



THE ACCELERATION OF VIRTUAL CARE:

Why solutions that connect the mind and body are critical

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In her current role at Teladoc Health, Dr. Hoffman is responsible for building evidence-based programs that offer a personalized approach to a full spectrum of behavioral health challenges. Previously, Dr. Hoffman served as national director of mobile health for mental health and suicide prevention at the Department of Veterans Affairs, where she oversaw the development of over 40 technology-based behavioral health tools. Dr. Hoffman was featured as one of the Top 25 Emerging Leaders – 2019 in *Modern Healthcare*.

Chronic health conditions cost the United States economy **over \$1 trillion in lost productivity and account for as much as 90% of America's \$3.8 trillion annual healthcare costs**. For a system already burdened by gaps in care and over- and under-utilization, it's imperative to better manage chronic conditions.

While continuing to address chronic medical issues such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension, employers and health plans have become increasingly aware that behavioral health issues are an integral part of the problem. A **Milliman analysis** of over 200,000 claims showed that people with diabetes and behavioral health issues cost two to three times as much as those with diabetes alone. Coupled with the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened mental health across the country—53% of U.S. adults reported that COVID-related worry and stress had a negative impact on their mental health, according to a **Kaiser Family Foundation survey**—the need to address mental and behavioral health challenges is becoming more apparent than ever before.



However, most health solutions today can only address a single health condition, not the whole person. As costs skyrocket and productivity plummets, employers and health plans struggle to manage multiple siloed point solutions. They urgently need more comprehensive solutions to meet the health needs of their employees and their members.

A recent [Sage Growth Partners study](#) of large, self-insured employers drives home the importance of addressing both mind and body health among employees. This study was conducted in the summer of 2020 and consisted of a quantitative survey of 230 respondents supplemented by 12 in-depth interviews, and reveals the following:

- Employers believe health benefits are critical to attracting and retaining top talent, listing it as one of the top three reasons to consider buying a digital solution. The other top-rated reasons were to control medical and pharmacy spend and to improve employee wellness—each of these three factors was rated by more than 70% of employers as important or very important.
- The growth of digital solutions is viewed as very or extremely important to most employers surveyed, about 72%. While about two-thirds of large employers currently use both digital and non-digital health solutions to manage medical and pharmacy costs, COVID-19 has fueled growing interest in digital health solutions like telehealth, allowing employees and their families to manage their health from the safety of their own home. This trend is not likely to wane.
- Elevated levels of stress and anxiety due to the pandemic have heightened the need to address mental health concerns, with 58% of respondents saying that offering their employees mental health support was important or very important. Meanwhile, 70% of respondents considered helping employees manage chronic conditions was important or very important. Providing mental health tools and support as part of a comprehensive chronic condition management solution can provide these organizations a more efficient way to extend both physical and mental support to the people they serve.

Digital solutions can supplement and extend access to behavioral health resources

The shortage of mental health workers is acute and growing, while demand for these professionals is surging due to the pandemic. Four years before COVID-19 exacerbated our mental health needs, [the Health Resources and Services Administration issued a report predicting dire shortages of mental health personnel in almost every category.](#)

Teladoc Health is addressing this need and has identified areas of lower coverage at the national and county level where virtual care increases healthcare access, including Medicaid populations.

Research shows the opportunity for digital health solutions to optimize mental health resources. A new case study published in the January 2021 issue of *NEJM Catalyst Innovations in Care Delivery* found that integrating digital apps into clinical practice and using clinical pathways was an effective way to extend the care behavioral health professionals could offer. As the availability and awareness of digital behavioral health solutions grow, clinicians and consumers are eagerly embracing them, though a wide gap remains between interest and usage. Fortunately, the study found that when clinicians educate their patients about mental health conditions, this increases engagement.



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The study concludes that these digital tools appear to be effective—especially when offered at no cost to consumers—and can extend the reach of clinicians. Its authors also recommend making digital mental health and wellness apps directly available to members, noting that “the evidence is clear that only a small percentage of people with mental health and wellness issues come to see a clinician.”

For clinicians who have flagged the need for increased access to mental health resources, this research is validating. For self-insured employers and health plans, it's a call to focus on solutions that address both chronic physical and mental health conditions. Previous research has already shown the economic value of these solutions. For example, a 2019 study conducted by Teladoc Health based on commercial claims data from 1.6 million members demonstrates significant per-visit savings by replacing treatment in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting with the company's virtual mental healthcare services.

Teladoc Health is building on this success with an expanded suite of mental health services, including a stepped-care model that combines digital offerings with virtual mental health. Ultimately, this approach extends access to multi-modal, personalized care that meets consumers where they are.

2020 was a year no one could have predicted, and the healthcare industry is bound to see long-lasting changes. While the impact of the pandemic is devastating, there are a few rays of hope beginning to shine through. For example, increased recognition of the importance of effective and accessible behavioral healthcare, alongside chronic condition management, is likely to help improve whole-person health. In addition, required physical distancing has further demonstrated the effectiveness of digital solutions and that consumers and clinicians are prepared to embrace them.

Even when the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us and we're able to seek the company of friends, family, co-workers and members of our communities, virtual and digital behavioral health solutions will continue to play a critical role in addressing whole-person health.

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About Teladoc Health

Teladoc Health is the global virtual care leader, helping millions of people resolve their healthcare needs with confidence. Together with our clients and partners, we are continually modernizing the healthcare experience and making high-quality healthcare a reality for more people and organizations around the world.

