

One-Stop Shopping: Adding psychology and health behavior to primary care clinics

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A behavior health provider can help Veterans adjust to medical problems and deal with life challenges. Since most people experience changes in health or lifestyle at some point in their life, behavior health specialists, are now located in many primary care clinics to better serve you. Veterans can talk to a psychologist, licensed social worker, trained nurse care manager, or a psychiatrist as part of their medical visit. These behavior health providers work with your medical provider as part of the new [Patient Aligned Care Team \(PACTs\)](#) in primary care to offer Veterans help with health-related issues.

One type of behavior health provider is the primary care psychologist, also known as a health psychologist. They provide services that address the body and the mind. Primary care psychologists also offer Veterans brief counseling for emotional and behavioral issues such as [depression](#), [substance use](#), [anxiety](#), and [PTSD](#). For example, a health psychologist can help you learn ways to lower blood pressure, decrease cholesterol levels, change unhealthy eating patterns, and lose weight. They can help you talk to your primary care provider to find a health plan that is right for you. Psychologists also help Veterans talk about common social and emotional challenges such as, feeling nervous about health changes, feeling less interested in things that you used to enjoy, sleep problems, the loss of a loved one, relationship problems, or stress management issues. You and your health team may decide that focusing on certain issues for a longer time might be helpful. Your primary care psychologist can refer you to a specialty program that is right for you.

Health psychologists and other behavior specialists are located in primary care because research indicates Veterans tend to talk about life stressors with their primary care provider during their medical visit. Research also strongly shows how the way we think and feel affects our physical health. This is the mind-body connection. Psychologists in primary care specialize in the mind-body connection. They can show you ways to improve your health by focusing your mind through relaxation and [mindfulness-based stress reduction](#) practice or by working through difficult life problems. In one research study, cancer patients who used relaxation techniques and received counseling in a group taught by a psychologist were cancer-free longer than patients who did nothing. That is powerful medicine.

Here is the story of a typical Veteran who benefitted from working with a behavior health provider, specifically a health psychologist, in primary care.

Mr. James is diagnosed with multiple medical problems including high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes, obesity, and high cholesterol. He takes five or more medications a day and he does not like taking medications. He knows he needs to lose weight but he enjoys eating cheeseburgers at his local bar for lunch and sometimes dinner because he feels lonely since his best friend died earlier this year. Mr. James thinks about telling his doctor that he started smoking cigarettes

again and frequently drinks a six-pack of beer at the bar, but he does not say anything because he thinks he might “get a lecture”.

On his next medical visit, Mr. James tells his doctor that lately he feels sad and lonely. His doctor recommends he talk to the primary care psychologist. During the next thirty minutes, Mr. James shares his concerns with the psychologist and together they recognize that Mr. James may be depressed as part of the natural grieving process. He feels a little better knowing that feeling sad and lonely are natural emotions after the death of a close friend. He agrees to meet with the psychologist again to talk about ways he may be coping with his loss.

Mr. James begins to feel better as he learns new coping strategies and he spends more time with others and less time at the bar. Mr. James also notices that he is more aware of what he eats and drinks. He even starts losing weight. At his next medical visit, his provider notices his weight loss and congratulates Mr. James for improving his cholesterol levels by changing his lifestyle. His provider also suggests that Mr. James may be able to reduce the number of medications he takes if he continues to manage his weight and add some regular exercise.

If you would like to meet with a behavior health provider during your next primary care visit, please talk to your provider or health care team. However, just as every VA building looks a little different, each primary care clinic may not operate the same. At large VA Medical Centers and very large community based outpatient clinics (CBOCs), you might meet a health psychologist or licensed social worker immediately or during specific clinics hours. Smaller clinics may have limited hours when you can meet with the behavior health specialist on your health care team, such as a psychiatrist in the clinic or a nurse care manager by telephone. Some clinics offer medical appointments for groups of Veterans with similar medical problems such as diabetes or high blood pressure. These group medical appointments include time spent with your primary care provider, a behavior specialist, and a care manager in the same visit to help you meet your health goals.

Your primary care team can put you in contact with the behavior health provider at your clinic. Overall, the VA is working to offer Veterans health care options that address the body and the mind. Behavior health services located in primary care clinics gives you more options in one location.

Learn More

[Patient Aligned Care Team \(PACTs\)](#) a new model of care focused on Veterans’ needs and goals (Veteran-centered care)

[Depression](#) The good news is that Depression, even the most severe cases, is a highly treatable disorder.

[Rethinking Drinking: Alcohol and Your Health](#) What do you think about taking a look at your drinking habits and how they may affect your health?

[Substance Abuse](#) VHA has many resources to help Veterans and their loved ones answer questions, find support, get treatment, and recover.

[National Center for PTSD](#) The Center aims to help U.S. Veterans and others through research, education, and training on trauma and PTSD.

[Returning Service Members \(OEF/OIF\)](#) **Have you recently returned from military service?** If you have served, you have earned benefits. Now is the time to take advantage of the benefits VA offers OEF/OIF Veterans.

[Anxiety/Panic and PTSD](#)

[Mindfulness-based stress reduction](#) Mindfulness is an excellent tool for developing awareness of our thinking, preventing these thoughts from overwhelming us, and ultimately transforming our relationships