

# How Health Systems can **Increase** **Throughput in the ED** **With Telepsychiatry**

According to the CDC, approximately 146.5 million patients visit hospital emergency departments (EDs) in the United States each year.

Among those seeking care from EDs, 4.9 million have a primary diagnosis related to mental disorders and behavioral and neurodevelopmental challenges.

With 44 million U.S. adults experiencing mental illness, getting timely care is critical. However, when patients seek care in the ED, health systems and hospitals aren't always equipped with sufficient staff or resources to give them the attention they need. In some cases, patients are held for long periods of time before getting help. This approach, known as psychiatric boarding, can be problematic.

In fact, the Joint Commission highlights several effects of ED boarding that details why this approach is stressful for psychiatric patients and staff.

These stressors include:

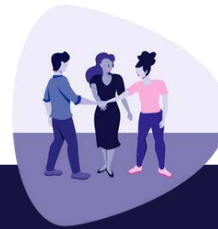
1. An increase in psychological stress on patients who may already be in depressed or psychotic states
2. Consumption of scarce ED resources and increased pressure on staff
3. Delayed mental health treatment that could mitigate the need for inpatient stay
4. Increased ED crowding
5. Longer wait times for all patients in the ED
6. Significant financial impact on ED reimbursement

The truth is, hospitals and health systems are overwhelmed, and addressing mental health needs in the emergency department can prove challenging for several reasons:



### Lack of resources

When they don't have adequate behavioral health support, some hospitals and health systems may work with a solution like locum tenens, to help supplement gaps left by the ongoing provider shortage. However, locums often lack integration and don't facilitate a team-based approach. At the height of the pandemic, [85% of healthcare facilities](#) utilized locum tenens.



### Increased need for specialty care

Hospitals have witnessed a [24% spike in mental health emergency department visits](#) for kids aged 5 to 11 and a 31% increase for adolescents aged 12 to 17. Overall, the rate of ED visits for mental health conditions, suicide attempts, drug and opioid overdoses, and other specialty care needs [increased during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).



### Patient return rate

In an [analysis](#) of ED visits for mental health and substance abuse, 14.2% of patients returned to the ED or hospital within 30 days.



### High costs

According to the [Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project](#), mental and substance use disorder ED visits had service delivery costs of more than \$5.6 billion, representing more than 7% of the \$76.3 billion total in ED visit costs.

## What is telepsychiatry?

[Telepsychiatry](#) allows patients to receive high-quality psychiatric care in a virtual environment, regardless of their location. In most cases, telepsychiatry uses video conferencing to deliver psychiatric assessment and develop customized treatment plans for each patient, allowing more people to get the convenient and accessible behavioral health care they need.

The Joint Commission points to [expanding psychiatric services through telepsychiatry](#) and integration of care as a tactic to support staff. With the appropriate support, hospitals can serve as a safe space for those seeking immediate mental health care.

# Telepsychiatry in the ED

Telepsychiatry ensures hospitals and health systems don't have to tackle the mental health crisis alone. This virtual approach to psychiatry solves problems for healthcare organizations and facilitates game-changing care for patients.

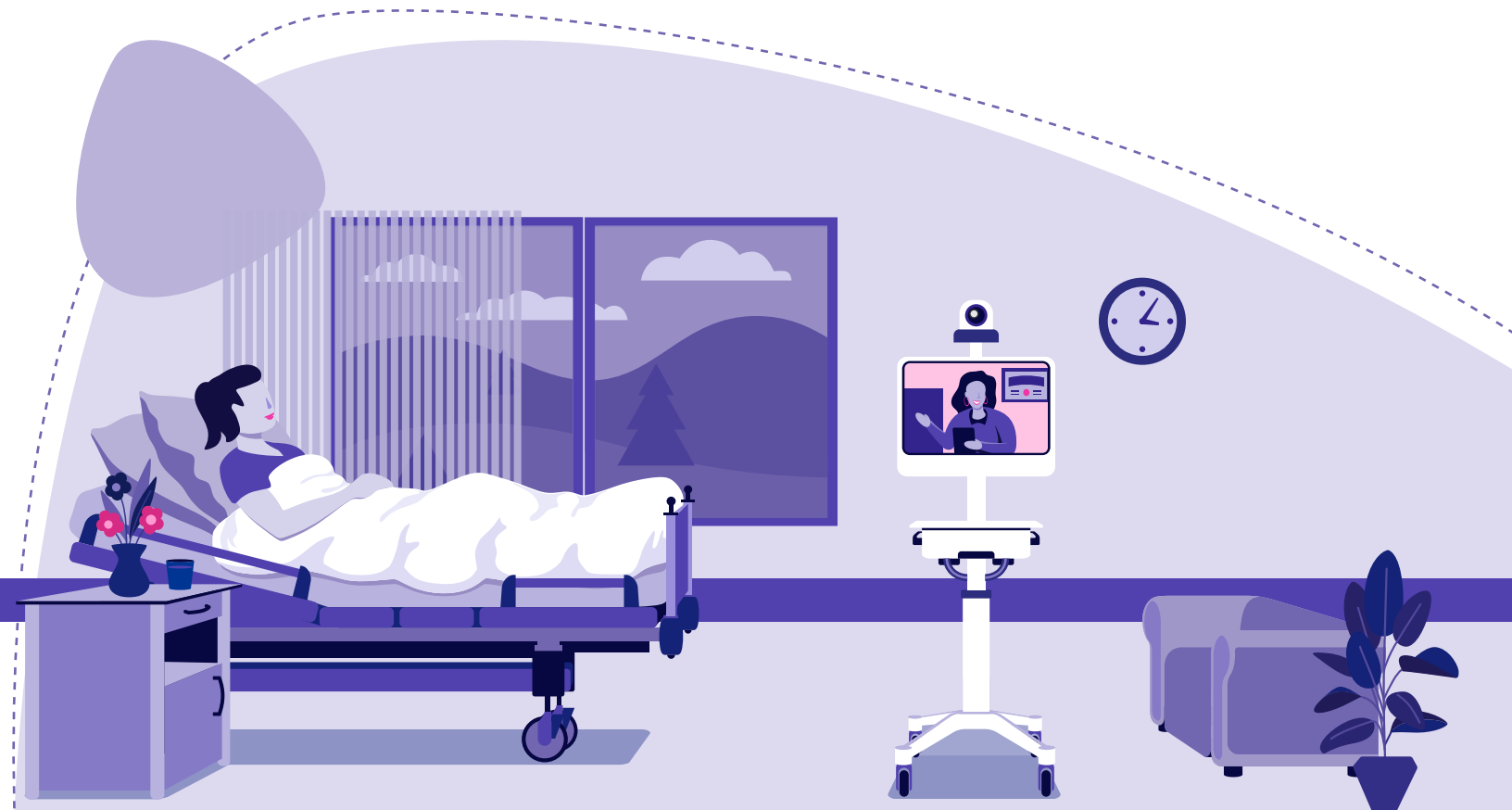
## Telepsychiatry in action

One evening, a patient in crisis went to the ED seeking immediate care for a mental health emergency. Identifying that the patient needed specialized behavioral health care, the ED staff connected them with the hospital's telepsychiatry partner. Even though it was late in the evening, the patient could see a provider, receive a prescription for their condition, and even get started on a treatment plan to help them get dispositioned quickly and effectively.

The impact of telepsychiatry can be felt across the ED – from patients and providers to the organization at large. In fact, the [American Psychiatric Association](#) (APA) points to substantial evidence of effectiveness for the use of telepsychiatry and cites research rating patient and provider satisfaction as high.

"Dr. Didario worked closely with myself and our team to serve a patient in one of our EDs. We were able to discuss the case even before she saw the patient and worked closely with him, his family, the ED Attending, and Crisis Clinicians to develop a comprehensive plan to serve him in the ED and safely discharge him after he left. We could not provide that kind of excellent care without our collaborative relationship with Iris!"

*Suzanne W., ED Medical Director of Psychiatry Health System in Minnesota*



# So, what are the benefits of telepsychiatry?

## Patient benefits

Telepsychiatry bridges the divide between critical need and timely care, allowing [patients](#) to receive care around the clock and cutting down time spent in the waiting room. Because of this expediency, their length of stay in the ED reduces dramatically. Patients get attentive care without waiting hours for an in-person consultation from a psychiatric provider or to see an ED physician, who might not have the experience needed to treat patients with specialized behavioral health needs.

The [APA](#) outlines several other significant benefits for patients utilizing telepsychiatry, including:

- Improved access to specialty care that might not otherwise be available
- Better outcomes due to integrated behavioral health and primary care
- Reduction in delayed care
- Reduction in transportation barriers, such as lack of transportation, or the need for long drives
- Increased feelings of safety, security, and privacy

Overall, telepsychiatry helps healthcare organizations drive patient engagement while assisting patients to overcome stigmas, attend follow-up appointments, and even strengthen medication adherence.

## Provider benefits

Providers are at the heart of helping make hospitals a safe and effective place for patients to get care. They're also under immense stress – with provider burnout, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the high demand for mental healthcare, they could use a helping hand. Telepsychiatry provides relief for attending ED physicians and staff by supplying top-notch [psychiatry providers](#) who can quickly assess, treat, and disposition patients. This extra help frees up the ED team to treat patients who come in for medical and surgical needs.

Telepsychiatry also facilitates efficient deployment of treatment. For example, [Iris Telehealth providers](#) help attendings and social workers develop treatment plans to get the patient dispositioned quickly and efficiently. This approach makes it possible to start medications immediately and helps facilitate transfer to a psychiatric facility if necessary.



## Organizational benefits

Telepsychiatry expands what [hospitals and health systems](#) can offer their patients and communities. And for [hospital emergency departments](#) facing America's mental health crisis, this extra help can make a significant difference in their ability to support more people as they encounter numerous obstacles every day. These obstacles include:

- An increase in the number of patients presenting with mental illness, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and more behavioral health issues
- A significant surge in psychiatric boarding times averaging 8-34 hours
- An increase in the number of patients in the ED because they can't get an appointment to see a psychiatrist



Telepsychiatry meets these issues head-on by providing the expertise organizations and attending physicians need for managing patients presenting with acute and complex mental health conditions.

This solution also offers significant financial benefits by cutting down on psychiatric boarding, which [some studies](#) estimate costs an average of \$2,264 per admission. By expediting disposition, transfer, and treatment, telepsychiatry helps organizations save on these costs and increase the opportunity to treat patients in need of medical and surgical care. The [APA](#) highlights cost reduction in transportation, inpatient utilization, and overall hospital costs as significant value adds.

Overall, the organizational benefits of incorporating telepsychiatry in the ED are substantial. Telepsychiatry increases throughput by allowing ED psychiatric patients to be seen faster. This expedience decreases boarding time and frees up beds for patients in waiting rooms, improving the quality and timeliness of care for all patients.

Telepsychiatry equips hospital EDs with the much-needed ability to quickly provide patients with access to high-quality psychiatric care through a virtual visit. By partnering with qualified, Joint Commission accredited telepsychiatry solutions like Iris, organizations are set up to simultaneously improve outcomes and financial goals.



# Common challenges to utilizing telepsychiatry in the ED

Telepsychiatry is growing in popularity. In fact, according to the APA, nearly [38% of Americans have used telehealth services](#) to meet with a medical or mental health professional. The report also highlights that nearly six in 10 would use telehealth services for mental healthcare. As the public's acceptance grows, more and more healthcare organizations are following their lead. In the [American Hospital Association's report](#) on telehealth, as of 2017, 76% of hospitals reported utilizing telehealth.



However, despite the growing popularity, there is still hesitancy around implementing a virtual solution, whether its technology concerns, common misconceptions about telepsychiatry, or cultural considerations. Determining how to tackle these worries is essential to a successful implementation.

## Technology barriers

Implementing telepsychiatry should help [remove barriers](#) to care, not create them. Hospitals may be concerned about not knowing how to use technology correctly, as well as a lack of fluency in technology. In most cases, questions tend to arise about the equipment needed for telepsychiatry consultations, such as where it will be located and who will be responsible for coordinating the machine.

However, these concerns are often alleviated with a technology-neutral partner -- like Iris Telehealth -- that integrates into your systems. At Iris, we also ensure all staff are trained on best practices for using technology and are comfortable with it before services start.

## Misconceptions about telepsychiatry

Some organizations may be concerned that this solution isn't as effective as in-person treatment. However, in collaboration with on-call staff, a telepsychiatrist can assess patients, manage risks, and create a treatment plan to properly treat patients — just like an in-person provider. Telepsychiatry strengthens a hospital's approach to psychiatric care by providing their team and their patients with more resources.

Additionally, the [APA](#) cites research that has found the overall experience of telepsychiatry has been good across [all age groups](#) and details that those with autism, severe anxiety, or physical limitations may prefer remote treatment to in-person care. The APA also cites telepsychiatry as especially effective with treating PTSD, depression, and ADHD.

## Evolving ED culture

Another common objection is getting staff on board with telepsychiatry in the ED. Attending physicians and staff are used to — and often prefer — providers close to them due to ease of access and collaboration.

Although working with telepsychiatry providers can be hard on staff at first, it is something that teams can overcome through open communication, education on processes and procedures, and ensuring that staff is always supported. This collaboration encourages an integrated approach to care, helping ensure the [best possible care](#) for patients.

# How telepsychiatry transforms the ED

Telepsychiatry is making it possible for more people to get the care they need in a hospital setting without the long wait. Because of this convenience and other notable benefits, people are leaning on telehealth as a tool to meet their mental health needs. In fact, **59% of people** say they would use telehealth for their mental healthcare, and by 2029, behavioral health visits may **increase by 50%**. As telehealth becomes the norm, organizations are seeing the benefits by way of on-demand resources, cost savings, and additional expertise.

## Telepsychiatry by the numbers

Hospitals willing to modernize their approach to behavioral health are well-positioned to improve outcomes and realize substantial benefits. At Iris, we've seen this first hand:

- 98% of attending physicians recommend our services to their colleagues
- 1.5M+ patient encounters to date
- 98% of our partners rate our telepsychiatry services as very good or excellent

**On-demand resources:** Telepsychiatry serves as a 24/7 resource for organizations and their patients – allowing patients access to high-quality providers who can assess their needs and manage risk to ensure each patient receives proper treatment, around-the-clock. Whether a patient comes in needing help in the wee hours of the morning or during regular business hours, a provider will be available to cover your emergency department.

**Cost savings:** This virtual solution helps hospitals meet their organizational and financial needs by helping them avoid unnecessary bed holds. Additionally, since healthcare spending comprises a large portion of any community's economy (especially rural communities), telepsychiatry services can give medical assistance to local individuals, so they don't need to travel outside the community for their care.

**Additional expertise:** The on-call doctors and staff will receive support, collaboration, and education on the best way to engage with mental health patients and discern if a psych evaluation or treatment is needed.



By implementing a telepsychiatry solution, your organization can help more people in the community, increase throughput in the ED, and release pressure on your providers and overall organization.



# How Iris Telehealth can help



Iris Telehealth provides support to ensure patients needing mental health care can access it when they need it – and the ED is no exception. We've brought our telepsychiatry services to over 40+ health systems and hospitals across the U.S., helping them deliver high-quality care to their patient populations and ensure their behavioral health program is set up for long-term success. Through our in-depth expertise, we help organizations optimize their behavioral health services across the care continuum. Our medical leadership can provide the guidance and recommendations you need to ensure your organization is using our telepsychiatry services to your best advantage.

If you're interested in learning more about how you can ensure minimal wait time and seamless access to behavioral health care, [contact us today.](#)

[iristelehealth.com](https://iristelehealth.com)

