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William Renda
(william.renda@bhsi.com, linkedin.com/in/william-renda/) is System Director of Professional Practice Compliance and Privacy at Baptist Health, based in Louisville, KY.

Chris Holcomb
(chris.holcomb@bhsi.com, linkedin.com/in/chris-holcomb-392565116/) is Associate Vice President, System Behavioral Health, at Baptist Health, based in Louisville, KY.

Cherene W. Fannin (cherene.fannin@bhsi.com) is Senior Corporate Counsel at Baptist Health, based in Louisville, KY.

A practical guide for utilizing psychotherapy notes in your EHR

by William Renda, Chris Holcomb, and Cherene W. Fannin

The prevalence of mental health conditions and the need for adequate treatment has long been on the rise in the United States. Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, many areas experienced a spike in demand for behavioral health services, and since then, overall demand seems to have returned to pre-pandemic levels.[1] Still, behavioral health providers need to be prepared for continued and increasing demand. Statistics related to mental health, in general, are compelling. Approximately half of all Americans will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lives.[2] Additionally, 46.3 million people aged 12 or older (16.5%) experienced a past year substance use disorder (SUD), and 19.4 million adults have co-occurring mental illness and SUD.[3] The global societal impact of poor mental health is expected to increase to $6 trillion by 2030.[4] Anecdotal feedback within our own system suggests that depression, anxiety, increased substance use, and post-traumatic stress disorder have been the most common reasons for people seeking treatment since 2020.

Often, individuals seeking treatment for any number of conditions receive psychotherapy. From a clinical perspective, psychotherapy is a broad term referring to a type of behavioral health therapy, often called "talk therapy." The services are facilitated by individuals whose academics and training evolved from social and behavioral sciences. These professionals can include a psychiatrist, psychologist, or other licensed mental health provider. These skilled clinicians are trained to rely on a variety of treatment modalities that can be utilized to help the patient achieve their desired goals. Behavioral health providers can sometimes be heard referencing the use of a "clinical toolbox" comprised of various evidence-based methods. A few of the more common modalities involve cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, and solution-focused brief therapy. Benefits of seeking therapy are numerous, ranging from acquiring problem-solving skills, self-care techniques, and gaining confidence. Psychotherapy tends to fall into four common categories: individual, group, couples, and family.[5]

Psychotherapy is described by service codes 90832–90838 in the Current Procedural Terminology manual.[6] An encounter for psychotherapy may be supplied as a stand-alone visit or on the same day as an evaluation and management service (in which the 25 modifier rules apply).

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