

Remove Intrusive Mental Health Questions from Licensure and Credentialing Applications

A Toolkit to Audit, Change,
and Communicate

All In
WellBeing First for Healthcare



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This toolkit was developed in collaboration with **Participant** and the American Medical Student Association as part of the impact campaign for the film *The First Wave*.

Barriers To Mental Health Access

6

Known Barriers for Doctors & Nurses

1. Licensure (state & specialty boards)
2. Hospital Credentialing
3. Commercial Insurance
4. Malpractice Insurance
5. Legal Discovery in Malpractice*
6. Health Plan Design

*Consider Safe Haven programs like Virginia's, [virginia.safehavenhealth.org](https://www.virginia.safehavenhealth.org)

How to Help Doctors Get Mental Health Care: Change the System, US News & World Report, Jennifer Feist, Corey Feist Sept. 9, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-09-09/change-the-system-to-help-doctors-get-mental-health-care>

The Effect of Invasive Questions

THE PROBLEM:

Clinicians aren't seeking mental health care despite high rates of burnout and stress.

Why?

They fear losing their license and credentials because of overly broad and invasive mental health questions on applications that are stigmatizing, discriminatory, and violate privacy in the workplace—and may even violate the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).



“ My sister-in-law Dr. Lorna Breen, who died by suicide in April 2020, was convinced that if she received mental health care, she would lose her medical license or face ostracism from colleagues. Sadly, we have heard from a number of families who lost physicians to suicide and their loved ones who expressed nearly identical concerns to Lorna. ”

J. Corey Feist, House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health, 10-26-21

The Data:

Nearly
four in 10
physicians

were either afraid or knew another physician fearful of seeking mental health care because of questions asked in medical licensure, credentialing, or insurance applications.

The Physicians Foundation 2022 Survey of America's Physicians

This must change.

Are These Questions Protecting the Public?

In short, no.

- In many cases, while these invasive questions were originally developed with good intent, it is a misconception that these questions actually protect the public, and in many cases, it has the opposite effect.
- Our goal here should be for everyone to take care of their physical and mental health so they can provide the best care to patients.
- While there is no data demonstrating that these questions protect the public, it is well documented that they often lead to clinicians not seeking care. Ensuring that clinicians can access necessary mental health care not only benefits their well-being, but it also improves the health of our entire country. Patient outcomes will improve when we prioritize clinician well-being, because to care for others, clinicians must also be cared for.

See: Burnout Among Health Care Professionals: A Call to Explore and Address This Underrecognized Threat to Safe, High-Quality Care, [National Academy of Medicine](#)

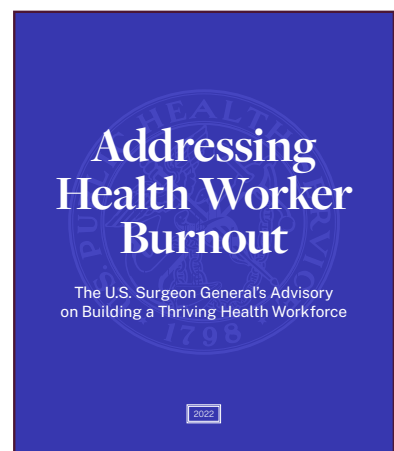
And Our National Leaders Agree



Joint Commission Statement on Removing Barriers to Mental Health Care for Clinicians and Health Care Staff

The Joint Commission does not require organizations to ask about a clinician's history of mental health conditions or treatment. We strongly encourage organizations to not ask about past history of mental health conditions or treatment.

[View the Statement](#) →



[Read the Full Advisory](#) →

3 Steps

Medical Boards and Hospitals/Health Systems Can Take:



1. AUDIT

all licensure and credentialing applications, addendums, and peer review forms.



2. CHANGE

any invasive or stigmatizing language around mental health.



3. COMMUNICATE

these changes to your workforce and assure clinicians that it is safe for them to seek care.

STEP 1: Audit

Audit all licensure and credentialing applications, addendums, and peer review forms.

Review **every single application** your organization issues, including training, renewal, initial, educational, supplemental/addendum, peer reference, and peer review forms.

Look for the following:

- Questions that contain **invasive** or **stigmatizing** language and **disclosure requests** around a clinician's **health or well-being**.
- Questions that ask about a clinician's history of **"time off"** or **"breaks in practice."**
- Language that references **mental health explicitly** in any way that's not supportive (see next page for recommended language).
- Questions that ask about **past usage or experiences**.
- Unnecessary asterisks or fine print (i.e., "current impairment can be any time in the last 5 years").

There is no reason to separate mental and physical health unless you're encouraging clinicians to seek treatment if and as needed.

STEP 2: Change

Change any invasive or stigmatizing language around mental health.



OPTION 1: Ask one question consistent with the Federation of State Medical Board's Recommended Language that addresses all mental and physical health conditions as one, with no added explanations, asterisks, or fine print:

"Are you currently suffering from any condition for which you are not being appropriately treated that impairs your judgment or that would otherwise adversely affect your ability to practice medicine in a competent, ethical, and professional manner? (Yes/No)"



OPTION 2: Refrain from asking probing questions about an applicant's health altogether.



OPTION 3: Implement an Attestation Model, like that used in North Carolina* and Mississippi. This uses supportive language around mental health from the Board and holds physicians accountable to their well-being, making it clear that their self-care is patient care. Offer "safe haven" non-reporting options to physicians who are under treatment and in good standing with a recognized physician health program (PHP) or other appropriate care provider.

***Important:** The Board recognizes that licensees encounter health conditions, including those involving mental health and substance use disorders, just as their patients and other health care providers do. The Board expects its licensees to address their health concerns and ensure patient safety. Options include seeking medical care, self-limiting the licensee's medical practice, and anonymously self-referring to the NC Physicians Health Program a physician advocacy organization dedicated to improving the health and wellness of medical professionals in a confidential manner. The failure to adequately address a health condition, where the licensee is unable to practice medicine within reasonable skill and safety to patients, can result in the Board taking action against the license to practice medicine.

STEP 3: Communicate

Communicate these changes and assure clinicians that it is safe for them to seek care.

- **Identify** your channel(s) of communication and your trusted messenger(s) for each key audience (licensees, health system leaders, etc.).
- **Craft** your message and ensure that in communicating these changes, clinicians are first met with supportive language so they know it is safe to seek mental health care. Sample language in reaching out is below.
 - “Your Medical Board/Health System recognizes the hardships of the last several years of the pandemic and urges you to seek the mental health care and support that you need. It is in the best interest of yourself, your patients, and your colleagues to take care of your physical and mental well-being, and we want to assure you that it is safe and encouraged to seek this care. As a protective and supportive measure, we have recently removed all unnecessary questions about mental health from all of our licensure/credentialing applications.”
- **Be direct, specific, and transparent** in communications (via text, mail, or email) with your audiences.
- **Establish** a designated communications channel to update clinicians in real time on the new language.
- **Make applications available** and **easily accessible** to the public on your website. Applications that are behind online portals inhibit transparency; it is important to ensure that applications are fully accessible on your website.
- **For health and hospital systems:** Share your institution's and state's facts on each of the 6 structural barriers. Knowledge is power, and in this case has lifesaving potential. This action is a transparent and measurable way that every health and hospital system can support its most valuable resource—its workforce.

Suggested Social Messaging: Communicate Out

Communicate these changes and assure clinicians that it is safe for them to seek care.

FACEBOOK COPY OPTION 1:

It's SAFE to seek mental health support! We're proud to share that we have recently updated our licensure/credentialing applications to be more supportive of physicians who need to seek or have sought mental health care and treatment. We recognize the hardships of the last two years of the pandemic and its toll on your mental health and well-being. We urge you to seek the care you need without fearing career setbacks. It is in the best interest of yourself, your patients, and your colleagues to take care of your physical and mental well-being, and we want to assure you that it is highly encouraged to do so. Let's [#StopTheStigma](#) and normalize conversations about mental health for all.

FACEBOOK COPY OPTION 2:

We have successfully audited and updated our state's licensing/credentialing questions, and have removed any invasive and stigmatizing language around mental health, to ensure our healthcare workforce that seeking mental health support is both safe and encouraged. Supporting and protecting clinicians' mental health is paramount to the well-being of healthcare professionals, their patients, their colleagues, and their families. And while there is much more work to be done, this is a significant step to [#StopTheStigma](#) and protect healthcare professionals' mental health and well-being.

TWEET OPTION 1:

It's SAFE to seek mental health care! We're proud to share we have updated our licensure/credentialing applications to make sure your privacy and safety around accessing mental health care is protected. For more information, [URL AND/ OR CONTACT INFO] Let's [#StopTheStigma](#) and normalize conversations about mental health for all!

TWEET OPTION 2:

It's SAFE to seek mental health care! We recognize the hardships of the last two years of the pandemic and urge you to seek the mental health care you need without fearing career setbacks. For more information, [URL AND/ OR CONTACT INFO] [#StopTheStigma](#)

TWEET OPTION 3:

We have updated our state's licensing/credentialing questions and have removed stigmatizing language around mental health to ensure that our healthcare workers seek the mental health support they need. For more information, [URL AND/ OR CONTACT INFO] [#StopTheStigma](#)

TWEET OPTION 4:

We urge you to seek the mental health care you need without fearing career setbacks and know that we support you. It's in the best interest of yourself, your patients, and your colleagues to take care of your physical and mental well-being. For more information, [URL AND/ OR CONTACT INFO] [#StopTheStigma](#)

Creative Assets for Social Media

Downloadable Asset Files:

Instagram (4:5 size): <https://participantmedia.box.com/s/o4axlzh3e-589hu3u2d9dbe4d3wbh6o4>

Facebook (1:1 size): <https://participantmedia.box.com/s/uti2ztsvrsswccno2sy-w5cm0cxm4f0pu>

Twitter (Landscape): <https://participantmedia.box.com/s/uluj70xf2fmmlfk-ckdxgzshvdpjotji8>

We urge you to seek the mental health care you need without fearing career setbacks.

It is SAFE to seek mental health support.

Rx

It is in the best interest of yourself, your patients, and your colleagues to take care of your physical and mental wellbeing.

Suggested Social Messaging: Audit & Change

INVITE other medical boards, credentialing committees, and hospitals to **audit** all licensure and credentialing applications + **change** any invasive or stigmatizing language around mental health.

FACEBOOK COPY OPTION 1:

We recognize that the pandemic has had an unfathomable toll on clinicians' mental health, and it's up to us to support their well-being. In our efforts to **#StopTheStigma** and ensure that our workforce has access to the mental health support they need, we have recently updated our licensure/credentialing applications to be more supportive of clinicians. We encourage other state medical boards, specialty boards, and credentialing committees to also audit their licensure or credentialing applications, remove unnecessary questions about physicians' mental health, and communicate these changes to their workforce.

FACEBOOK COPY OPTION 2:

[Share your board's story and experiences of how you changed your questions, and set an example for other boards to do the same!]

TWEET OPTION 1:

We've recently audited and updated our state's licensing/credentialing questions to remove any potentially invasive or stigmatizing language around mental health to ensure our healthcare workers that seeking mental health support is both safe and crucial. It's time to **#StopTheStigma**

TWEET OPTION 2:

We have taken the important step to support physicians' well-being by removing invasive language in licensure/credentialing applications. It's time for other medical boards and credentialing committees to follow suit. **#StopTheStigma**

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Twitter (Landscape): <https://participantmedia.box.com/s/ulu70xf2fmm1fk-ckdxgzshvdpjotji8>

We are committed to:

Auditing licensing applications

Removing unnecessary questions about physicians' mental health

Communicating these changes to our workforce

We are committed to ensuring that physicians have access to mental health care without any fear of losing their job.

Supporting and protecting clinicians' mental health is paramount to the wellbeing of healthcare professionals, their patients, their colleagues, and their families.

#StopTheStigma

Let's #StopTheStigma and normalize conversations about mental health for all!

Protect the mental health of our health workforce

Learn more 

Want your state to be ALL IN for prioritizing clinician well-being?

Submit your updated licensure applications by emailing ALLIN@drbreenheroes.org

We also urge all medical boards to make applications publicly available on their website.

STAY TUNED

Our WellBeing First Champion Challenge is coming soon to recognize the hospitals and health systems who are ALL IN for protecting its workforce. To participate, submit your updated credentialing applications by email to ALLIN@drbreenheroes.org.

All In
WellBeing First for Healthcare

CO-FOUNDERS:



**FIRST
RESPONDERS
FIRST**