



Addressing the root causes of mental health disparities



Many people in the United States face significant barriers to receiving mental and behavioral health care. This inequity is often the root cause of mental health illness and poor outcomes. Equal access to affordable, culturally competent, high-quality care and health services can close gaps in care and improve outcomes for physical and mental health.

By working to reduce disparities, organizations will be in a better position to provide everyone with the chance to lead a healthier life. On the other hand, not addressing health inequities greatly costs the health care system.

Mental and behavioral health affects everyone. Genetics, illness, injury, chemical exposures or life stressors like personal losses, divorce/separation, interpersonal violence and unemployment can all contribute to the onset or impact of these disorders.

Consider also that limited access to providers, economic instability, the safety and security of their home environment, their education level, and their experience with stigma and racism also play important roles in a person's ability to achieve mental well-being. While all populations are at risk for mental health issues, some populations are at higher risk for mental health disparities.

These disparities are experienced at a deep level by veterans, immigrant populations, people with disabilities, the financially disadvantaged, rural communities, those managing chronic conditions, the LGBTQ+ community and BIPOC communities. Cultural differences and language barriers can affect health care quality.² In addition, inequities in treatment³ and even historical events may spur distrust of care systems.



A recent study from the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, part of the National Institutes of Health, reports that racial and ethnic health disparities cost the U.S. economy \$451 billion.¹ The costs were primarily a result of excess medical care expenses, lost work productivity and premature death.

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If you know that you have a higher proportion of your population that has diabetes and depression and they happen to be Latino or African American, for example, you can recognize the cultural differences that may exist with eating patterns or exercise habits. You can implement programs specific to these populations to address the problem directly.”

Francisca Azocar

Vice President Clinical Insights and Analytics

Implementing the following strategies can help your organization map a path to remove barriers for more equitable mental and behavioral health care.

Understand the populations you serve and the gaps they face

1. Start with your data. Ensure that it is complete, accurate and timely, and is amended to include appropriate national and stakeholder information. Be prepared to layer on personal and local insight to identify populations, like racial /ethnic identities and language preference, gender identities, developmental and physical disabilities that you serve and are at the highest risk of having their mental health needs unmet or underserved.

Reviewing P and Z codes and other social determinants of health (SDOH) data is essential to understanding how to address the challenges individuals may be facing. Take a whole-health view – by collecting information from community partners, including self-reported data on symptoms and tracking the use of mental health medications, such as antidepressants – can build a more reliable and complete picture.

2. Identify the root causes that create barriers to care. These include SDOH, such as education, race, safe housing, access to quality health care within a neighborhood or community, transportation, income and the ability to afford care, and more.⁴ Identifying SDOH in your populations is critical to tackling barriers and connecting more people to care.

Tie mental health equity to your growth goals

3. Connect health equity activities to your business goals. For example, you can expand volume by reaching the underserved. Determining language preference, hiring health professionals from diverse cultures, and treating the whole person are ways to foster relationships and increase volume. Build loyalty by learning how people want to engage. Then, work toward improving quality and lowering costs through early, well-tailored interventions.

Having identified areas of priority, leaders can act to improve access to appropriate, culturally competent mental health services.

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Responsibly leveraging a wide range of appropriate real world and clinical data is key to unearthing other health drivers. Cluster analysis helps actuaries and clinicians understand linkages and drivers that can be acted on to drive more accurate models that have been tested for fairness, leading to better outcomes.”

Jim Dolstad

Vice President of Actuarial Consulting

Take action on the root causes of mental health disparities

4. Engage with the people who need care that you want to serve and learn how to develop culturally appropriate care delivery models. This includes examining intake processes to ensure that the languages spoken and the terminology used during visits and on forms are appropriate as they relate to cultures, gender, age, race and other factors.

5. Address other barriers such as physical handicaps, geographic access, a limited understanding of mental health, or a mistrust of the health system. These are all barriers that may prevent people from accessing behavioral health services and support. In a hierarchy of needs, mental health care is a lower priority when an

individual is unsure where they will find a meal or a safe place to live and sleep. Providing access to housing, transportation and other support services allows a person to shift their focus to their mental health needs.

6. Find new ways to bring behavioral care to these underserved consumers. This equates to offering services at the right time, in the right place, and in a way that is comfortable and convenient for them. Consider care services such as telehealth and other digital or virtual programs, and facilitate the needed technology for the use of these services like broadband internet. Locate pharmacies inside community centers and involve care guides or care navigators who are prepared to meet people where they are. Consider the use of peers and local people in the community that underserved populations tend to trust like priests, stylists, etc.

7. Consider implementing an integrated care model into existing delivery structures. Examples of connected models include mental/behavioral health intertwined with primary care, a psychiatric collaborative approach, and a connected, pharmacy/whole-person care design.⁵

There are several ways to transform your current physical care model so that it more thoroughly connects with mental and behavioral care and is closing the care gaps that lead to mental health inequities:

- Determine whether your organization has the internal capacity and expertise to fully integrate care. If not, turn to the market and look for an organization that is equipped with the expertise and a capacity for partnership.
- Verify that you can meaningfully invest in integration and explore each partner's expected role in the integration.
- Identify which provider will be responsible for leading the program so that it will be successful, establishing and treating it like any other service line.
- Start building the clinical team – including the lead physician, advanced practicing clinicians, licensed mental health practitioners and pharmacists – to refine the new care pathways.
- Outline the infrastructure needed to gather data, measure and optimize based on the results.

Measure improvements and assess progress

Gauge incremental movement toward your goals by examining a few key metrics. As you address these root causes, you should see improvement in 3 core measures of mental health.

- **Clinical:** Consumers are staying engaged in their mental health care plan, their level of medication adherence, their engagement in care, reduced utilization of acute services (e.g., emergency room), and improvement on other clinical metrics like mental health signs and symptoms.
- **Functional:** Individuals have improved social function and focus at work or in school and during community events.
- **Overall lifestyle:** They experience a better quality of life in terms of relationships, effectiveness, confidence, resilience and stress management.

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We need to be able to tell the story in terms of whether we are improving access to care for underserved and disadvantaged communities. Are more people getting care, are they getting the care they need, and are they getting it at the right time with the right provider so that the problems they're having are adequately addressed and become less entrenched?”

Francisca Azocar

Vice President Clinical Insights and Analytics

Pushing health equity forward for the future

Uncovering the underlying social determinants of health that affect an individual's ability to achieve successful mental and behavioral outcomes is paramount. In turn, employing strategies for continued support as you measure success and adjust accordingly will contribute to stronger care connections among your consumers in need of services. “For example, about 25 to 35% of those who have a chronic medical

condition also are going to have a behavioral health condition, and on the flip side about 65% of those who have mental health or substance use disorders also have a chronic medical condition” says Azocar.

The process for addressing the root causes for of mental health inequity is similar to addressing clinical inequity.

1. Identify the specific utilization scenarios and mental health outcomes that are falling below benchmark.
2. Pinpoint areas of inequity and prioritize one or two for a root cause review.
3. Initiate system updates and staff training to collect, manage and share more holistic information about consumers.
4. Align holistic care delivery with consumers’ cultural, social and economic realities.

Achieving mental health equity will not only benefit the health care system and society, but it also allows everyone the chance to lead a full and productive life.

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