

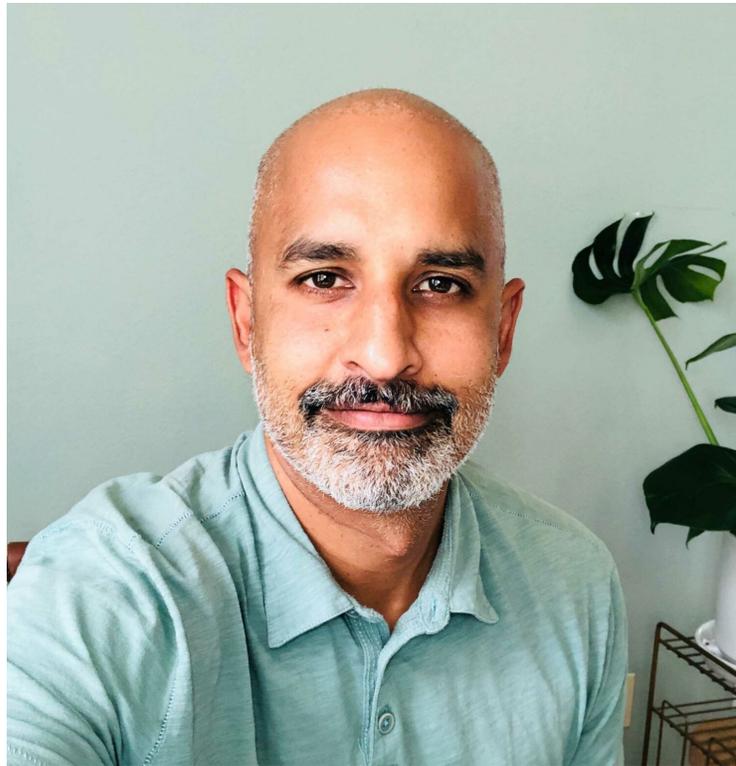


# Why Patient Portal Usability is Critical to Patient Experience

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Improving patient experience is a primary concern for behavioral health providers today. A positive patient experience can keep clients returning, while a frustrating or confusing experience may push them away. With so much on the line, it's important to get it right. One of the most powerful tools in a behavioral health practice's arsenal is a user-friendly, highly functional patient portal. These portals are often clients' main point of connection to a practice outside of appointments.

## **What is “The Patient Experience” and Why Is It Important?**

The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) defines the “patient experience” as “the range of interactions that patients have with the healthcare system.” This includes interactions with providers and the actual care itself. It also includes interaction with staff

members, timely appointments, accessing their information and records, and communicating with their provider or practice outside of appointments.

When clients have a positive experience with a provider and also find these logistics easy to navigate, they're much more likely to stay with a practice. If interactions with a practice are disjointed or confusing, they may get discouraged and ultimately leave the practice.

Technology has allowed us to build more conveniences into our daily lives, but the flip side is that those conveniences heighten the expectations of consumers. They've grown to expect more convenience and to treat it as a must-have, not as a perk.

Utilizing online patient portals has been one-way behavioral health practices have been able to change a mediocre or bad patient experience for the better. They bring several distinct advantages over traditional models of patient and practice interaction.

## **Convenience**

Many patient portals today come equipped with a range of functionalities that allow patients to get information quickly and easily. For example, in a robust patient portal, patients can check billing statements, request appointments, fill out paperwork, update their personal or payment info, access test results and medical records, and more.

Before patient portals, all of these things required a phone call or in-person visit to the practitioner's office—or a long wait time for snail mail. Historically, patient portals were browser-based but today some are available in app form adding extra convenience and greater accessibility. For the best experience, a patient portal should work on a desktop, on mobile, and via an app. This gives patients multiple ways to access critical health information and engage with a practice.

## **Improving the Patient Experience with Communication**

Communication with the practice and with the provider(s) is a huge part of the patient experience. Some of that communication happens face-to-face during appointments. However, technology has left patients craving fast, easy communication outside of appointment times.

Between appointments, patients may have questions about their treatment plan. They may begin experiencing new or worrisome symptoms and need reassurance. Or, they may have questions about upcoming appointments.

It's hard for providers to field all of those things through phone calls. And because of HIPAA privacy regulations, email isn't an easy fix either.

HIPAA-compliant patient portals provide a platform for secure messaging between patients and providers outside of appointment times. The same applies to interactions with staff. Rather than calling in with schedule or billing questions and being transferred around the office to the right person, clients can just hit “send” on a message to practice staff and wait for a reply from the correct person. They can also easily access their telehealth sessions.

### **Simple Onboarding**

First impressions are important. How a patient experiences their first appointment makes an impact. A cumbersome process of account setup and data collection can be frustrating.

In the past, patients had no choice but to endure long phone conversations with staff to deliver their personal information, or arrive early to the first appointment and fill it out on paper. With patient portals and/or mobile apps, much of this information-gathering can be conducted online before the first appointment, at the patient’s leisure.

### **Easier Outcome Measures**

Ultimately, the most important facet of the patient experience is whether treatment helps to alleviate symptoms and helps them heal from mental health challenges. Here again, a well-designed patient portal can help by supporting the use of outcome measures.

Research is clear that outcome measures can improve results for behavioral health patients.

But outcome measures can feel cumbersome to patients if it means filling out additional materials at the office, which can cut into appointment time and/or force patients to arrive early.

Even worse, the logistics of managing outcome measures make some practices avoid them altogether, so patients are missing out on the full range of treatment benefits they might enjoy—even if they don’t know it.

A patient portal that supports the distribution and collection of outcome measures online makes it more practical for practitioners to deliver this kind of care. It also allows patients to fill out the forms at their own convenience and visualize the results of assessments to feel confident that treatment is making progress.

### **Is a Patient Portal User-Friendly?**

Some behavioral health practices might be using a patient portal but don’t know how or whether it’s affecting patient experience. Practices can get a read on how clients interact with their patient portal by creating a demo patient account to confirm that the portal’s features work properly and offer easy communication. Adoption and use can also be tracked including how many patients have set up an account. If adoption is sluggish over time, it may be that the portal isn’t patient-friendly.

Investing time and effort in the patient portal experience is well worth it to raise client satisfaction and retention rates at a practice. Word-of-mouth from satisfied clients and increased referrals from referral sources are some of the best “marketing” tactics a practice can aim for—and a smooth patient experience is critical for this success.

### **About Ram Krishnan**

Ram Krishnan is the CEO of Valant, an EHR platform designed specifically for behavioral health professionals in group and solo private practices. Ram joined Valant in 2020 as an experienced technology executive to lead the organization through its next stage of growth. His passion for listening to the customer and building strong teams, coupled with his demonstrated ability to drive scalability, provide a solid foundation for Valant to grow as it finds new ways to serve the behavioral healthcare market.