Mental Health America of Central Carolinas

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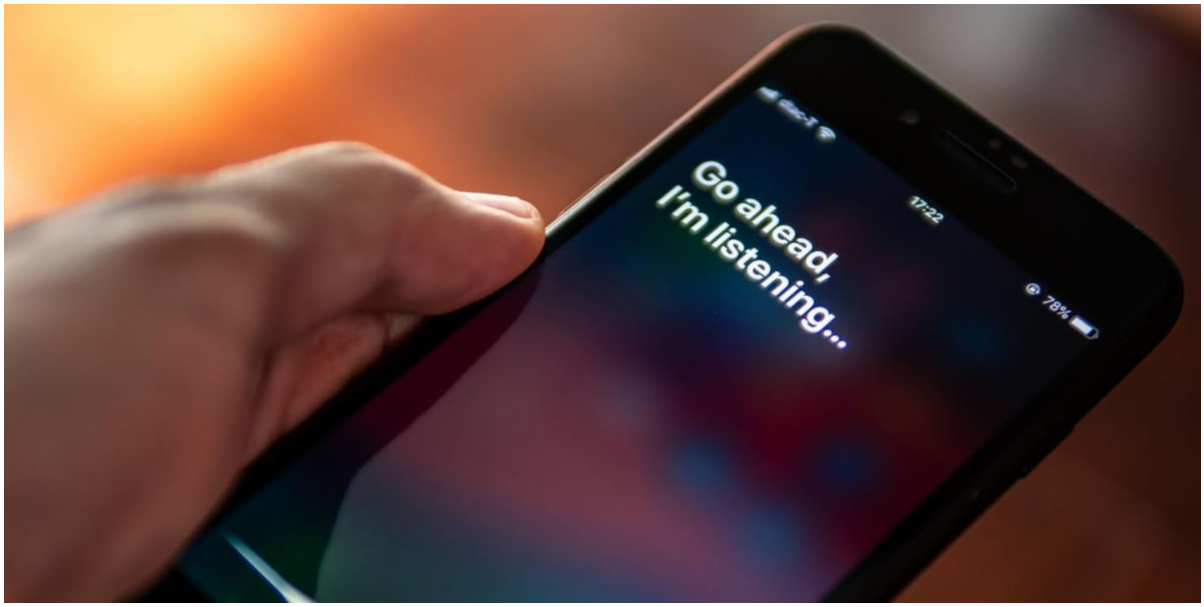
Helping Us Live Mentally Healthier Lives Since 1933



Mental Health Matters:
A Monthly Blog Post from the Director

There's An App for That:
Exploring the Growing Use of Mental Health Apps

In today's digital society, there truly is an app for everything, from shopping, travel, entertainment, news, even ordering Starbucks. With the growing use of apps in our daily life, programs relating to mental health are becoming more prevalent. But should we be leaving our mental health to an app?

Approximately 48.3 million adults in the United States live with a mental health condition, with 9.8 million living with a diagnosis that is serious enough to limit everyday activities. Statistically, one in five of us are living with a mental health concern. There are many reasons why individuals may find using an app on their smartphone an appealing way to improve mental health, including the inability to find a therapist to take them on as a patient, the ease and convenience of using an app and, unfortunately, the stigma that continues to prohibit people from seeking help.

While I am not making any recommendations in this post, there is evidence that apps can have a positive impact for many. In the **Forbes** article titled *"Should You Trust An App With Your Mental Health?",* Health Economist Simon Leigh points to real positives to mental health apps. "An app can

reduce the time people are left without help, becoming an early support system or safety net, whilst waiting for face-to-face care; later after a therapist has been seen, apps can reinforce strategies and track information."

With the use of technology for mental health, we should look at a holistic approach, with apps as one tool in our mental wellness routine. Hilda Burke, a psychotherapist and author of **The Phone Addiction Workbook**, sees mindfulness and meditation apps as having the potential to be a "great learning tool," but also highlights the irony that our increased use of smartphones "has been found in studies to be partly to blame for the rise in mental health problems, yet we are steering people back to their phone to try and solve the issue."

Other concerns come from the advice given from a screening through an app. While Mental Health America of Central Carolinas promotes **online screening tools on our website**, we do not view the results from these screenings as an end result. These online screenings can, however, be a starting point and help users have a discussion with their doctor. Being diagnosed by a professional rather than an app, means being seen in person and working together in devising a suitable treatment plan, possibly combining medication and therapy. "Without that immediate follow-up plan, the app user could be left feeling even more anxious and alone." **(Forbes)**

Burke also points out in **Forbes** that there is the "potential problem of there being no 'time boundaries' with apps which could lead to inappropriate use; for instance, users could get caught in the trap of lying awake worrying, playing with their treatment app, when in fact they would be better off trying to sleep. The phone offers up so many other things – chat, dating matches, news – so the risk is that what starts off as a desire for relaxation and calm can become a gateway to further stress and anxiety, thus making sleep even more elusive."

So how do we go about evaluating mental health apps, when experts estimate there are about 10,000 out there to choose from? Dr. Russell DuBois, "Evaluating Mental Health Apps," (Psychology Today), notes that while the vast majority of mental health apps are likely well-intentioned, very few actually have empirical data supporting their content. "Many app developers may not even have a mental health professional on their team, relying solely on ambitious product developers who pull close enough content from a variety of professional sources."

In order to assist individuals in selecting mental health apps or tools, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) recently published what they call their **App Evaluation Model**. DuBois writes that this model was developed to empower clinicians with a five-step framework for evaluating the validity and safety of all the mental health apps out on the market. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) also reviews apps based on five ratings: Ease of Use, Effectiveness, Personalization, Interactive/Feedback, and Research Evidence.

In considering mental health apps, we should also look at how they can help with overall mental wellness and well-being. According to ***Medical News Today,*** here are the Top 10

Mental Health Apps they have identified:

1. **Calm:** The app is designed to reduce anxiety, improve sleep, and help you feel happier. Calm focuses on the four key areas of meditation, breathing, sleep and relaxation, "with the aim of bringing joy, clarity, and peace to your daily life."
2. **Headspace:** The app uses mindfulness and meditation to help you perform at your best each day. "Whether you need to build healthier relationships, find a place of calm, keep your mind fit, or reduce stress, Headspace has hundreds of themed mindfulness and meditation sessions to support you."
3. **Moodnotes:** Moodnotes is a thought journal and mood diary. The app can be used to capture feelings and improve thinking habits through the implementation of Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and positive psychology. The app allows the use to "track your mood and increase self-awareness of what influences it. Learn to recognize 'traps' in your thinking and ways to rethink the situation."
4. **Moodpath:** "Your pocket-sized mental health companion. Whether you are facing a rough patch or have concerns about your mental health, the app's goal is to support you through the difficult times and guide you out the other side. Moodpath asks daily questions in order to assess your well-being and screen for symptoms of depression. The screening progress aims to increase your awareness of your thoughts, emotions, and feelings. After a period of 2 weeks, the app generates an electronic document that you can discuss with a healthcare professional.
5. **Pacifica:** Pacifica is an app with anxiety and stress in mind. It provides a toolbox to deal with daily anxiety and stress, along with a highly supportive community of like-minded individuals. Pacifica helps you to break cycles of unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and behaviors through methods such as CBT, mindfulness meditation, mood tracking, and relaxation.
6. **SuperBetter:** This app is a game focusing on increasing resilience and the ability to remain "strong, optimistic, and motivated when presented with challenging obstacles in life. The app will help you to adopt new habits, improve your skills, strengthen relationships, complete meaningful projects, and achieve lifelong dreams."
7. **7 Cups:** Provides online therapy and emotional support for anxiety and depression. There are more than 160,000 trained listeners and licensed therapists who are available to anonymously speak with you 24/7. "Speak your mind and confide in listeners without fear of being judged." The app allows users to search for listeners based on their experience or their specialties, such as bullying, panic attacks, eating disorders, relationship breakups and many more.
8. **Anxiety Relief Hypnosis:** An app suggested to improve relaxation and anxiety within "just 1 to 3 weeks of use." The app provides an audio session read by a certified hypnotherapist together with calming music and sounds from nature to aid relaxation.
9. **Happify:** Happify is a space "to overcome negative thoughts and stress and build resilience. Whether you are feeling stressed, anxious or sad, Happify helps you to regain control of your thoughts and feelings. The app employs techniques in the areas of CBT, positive psychology and mindfulness.
10. **Talkspace:** A counseling and therapy app that connects users with a convenient, affordable and confidential way to deal with anxiety, stress, depression, relationship issues and chronic illness. A free consultation is provided with a Matching Agent to identify the ideal therapist for your needs based on several factors. More than 1,000 licensed therapists are available, who specialize in anxiety, phobia, depression, domestic violence, PTSD, and more.

It makes sense that mental health apps would be on the rise, but it takes a combination of techniques for us to be both physically and mentally healthy. Our smartphone can help us track our steps, our daily caloric intake and now, with other apps, can help us track our moods and "feelings." Take time to research these mental health apps on your own (many are free or offer a free trial period), and look at those reviewed by ADAA and other professional organizations. Finally, don't let your device or app take the place of human connection, whether it is with a loved one, friend, colleague, or your therapist. We all need human interaction to thrive.

Have you had success or a positive experience with a mental health app? If so, would you be willing to share? We'd love to learn more from our readers about this subject.
Thank you!

Mental Health America of Central Carolinas promotes mental wellness through advocacy, prevention and education in Mecklenburg and Cabarrus Counties.

United Way Member Agency

Mailing Address
3701 Latrobe Dr., Suite 140
Charlotte, NC 28211
704.365.3454