Integrated Health Care for an Aging Population

A Fact Sheet for Policymakers

What Is Integrated Health Care?

Integrated health care, often referred to as interdisciplinary health care, is an approach characterized by a high degree of collaboration and communication among health professionals. What makes integrated health care unique is the sharing among team members of information related to patient care and the establishment of a comprehensive treatment plan to address the biological, psychological, and social needs of the patient. The interdisciplinary health care team includes a diverse group of members (e.g., physicians, psychologists, social workers, occupational therapists, and physical therapists), depending on the needs of the individual.

Who Benefits From Integrated Health Care?

The benefits of an integrated health care approach extend to patients, caregivers, health care providers, and the health care system at large. Research indicates that integrated health care models are effective in reducing depressive symptoms in older adults. Further evidence also suggests that coordinated care, which integrates psychologists and other mental health providers within primary care settings, can enhance access to services, improve quality of care, and lower overall health care expenditures.

In What Setting Can Integrated Health Care Be Used?

Integrated health care delivery can occur in multiple settings to benefit the aging population. These settings include primary care, specialized medical settings (e.g., rehabilitation units, cardiology, and surgical centers), long-term care settings, and community-based health and social service sites. The integrated health care team often functions differently according to the setting; however, mutual respect and communication are critical at all sites.

Why Is Integrated Health Care so Important for Older Adults?

- Complex care necessitates multiple treatments.
- Without coordination of care, different treatments often result in unforeseen negative outcomes.
- Behavioral health is a key aspect of chronic disease self-management.
- Treatment of comorbid mental and physical health concerns results in the best outcomes for older adults.
- Sensitivity to issues of multicultural diversity and marginalization (e.g., ageism) is a key component of care.

What Contributions Do Psychologists Make to an Integrated Health Care Team?

- Conduct cognitive, capacity, diagnostic, and personality assessments that differentiate normal aging from pathology, side effects of medications, adjustment reactions, or combinations of these problems.
- Offer behavioral health assessment and treatment that provide older adults with the skills necessary to effectively manage their chronic conditions.
- Diagnose and treat mental and behavioral health problems (e.g., depression, suicide risk, anxiety disorders, addiction, and insomnia).
- Offer consultation and recommendations to family members, significant others, and other health care providers.
- Contribute research expertise to the design, implementation, and evaluation of team care and patient outcomes.
- Develop interventions that are responsive to specific individual and community characteristics that may impact the treatment plan.

American Psychological Association

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APA Federal Policy Recommendations

The American Psychological Association (APA) urges support for the following federal policy recommendations that encourage and promote integrated health care for older adults:

- Enact legislation designed to make mental health services for older adults an integral part of primary care services in community settings and to extend them to other settings where older adults reside and receive services (e.g., Positive Aging Act).
- Support initiatives to address the geriatric mental health workforce crisis, including:
    - Reinstate the geropsychology training grants in the Graduate Psychology Education (GPE) Program. GPE is the nation's only federal program dedicated solely to the education and training of psychologists and provides grants to accredited psychology doctoral, internship, and postdoctoral training programs to support the interdisciplinary training of psychology graduate students.
    - Enact legislation to strengthen recruitment and retention of professionals in the geriatric health workforce by establishing an interdisciplinary geriatric and gerontology loan repayment program for those who agree to provide clinical services to older adults (e.g., Caring for an Aging America Act).
    - Expand interdisciplinary training opportunities for psychologists and other health care professionals to work with older adults under Title VII of the Public Health Service Act.
- Support education and training opportunities for health care professionals and students in integrated health care settings across disciplines and at all levels of professional development.
- Support funding of scientific research related to:
    - The impact and effectiveness of integrated health care and the contributions of psychologists as members of these teams.
    - Factors of diversity (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, family structure, culture, and immigration status) affecting access to and use of integrated health care services.