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Key Findings

- The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing disparities in accessing mental health care in rural settings.
- Primary care providers have a unique opportunity to address the mental health needs of their patients, eliminating persistent barriers in access to care.
- The Weitzman ECHO Advanced Primary Care Adult Psychiatry Module was developed to enable primary care providers to deliver evidence-based mental health treatment to their adult patients.
- Findings from the module's pilot demonstrated statistically significant improvements in learners' knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy as a result of participating in the module. Participants expressed satisfaction with the module and described ways in which they applied the content to their clinic setting, demonstrating the module's applicability to their practice.
- Future implementation of the Advanced Primary Care Adult Psychiatry Module will be beneficial to providers to support their patients as evidence-based treatment strategies continuously evolve.

Module Objectives

This program aimed to enable participants to:

1. Integrate screening and symptomology instruments to determine appropriate first line treatments for common psychiatric conditions.
2. Assess patients' levels of care, stratifying based on diagnostic criteria, and determine when a referral to a higher level of care is necessary.
3. Improve the use of suicidality risk assessments and the management of psychiatric crises.
4. Better facilitate and improve medication management, behavioral approaches, and other therapies for common psychiatric conditions.
5. Utilize different members of the care team more effectively in order to promote integrated care.
6. Identify services to address social determinants of health to improve health outcomes.

What's at Stake?

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing disparities in accessing mental health care in rural settings. In the years leading up to the pandemic, prevalence rates for mental illness in rural areas were already rising. One study found that the suicide rate between 2001 and 2015 in rural counties was approximately one and a half times more than in their urban counterparts.¹ Meanwhile, in 2020, the estimated percentage of rural counties without access to a psychologist or psychiatrist ranged from thirty to more than eighty percent in some states.¹ Data from the SAMHSA National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicates that in 2021, the prevalence of adults who experienced a serious mental illness was significantly higher for rural counties as compared to their metropolitan counterparts, and there was a significant difference in the proportion of these individuals who received medication as their only form of treatment in rural versus metropolitan counties.² In light of the contextual data around access to behavioral health professionals, it is likely that these individuals were receiving treatment from their primary care providers.



In response, the Weitzman Institute launched the Project ECHO Advanced Primary Care (APC) Adult Psychiatry Module in February 2022. This live, virtual 8-session series aimed to enable primary care providers to deliver evidence-based adult mental health treatment. Each ECHO session consisted of a 30-minute or less didactic followed by a case presentation shared by participants for discussion and feedback from faculty and other participants. To understand how the Adult Psychiatry Module influenced learner outcomes and practice changes, evaluators conducted a pre-post study design.

Methods

Data was collected through surveys at the beginning and end of the module. The pre-survey collected information about the participants and assessed their baseline knowledge, skills, attitudes, and self-efficacy related to the ECHO module's learning objectives. It was administered to 109 registered participants (n=109) and was completed by 71 participants (n=71) for a response rate of 64%. The post-survey included questions related to: program outcomes including level of knowledge, skills, self-efficacy, attitudes, and practice; program satisfaction; and the participants' application of the ECHO content. This survey was administered to 73 active participants (i.e., those that attended at least one session) and was completed by 30 participants for a response rate of 41%. End of module learner outcomes were compared to baseline responses using a paired sample t-test to evaluate changes for each domain as a result of participating in the module.

Results

Findings demonstrated statistically significant differences in select learner outcomes after participation in the Advanced Primary Care ECHO Adult Psychiatry Module (see Table 1). More specifically, participants experienced statistically significant improvements in:

- **Knowledge (p=0.022), self-efficacy (p=0.014), and skills (p=0.019) related to managing a psychiatric crisis;**
- **Knowledge (p=0.012) and self-efficacy (p=0.022) for utilizing suicidality risk assessment tools;**
- **Knowledge changes (p=0.047) in identifying services to address issues related to social determinants of health;** and
- **Skills (p=0.050) related to screening patients for common psychiatric conditions.**

Statement	Pre-Mean (1-5)	Post-Mean (1-5)	Change in Mean	Significance (p<0.05)
KNOWLEDGE				
Selecting appropriate first line treatments based on screening and symptomology	3.00	3.22	0.22	0.293
Assessing a patient's level of care and determining if a referral to a higher level of care is required	3.35	3.54	0.19	0.253
Utilizing suicidality risk assessment tools	3.22	3.74	0.52	0.012
Managing psychiatric crises	2.78	3.35	0.57	0.022
Identifying services to address issues related to social determinants of health	3.26	3.74	0.48	0.047
Utilizing medication management strategies	3.04	3.48	0.44	0.053
Applying behavioral approaches and therapies	3.17	3.43	0.26	0.183
SELF-EFFICACY				
Selecting appropriate first line treatments based on screening and symptomology	2.65	3.22	0.57	0.065
Utilizing suicidality risk assessment tools	2.61	3.35	0.74	0.022
Managing psychiatric crises	2.13	3.04	0.91	0.014
SKILLS				
Identifying appropriate screening and symptomology instruments for common psychiatric conditions	2.74	3.30	0.56	0.104
Screening patients for common psychiatric conditions	2.91	3.65	0.74	0.050
Managing psychiatric crises	2.48	3.35	0.87	0.019
ATTITUDES				
Addressing factors related to social determinants of health in the treatment of patients with psychiatric disorders leads to better patient outcomes	4.57	4.52	-0.05	0.788
Utilizing different members of the care team is essential for addressing patients' need when managing psychiatric conditions	4.65	4.48	-0.17	0.257

Table 1. Participant Changes in Learner Outcomes for Adult Psychiatry Module Objectives

Participants also expressed satisfaction with key components of the ECHO module. Results are displayed in Figure 1. Reported on a scale of 1 to 5, high satisfaction was reported with the **expertise provided by faculty (M=4.36)**, **ECHO learning community (M=4.25)**, and the **content covered during didactic presentations (M=4.21)**. As stated by one participant,

"I enjoyed the expert panelist[s] who share[d] knowledge and best practices."

Participant Satisfaction

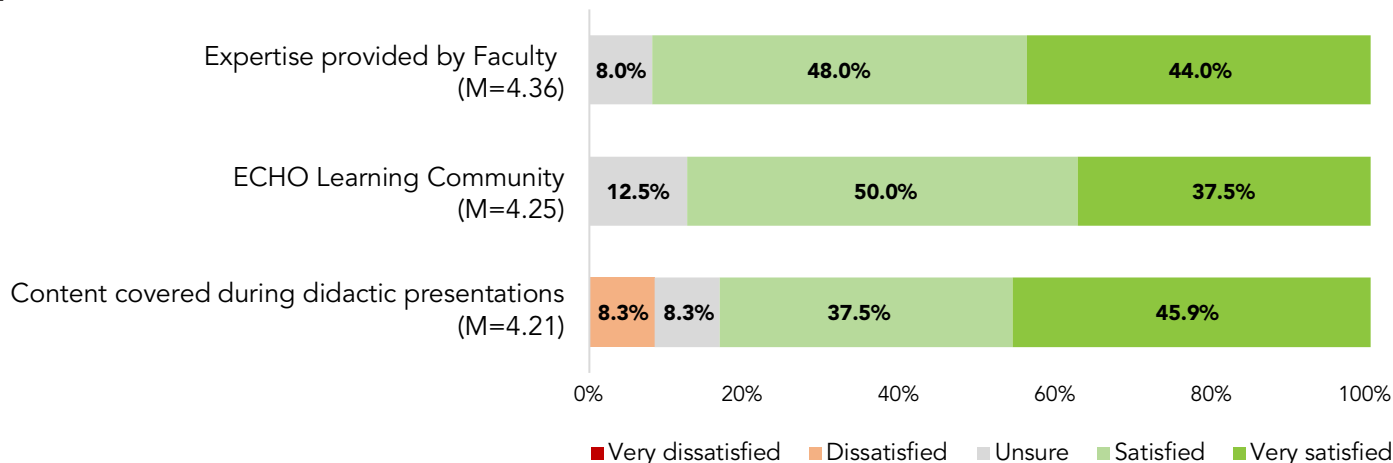


Figure 1. Participant Satisfaction with the Advanced Primary Care Adult Psychiatry Module

On a scale of 1-5, participants indicated their agreement with a series of statements related to the ways in which they applied the content learned to their clinic setting, demonstrating the applicability of the content. The results from these questions are shown in Figure 2. Participants expressed the strongest level of agreement that they **apply best practices learned through the module to all of their patients experiencing psychiatric conditions in a primary care setting (M=3.96)**. Participants also agreed that they have **applied new team-based care strategies to their practice as a result of what they learned in this module (M=3.83)** and that they **often shared what they learned from this module with colleagues (M=3.77)**. One participant noted,

"[I am] continuing to collaborate with other members of the behavioral health team and working to develop work flows to best utilize the talented people on the team."

Application of Content

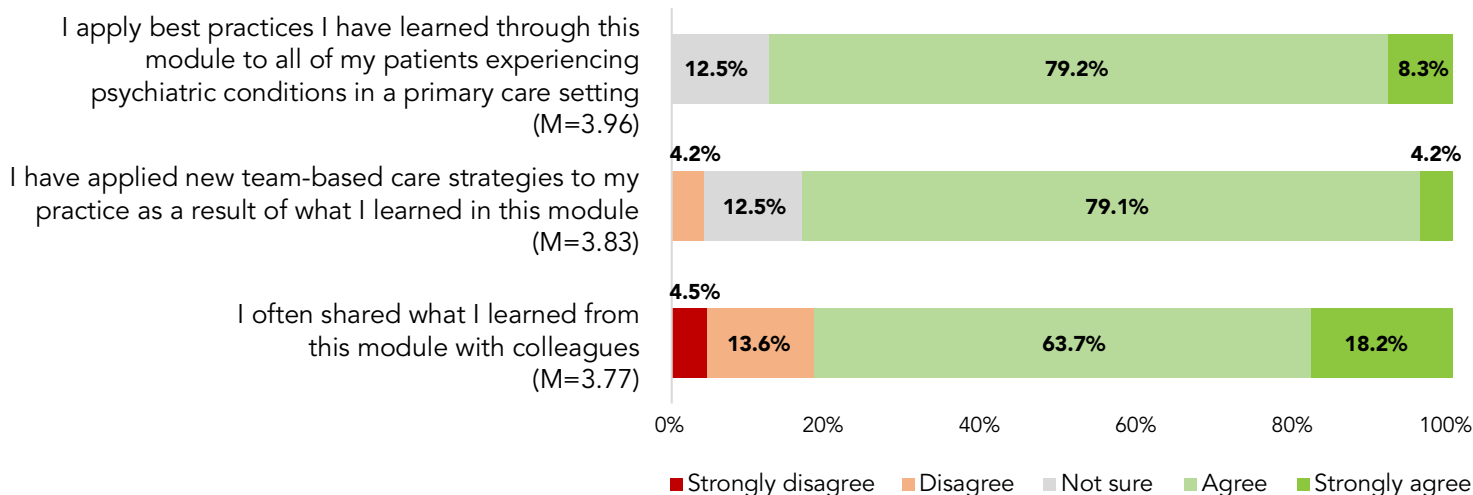


Figure 2. Participant Application of Advanced Primary Care Adult Psychiatry Module Content to Clinical Setting

Discussion

The purpose of the Weitzman ECHO Advanced Primary Care Adult Psychiatry Module was **to increase the capacity of primary care providers to deliver evidence-based interventions and treatments for adult mental health**. Results revealed **statistically significant improvement in knowledge, self-efficacy, and skills** for specific module objectives. Additionally, participants were **highly satisfied with the content, faculty knowledge, and engaging environment**. Most participants agreed that they **apply the best practices they learned through this module to their patients experiencing psychiatric conditions**.

Findings from this evaluation coincide with previous studies that assess the effectiveness of the ECHO model for delivering continued education to healthcare practitioners.³ The statistically significant positive changes in knowledge, self-efficacy, and skills indicate that the ECHO model improved participant outcomes, which could lead to care that is **more comprehensive and grounded in evidence-based practices** for the patients they serve. This is especially important as the module focused on providers that provide care in rural areas with limited specialists.

Primary care providers are typically the first point of contact and continuing point of care for many individuals, including those with psychiatric conditions. Previous research indicates that provider knowledge and personal values related to mental health and ability to deliver care in a person-centered manner determine the extent to which patients feel their specific mental and physical health needs are met in the primary care setting.⁴ Many primary care providers lack the education and support to address the mental health needs of their patients, emphasizing the need for continuing education related to this topic. As patient mental health conditions and evidence-based treatment strategies continuously evolve, the Weitzman Institute will continue to offer this ECHO to meet this critical need.

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More Information

For more information regarding Weitzman ECHO visit <https://www.weitzmaninstitute.org/education/weitzman-echo/> or contact **Ariel Porto** at portoar@chc1.com.

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