

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE INTEGRATED PRIMARY AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE TEAMS

The SAMHSA-HRSA Center for Integrated Health Solutions identified four essential elements for effective integrated behavioral health and primary care teams:

1. Leadership and organizational commitment
2. Team development
3. Team process
4. Team outcomes

What is an Integrated Behavioral Health and Primary Care Team?

The definition of integrated care is “the care that results from a practice team of primary care and behavioral health clinicians, working together with patients and families, using a systematic and cost-effective approach to provide patient-centered care for a defined population.”



In integrated care, it is less about each member playing a specific role and more about the interconnectedness of interventions to address the whole person. This distinction strikes at one of the unique aspects of integrated teams: team effectiveness and the degree of team members’ collaboration and synergy may actually make the treatment successful. In that case, the team becomes an essential ingredient rather than simply a means to an end.

What Makes Integrated Care Team Development Unique?

Healthcare’s focus on team-based care as a way to optimize care and improve health outcomes is beginning to change not simply the practice, but the conceptualization of healthcare. Increased collaboration between multidisciplinary providers improves outcomes, quality, cost efficiency, client experience, and treatment adherence. These integrated care teams possess unique features, creating complexities to team development that require innovation.

- Primary and behavioral healthcare have different educational backgrounds and practice models.
- The language providers use, the workflow, how cases are conceptualized, and how treatment goals are prioritized all require cultural shifts and integration.
- In addition to the specific language used, the communication process changes and requires practice.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENT 1: Leadership and Organizational Commitment

Leadership at behavioral health and primary care organizations must commit to the philosophy of integrated care. In effective integrated settings, leaders are willing to allocate resources to the developmental process, including the time needed for cultural shifts, changes to practice, and team process.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENT 2: Team Development

One component of integrated healthcare team development requires clarifying individual team members’ roles and responsibilities. Traditional team roles are often considered in three categories: individual (members have no collective decision-making and tasks are individual); group (there are no individual assignments and decisions are collective); and hybrid (a mixture of individual and collective responsibilities).

TIP: Providers need clear expectations regarding team-based care, roles, and responsibilities.

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In integrated care models, understanding the sometimes-complex roles and responsibilities within teams is important. Providers adapt their competencies, shift traditional practice styles, and explore how to combine skills to treat the whole person. Provider roles become central because different types of behavioral health and primary care providers can deliver the same or similar functions or roles. For example, a nurse and a case manager can both provide the function of care management and thus the role is no longer defined by the discipline – as is traditional – but rather by the team and model. Integrated teams focus on ensuring that functions are provided rather than on defining roles and responsibilities along traditional discipline lines.

In addition to clarifying roles and responsibilities, integrated care teams must understand each other’s skill sets and train one another on vital elements of care. Cross training is a central aspect of formal team development.

Formal development is a major component in integrating different professionals, and is largely unique to these types of healthcare teams. The current funding climate and healthcare requirements significantly affect integrated care models. Barriers in many state Medicaid programs still exist to providing a behavioral health and a medical service on the same day to the same patient, even though two separate providers see the patient. There continues to be a need for claims payers to implement innovative solutions to support integrated behavioral health and primary care models. There is a clear need to review old systems and eliminate operational constraints across the areas of credentialing, documentation, and billing (e.g., billing a behavioral health and primary care service on the same day by the same organization) to support effective teams.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENT 3: Team Process

In addition to effective integrated teams regularly reviewing clinical care they provide, they must also continuously reexamine team functioning and dynamics as the team grows. As an integrated team member at the University of Florida Center for HIV/AIDS Research, Education and Service described it, “As things change, [we must] make sure that the team is still moving in the right direction. [We] have to get out of a rut and actually take a step back and look at the process and not just ‘do.’ Spend that effort and time to step back and look at ‘are we doing what we said we set out to do.’”

TIP: Hire practitioners who understand what’s involved in providing integrated care. You need professionals who want to participate in a team and value feedback.

TIP: Joint review of client health records by the team during clinical meetings can improve efficiency.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENT 4: Team Outcomes

A defining aspect of integrated care is that the integrated team tracks and monitors patients’ treatment through objective measures. Integrated teams predetermine desired outcomes to ensure shared understanding regarding the integrated treatment approach. The shared understanding of treatment success, which may differ for a medical provider and a behavioral health provider, can create clarity and reduce conflict over treatment goals while also guiding client care.

Are There Challenges and Barriers to Developing an Integrated Team?

Integrated care teams can face barriers. However, success is clearly worth the effort. Read more about how integrated healthcare settings developed their teams in the full paper, Essential Elements of Effective Integrated Primary and Behavioral Healthcare Teams.

