



Telemental Health



GENERAL MENTAL HEALTH BACKGROUND

Mental illnesses are among the most common health conditions in the United States. More than 50% of Americans will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder at some point in their lifetime [\(CDC\)](#).

- 1 in 5 Americans will experience a mental illness in a given year [\(CDC\)](#)
- 1 in 5 children, either currently or at some point in their lifetime, have had a seriously debilitating mental illness [\(CDC\)](#)
- Annual prevalence of mental illness among U.S. adults, by demographic group [\(NAMI\)](#):
 - Non-Hispanic Asian: 14.7%
 - Non-Hispanic white: 20.4%
 - Non-Hispanic black or African-American: 16.2%
 - Non-Hispanic mixed/multiracial: 26.8%
 - Hispanic or Latino: 16.9%
 - Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual: 37.4%
- 19.3% of U.S. adults with mental illness also experienced a substance use disorder in 2018 (9.2 million individuals) [\(NAMI\)](#)

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Psychologists and psychiatrists are beginning to report signs of distress among patients worried about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Stress caused by fear of the disease is compounded by isolation – with stress-reducing activities, like exercise, watching sports and going to movies, becoming nearly impossible after shutdowns of gyms, professional leagues and theaters [\(NYT\)](#).

Six clinicians interviewed by Reuters say the coronavirus has been the prime focus of virtually all recent therapy sessions. They cited surges in requests for new anti-anxiety prescriptions and longer refills on existing ones [\(NYT\)](#). A Reuters/Ipsos poll the week of March 16 showed 48% of Americans feel the pandemic is an “imminent threat” to the United States [\(NYT\)](#).

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TELEMENTAL HEALTH TODAY

Historically, most therapists have not provided telemental health services ([NYT](#)). A 2018 study published in the American Psychological Association (APA) Journal showed nearly 60% of providers do no online counseling, and just 6% do more than five hours per week ([NYT](#)).

As of March 17, 2020, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced they will not penalize doctors, including those who offer mental health counseling, who use telemedicine in a good-faith effort to practice social distancing during the pandemic and expanded coverage for telemedicine. Similarly, Drug Enforcement Administration will allow doctors to prescribe medications virtually without meeting the patient first ([CMS](#), [DEA](#), [Washington Post](#)).

Health Insurance coverage by company:

- Anthem will waive any cost sharing for telehealth visits, including visits for mental health care, for fully insured employer plans, individual plans, Medicare plans, and Medicaid plans, where permissible ([AHIP](#))
- ConnectiCare is covering telehealth visits for covered medical and mental health services at no cost through May 31, 2020 ([AHIP](#))
- Florida Blue is offering mental health support for stress related to COVID-19 ([AHIP](#))
- Piedmont Community Health Plan is waiving out-of-pocket costs for telehealth services, and is permitting online mental health counseling for all members at in-network providers ([AHIP](#))

The New York State Office of Mental Health, along with relevant agencies in other states, provided a pandemic waiver to speed the adoption of telemental health ([WaPo](#)). On a state level, many governments have focused on expanding telehealth in their Medicaid programs, and relaxed restrictions around provider licensing, online prescribing and written consent. With growing demand for telemedicine, several changes have been made to telehealth policy, coverage and implementation, in order to make telemedicine more widely accessible during this state of emergency ([Kaiser Family Foundation](#)).

The Center for Connected Health Policy has compiled a list of telehealth coverage policies and a fact sheet on coverage; see also, [psychiatry.org](#)'s compilation of state-by-state guidance for coverage.

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VETERANS AFFAIRS EFFORTS

Veterans continue to receive benefits and services after VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) temporarily closed its 56 regional offices to the public on March 19 in response to COVID-19 [\(VA\)](#). Many in-person services are already available via the phone or online through virtual options like VA Video Connect [\(VA\)](#); pre-pandemic, the VA already offers VA Telehealth Services to any Veteran who qualifies to receive VA care and lives in one of the 50 U.S. states or a U.S. territory is eligible to use VA telehealth.

Telehealth connects Veterans to VA care teams and specialists, no matter the distance, through

- Real-time, interactive video visits
- In-home and mobile health remote monitoring
- Devices that gather and store health data
- *Free mental health apps*

In 2019, over 900,000 Veterans received care through VA telehealth through video and phone telemental health options. VBA has and continues to adjust to ensure the safety and well-being of its clients and staff throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Changes include conducting examinations for disability benefits using tele-compensation and pension or “tele-C&P” exams. If an in-person examination is required, Veterans will be notified for scheduling [\(VA\)](#).

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RESOURCES

ASSOCIATION OF BEHAVIORAL AND COGNITIVE THERAPIES

[Find-a-Therapist Guide - TeleHealth Providers](#)

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

[ADAA Telemental Health Providers listed by state](#)

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

[Popular Online Therapy Services](#)

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

[Software/Telehealth Solutions for Practitioners and Patients](#)