

A photograph of two women wearing face masks, overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. The woman on the right is in the foreground, looking directly at the camera. The woman on the left is slightly behind her, also looking forward. Both are wearing light-colored, pleated surgical-style masks.

Mental Health and Telehealth Utilization:

What the Pandemic
Data Is Telling Us



45%

say the pandemic
has affected their
mental health

19%

say the pandemic is having
a major impact on their
mental health

01. A physical—and mental— health crisis

The physical health effects of the coronavirus crisis are well documented. But as recent studies are uncovering, it's important for the healthcare industry—payers, providers and others—to address a concurrent crisis, as well: The detrimental impact of the pandemic on Americans' mental health.

According to a recent study,¹ nearly half of American adults say COVID-19 is harming their psychological wellbeing.

At Carenet Health, we took a look at our own data—collected from supporting the tens of thousands of patients every day during the height of the pandemic—for insights into the rising mental health concerns of those choosing to use virtual care.



02. Clearly, an increased use of telehealth for behavioral health triage

Over a 30-day period during the COVID-19 crisis (March 21 - April 21, 2020), Carenet analysis showed an overall increase of 166% in the numbers of behavioral health triage cases our healthcare professionals have handled via our nurse advice line and Virtual Clinic. (You can learn more about those solutions [here](#).)

Behavioral health triage cases are instances when our telehealth clinical teams use evidence-based behavioral health protocols to assess symptoms and guide patients.

166%

increase in behavioral
health telehealth cases

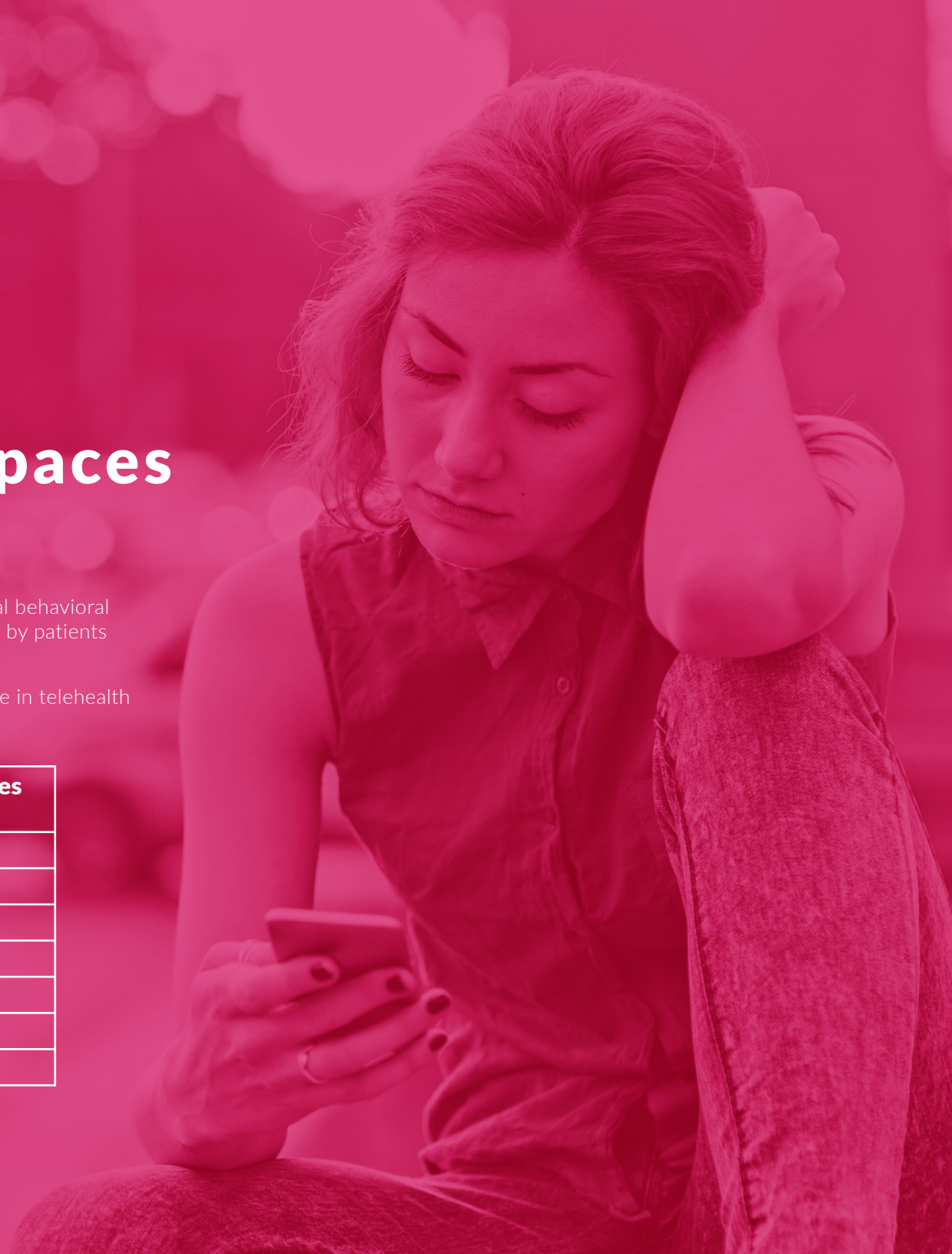
03. Millennial use outpaces other age groups

Telehealth patients ages 30 to 39 had the largest growth in virtual behavioral health triage cases in our data, with an increase of 37%, followed by patients ages 20 to 29, with a rise of 24%.

Interestingly, telehealth patients ages 50 to 59 saw a 4% decrease in telehealth triage cases for behavioral health.

Increase in Behavioral Health Telehealth Triage Cases by Age Group	
Under age 20	0%
20 -29	24%
30 - 39	37%
40 - 49	14%
50 - 59	-4%
60 - 69	11%
70+	19%

Percentage increase when comparing numbers of cases in February 2020 to March 2020, rounding up to nearest whole percentage point.





04. Anxiety tops the list of concerns

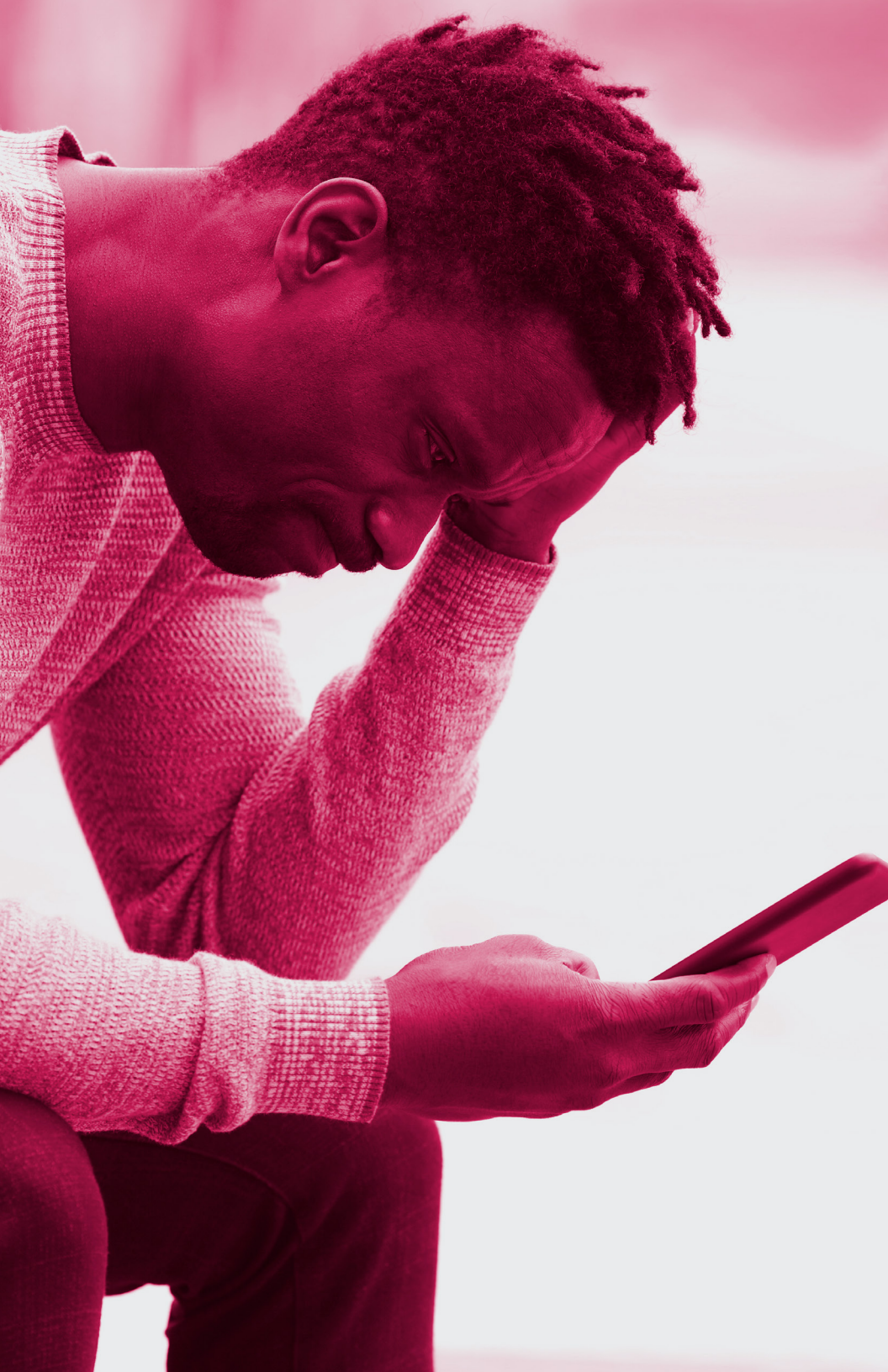
Carenet data showed that as the pandemic began to grip the U.S., anxiety-related telehealth triage cases saw a 41% increase (March 2020 compared to February 2020). In fact, anxiety-related triage cases made up 50% of all behavioral health-related triage calls in March 2020.

Telehealth cases indicating patients with potential withdrawal symptoms were also up 40% in March—a possible byproduct of the lack of access to mental health care, medication access and support as the health system became overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases.

Virtual care triage cases related to depression rose by 18%.

Top 4 Types of Telehealth Behavioral Health Cases, March 2020

1. Anxiety/panic attacks
2. Depression
3. Sleep disorders
4. Withdrawal symptoms



05. Quotes from the frontlines

We also interviewed our Carenet clinical teams—made up of outstanding registered nurses (RNs) serving 24/7 on the telehealth frontlines—for their anecdotal insights to learn what they're hearing from behavioral health-triaged patients. Here are some examples of what they're telling us.

"The anxiety and despair is truly apparent in so many of our telehealth patients right now, no matter their age, gender, cultural background and socioeconomic class."

"Patients are experiencing barriers to care access and reaching their usual therapists and doctors. We're a crucial link, a person who will listen on the other end of the line."

"We have patients who are out of anxiety or depression medication and can't get in touch with their usual providers for refill approvals. In these cases, we often play the part of a liaison AND nurse."

"Anxiety is high across the board. Many patients want testing so they know if they are spreading COVID to others, and testing is not available or not an option in many cases."

"Job loss is weighing heavy on a lot of people right now. Individuals with set and limited income are struggling to meet basic needs, and it's presenting as mental health concerns."

"I am experiencing calls from more and more college students struggling with anxiety and depression. They're running out of savings, struggling with online learning and not coping well with social isolation from friends."



06. The critical role of telehealth

While traditional healthcare providers are focused on emergency response to COVID-19 and Americans are encouraged to stay at home, the role of virtual telehealth care is playing an unprecedented role in providing patients with access to non-contact quality care. And that includes those who have behavioral health concerns.

That's why telehealth is emerging as an essential mental health lifeline.

Unfortunately, there are few signs that the need for that lifeline will lessen any time soon. Authors of a report in *JAMA Internal Medicine*² said they're expecting a surge in mental illness as the pandemic continues to evolve—with increases in anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness and domestic violence.

If we're wise as an industry, we'll use this difficult time as an opportunity to improve our understanding of how to provide virtual care that is not only excellent for non-emergency physical health needs, but also efficient and effective mental health care that is consumer-centric and population-specific—in crisis, in prevention and for long-term whole-health needs.

07. About Carenet Health

Carenet Health is the nation's premier telehealth and healthcare engagement partner—providing consumer engagement, clinical support, virtual care and health advocacy solutions on behalf of 250+ of the nation's most consumer-focused health plans and health systems. Our mission is to drive transformational engagement, lower costs and better outcomes through our proprietary Intelligent Engagement™ approach.

We offer an industry-renowned nurse advice line service, an innovative and comprehensive Virtual Clinic and just-in-time behavioral health crisis support. For more information visit **carenethealth.com**.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Send an email to
marketing@carenethealthcare.com

Sources:

1. Tracking poll, Kaiser Family Foundation, conducted March 25 to 30, 2020.
2. Galea S, Merchant RM, Lurie N. The Mental Health Consequences of COVID-19 and Physical Distancing: The Need for Prevention and Early Intervention. *JAMA Intern Med*. Published online April 10, 2020.

