

USA/Utah: Mental Health – from isolation to routine health care

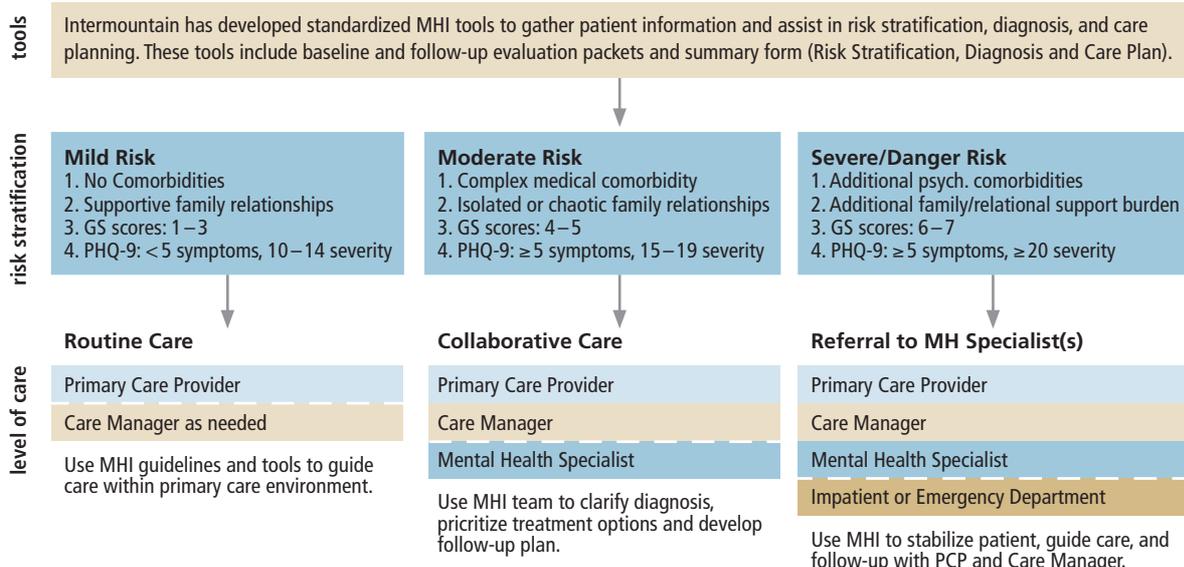
Worldwide mental health problems increasingly add to the burden of disease. But despite the epidemiological challenge, general practice and specialized care, social services and nursing remain fragmented in many healthcare systems, leaving mental health on the side. Intermountain Healthcare, largest provider of healthcare services in the U.S. state of Utah, developed a Mental Health Integration model which has been successfully used for over ten years. Mental Health Integration is defined as a standard clinical and operational process that incorporates mental health as an essential part of well-being and healing.

How to integrate mental health?

In its primary care clinics, Intermountain Healthcare uses a cascade approach to integrate mental health:

- When a patient enters a clinic, the entire care team – from the desk officer to the head of the clinic – not only addresses somatic complaints but also mental well-being. If the first-contact healthcare provider and the patient agree that a mental health issue might be present, a questionnaire is used to determine the extent of the mental illness and the need for treatment.
- Depending on the complexity of the condition (“mild”, “moderate”, or “severe”), primary healthcare staff, care managers, mental health specialists, family members and, above all, the person affected are involved in the treatment process.
- Information is exchanged continuously between the routine care teams, collaborative Mental Health Integration teams and specialized mental health services.

The Intermountain Integrated Healthcare Process Model



Source: Reiss-Brennan, B. et al. Mental Health Integration Treatment Cascade Model. Poster. Available at www.hpm.org/Downloads/Events/HPN_Events/mhi_poster.pdf

How to ensure an integrated care process?

Several aspects contribute to the integrated process:

- Treatment follows clinical guidelines and the principles of evidence-based medicine.
- To ensure an effective treatment from the start, all staff at Intermountain Healthcare and cooperating service providers are specifically trained in the triage of patients with mental health issues.
- Mental Health Integration is based on a collaborative approach. Care managers (specially trained nurses) mediate and coordinate the activities of primary care providers (physicians or nurse practitioners), specialized mental health experts and family support groups. Electronic medical records facilitate continuous exchange of information.



A win-win situation – success factors of Mental Health Integration

Evaluation results of MHI indicate benefits both for the patient and for the provider:

- **For the patients**, Intermountain's model has increased quality of care and quality of life. The program improves both health status and the degree of satisfaction, a fact from which relatives benefit as well.
- **For service providers**, especially for primary care providers, improved interdisciplinary cooperation reduces pressure during the treatment of mental health patients. The system as a whole becomes more efficient, as the overall costs are not higher than for regular care.

Challenges to successful integration

In principle, the Mental Health Integration program could be adapted and transferred to other systems and settings. But in order to function well, the program requires

- **paradigm shift:** Instead of considering physical health in isolation, service providers need to take account of the interplay between mind and body, between individual and society.
- **communication skills:** To work successfully in an interdisciplinary team and to ensure exchange of information, potential conflicts and divergent interests of various service providers should be addressed.
- **shared leadership:** Not only at provider level, but also at political scale stakeholders have to develop a shared understanding of mental health issues and a common will to take action.

Further information:

Reiss-Brennan, B. (2009). Presentation: Intermountain's Mental Health Integration Story - Social Change & Chronic Conditions in Primary Care, Berlin. Available at www.hpm.org/en/Events/HPM_Events/Lunchtime_Forum__Mental_Health_Integration_.html

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