

Introduction

As a society, we often encounter barriers to delivering mental-health treatment to those who need it. These barriers can be logistical (scheduling conflicts, transportation) or economical (high co-pays, insurance companies limiting the number of sessions). In an effort to meet some of these challenges, researchers are investigating the effectiveness of smartphone/tablet applications that aim to help users track symptoms, learn coping skills, develop safety plans, and reduce anxiety and depression (at least in the short-term). While these apps can not replace real-life interactive treatment, many individuals have found them helpful in accessing treatment tools in a convenient, private (given the ability to “lock” the phone), and immediate format.

What is “Gamification”?

Gamification or “gamifying” is a new but scientifically-supported intervention that involves using game design or game style into any other area (for example, a game that stimulates memory function for older adults). New research indicates that gamification has also been effective in producing measurable benefits for people with mental health or behavioral issues, such as anxiety or addiction.

Resources

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What Does the Research Say?

- Playing a science-based mobile gaming application for 25 minutes can reduce anxiety for people experiencing stress. Researchers suspect that using the application for shorter spurts (say, 10 minutes) over a few months could also spur reductions in stress and anxiety.
- In a clinical trial, individuals with alcohol dependence used the Addiction-Comprehensive Health Enhancement Support System (A-CHESS) app and were found to be more likely to maintain consistent abstinence from alcohol than those who did not use the app.
- Many of the available mental health apps that have been researched are based on a cognitive treatment called “Attention-Bias Modification Training” or ABMT. This treatment is particularly helpful in reducing anxiety and works by “re-training” the brain to focus on non-threatening stimuli. Users learn to give their attention more to positive stimuli and less to the negative.
- Since most of the research on gamification is very new, users should be cautious about which apps are research-tested and include their current treatment provider in a conversation about how apps can effectively complement traditional cognitive treatment or behavior modification.

Research-Tested Apps

Personal Zen: A free app modeled after cognitive treatment for anxiety. The game-based exercises train the brain to ignore threatening stimuli and focus on positive influences.

PTSD Coach: Created by clinical psychologist Julia Hoffman, this free app helps users with symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder such as intrusive thoughts and anger. The app responds to user-input data about symptoms by providing relaxation exercises and even crisis management access if symptoms are extreme.

ReliefLink: This free app provides mood-tracking and safety planning capabilities, along with suicide prevention interventions and emergency resources access. ReliefLink won the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s annual app contest last year.

A-CHESS: Available on Android devices – promotes alcohol abstinence and reduction of risky behaviors as shown in a clinical trial.

Apps for Anxiety & Depression

Let Panic Go: Designed as a quick intervention for times that people feel a panic attack coming on. Users have found this app effective in slowing down breathing rates and quelling the “fight-or-flight” body response.

Mobilyze: Tracks users’ mood patterns and behaviors to help preventatively identify triggers to depression. This app uses your device’s GPS, accelerometer, and Wi-Fi to determine activity level and location, and combines this with user-input information about mood and social context to provide feedback.

Apps for Holistic Wellness

Research indicates that learning and consistently practicing skills such as mindfulness and relaxation through guided meditation can lead to better physical and mental outcomes such as lower stress levels, decreased risk for heart disease, better focus and concentration, creativity, patience, and even an immunity boost! These apps focus on the body and mind connection:

Breathe Sync: This app measures the quality of your breath and pulse rate variation to provide one of the world’s first biofeedback apps. Improve your “well-being” score to achieve more relaxation! The high-tech app is available on iOS for \$9.99

Headspace: Free, popular app that offers daily guided meditation. Created by a Buddhist monk, the app offers one of the most comprehensive guided meditation apps on the market. Optional \$7.99/year upgrade package after free 10-day period.

MindBody Connect: Free iPhone app used to locate the nearest yoga or meditation class in any US metropolitan area.

Buddhify 2: Designed for the busy and stressed people with limited time, this app offers 10-minute or less exercises for nearly every life scenario. This app is perfect for meditation beginners. (\$1.99)

Sleep Cycle: This high-tech app uses the iPhone accelerometer to analyze your sleep and wakes you within your chosen time frame while you are in your lightest sleep phase – allowing for a natural way to wake up refreshed. Provides daily charts of sleep quality. \$2.99