



Managing the Behavioral Health Patient in Primary Care

Patients with depression often present with other physical ailments (e.g., fatigue, back pain, abdominal pain) in which the underlying cause is a mental health illness. According to [HRSA](#), depression and the physical ailments associated with depression trail only diabetes and hypertension as the reasons patients seek medical attention from primary care providers. As this information suggests, behavioral health needs are integral to the overall health needs of patients seen at health centers and free clinics. Primary care providers—whether they practice family medicine, internal medicine, obstetrics/gynecology, or general practice—need to know what role they should play in screening patients for depression and ensuring adequate diagnosis and treatment.

Health centers and free clinics can use the following checklist and tools referenced for some general guidance on assessing and treating patients for behavioral health issues. For more information on assessing patients for risk of suicide or self-harm, see [Get Safe: Assessing Patients for Risk of Self-Harm](#).

- ☐ Ensure coordination among primary care providers, behavioral health staff (e.g., social workers, clinical psychologists), patients, and families to help patients manage their medical conditions and behavioral health needs (see the [SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions' website](#) and the [AHRQ website on integrating behavioral health and primary care](#)).
- ☐ Educate all patients about the symptoms of depression and other mental illnesses and the importance of seeking treatment (see patient education resources from the [American College of Physicians](#) and the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)).
- ☐ Routinely screen all patients for mental health issues including depression and refer patients with high scores on screening tests for additional diagnostic testing (see the [American Academy of Pediatrics' \(AAP\) Mental Health Screening and Assessment Tools for Primary Care](#), the [SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions' Screening Tools website](#), and the [American College of Preventive Medicine's position statement on screening adults for depression in primary care](#)).
- ☐ Assess pediatric patients for emerging mental health, social-emotional, or anxiety issues and provide appropriate treatment and support for patients who require it (see AAP's [Mental Health Initiatives: Primary Care Tools](#)).

☐ Adopt a patient-centered approach to treatment that includes working with patients and their families to determine which treatment approaches (e.g., counseling, antidepressant medications, referral to other psychiatric services) are most appropriate for the patient.

☐ Monitor patients' behavioral health treatment on an ongoing basis, including patient compliance with treatment recommendations, improvement in symptoms, and the need to modify treatments.

☐ Reassess all patients diagnosed with depression within a short time period or refer to continuing care if appropriate.

☐ As part of the health center's quality improvement efforts, establish clinical performance measures related to behavioral health (e.g., mental health, substance abuse) and focus on meeting performance improvement goals (see [HRSA Clinical and Financial Performance Measures](#)).

Want to learn more? Refer to [Patient Suicide Risk: Assessment and Evaluation](#) and [Resource Page: Patient-Centered Medical Home](#) on the Clinical Risk Management Program website. All resources are provided for FREE by ECRI Institute on behalf of HRSA. Don't have access or want to attend a free, live demonstration of the website? E-mail Clinical_RM_Program@ecri.org or call (610) 825-6000 ext. 5200.

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