ones via phone, e-mail, video conference or connecting on social media.[15]

- **Potential Best Practice:** NAMI encourages contacting a warmline. Warmlines are confidential, non-crisis emotional support telephone hotlines staffed by peer volunteers who are in recovery. NAMI Helpline Warmline Directory is a resource to finding local warmlines.[16]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Mental Health America (MHA) offers at home, free, anonymous, and confidential online tools and screenings to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition.[17]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Several states have established support lines to provide services to those needing assistance.

  - New York launched a statewide COVID-19 Emotional Support Hotline, staffed by volunteer mental-health professionals. The hotline can be reached at 1-844-853-9314 from 8 AM - 10PM, seven days a week.[18]

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[12] 2020 MHA, Living with Mental Illness During COVID-19 Outbreak – Preparing For Your Wellness, https://mhanational.org/living-mental-illness-during-covid-19-outbreak-preparing-your-wellness

[13] 2020 WHO, Mental Health Considerations during COVID-19 Outbreak, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf

[14] 2019 SAMHSA, Disaster Distress Helpline, https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline

[15] 2020 NAMI, COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Information and Resources, https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf

[16] 2020 NAMI, COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Information and Resources, https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf

[17] 2020 MHA, Living with Mental Illness During COVID-19 Outbreak – Preparing For Your Wellness, https://mhanational.org/living-mental-illness-during-covid-19-outbreak-preparing-your-wellness

[18] 2020 New York State, COVID-19 Resources, https://omh.ny.gov/omhweb/covid-19-resources.html

- Texas has issued a statewide Mental Health Support Line to help Texans experiencing anxiety, stress or emotional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The line is operational 24/7 tool-free at 833-968-1919.[19]
- Louisiana established the Keep Calm Through COVID crisis phone line providing trained counselors to support Louisiana residents. The hotline can be reached at 1-866-310-7977.[20]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Utah is using its existing application, SafeUT, a real-time crises intervention chat line. The app connects individuals to licensed counselors from the Utah Neuropsychiatric Institute through text, calls, or anonymous tips 24/7. [21]

- **Strength:** NAMI provides a Helpline Resource Directory with an extensive list of online support groups and other mental health resources. Local NAMI Affiliates or State Organizations also provide support program information.[22]

Telehealth

- **Area for Improvement**: Some providers do not have access to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) approved technology to conduct a virtual video-enabled counseling session.[23]

  - **Mitigating Action/Resource:** As of March 17, 2020, the HHS Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced it will waive potential HIPAA penalties for good faith use of telehealth during the emergency.[24]

  - **Mitigating Action/Resource**: Popular applications that allow for video chat including Apple Facetime, Facebook Messenger video chat, Google Hangouts video, Zoom, or Skype may be utilized during the current nationwide public health emergency.

- **Potential Best Practice:** Providers should continue regular check-ins with patients through the use of telemedicine where possible.[25]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Healthcare providers should communicate visit changes to patients. If offering telehealth visits, post information to the organization's website, consider changing phone script to include

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[19] 2020 Texas HHS, HHS Launches Statewide COVID-19 Mental Health Support Line, https://hhs.texas.gov/about-hhs/communications-events/news/2020/03/hhs-launches-statewide-covid-19-mental-health-support-line

[20] 2020 Louisiana Department of Health, Update: Office of Behavioral Health offers free counseling services through Keep Calm Through COVID hotline, http://ldh.la.gov/index.cfm/newsroom/detail/5492

[21] 2020 KSL, How Utah is preparing to meet the mental health demands of COVID-19, https://www.ksl.com/article/46739025/how-utah-is-preparing-to-meet-the-mental-health-demands-of-covid-19

[22] 2020 NAMI, COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Information and Resources, https://www.nami.org/getattachment/About-NAMI/NAMI-News/2020/NAMI-Updates-on-the-Coronavirus/COVID-19-Updated-Guide-1.pdf

[23] 2020 OPTUM Behavioral Health, COVID-19 updates to telehealth policies, https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/OBH_COVID-19_Telehealth-Update_03192020_FINAL_WithMemberDisclaimer.pdf?daf=375ateTbd56

[24] 2020 HHS, OCR Announces Notification of Enforcement Discretion for Telehealth Remote Communications During the COVID-19 Nationwide Public Health Emergency, https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/special-topics/emergency-preparedness/notification-enforcement-discretion-telehealth/index.html

[25] 2020 SAMHSA, Considerations for Outpatient and Substance Use Disorder Treatment Settings, https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/considerations-outpatient-mental-substance-use-disorder-treatment-settings.pdf

this information at the beginning of your recording, call patients with upcoming appointments and offer telehealth visit. Consider targeted outreach to "high risk" patients.[26]

- **Potential Best Practice:** NAMI encourages those experiencing symptoms of a mental health emergency to contact local mental health crisis teams in order to avoid further risk of exposure to COVID-19 by reporting directly to the emergency room.[27]

  □ Phone numbers can be found through the county or local jurisdiction's department of Health and Human Services by searching "crisis" or "Emergency Mental Health Services".[28]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Using telehealth promotes the practice of social distancing and reduces the risk of spread in high-volume or high-traffic areas such as waiting rooms.[29]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Healthcare providers are offering smartphone applications that allow users to chat via text messaging and gain access to educational content about both mental and physical health. When appropriate, the application escalates users to a telehealth consult.[30]

- **Strength:** Federally Qualified Health Centers are community-based centers that offer mental health and substance use services. They are authorized to provide telehealth services even if an individual has not previously been a patient. Visit the Health Resources & Services Administration's interactive portal to find contact information for local health center.[31]

- **Strength:** The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is allowing DEA-registered practitioners to issue prescriptions for controlled substances to patients whom they have not conducted an in-person medical evaluation.[32]

Topics for the "Best Practices" series are generated from crowd sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov.

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[26] 2020 National Council for Behavioral Health, Best Practices for Telehealth During COIVD-19 Public Health Emergency, https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Telehealth_Best_Practices.pdf?daf=375ateTbd56

[27] 2020 NAMI Minnesota, Mental Health Support and COVID-19, https://namimn.org/nami-minnesota-covid-19-resources/

[28] 2020 NAMI, National Helpline Resource Directory, https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Images/FactSheets/NAMINationalResourceDirectory.pdf

[29] 2020 National Council for Behavioral Health, Best Practices for Telehealth During COIVD-19 Public Health Emergency, https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Telehealth_Best_Practices.pdf?daf=375ateTbd56

[30] 2020 STAT, Coronavirus pandemic sets up potential breakout moment for virtual mental health care, https://www.statnews.com/2020/04/13/remote-mental-health-livongo-omada/

[31] 2020 VOX, How to find a therapist during the Covid-19 pandemic, https://www.vox.com/identities/2020/4/7/21207281/coronavirus-covid-19-how-to-find-a-therapist

[32] 2020 DEA, DEA is protecting the nation's prescription drug supply chain, https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2020/03/20/deas-response-covid-19