



2026 State of AI for Behavioral Health

Table of Contents

Executive Summary3

Key Findings from the Qualifacts National Survey..... 4

What Shaped Behavioral Healthcare in 2025 and Beyond.....11

What’s the Impact of AI for Behavioral Health?17

Use Cases and Impact Areas..... 22

How to Drive Success with AI for Behavioral Health.....30

Challenges and Considerations.....36

Conclusion.....41

Endnotes.....44

Executive Summary

Behavioral healthcare is at a crossroads. Rising demand for services, coupled with severe workforce shortages, is straining the system. At the same time, artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as a transformative force—offering solutions to reduce administrative burdens, improve efficiency, and enhance care.

This report explores the current state of AI adoption in behavioral health, public attitudes toward its use, and actionable strategies for behavioral health organizations to integrate AI responsibly and deliver care that is both effective and deeply human.

Key Findings from the Qualifacts National Survey

AI is entering behavioral health workflows, but its success depends on more than technology—it requires trust, transparency, and strong safeguards.

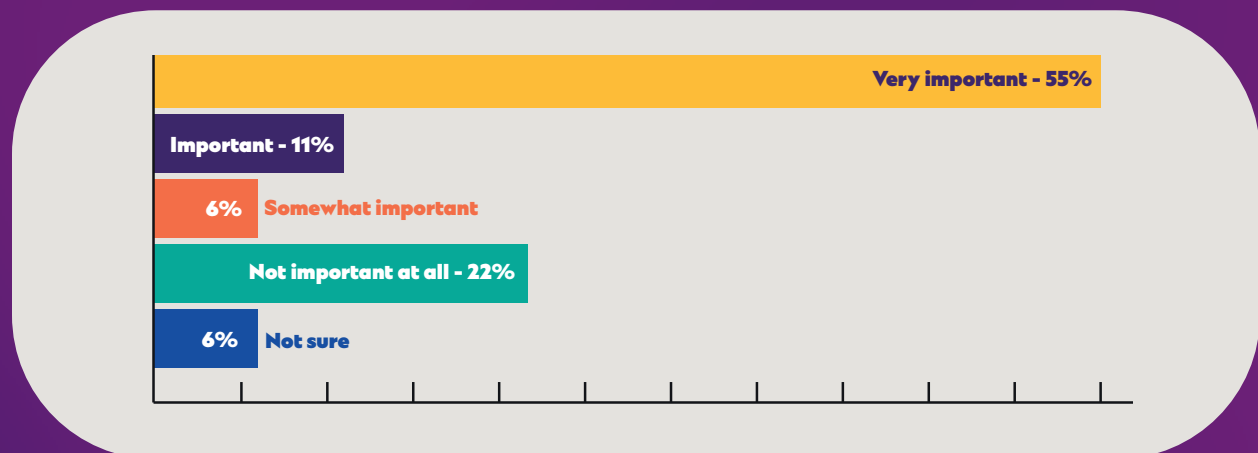
To understand public attitudes toward AI in behavioral health, Qualifacts recently conducted a national survey of 2,000 U.S. adults. The results reveal strong interest in AI's potential, along with clear expectations for clinician oversight and privacy protections.

Survey Highlights

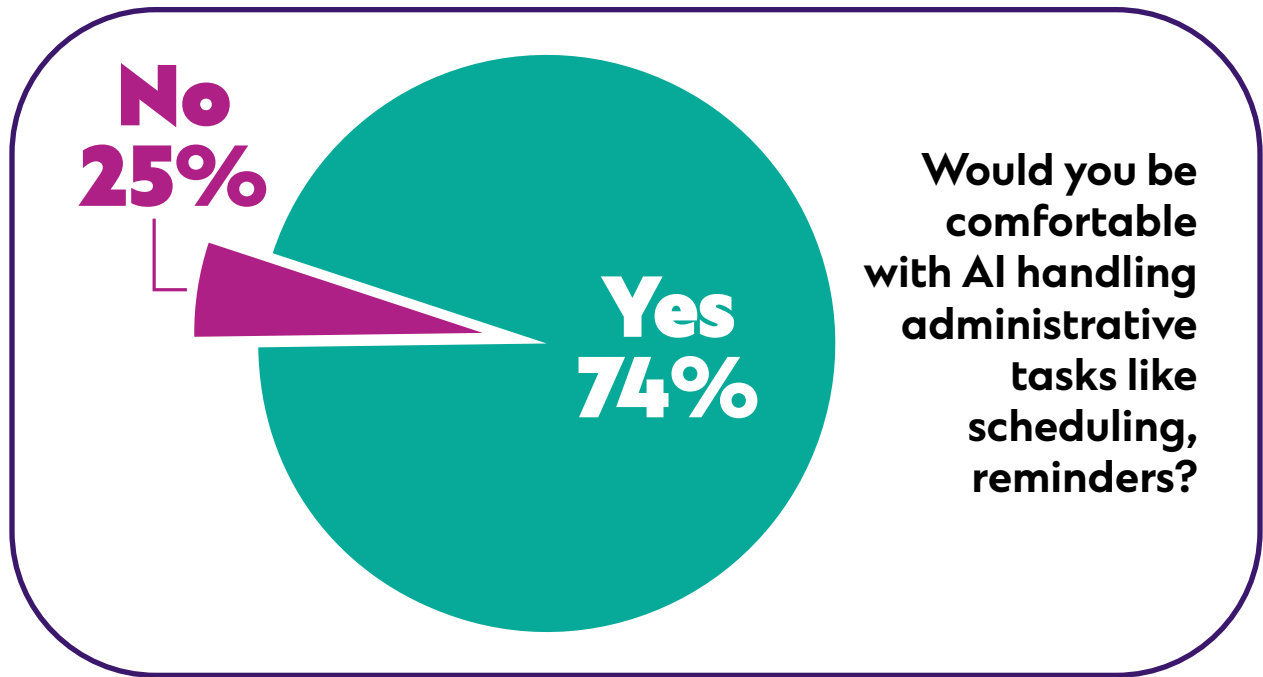
The survey uncovered several important trends shaping the future of behavioral health.

More than 80% of respondents reported seeing a doctor or mental health professional in the past year, underscoring the continued demand for care.

When it comes to AI, 77% believe patients should always be informed when AI is involved in their care, and 76% expect providers to meet international certification standards such as ISO/IEC 42001:2023.



There is an international AI certification standard to ensure responsible and secure AI usage by mental health and behavioral health providers. How important is it that your provider meets those standards?



Administrative applications of AI are widely accepted, with 74% of respondents comfortable with providers using AI for tasks like scheduling, billing, and reminders.

However, clear boundaries exist around clinical decision-making: only 10% would trust an AI-generated recommendation on its own, while 37% would consider AI guidance if a clinician remains involved.

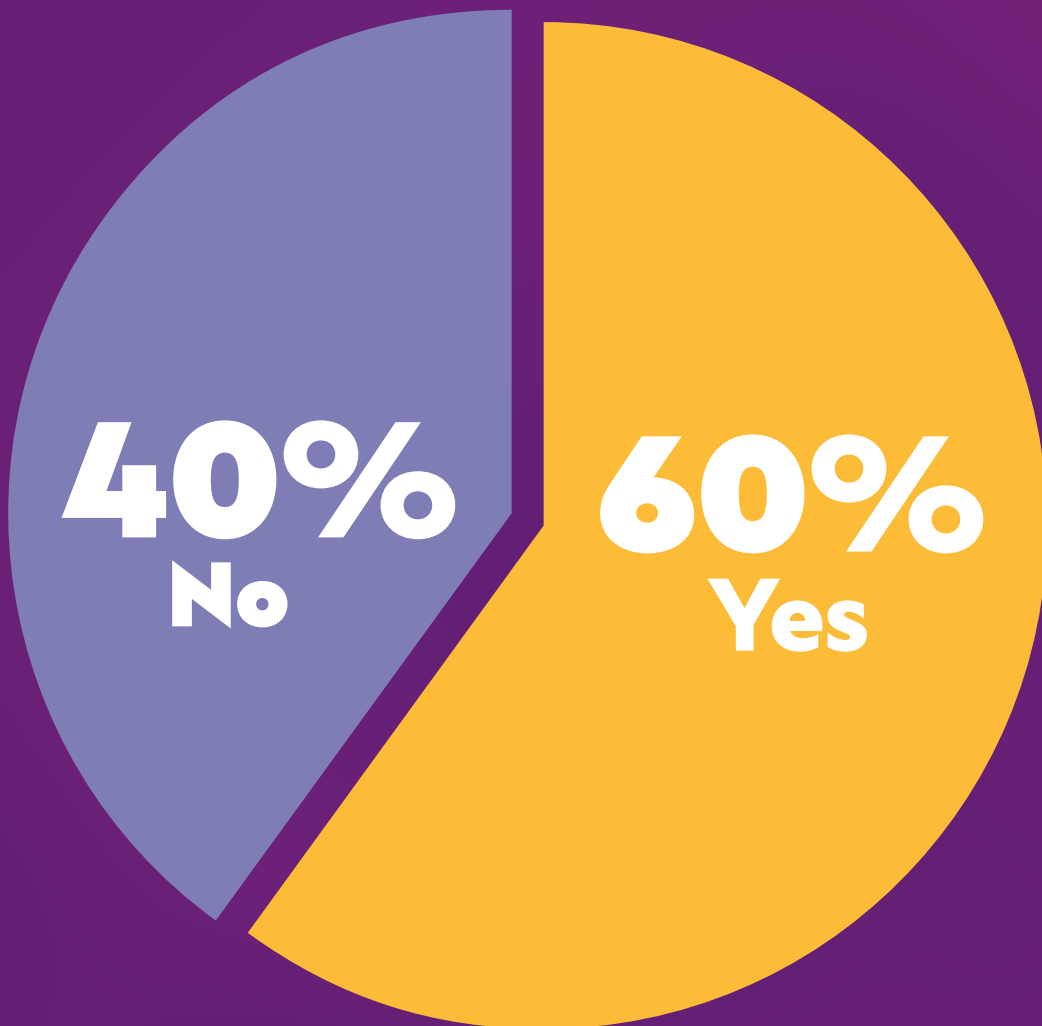
Nearly 29% of respondents already use AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini to explore mental health concerns, and 47% trust AI in healthcare either fully or in limited ways—though only 9% fully trust it.

Interpretation and Industry Impact

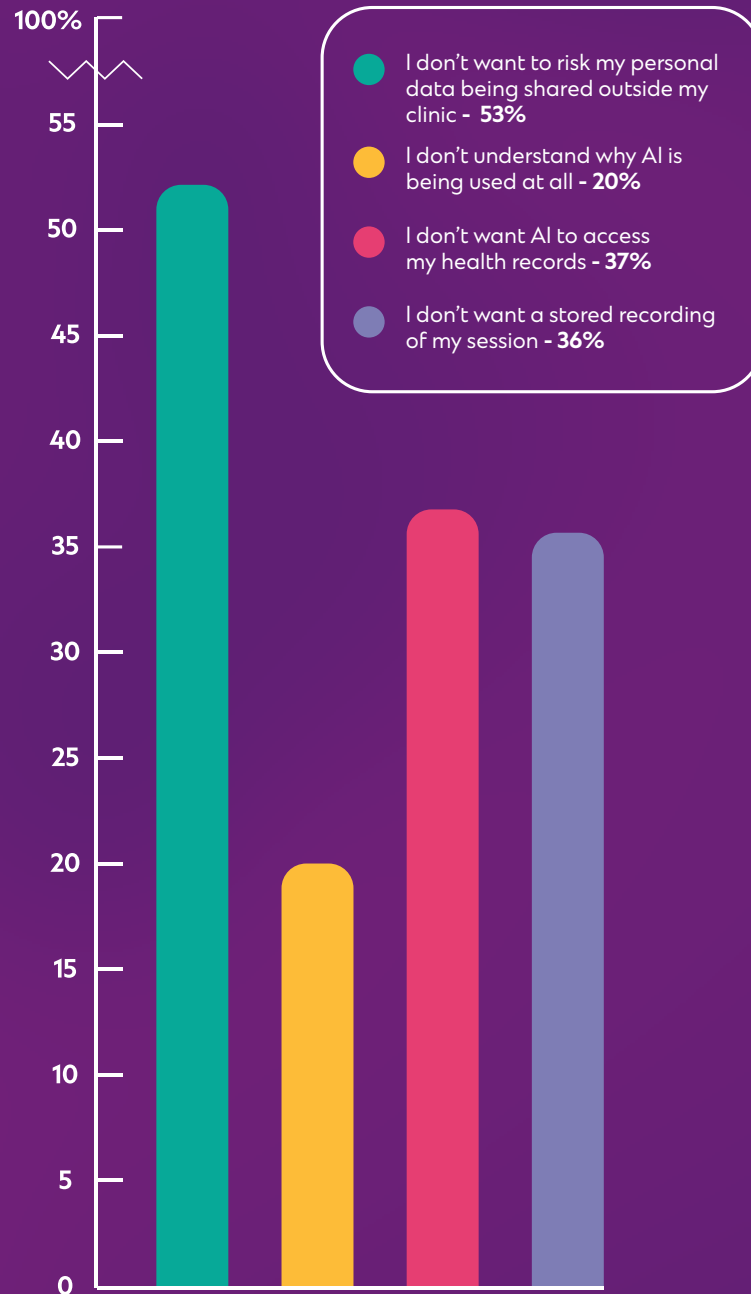
These findings reveal a nuanced perspective: Americans are ready to embrace AI in behavioral health, but only under conditions that prioritize transparency, privacy, and human oversight.

- **Prioritize Transparency:** Clients expect clear disclosure when AI is involved in their care. Providers should integrate communication protocols that explain how AI supports—not replaces—clinical decision-making.
- **Recognized Certification and Compliance:** With 76% of respondents expecting adherence to international AI certification standards, including International Organization for Standardization (ISO) frameworks, organizations should look to recognized certifications and governance frameworks to reinforce trust.
- **Focus on Administrative Efficiency First:** Acceptance of AI for provider scheduling, billing, and reminders presents a low-risk entry point for adoption, allowing providers to demonstrate value without compromising clinical integrity.

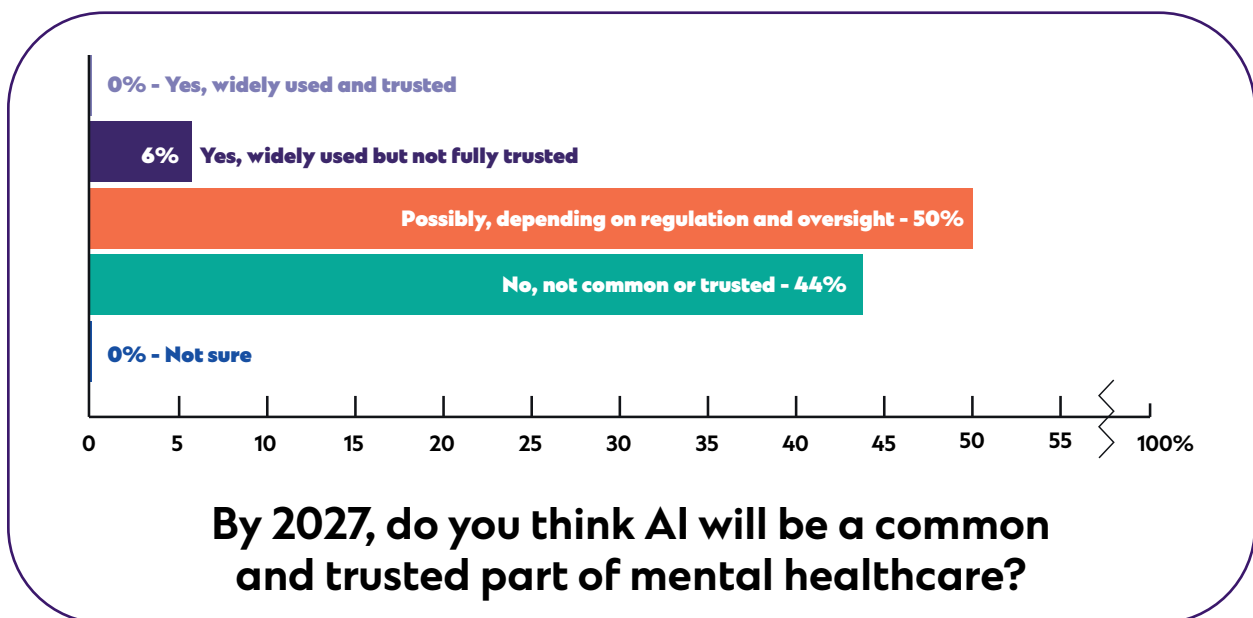
Do you have privacy concerns around the use of AI-enabled transcriptions of your doctor or therapy visits?



Which of the following concerns you? (select all that apply)



- **Maintain Human Oversight:** The reluctance to trust AI-generated recommendations independently highlights the need for clinician involvement in all care decisions. AI should augment—never replace—the expertise of behavioral health professionals.
- **Educate and Engage Clients:** Nearly one-third of respondents already use AI tools outside clinical settings. Providers have an opportunity to guide safe, informed use and position themselves as trusted advisors in this evolving landscape.



By aligning AI implementation with these principles, behavioral health organizations can harness technology to improve outcomes while safeguarding the trust that defines effective care.

The background of the page features a series of abstract, three-dimensional geometric shapes. On the left, there are tall, rectangular blocks in various shades of purple and blue. In the center and right, there are curved, cylindrical forms, some of which are stacked or nested. The lighting creates soft shadows, giving the shapes a sense of depth and volume. The overall color palette is a range of purples, from deep indigo to bright magenta, with some blue tones.

What Shaped Behavioral Healthcare in 2025 and Beyond

2025 was a rollercoaster ride for the behavioral health industry, marked by dramatic policy shifts and mounting workforce challenges. Here are two critical themes that emerged and will follow leaders through 2026 as they weigh the impact and promise of AI.

Unprecedented Regulatory Shifts & The One Big Beautiful Bill

Foremost, on July 4, 2025, President Donald Trump signed into law the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, igniting significant funding realignments for behavioral health leaders nationwide.

The Congressional Research Service reported that health coverage provisions would cut federal spending by about \$907.5 billion over 10 years and raise the uninsured population by roughly 9.1 million by 2034, mainly due to changes in Medicaid.¹

For behavioral health organizations, these changes mean potential reductions in Medicaid reimbursements, tighter budgets for services, and greater difficulty ensuring access to care for vulnerable populations—making this event especially consequential for providers and the communities they serve.

In a statement issued after the bill's passage, the National Council for Mental Wellbeing noted:

“This combination of loss of coverage, increased uncompensated care and increased administrative burden tied to new requirements will create a perfect storm for safety-net mental health and substance use treatment organizations. The results will include longer waiting times, fewer services available and more people diverted to emergency rooms and local jails. In the end, everyone loses.”²

What's more, other turbulent policy moves challenged access to care with the rollback of mental health parity protections, including plans to dissolve SAMHSA and HRSA.

The effect? Policy shifts around mental health parity, reimbursement, and data sharing are changing rapidly, creating more compliance complexity and documentation demands for providers.

On a positive note, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is spearheading the Health Technology Ecosystem and Interoperability Framework, also known as the “Kill the Clipboard” initiative, a growing coalition of healthcare and technology leaders committed to building a more connected, patient-centered healthcare system.

In December 2025, Qualifacts pledged support for the coalition and is participating in the CMS EHR Workgroup, bringing the only behavioral healthcare-specific viewpoint to the table.³

“Behavioral health providers care for some of the nation’s most vulnerable populations including a behavioral health-focused EHR provider in this effort makes sure their voices are heard and their needs are prioritized as CMS builds the framework for the next generation of interoperable, patient-centered tools.”

-Josh Schoeller, CEO of Qualifacts

Demand for Care Outpaces Capacity

The behavioral health industry faces a growing workforce crisis that threatens access to care for millions of Americans.

As of December 2, 2025, 40% of the U.S. population—approximately 137 million people—live in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area.⁴

This shortage is not evenly distributed: rural counties are disproportionately affected, with residents more likely to lack access to behavioral health providers. In many rural communities, primary care providers often serve as the primary source of behavioral health services, underscoring the urgent need for integrated care models and expanded provider networks.

Projections indicate that by 2038, the U.S. will experience substantial shortages across critical roles, including addiction counselors, mental health counselors, social workers specializing in mental health and substance use disorders, and more.⁵

Where AI Fits In

Without strategic intervention, these shortages will deepen disparities in access to care, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Addressing this crisis requires a multi-pronged approach that includes policy reform, workforce development initiatives, and technology-driven solutions to extend the reach of behavioral health services.



What's the Impact of AI for Behavioral Health?

What AI Can Do

AI is not just a technological upgrade—it's a strategic enabler for behavioral health organizations.

By automating administrative tasks and supporting clinical workflows, AI creates breathing room for clinicians, giving them the margin to focus on what matters most: patient care.

Specific Benefits of AI in Behavioral Health

- **Increase Revenue:** Optimize billing processes and improve reimbursement rates.
- **Reduce Denials:** Streamline claims submission and accuracy.
- **Serve More Clients Without Adding Staff:** Expand capacity through automation.
- **Reduce Costs:** Eliminate inefficiencies and administrative overhead.
- **Shorten Onboarding:** Built-in guidance accelerates staff training.
- **Eliminate System Switching:** Integrated workflows save time and reduce errors.
- **Increase Client Retention:** Improve engagement and satisfaction.
- **Give Providers More Time with Clients:** Reduce documentation burden.
- **Support Documentation with Multilingual AI:** Enhance accessibility and accuracy.
- **Increase Employee Retention:** Reduce burnout and after-hours work.
- **Reduce Risk:** Keep all data secure within your EHR.
- **Improve Documentation Accuracy and Consistency:** Ensure compliance and quality.

What AI Cannot Do

In a recent post, Monica Oss, CEO of OPEN MINDS, wrote, “Executives should reshape their perspectives about what AI is not. It is not a magical high-precision technology. It is not a replacement for humans.”⁶

While AI offers transformative benefits, it is not a silver bullet.

AI cannot:

- Resolve funding challenges.
- Address workforce shortages.
- Rebuild trust between providers and policymakers.
- Guarantee that alternative payment models work effectively for behavioral health.

AI is a powerful tool—but its success depends on responsible implementation, clinician oversight, and alignment with organizational strategy.

“In a field where every additional hour with a client, every prevented resignation, and every accelerated intake process can transform a life, that support matters profoundly.”

-Josh Schoeller, CEO of Qualifacts in *Fast Company*⁷

The background of the page is a photograph of a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard, overlaid with a semi-transparent purple filter. In the upper left, there is a large, light blue circle. On the right side, there are faint, glowing purple line-art graphics that include speech bubbles, a head profile containing a gear with the letters 'AI' inside, and various circuit-like patterns.

Use Cases and Impact Areas

For AI to deliver on its promise in behavioral health, three critical elements must guide its implementation:

1. **Clinical Expertise Driving Development:** AI tools should be designed with input from behavioral health professionals to ensure relevance and accuracy
2. **Seamless Integration into Existing Workflows:** Technology must fit naturally into clinicians' daily routines without adding complexity or disrupting care delivery.
3. **Evaluation Against Regulatory and Security Standards:** Compliance with HIPAA, ISO, and other certification standards is essential to maintain trust and protect sensitive data.

Use Case 1: Clinical Productivity

AI can dramatically improve clinical efficiency by reducing administrative burdens and supporting better decision-making.

Ambient Documentation and AI-Assisted Note-Taking: Automating documentation allows clinicians to spend more time with clients, reducing burnout and improving engagement.

Clinical Decision Support and Risk Prediction: AI-driven insights help identify high-risk patients, flag potential crises, and guide evidence-based interventions—always with clinician oversight.

Impact in Action

Among AI-powered Qualifacts iQ Clinical Documentation customers:

- **80%** reduction in clinical note-taking time, freeing clinicians to focus on care.
- **50%** of providers report they can treat more clients, increasing access without adding staff.
- **60%** of providers feel more connected to clients during sessions, improving engagement and outcomes.⁸



Customer Success Spotlight: Beacon Health

Beacon Health implemented Qualifacts' AI-powered solution, Qualifacts iQ Clinical Documentation, to combat documentation fatigue and improve clinician satisfaction. By leveraging ambient documentation and automated workflows, Beacon reduced time spent on clinical notes by up to 80%, enabling providers to reclaim hours for direct patient care.

- **Documentation Time Reduced:** From 10–12 minutes per note to under 3 minutes.
- **Provider Adoption:** 30% of Beacon's behavioral health providers use Qualifacts iQ as of November 2025, with a goal of reaching 75% by Q1 2026.
- **Enhanced Client Experience:** Providers are more present during sessions, leading to improved client satisfaction and outcomes.

Use Case 2: Administrative Efficiency

Administrative tasks often consume valuable time and resources. AI can streamline these processes to improve operational performance.

With nearly one in five U.S. adults living with a mental illness and many clinicians reporting no openings for new patients, simplifying scheduling workflows is essential to expanding access without adding administrative load.⁹

Billing, Scheduling, and Compliance

Automation: Automating repetitive tasks reduces errors, accelerates workflows, and ensures compliance with regulatory requirements.

Impact: Lower operational costs, faster onboarding, reduced claim denials, and improved overall efficiency without adding staff.

Key Capabilities:

- Simplifies complex scheduling workflows using chat-based AI prompts.
- Frees staff time by eliminating manual appointment coordination.
- Built directly within the EHR environment to keep data secure and compliant.
- Enables natural-language scheduling tailored to user preferences and workflows.

Impact: Lower operational costs, faster onboarding, reduced claim denials, and improved overall efficiency—without adding staff.



Customer Success Spotlight: Options Counseling and Family Services

Options Counseling and Family Services implemented Qualifacts iQ Assistant, an AI-powered chatbot, to simplify staff support and cut administrative overhead. By uploading their customized EHR workflows and internal guides into the tool, they built a tailored, always-on AI resource that boosts efficiency and empowers teams.¹⁰

- **Customized Support:** Uploaded internal guides and training materials for accurate, workflow-specific guidance and responses.
- **Faster Answers:** Staff now resolve questions instantly without submitting tickets or waiting for supervisors.
- **Operational Efficiency:** Automated routine inquiries free up IT resources to focus on complex, high-priority issues.

How to Drive Success with AI for Behavioral Health

AI adoption in behavioral health is not just about technology—it's about strategy. To realize its full potential, organizations must approach AI implementation in three phases: start, scale, and strategize.

01

How to Start AI

Begin with low-risk, high-impact use cases that deliver immediate value without disrupting care. Administrative automation, ambient documentation, and scheduling are ideal starting points because they reduce burdens and free clinicians for patient engagement.

What to Look for in an AI Partner

- **Behavioral Health Expertise:** Solutions should be designed with clinical input to ensure relevance and compliance.
- **End-to-End Workflow Integration:** Choose platforms that augment existing processes rather than create new silos.
- **Security and Compliance:** Verify adherence to HIPAA and ISO standards to protect sensitive data.
- **Transparency and Oversight:** Ensure AI tools support clinician involvement and provide clear audit trails.

02

How to Scale AI

Once initial use cases deliver measurable results, expand AI capabilities across workflows.

Strategic scaling involves:

- **Embedding AI into Your EHR:** AI-powered EHRs amplify efficiency by integrating documentation, billing, scheduling, and compliance in one secure environment.
- **Training and Change Management:** Equip staff with education and support to maximize adoption.
- **Continuous Evaluation:** Monitor performance against KPIs like time savings, claim accuracy, and patient satisfaction.

Scaling AI is not about adding more tools—it's about creating a connected ecosystem that improves care delivery and operational resilience.

03

How to Strategize AI

At the end of the day, AI should deliver traditional ROI:

- Serve more clients without adding staff.
- Increase clean claims and reduce denials.
- Improve data quality and compliance.

But AI should also deliver a different ROI—a Return on the Individual:

- Strengthen therapeutic alliances.
- Free staff time for meaningful client interactions.
- Enhance care quality and outcomes.
- Reduce workforce burnout and turnover.

This dual ROI—financial and human—defines the true success of AI in behavioral health.

Sample ROI Formula:

$$\text{ROI} = \frac{(\text{Financial Gains from AI} - \text{Cost of AI Implementation})}{\text{Cost of AI Implementation}} \times 100$$

The background of the slide features a conceptual illustration. A hand is shown holding a central, glowing square chip with the letters 'AI' on it. From the chip, numerous circuit-like lines radiate outwards, some ending in small dots. To the left, there is a network graph with interconnected nodes and lines. The entire scene is set against a dark blue background with a subtle grid pattern.

Challenges and Considerations

As healthcare organizations explore AI solutions, they need assurance that any technology meets the strict standards required in healthcare.

Compliance and Data Security Risks

Healthcare organizations handle highly sensitive patient information, making compliance and security non-negotiable. As organizations explore AI solutions to reduce administrative burdens and improve care, they need assurance that these technologies meet strict governance and security standards.

Qualifacts set the benchmark by achieving ISO 42001 certification—the global standard for AI management systems—becoming the first EHR solutions provider to earn this distinction.

This certification underscores our commitment to ethical AI practices, data protection, and regulatory compliance, ensuring providers can adopt AI confidently.

Clinician Skepticism and Change Fatigue

Behavioral health professionals often face skepticism toward new technologies, particularly when past implementations have added complexity rather than reduced it. Change fatigue is real—especially in a field already burdened by administrative overload.

However, a recent study from the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions found that cost and technology initiatives were five times more effective when frontline clinicians were engaged.¹¹ The same logic applies to behavioral health.

Involve providers early in design; deliver training and upskilling; and maintain clear, ongoing communication. Emphasize the benefits and long-term value of the new solutions to generate excitement and reduce resistance to change.

Engagement isn't optional—it's the key to driving adoption and achieving meaningful adoption and impact.

Budget Constraints and Integration Complexity

AI implementation can raise concerns about cost and technical complexity. Organizations must evaluate solutions that deliver measurable ROI—both financial and human—while minimizing disruption.

Choosing platforms that embed AI within existing EHR environments reduces integration and security challenges and accelerates time-to-value.

The bottom line: AI adoption in behavioral health is not just about technology—it's about trust, compliance, and strategic implementation.



Qualifacts set the benchmark with ISO 42001:2023 certification, the global standard for AI management systems.¹²

Benefits of the ISO 42001:2023 certification include:

- Strengthened cybersecurity and data privacy
- Enhanced trust and transparency in AI Systems
- Improved risk management and mitigation

Conclusion

As AI adoption continues to rapidly grow, leaders will treat AI as a critical piece of infrastructure to scale care quality without risking staff burnout.

In a recent *Fast Company* article, Qualifacts CEO Josh Schoeller predicted that AI will make behavioral healthcare more human in 2026 than it has in decades:

“The reason is simple. Burnout and administrative burdens have been increasingly limiting what clinicians can do. Providers must spend hours on documentation, prior authorizations, and data entry instead of with patients. AI built to reduce that friction can return clinicians to the work that drew them here in the first place: showing up fully for the people they serve.”¹³

In 2026, the resounding question around AI is not if it belongs in behavioral healthcare but rather how best to deploy it.



About Qualifacts

Qualifacts is the leading behavioral health technology partner, specializing in AI-powered electronic health record (EHR) software and data solutions. Putting the health of individuals first, our award-winning solutions enable behavioral health providers to spend more time on what matters most: delivering superior care that drives better outcomes. Qualifacts is more than a provider of innovative technology—we're partners in care, working alongside organizations of all sizes nationwide to simplify the lives of behavioral health providers. We simplify clinical workflows and ensure compliance, while strengthening client-provider relationships. Today, we serve more than 2,700 organizations across all 50 states, including 33% of the nation's Certified Community Behavioral Health Centers (CCBHCs), supporting both non-profit and for-profit organizations in delivering superior behavioral healthcare.

About the Survey

The data was derived from a national online survey conducted by Qualifacts via Pollfish on December 12, 2025. A total of 2,000 U.S. adults aged 18 and older completed the survey. The study examined healthcare and behavioral health access, attitudes toward artificial intelligence, trust and privacy concerns, and expectations for oversight and international certification standards. Respondents were 56% female and 44% male. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not total 100%.

Endnotes

- 1 Congressional Research Service, “Health Coverage Provisions in One Big Beautiful Bill Act (H.R. 1),” https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R48569/R485691.pdf
- 2 National Council for Mental Wellbeing, “Statement Regarding Senate Passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill,” <https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/news/statement-senate-passage-one-big-beautiful-bill/>
- 3 Qualifacts, “Qualifacts Pledges Support for CMS Effort to “Kill the Clipboard” and Advance Healthcare Technology Interoperability,” <https://www.qualifacts.com/resources/qualifacts-pledges-support-for-cms-effort-to-kill-the-clipboard-and-advance-healthcare-technology-interoperability/>
- 4 HRSA Health Workforce, “State of the Behavioral Health Workforce, 2025,” <https://bhw.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-workforce/data-research/Behavioral-Health-Workforce-Brief-2025.pdf>
- 5 Ibid
- 6 OPEN MINDS, “Executive Briefing: AI is not ...,” <https://openminds.com/market-intelligence/executive-briefings/ai-is-not/>
- 7 *Fast Company*, “What AI can—and can’t—fix in behavioral health’s labor crisis,” <https://www.fastcompany.com/91356416/what-ai-can-and-cant-fix-in-behavioral-healths-labor-crisis>
- 8 Qualifacts, “Revolutionizing Clinical Care: How Qualifacts iQ AI Optimizes CCHO’s Mental Health Services,” <https://www.qualifacts.com/resources/ai-clinical-documentation-ccho-success/>
- 9 National Institute for Mental Health, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>
- 10 Qualifacts, “Options Counseling and Family Services: Empowering Care with Qualifacts Behavioral Health AI Chatbot,” <https://www.qualifacts.com/resources/options-counseling-oregon-behavioral-health-ai-chatbot/>
- 11 Deloitte Center for Health Solutions, “Clinician engagement is key to driving effective cost and tech change at health systems,” <https://www.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/health-care/clinician-buy-in-system-shifts.html>
- 12 Qualifacts, “Qualifacts Becomes the First EHR Solutions Provider to Earn AI Management Systems Certification ISO 42001:2023,” <https://www.qualifacts.com/resources/qualifacts-becomes-the-first-ehr-solutions-provider-to-earn-ai-management-systems-certification-iso-420012023/>
- 13 *Fast Company*, “How AI will make behavioral health more human in 2026,” <https://www.fastcompany.com/91470897/how-ai-will-make-behavioral-health-more-human-in-2026>

**Connect with us to learn
more about Qualifacts'
AI-powered EHRs.**

