

## An Integrative Health Care System: Patient and Team Perspectives

The ultimate goal of Integrative Health is system-wide transformation. A truly integrative, Whole Health-based healthcare system fully supports patient-centered care, the care that all clinicians know is important, but that may not always be possible to provide the way they would like because of various barriers and challenges. Optimally, a health care system informed by Integrative Health emphasizes personal health planning, patient empowerment, and seamless care by transdisciplinary interprofessional teams. The system must be supported by leadership at all levels. While level of engagement may vary from person to person on the staff, the key is to have a critical mass of people any given facility who are committed to making positive change happen. This commitment is needed at the individual and group (team) levels, as well as at the wider organizational level. It is also vital that patients be equally committed to this, as the recipients of care.

### Key Elements of the System

An Integrative Health System shares many similarities with the Whole Health System model, which is being actively advanced within VA Health System. This frames care according to 3 key elements, as featured in Figure 1:

1. **The Pathway.** A person's Whole Health experience typically begins with the Pathway. That is, patients are oriented to Whole Health and reflect on how improving their health could support their Meaning, Aspiration, Purpose (MAP). They begin learning more about, and can choose to directly experience, different ways to care for themselves and seek care from others.
2. **Well-Being Programs.** In this health care system, each patient has access to support to successfully achieve self-care goals. They can take various classes, work with peers who are trained to support them in this model, consult with specially trained health coaches, and explore various Complementary and Integrative Health (CIH) approaches.
3. **Clinical Care.** Clinicians of all types—providers, nurses, social workers, psychologists, chaplains, pharmacists, physical therapists, and so on—weave the Whole Health approach into their patient encounters. All the members of a transdisciplinary team support each person with their goal setting and personal health planning.

### Introduction

The Whole Health approach can transform care at all levels. At the individual level, it can be applied to each patient's (and clinician's) self-care. Clinicians are encouraged to prioritize therapeutic presence and support the creation and implementation of their own health plan. It does not stop there, however. As an overarching philosophy of care, Whole Health can inform the function of teams, departments, facilities, and ultimately, the entire health care system.

Other overviews on the UW Integrative Health website focus on implementing Integrative Health in your personal life or in your practice. This overview scales thing up to the broader perspective, exploring what it might look like for a person to receive care within a Whole Health System, where every aspect of their care is informed by the same philosophy.



Figure 1. Key Elements of the Whole Health System

## Bob: An Integrative Health Care System from the Patient Perspective

The overview [“Implementing Integrative Health in Your Practice, What an Integrative Health Visit Looks Like,”](#) introduces Bob, a 68 year-old patient. It offers an example of what, ideally, and Integrative Health clinical visit could look like for him. What would his experience look like from the broader perspective? That is, how would receiving care in an Integrative Health System affect Bob as an individual?

### First Encounters with the Integrative Health System: The Pathway

People could be introduced to Integrative Health—and Integrative Health System—in a variety of ways. An established patient like Bob may first hear about it from one of his clinical team members, through taking a class, or because he asked for more information because of a poster or a website he saw. Patients who are new to the system might be introduced to Whole Health during an orientation program. Others may learn about Whole Health while participating

in Well-Being Program offerings, like a mediation class, when the course instructor offers more information.

Once someone is familiar with what the Integrative Health approach is like, they can decide how involved they would like to be with it. The Pathway component of an Integrative Health Care system includes all the potential ways people can get started creating a PHP. First, they focus on exploring their MAP and completing a Personal Health Inventory (PHI). Then comes goal setting, along with seeking out the education, skill building, resources, and support needed to achieve their goals. They may choose to start this process on their own, or to do it with support.

Bob's highest priority on his health plan was improving his sleep (Recharge). Other self-care areas he wanted to focus on included Physical Activity and Nutrition. Once Bob knew the general areas where he wanted to focus, he needed to zero in. It was time to learn more details and to experience some of the of options that could support him with implementing his plan.

## Well-Being Programs

Bob sought out programs that could equip him to more fully reach his goals. For example, he was drawn to mindful awareness after the clinician first mentioned it in and Integrative Health visit. He searched for more information online and selected two handouts to print out: "[An Introduction to Mindful Awareness](#)" and "[Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living](#)." After reading them, he visited the Mindfulness Resources on the UW Integrative health website and downloaded several audio files featuring guided mindful awareness exercises. After he tried meditating and found it to be helpful, Bob signed up for a meditation class, one of several well-being programs offered by his clinic and local hospital. He gradually ramped up to meditating 20 minutes a day.

Bob reviewed the list of other well-being services his insurance covered. He signed up for a tai chi class, because he had read in the handout, "[An Introduction to Tai Chi and Qi Gong for Whole Health](#)," that tai chi could help balance and leg strength. Since his most important goal was to be able to walk his granddaughter down the aisle and dance at her upcoming wedding, tai chi seemed like a good fit.

Bob was also pleased to learn that acupuncture was offered for treatment of chronic pain. He found a reasonably priced practitioner about 20 miles away.

Bob was given the option of working with a peer (a fellow patient trained in guiding people through the PHI and setting their health goals) or a health coach to help him along with creating and implementing his PHP. He started to meet with a coach every few weeks.

## Bob's Experience: Whole Health Clinical Care and Transdisciplinary Teams

One of the remarkable things about a truly integrative care system is that it helps a person implement their plan; everyone, from the Bob's physical therapist and his nurse, to his acupuncturist and his tai chi instructor, can check in with Bob about how it is going with reaching his goals. No one provider is expected to be totally responsible for Bob's Whole Health; everyone on the team shares responsibility. Because Bob worked with a Whole Health Coach and clearly outlined his goals, it was easier for his clinicians to support him without having to invest a significant amount of additional time.

Over time, as he sought out the professional support he needed, Bob ended up being the captain of a large transdisciplinary team. Every member of the team was committed to Bob's success. Bob confided to his primary care doctor that it was the first time in his life he had ever felt like his health care team truly cared about him on a personal level.

Bob's goals, his Personal Health Plan, evolved with time. As Bob reached his initial goals—he was able to fully participate in his granddaughter's wedding, for example—he set new goals to take their place. Every year or so, Bob completed a new PHI and reviewed it with his team.

Over the next 10 years, working within the Whole Health System, Bob started to find the right combination of self-care and professional care tools to help him with his various health needs. For example:

- **Health care maintenance.** Bob continued seeing his primary care team every 6 to 12 months for routine wellness visits and physical exams. He stayed up to date with his screening and diagnostic tests, as well as his vaccinations. A pharmacist on his team helped him keep track of his medications and supplements and how they interacted. Bob found that with more physical activity and some changes to his eating patterns, he was able to phase out some medications and decrease the doses of others.
- **Metabolic syndrome.** All of Bob's metabolic syndrome issues markedly improved. He felt that was due to 4 things: 1) participating in a weight loss course 2) being able to walk more with the help of his physical therapist, 3) having a good response to acupuncture, and 4) taking a cooking skills course from a dietitian. Bob was able to lower his doses of blood pressure and cholesterol pills, and his blood sugars normalized. He gradually lost 30 pounds. (For ideas on how to help someone like Bob with these challenges, refer to "[Heart Health](#)" and related Integrative Health tools for more information, as well as "[Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus](#)" and "[Achieving a Healthy Weight](#).")
- **PTSD.** Bob continued meditating and followed up regularly with his mental health team. He received psychotherapy, which reduced how often his PTSD symptoms were triggered. He tried several other mind-body approaches that were offered at his clinic without additional charge, including guided imagery, clinical hypnosis, and biofeedback. Ultimately, for his PTSD, he found he favored breathing exercises and seated meditation over the other techniques. (Check out the overview on [PTSD](#) for more information about how to apply Integrative Health for this challenging chronic condition.)
- **Depression and anxiety.** Bob made sure he took his antidepressants without missing doses. He saw a psychiatrist who was skilled with an Integrative Health approach. Over the years, his episodes of suicidal ideation became less frequent, and he did some work with a therapist surrounding the complicated grief he experienced after he lost his wife. He continued to have "occasional ups and downs," but found they were much easier to handle. (The "[Anxiety](#)," "[Depression](#)," and "[Grief](#)" overviews offer for more information on how Whole Health can help with these challenging mental health issues.)
- **Chronic pain.** Tai chi helped a lot with Bob's balance and leg strength, and he continued to practice it a few times a week. His primary care provider had him start

taking turmeric capsules, which eased his knee pain. For a period of about 3 months, Bob had acupuncture, which eased his chronic pain. With the support of his facility's pain team, he created a pain self-management plan, and ultimately, it helped him reach a point where he felt he could manage his pain on his own without medications, acupuncture, or other interventions. (For more information, refer to "[Chronic Pain](#)" and "[Self-Management of Chronic Pain](#).")

- **Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).** Bob's gut symptoms steadily improved after his primary care provider had him take probiotics for a month. Doing so also seemed to help with his mood as well. (Go to "[Irritable Bowel Syndrome](#)" and "[Promoting a Healthy Microbiome with Food and Probiotics](#)" to learn more about the many ways gut function affects health.)
- **Insomnia.** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I), which was part of Bob's original plan that he created with his psychologist, was helpful. Eventually, he was able to sleep 7-8 hours most nights. His sleep study was negative for obstructive sleep apnea, and with his weight loss, he stopped snoring. (The "[Recharge](#)" overview and related resources offer for more information on ways to improve sleep.)
- **Tobacco use and COPD.** Bob decreased his smoking to 1/3 of a pack daily, which helped his breathing. For COPD flares, he used the breathing exercises he learned from his meditation instructor. Every few years, he was given the "[Nicotine Use Disorders](#)" handout. He never completely quit, but he kept trying.
- **Alcohol use.** It took several years, but Bob acknowledged that his drinking was a problem and agreed to see a substance abuse specialist. He enrolled in Alcoholics Anonymous and later became a sponsor. ("[Substance Use](#)" and related tools offer more details about integrative approaches to alcohol and other substance problems.)

Many of the goals Bob set over the years were not specifically intended to address one particular problem; they had an effect on many different aspects of his health. Better sleep, more activity, improved stress management, and increased attention to Nutrition (along with other approaches to self-care) can have benefits that extend beyond any one medical diagnosis. It was not necessarily that all of Bob's problems were completely "cured." Some were, but others did not completely go away. The key was that *Bob's quality of life and overall functionality improved*. Whether Bob was cured or not, he experienced healing. He was empowered to take steps that would help him live his life more fully.

Bob received excellent patient-centered care with every encounter in his health system. What were common threads that ran through his experience?

- His care was **personalized**. His plans were specific to his needs and honored his values (MAP).
- His care was **proactive**. The focus was on more than simply playing the "defensive game" of responding to his health concerns after they arose.
- His care was **patient-driven**. Bob was the one mobilizing his team. He was in charge of his goals and his plan. He decided where to focus and when. He also took classes, learned skills, and most importantly, understood the importance of taking care of himself. He acknowledged that he had to do his own work and could not simply be passive as others took care of him.

- He remained highly **motivated**. His team helped with that, by engaging him in his care.
- His care was **evidence-informed**. Bob was guided to follow a care plan that was supported by good research whenever available. His longevity despite his multiple chronic issues was likely due to a combination of factors, including his connections with others, his spirituality and sense of purpose, his ability to stay active, his improved sleep, his decreased cardiac risk, his improved mood, and his ability to manage stress. The important thing was, his care included many different elements that could increase his longevity. No one will ever know how much each individual factor contributed, but the final outcome was good.
- Bob had a dedicated **transdisciplinary** team that communicated in-person, on the phone, and through medical records. The team communicated well with Bob and with each other.

## The Transdisciplinary Team

Transdisciplinary teams are vital to the successful creation of an Integrative Health Care System. As various organizations experiment with implementing Integrative Health, clinicians must determine how they can best contribute to it, based on their training, skills, and scope of practice. Just as patients do when creating their health plans, clinicians must also ask what education, skill building and support they need to be effective Integrative Health caregivers. How this looks will vary by person and by profession? For instance, one health coach will do things differently compared to other health coaches. They will also do it differently from a physician, advanced practitioner, social worker, pharmacist, chaplain, psychologist, dietitian, occupational therapist, or medical assistant. There is a richness in the diversity of practice styles that come into play.

The medical literature describes 3 general types of teams:<sup>1</sup>

1. **Multidisciplinary teams** are groups of professionals working in parallel to support a patient. They do not necessarily communicate.
2. **Interdisciplinary teams** are groups of professionals working together to address a common problem. Though their perspectives may remain separate, they work together more closely.
3. **Transdisciplinary teams** work from a shared framework that links ideas from different disciplines. Each discipline's unique expertise is honored, but team members let down professional boundaries. Transdisciplinary team members include professionals (including CIH practitioners), the patient, and the patient's loved ones and various members of the community. Some experts hold that transdisciplinary teams are equipped to focus on real-world problems in ways other types of teams cannot.<sup>2</sup>

An Integrative Health Team is a transdisciplinary team. Patients are active members of their team. They are the captains, essentially, and they choose the other team members. Bob's team included his daughter, health coach, primary care team members, acupuncturist, tai chi instructor, physical therapist, dietitian, psychotherapist, AA sponsor, and pharmacist. Some of his peer supporters were part of his team as well.

## What We Know About Successful Teams

Over 15 years ago, the Institute of Medicine noted that high-functioning teams with representatives from multiple disciplines were one of the key elements of the 21<sup>st</sup> –century health care system.<sup>3</sup> While most research related to teams focuses on interdisciplinary teams, findings likely cross-apply for transdisciplinary teams as well. Some of the main research findings related to team-based care include the following:

### 1. Functional teams are beneficial to patients and team members alike.<sup>2</sup>

- Patient outcomes improve.<sup>4</sup>
- Patient safety is enhanced—over 60% of sentinel events are linked to failures in inter-professional teamwork and communication.<sup>2</sup>
- Teams are more efficient when they work together, which results in increased cost savings and workforce retention, as well as reduced lengths of stay for patients.<sup>5</sup>
- Burnout risk is reduced for team members.<sup>6</sup>

### 2. Successful teams are likely to have certain characteristics.<sup>2,7,8</sup>

- Effective teams have strong support at the organizational level.
- Team leaders create a positive atmosphere and motivate fellow team members. They focus on keeping the team high-functioning.
- Protocols encourage communication, routine meetings, and standardized (and efficient) ways to both document and find information in patient records.
- Members back each other up, to prevent any one person from being overloaded or at risk of making errors.
- The team is adaptable; members handle change well.
- Teams practice democratic decision making, so collective agreement is given higher priority than individual perspectives or biases.
- Members trust and respect each other.
- There is excellent communication. A meta-analysis of 72 studies across different industries found that information sharing was one of the best predictors of overall performance for the nearly 4,800 teams studied.<sup>9</sup>
- Team members have a shared understanding and a sense of camaraderie. Camaraderie increases when team members complete training together and see each other outside of the workplace at social gatherings.
- Team members break out of professional silos and hierarchies and are mindfully aware of any biases they might have. Successful teams effectively navigate their differences in perspective and use those differences to their advantage.
- Successful teams still function well even if they are spread out geographically. Having a peer support person, a coach, or someone else who helps keep tabs on the overall Integrative Health trajectory of a given person is important; it is the equivalent of having a conductor who can bring an orchestra into harmony. Of course, the ultimate conductor is the patient, but it is important for them to have additional support keeping track of the many different aspects of their care.

## Your Role in the Integrative Health System

Take a moment to reflect on what you can bring to an Integrative Health System. Ideally, everyone in the system would have the skills and experiences necessary to confidently answer the following questions.

1. Do you have a good general knowledge about Whole Health?

- Do you have an Elevator Speech? If not, you can learn how to create one in Chapter 2 of the [Passport to Whole Health](#).
- Can you describe the various components of Circle of Health? Consider displaying a copy where you can see it regularly.
- Have you completed a PHI for yourself? You can complete the [Brief PHI](#).

2. Which of the following roles can you play in a Whole Health System? (You will likely find that you are suited for more than one role.)

- Organizational leader (Medical Director, Nursing Supervisor, Chief of Staff, Clinic Manager, etc.)
- Department Chair
- Care team leader
- Integrative Health provider
- Group visit or shared medical appointment leader
- Provider of services related to one or more of the self-care circles (e.g., a dietitian might be a Nutrition expert, or a social worker may help most with Surroundings or Relationships. Chaplains are a natural fit for Spirit and Soul).
- Provide CIH services or other Well-Being Programs
- Offer clinical visits that have dedicated time for personal health planning
- Set the stage for an Integrative Health visit (may include welcoming a patient to the clinic, explaining what Integrative Health is when they check them into a clinic or admit them to a hospital)
- Orient new patients about Whole Health
- Become a peer support person or coach
- Contribute to Whole Health inpatient care
- Contribute to Whole Health outpatient care
- Provide Whole Health-focused group home/residential care

3. Who else do you need on the team? It might be helpful to create a list of potential team members, (e.g., providers, nurses, mental health, pharmacists, physical therapy, chaplains, social workers, and people from the community.)\_

Each clinician, staff member, community provider, or other member of the transdisciplinary team will have something different to offer. Consider how your specific skills complement the skills of others on the team. There are a number of ways to build team dynamics, including [CREW](#), [TeamSTEPPS](#), [National Center for Organizational Development](#), Relationship-Based Care, and others.



A health care system is only as effective as the people who are part of it. As more people learn about the Integrative Health approach, “perhaps people will come to take it for granted that health care always equates to “good care,” the kind of care that everyone should be receiving. In your role, whatever that may be, you can be an integral part of the transformation to a health system that offers everyone the best care anywhere.

## Author(s)

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