

Just a click away: smartphone apps can improve mental health

Within the past decade, smartphones have been assimilated into the personal, social, and occupational routines of a significant proportion of people around the globe. In fact, previous reports show that more than half of the Western population owns a smartphone, nearly 90% of users don't leave their home without it, and average users check their smartphones as much as 150 times a day.

Smartphones can serve numerous purposes. They can help us connect with friends, store precious memories, and can even help us engage in many health behaviours, such as eating healthily, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep. More recently, there has been a surge in the number of apps available designed to help with common and costly mental health problems. Although there are hundreds of mental health apps freely available, many of which have received significant media, public health, and clinical attention, a key question concerns whether these apps actually improve our mental health.

This question was addressed in a 2019 meta-analysis conducted by Linardon and colleagues. Specifically, the authors synthesized 66 randomized controlled trials that evaluated the efficacy of smartphone apps for numerous mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, stress, and quality of life impairment. Overall, the meta-analysis revealed that smartphone apps led to significant and modest improvements in symptoms of depression, generalized anxiety, social anxiety, stress, and quality of life impairment. Importantly, these effects occurred for people who spanned the entire spectrum of mental health problems, ranging from this at low risk, to those with mild symptoms, and to those with a diagnosed mental health disorder. However, smartphone apps were not shown to be effective for addressing specific anxiety symptoms, including panic and post-traumatic stress.

An important aspect of this meta-analysis was that there was attempt to identify what features of these trials produced the largest mental health improvements. A couple of important findings emerged. First, smartphone apps produced the most improvements in certain mental health symptoms when the app itself was based on principles of cognitive-behavioural therapy. Second, people benefited most from smartphone apps when there was some level of professional support provided – whether that be some weekly support calls or regular emails support. Third, larger mental health improvements were also observed when people were routinely reminded to use and engage with the app, suggesting that the more people engage with the app the better their outcomes.

Overall, this meta-analysis was the first to establish the effectiveness of smartphone apps for several different mental health problems. It is clear from this study that, although mental health apps are not here to replace professional clinical services, the findings highlight the potential of

apps to serve as a cost-effective, easily accessible, and low intensity intervention for the millions of people worldwide who cannot receive face-to-face psychological treatment.

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Publication

[The efficacy of app-supported smartphone interventions for mental health problems: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials.](#)

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