

Helping Medical Assistants and Support Staff Talk with Patients about the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)

Clinical workflows often include front desk reception, medical assistants, community health workers, and other staff members, who have not have behavioral health training, to interact with patients regarding screening and treatment monitoring for depression and other behavioral health conditions being treated in the clinic.

Sometimes these staff members feel inadequately prepared to discuss these sensitive issues with patients and it is important to make sure they have the support and training they need in order to feel comfortable with patients. The level of comfort staff members have when talking about behavioral health symptoms sends an important message to the patient. It is important to send the message that the clinic, including all of the clinic staff, feels comfortable addressing these conditions and the clinic treats behavioral health conditions the same as any other condition treated at the clinic.

The Importance of the PHQ-9

Accurate baseline scores help guide the diagnostic process and accurate follow up scores determine the course of treatment for the patient

It is vital that these numbers are correct and truthful, much like recording blood pressure or temperature at the beginning of a visit; it helps show patterns that can determine the outcome of a patient's treatment and /or improvement. Once a patient fills out the PHQ-9, the person administering the scale should immediately enter the numbers into the patient's EHR and registry (e.g. CMTS). The questions have to be asked exactly as they show in your EHR or on the paper copy. Alternately, the patient can read it themselves and answer the questions.

If a patient declines to fill out the PHQ-9 or one is not administered during a follow-up visit, then a note should be made in the registry outlining why PHQ-9 scores are not available. **Do NOT enter "0" on the PHQ-9 if the patient did not report it.** Entering a score of "0" falsely shows improvement in the patient's symptoms and treatment will be hindered.

Common Questions When Presenting PHQ-9 to Patient

We have designed the following Q&A to help clinic support staff feel comfortable answering common questions they may be asked by patients about the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9).

It is best for support staff to have the opportunity to roleplay these questions/situations with other clinic staff to give everyone the opportunity to practice before using them with patients. It can also be helpful for support staff to keep this some place where they can refer to it, as needed, when they get questions from patients.

Question	Why do I need to fill this out?
Answer	<p>SCREENING Your provider is interested in how you are feeling. It's like taking your blood pressure or temperature but it's focused on how you've been feeling over the past 2 weeks. We ask these questions for all of our patients because we care about how you're doing in all areas.</p> <p>FOLLOW-UP (<i>already in treatment</i>) Your provider wants to know how you are feeling so that we know if the treatment is working. It's important to measure regularly so that we can change the treatment if it's not working.</p>
Question	I don't have these problems. Why do you want me to fill this out?
Answer	It's like taking your blood pressure or temperature. We check everyone so that we can keep track of how you're feeling over time. [Ask if they have concerns. If they do then say I'll tell your provider you would like to talk about it.]
Question	Do I have to fill this out even if I'm not comfortable answering these questions?
Answer	You never have to fill out a form or answer questions that you're not comfortable with. If you're concerned about these questions I'll let your provider know
Question	I would rather just talk to my provider about these questions instead of filling this out. Is that OK?
Answer	Yes, of course.
Question	I don't understand some of these questions. Can you help me?
Answer	If you have questions about the specific items on the form and how they apply to you it would be best to talk about that with your provider.

