



Mobile psychology

Psychologists are developing digital applications to help patients and colleagues.

BY ANNA MILLER • *Monitor* staff

Just four hours after the PTSD Coach app was released to the public, a distressed veteran called the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' crisis line because, he said, "my phone told me to call." The call led to an appointment, and the next day, the vet received mental health care at his local VA.

The app has the potential "to really change the course of someone's day or life," says Julia Hoffman, PsyD, a clinical psychologist and mobile applications lead at the VA's National Center for PTSD, where it was developed in partnership with the U.S. Department of Defense's National Center for Telehealth and Technology.

Hoffman is one of many psychologists developing apps as a way to circumvent barriers to mental health care, and bridge gaps in it, by putting psychology directly into people's palms.

PTSD Coach, for example, targets an important audience because stigma and logistical issues often prevent veterans, service people and civilians dealing with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder from receiving care, Hoffman says. The free app was launched in 2011 and as of January, had been downloaded 135,000 times in 78 countries. It also provides educational resources about PTSD, tools to assess symptoms and

hundreds of "bite-sized" evidence-based cognitive and behavioral interventions, such as deep-breathing exercises and guidance on positive self-talk, to help users manage their symptoms.

"We don't see apps as a way to replace treatment, but for those who may be reluctant consumers, this may provide a step into care and something in place of nothing," Hoffman says.

Here's a look at five other smartphone applications that can help you and your clients.

CBT*ABC way: Cognitive-behavioral therapy apps in Spanish and English

Available on iTunes, \$6.99

San Jose, Calif., clinical psychologist Yvette Tazeau, PhD, designed her app, CBT*ABC way, after noticing parents and children tapping on iPhones and tablets in her waiting room but putting them away as soon as they entered the therapy room.

"I was plugging away using traditional books, workbooks and thought records, and it dawned on me ... why don't we put those two things together?" Tazeau says.

So, Tazeau teamed with a computer programmer and a graphic designer to create a series of apps for children

to build awareness of the problem, set specific goals and develop skills either to moderate or abstain from drinking. It provides prompts for users to check in daily about progress and upcoming events, and offers weekly feedback based on their goals. For example, if a college athlete aiming to curb her drinking indicates a party on an upcoming Saturday, the app may remind her of her goals on that day — perhaps by showing a photo of her team or by showing a strategy for staying in control while at the party. A father who's worried that his drinking is alienating his children may view a photo of his family when he indicates he's tempted to drink.

The app also links to care, such as the option to call a friend, email a doctor or find a treatment facility, and it allows users to schedule alternative non-drinking-related activities on their calendars. It also records users' progress so that they can share it with friends or health-care providers. "Having this system keeps them aware of various triggers and it helps them to stay on track," Dulin says.

A pilot study of the app's prototype, which Dulin and his colleague Vivian Gonzalez, PhD, created and tested with a grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, showed that people who used the app for six weeks spent 60 percent less time drinking heavily and cut their overall number of drinks in half (*Substance Abuse*, 2012).

For more information, go to <http://stepaway.biz>

The Therapy Outcome Management System: Instant feedback on therapy outcomes

Available on iTunes, \$14.99

Tracking patient progress over the course of treatment is a proven way to improve outcomes, reduce dropout rates and strengthen the therapeutic alliance. But how exactly do you ask, and record, how a patient feels about therapy — or about you?

One new way is through TOMS (Therapy Outcome Management System), an app designed by Nicholas Wiarda, a predoctoral intern at the Spokane VA Medical Center, Mark McMinn, PhD, a professor of psychology at George Fox University in Oregon, and Scott Miller, PhD, founder of the International Center for Clinical Excellence.

Based on Miller's empirically validated session and outcome scales, the app asks clients about their well-being and satisfaction with the therapist's approach before and after each session. Having those data — which the app plots onto a graph — allows therapists to adjust their approach along the way, says McMinn, who uses the app himself. "It is simple, affordable and the results are immediate," one reviewer wrote on the Apple store's website. "This seems like the perfect solution."

To learn more, go to www.114consulting.com. ■



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