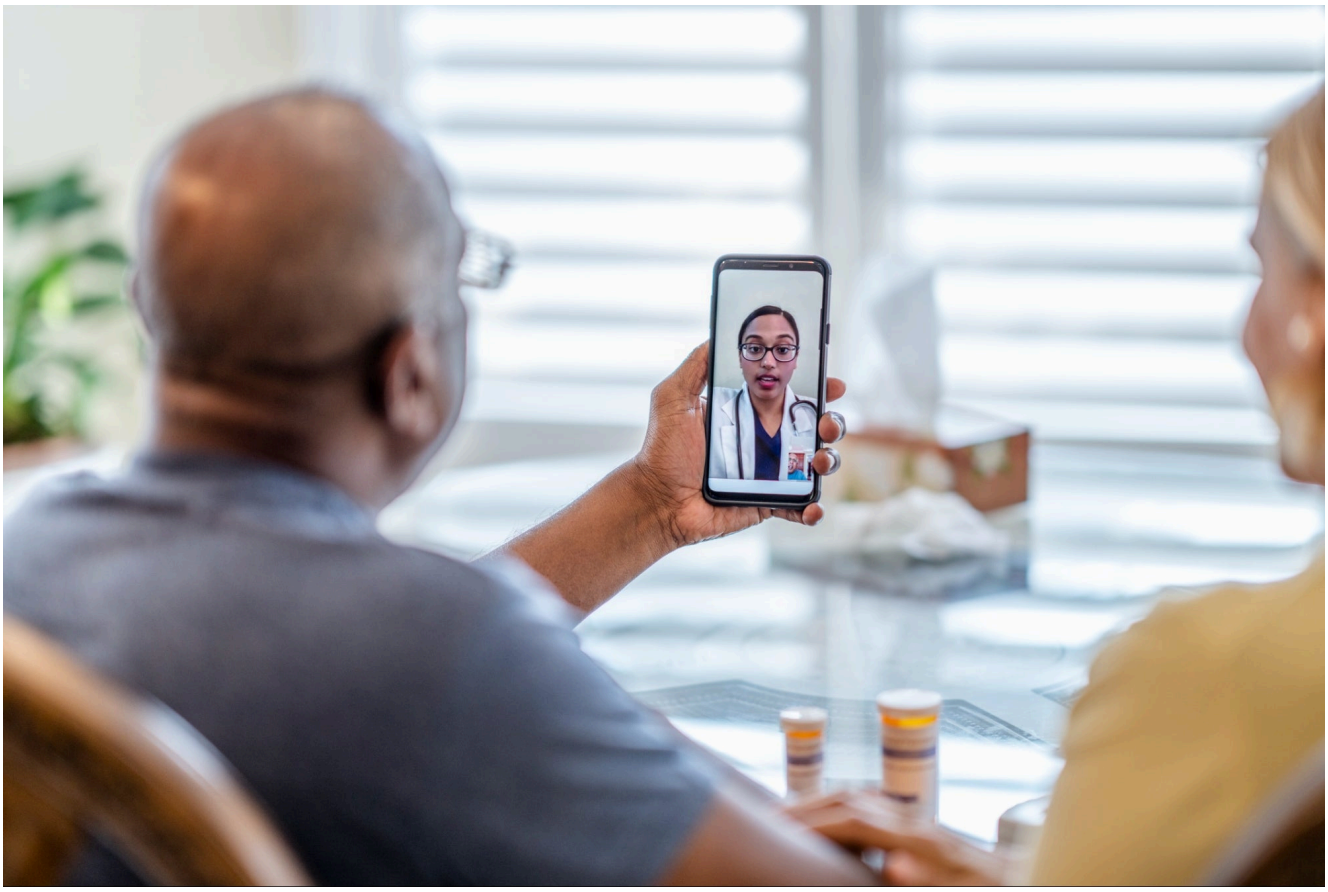
What Is Next for Telehealth?



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As COVID-19 cases wane, the world is gradually ushering in a new normal, with many countries relaxing regulations on social distancing, venue capacity limits, cultural life, masking, and more.

But the dawn of a post-COVID world won’t mean the twilight of all pandemic-era phenomena. Remote and hybrid work, for example, aren’t going anywhere. Neither is telehealth, which rapidly went from a nice-to-have service to an absolutely essential one with the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Physicians overwhelmingly found the shift to virtual care beneficial for operational efficiency, disease management, and patients’ access to care. That’s not to say that the

transition was without hitches.

As a result of social distancing protocols and healthcare rapidly shifting to digital-first, many patients lost access to the face-to-face support structures that helped guide them through both physical and mental health challenges. Now, as telehealth and digital platforms cement their role in the post-pandemic future, it's imperative for the digital health ecosystem to find ways of enhancing those support networks.

Why support systems matter

Among the most exciting promises of digital health innovation is its power to improve our overall physical and emotional wellbeing. From mindfulness and fitness apps to remote patient monitoring services, millions are harnessing digital tools as part of a holistic approach to health – one focused not simply on episodic care, but on daily routine.

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Support groups – for those facing serious physical ailments, grief, addiction, mental health issues, and more – predate the digital health revolution. Whether they serve patients and caregivers dealing with physical health challenges or for those facing mental illness, they are highly effective for participants' wellbeing. Support networks provide patients, their families, and their caregivers an outlet to share their struggles, lean on and learn from each other, and find ways of navigating the wide range of physical, mental, and emotional issues that a serious health challenge can bring.

What happens when patients are isolated and lack these structures? They often turn to Google to help them make sense of their health issues – leaving them vulnerable to false or misinformed advice.

While the end of the pandemic will mean many of these groups

will go back to reconvening in person, now is the time to think about how patient support and engagement programs can be translated to the digital arena. Unlike purely in-person meetings, creating digital versions of these groups would remove hurdles that existed before the pandemic and will continue well beyond it. Distance, financial hardship, hesitation to attend in person, familial or professional responsibilities are just a few of the plentiful reasons that can result in the unintentional exclusion of those that stand to benefit the most from a robust support structure.

From Telehealth to Tele-wellbeing

Millions of people are already attempting to deal with their health challenges in the digital space. The unchecked trust in "Dr. Google" points to something that the healthcare ecosystem can't afford to ignore. People are looking for support resources that conform to their daily schedules, not just to weather an individual illness, but to thrive.

For digital health platforms to make this possible, they should operate according to a few key guiding principles.

Accuracy

Patients should see their support group meetings as essential events that contribute to their overall health and wellbeing – and the onus is on providers to ensure that their virtual programs meet this threshold.

Virtual support programs should be organized and led by credentialed medical professionals to ensure that patients are receiving evidence-based, accurate guidance rooted in a thorough understanding of the relevant science, psychology, and best practices.

Interactivity

It's not enough to simply convey information to patients – no

matter how well-grounded it is in the research literature. Digital support programs are about, well, support, and that means it's critical to actually *engage* participants in interactive, accessible, and yes, entertaining ways.

Live and synchronous Q&A sessions, interactive questionnaires, and guided group discussions can provide the vital element of interactivity needed for all participants to make their voices heard. While a-synchronous secured video messages accessible only within the group can provide the kind of "always available" community support that is often lacking just when needed most at times of pressure and distress.

Accessibility and Affordability

At its best, digital health eliminates barriers to access, rather than erecting new ones. Telehealth, for example, has provided many patients in underserved and remote areas with more reliable and convenient connections to clinical care. But accessibility shouldn't just be a welcome side effect of digital health. It must be a front-and-center priority.

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One in four Americans reports skipping medical appointments for financial reasons. But affordability is just one pillar of accessibility and inclusion. Making virtual support meetings available on-demand can widen the circle of participants and allow patients to access meetings (or review compelling and engaging content) whenever is ideal for them, irrespective of their work and daily schedules and not dependent on when their doctor is available to take the call.

Providing effective and accessible programs for caregivers is also paramount, as their wellbeing can be seriously compromised absent reliable sources of support.

Better Outcomes for All

The healthcare industry is in the midst of a paradigm shift, one that has been significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. And while many patients only became acquainted with telehealth and digital health tools when they needed episodic care, digital health has the potential to provide community and emotional value well beyond such use cases.

By creating online communities designed to bolster the wellbeing of patients, their families, and their caregivers, providers can forge a new healthcare system that’s truly there for those who need it most.

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