



How Behavioral Health Services Work in Primary Care

You do not have to decide whether a concern is “medical” or “behavioral” before bringing it up to someone at your local clinic. You can start with what you are experiencing, and your care team can help decide what support may be useful.

When Might Behavioral Health Be Helpful?

Behavioral health can be part of regular primary care. You do not have to be in crisis or need long-term counseling to ask for support. Some common situations may include the following:

- Trouble sleeping because of stress or worry
- Chronic pain or adjusting to a medical diagnosis
- Challenges managing diabetes or another health condition
- Stress, grief, family concerns, or caregiving
- Anxiety, low mood, irritability, or emotional exhaustion
- Alcohol or substance use concerns
- Difficulty making health changes or putting a treatment plan in place

If you experience any of these or other concerns, your provider may suggest behavioral health support. Or you can also ask for it yourself.

How Do Medical and Behavioral Health Work Together?

Sometimes the most helpful care includes both medical and behavioral health support. Some examples include:

- ***“I can’t sleep.”*** Your medical provider may look at physical causes. Behavioral health may help with stress, racing thoughts, routines, and sleep habits.
- ***“Managing my diabetes is getting harder.”*** Your medical provider can address treatment and medications. Behavioral health may help with stress, burnout, routines, motivation, or other barriers.
- ***“My pain is affecting everything.”*** Your medical provider can evaluate and treat the physical condition. Behavioral health may help with coping, stress, sleep, and the effects of ongoing pain.

Getting the most from Behavioral Health in Primary Care

1 Tell your provider the whole story

Along with physical symptoms, mention changes in sleep, energy, stress, mood, routines, relationships, substance use, or your ability to follow your health plan. These details can help your providers understand the bigger picture.

2 Ask for Behavioral Health Support

You do not have to wait for your provider to bring it up. You can say:

- *“Could behavioral health help me with this?”*
- *“Is someone from behavioral health available today?”*
- *“Can I talk with someone about how this is affecting my life?”*

3 Let providers know when the plan is hard to follow

Work, transportation, cost, caregiving, family responsibilities, medication side effects, stress, or low energy can all make it harder to focus on your health. It’s helpful your providers know when you are having challenges. Tell your team what is difficult so you can work together on a realistic next step—we want to help you reach your health goals. TIP: Try saying: *“I understand the plan, but this is the part I’m having trouble with.”*

4 How to access Behavioral Health

Depending on your clinic, you may be able to connect through a same-day visit or warm handoff, a referral, telehealth, or a follow-up appointment. Knowing your options can make it easier to get support when you need it.

Bring Your Strengths into Your Care

What helps you stay well matters. Family, community, culture, language, spirituality, traditional practices, time in nature, connection with Elders, or other supports may be important to you. If they are, tell your care team. Your strengths can be part of the conversation about your health.

Your physical and emotional health are connected.

Your care can be, too.

Bibliography

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