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## What is integrated health care and how can it improve lives?

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It is a little-known but sobering fact that people with severe mental health and substance use disorders die an average of about 25 years earlier than the rest of the population. This is mostly due to untreated and preventable chronic illnesses, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. These conditions are further aggravated by poor health habits, such as smoking, substance misuse, poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle. For many individuals, the barriers to primary health care and the challenges of navigating the complex health care system have been major obstacles to receiving appropriate care. Coincidentally, primary care settings provide about half of all mental health care for common psychiatric disorders.

Fortunately, there is a growing movement toward providing what is known as "integrated health care," an approach that blends the expertise of mental health, substance use, and primary health care clinicians, in order to provide "whole person health." With this team-based approach, physical medical care and behavioral health care, including treatment for substance use disorders, are offered to clients in the same setting. Coordinating primary and mental health care in this way can help address the

life-shortening physical illnesses of people with serious mental health disorders. In addition, primary care providers are often on the frontline of identifying and treating mental health problems because this setting is often viewed by patients as more acceptable and accessible than specialty psychiatry and psychotherapy settings.

What does integrated health care look like? This model of care fosters increased communication not only with provider and patient, but also among the professionals treating the patient. Behavioral health and primary care team members have routine face-to-face communication and attend the same meetings, and care can be coordinated based on the patient's personal health needs. Integrated health care utilizes evidence-based practices to provide the best possible care, including using tools that range from screening for chronic disease, substance misuse, depression, anxiety and everything in between. Identifying a possible problem is the first step toward preventing it. In addition, integrated health care systems include wellness and education programs. Learning to manage diseases, decrease stress, increase physical exercise, make healthy food choices, and quitting smoking all lead to improved "whole person" wellness.

The benefits of integrated health care are many. Patients with chronic health

conditions are more likely to have related behavioral health concerns, and often find it easier to improve physical conditions when their mental health concerns are also addressed. In addition, patients prefer the convenience of receiving care in one convenient location. Whether they are struggling with stress, mental health symptoms, substance misuse, or general physical health issues, many patients find it more socially acceptable and easier to access behavioral health care treatment in a setting with which they are familiar. Integrated health care not only enhances access to services and improves quality of care, but an additional

bonus is that it also lowers overall health care costs.

**One Mind, One Body, One You!**

*Good health includes both mind and body. That is why Greater Nashua Mental Health and Lamprey Health Care have teamed up to offer a new program called InteGreat Health. InteGreat Health is our commitment to treating both the mind and body, making it easier for our patients to receive primary and behavioral health care, helping them achieve their best possible "whole person" health! To learn more, contact the InteGreat Health program at 603-402-1501, or visit [www.gnmh.org](http://www.gnmh.org).*

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