

Are mindfulness apps good enough?

My mind tricks me. I either ruminate about the things I always wanted to do but never did or worry about something that's yet to happen. I'm lost in meaningless thoughts, empowering them, ignoring the present moment. Whenever I get a chance I mindlessly scroll through facebook pages in my smartphone which I carry all the time.

“Mindfulness” is a way of life, a practice that helps you live a better life. At the least, it helps you to be more aware of the present moment and to openly accept your life experiences without judging them. Research shows that mindfulness practice improves wellbeing, reduces distress and optimizes psychological functioning. It is a life skill that can be learned and practiced. There are various mindfulness training programs and hundreds of teachers. But the inconvenience of logistics, unbearable cost and the diversity in people prevent programs’ reach to wider audience.

The ubiquitous smartphones and mobile apps have enormous potential as a mindfulness training medium. The flexible, cost-effective and customizable mobile apps can potentially aid mindfulness practice. There are some challenges when mobile apps are conceived as health intervention tools. The number of mobile apps available in the market keeps increasing exponentially which complicates identifying relevant apps. Other than the unreliable user star-ratings, presently there is no check on quality and effectiveness of these apps. This research aimed to explore these factors and find if mobile apps can aid mindfulness practice.

A search for “mindfulness” in June last year found 700 apps for iPhone in iTunes app store. A review of these apps for quality mindfulness training and education identified only 23 apps. The Mobile Application Rating Scale (MARS) was a recently developed tool to assess the quality of mobile health apps. The 23 apps were rated with MARS for engagement, functionality, visual aesthetics, information quality and subjective quality. The Headspace app had the highest average score, followed by Smiling Mind, iMindfulness and Mindfulness Daily. Overall the apps exceeded minimal acceptable level of quality. The apps were also reviewed for features like guided meditations, program based approach, support for app community, timers, reminders, etc. The apps varied highly in providing these features. For instance, almost all apps provided breathing and body-scan meditation but only few provided comprehensive meditation trainings. Only five apps provided progressive/program-based mindfulness training (Headspace, Smiling Mind, Mindfulness Daily, Simply8 and Meditation without Borders). The apps differed in cost as well. Some apps were free, some partially free and others costed a minimum price. Table 1 presents the overall score and some of the features of the top few apps.

	App ^a	Overall MARS score	Timer	Reminders	Program based Practice	Mood assessments	Social Media	Cost
1	Headspace	4.0	✓	✓	✓		✓	Free
2	Smiling Mind	3.7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Free
3	iMindfulness	3.5	✓	✓				\$2.49
4	Mindfulness Daily	3.5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Free
5	Buddhify 2	3.4	✓					\$3.79
6	Complete Mindfulness	3.4						\$2.49
7	Mindfulise	3.4	✓					\$3.79
8	ACT Coach	3.3						Free
9	Rhythm Free	3.3	✓	✓			✓	Free
10	Simply8	3.3	✓	✓	✓		✓	\$3.79
11	Stop, Breathe & Think	3.3				✓	✓	Free

^a The rated versions of the apps may not be available in the App Store at the time of publication, as they may be replaced by newer version

Table 1 MARS Rating of Apps

In conclusion, though many apps claim to be mindfulness-related, most were not. The quality of the apps can be improved, especially in the areas of engagement, aesthetics and information. The effectiveness of the apps is yet to be determined.

Publication

[Review and Evaluation of Mindfulness-Based iPhone Apps.](#)

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