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COULD APPS SOLVE AMERICA'S MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS?

With more than 44 million adults having a mental health condition and rates of depression and suicide on the rise among younger generations, America's mental health crisis shows no sign of easing in the near future. How might mobile apps enable people to better manage their wellbeing?

Location [North America / Northern Europe](#)

Featured Experts

Acacia Parks

Acacia Parks' research focuses on self-help methods for increasing happiness via books and digital technology, with an emphasis on objective/observable outcomes such as physical health indicators. She received her BA in psychology from Reed College, and her PhD in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania, where her graduate studies helped build the foundation for research on bringing happiness interventions to the general public.

John Torous

John Torous is the director of the digital psychiatry division at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a Harvard Medical School-affiliated teaching hospital.

Nadia James

Nadia James is a serial entrepreneur who's passionate about using social media for good. She is the founder of Kinde, a free mental health app connecting people to judgement-free wellbeing communities, emotional support, and tools for recovery.

Neil Leibowitz

Neil Leibowitz is the chief medical officer at Talkspace.

Kim Palmer

Kim Palmer is the CEO and founder of Clementine.

Author

Francesca Baker

Never happier than when in a library or clutching a notebook, Francesca Baker is a writer, reader, and word lover. As Virginia Woolf said 'my head is a hive of words that won't settle.' So she puts them to use, exploring the world and then writing about it. A freelance copywriter, she You can read more about Francesca on her blog andsoshethinks.co.uk or follow her Instagram and Twitter: [@andsoshethinks](#)

Highlights & Data

- Smartphone-based apps can negate the
- 42% of Americans see cost and poor

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cost and logistical barriers that often prevent people from seeking professional mental health care

- They also combat the lingering stigma associated with getting support, allowing users to flexibly access treatment without judgment from others
- Gamification features, real-time feedback, and usage reminders help to form positive habits quickly
- However, many apps lack clinical evidence for their claims and people may feel overwhelmed by an abundance of content that's added to boost revenue

insurance coverage as the top barriers for accessing mental health care (*Ketchum Analytics, 2018*)

- **69%** of people want an individualized customer experience, yet only **40%** of brands offer one (*Cloud IQ, 2017*)
- Late night phone users are **11%** more likely to have bipolar disorder and **6%** more likely to have depression (*The Lancet Psychiatry, 2018*)
- **12.2%** of American adults with a mental illness are uninsured (*Mental Health America*)

Scope

A mental health crisis is mounting in the US as various medical journals have highlighted rises in suicide rates, major depressive episodes, anxiety, and other mood disorders among teens and young adults over the past decade. [1][2] The studies make for grim reading about the nation's youth and with roughly 44 million adults already having a mental health condition, there are growing concerns about how people can get adequate care and support. [3]

The high price of therapy, coupled with a shortage of mental health professionals and insurers' efforts to deny coverage for certain treatments, is creating high barriers to entry that mean many people with mental health issues are left untreated. [4] Research carried out in 2018 found that 42% of Americans see cost and poor insurance coverage as the top barriers for accessing mental health care and 38% report that they've had to wait more than a week for treatment. [5] Throw a lingering stigma around mental illness into the mix and the landscape is troubling indeed. Alarming, Mental Health America reported that in 2015/16, 56.4% of adults with a mental illness received no treatment and 61.5% of youth with major depression did not get any help.[6]

A plethora of mental health apps are now looking to fill the void and disrupt the industry. Tech-savvy young adults appear to be the target audiences from these platforms, which makes sense given that they're experiencing a marked surge in mental health problems; in 2017, 10.3% of them reported suicidal thoughts or other suicide-related outcomes, up from 7% in 2008. [5] There are approximately 10,000 mental health and wellness apps available to download, providing a range of services including information, mood tracking, medication monitoring, and coaching. [7] Yet while they're feeding into a global mental health software market that's projected to reach \$4.6 billion by 2026, do they have a positive impact on people's approach to wellbeing? [8]

Apps for access

According to Mental Health America, 12.2% of adults with a mental illness are uninsured. [6] Even among those who do have coverage, access to treatment can be prohibitively expensive or unavailable. Different systems in different states mean there is no parity of treatment and some places have a severe shortage of mental health workers and clinicians. This is where apps can make a difference, providing an entry point into managing one's wellbeing.

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) classifies mental health apps into six categories based on functionality: self-management, cognition improvement, skills training, social support, symptom tracking, and passive data collection. These platforms are flexible in their utility and can be used for immediate crisis intervention, prevention, diagnosis, as a supplement to traditional therapy, and for post-treatment condition management. [9]

People are turning to mental health apps because they're user-friendly, stripping away intimidating medical terms and focusing on making them happy through nudge-based features and practice. The relatively low effort they require, in addition to real-time feedback, usage reminders, and gamification features, help to form positive mental health habits quickly. [10] [Happify](#), for instance, uses science-based games to engage users and encourage long-term usage, while [Kinde](#) encourages people to take on challenges and rewards them upon completion.



Traditional therapy is often too expensive to access

Daniel Brubaker (2019) ©

Community-specific solutions

Due to a variety of complex factors – from systemic racism to cultural stigmas around seeking treatment – marginalized populations in the US are likely to face more barriers when accessing mental health care. A paper published in the *Journal of the National Medical Association* highlighted that many African Americans hold negative attitudes toward healthcare professionals, largely due to stigma, mistrust, communication barriers, and religious beliefs. [11] A separate study from 2007 found that 63% of black Americans viewed depression as a personal weakness and only a third would accept medication if prescribed. [12] “In the African American community, there is also an association that mental illness means weakness and the inability to handle your problems on your own or that anxiety or depressive symptoms should be addressed with praying and fasting,”

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said social worker Arron Muller to *The Chicago Crusader*. [13]

The fact that African Americans and Latinos are significantly less likely to seek and receive treatment than European Americans is especially worrying given that depression among these minority groups is likely to be more persistent than in white Americans. [14][15] But tech can help break down the barriers that stop them seeking treatment. “Apps have become an important connectivity gateway for minority groups,” says Nadia James, the founder of Kinde, an app based on CBT methods. “While the majority of Americans own smartphones, minorities tend to rely more heavily on their smartphones to access the internet. People of black and Hispanic backgrounds are also more likely to use their phone to look up health information. So, it's really a no brainer that apps should cater more to people of color, women, and LGBTQ people. We have dedicated safe spaces for people who identify as minorities to share their experiences and mental health concerns with one another without fear of judgment or misunderstanding.” [16]

Therapy for Black Girls is an app and podcast that aims to connect African American women with experienced professionals while opening up conversations around mental health. By providing access to therapists who understand their particular cultural nuances, it's improving the treatment experience and outcomes. In a similar vein, Huddle is specifically geared toward helping the LGBTQ community find support, recognizing that they are more than twice as likely as heterosexual men and women to experience symptoms of poor mental health. [17][18]

Easy-to-use, but ill-equipped?

App-based mental health resources are most impactful among digital natives. “Younger generations are simply more accustomed to living in a digital world and, at the same time, are oftentimes disenchanted with our existing health system and open to new avenues for addressing their health,” says Dr. Acacia Parks, a psychologist and chief scientist at Happify Health. “According to a recent Accenture survey, people aged 22-38 are up to three times more likely than older patients to express dissatisfaction with the healthcare system and half of them are already using digital tools to self-manage some aspect of their health.” [19][20]

Talkspace is one such digital platform, matching people with therapists through an app and website. “We've found that people typically encounter a few main barriers when attempting to access therapy: access, cost, stigma. Technology is able to bypass all three of these factors,” says Neil Leibowitz, the chief medical officer at Talkspace. “Technology also allows for a more seamless process for matching with a therapist who will be able to successfully treat you, and it also makes it easier to switch therapists if it doesn't work out. In this way, technology not only makes the ability to start therapy easier, but it can also ensure a better clinical outcome.” [21]

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Neil Leibowitz, chief medical officer at Talkspace

Since most people come to an app through a search on their phone rather than through advice from a clinician, marketing materials supplant medical expertise as the main source of information, and it can be misleading. Scientific language and supporting statements make claims that can't always be backed up. One study that looked at mental health apps found that just 35% were

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clinically relevant for depression, while only 2.6% claimed clinical effectiveness.[22] A separate study of bipolar disorder apps found that their content was generally “not in line with practice guidelines or established self-management principles.” [23]

“Many of these apps are often not well designed for the needs of those who would benefit the most from them,” says John B. Torous, an instructor in psychiatry at Harvard University. “Many people have smartphones today, but they are also unsure how to use their phones towards wellness or recovery.” [24] Kim Palmer, the CEO and founder of Clementine, an app that supports women to sleep better, says: “I’m deeply concerned about apps that use a subscription model and just keep loading on more and more content that frankly isn’t needed, but is added to justify their monthly subscription. For many people who are suffering with poor mental health, libraries of content just add confusion and stress and often make people feel like they are a failure. Some apps try to encourage ‘challenges’ – a sort of gamification strategy. Again, this is designed to justify a monthly subscription and can have the complete opposite effect where you feel like a failure because you haven’t achieved the desired challenge.” [25]



Developers don't tend to have medical degrees to back up claims

Wanderlust | Facebook (2019) ©

Insights and opportunities

People are getting used to personalized service across sectors and increasingly expect the same from healthcare. Research carried out in 2017 found that 69% of consumers want an individualized customer experience, yet only 40% of brands offer one. [26] By offering bite-sized meditation sessions to meet busy schedules, Headspace has forged ahead in the mindfulness area. With Talkspace, meanwhile, anyone can get therapy without traveling to an office, which serves to make it more accessible and flexible. Accenture estimates that clinical applications for AI could save the US healthcare system \$150 billion a year by 2026, and while many of the mental health apps on the market are not harnessing artificial intelligence, their use of data could transform the way that people obtain customized care. [27]

There is, however, some concern that using data may come at the expense of users' trust. In a

cross-sectional study of 36 top-ranked apps for depression and smoking cessation, 29 transmitted data to services provided by Facebook or Google, but only 12 accurately disclosed this in a privacy policy or made it clear that data would be shared in this way. [28] The researchers concluded that because many insurance companies do not cover apps, selling personal data or subscriptions is the only way to make money. While making money out of mental illness still feels uneasy, there are platforms that have worked to cultivate supportive communities and monetize events around them. Goop's health festival, for example, brought together talks around wellness and mental health, while *Wanderlust* pops up across US cities to mix wellness, mental health and food, and the long-running *Sun Valley Wellness Festival* encourages people to prioritize mental and physical wellbeing. [29]

Social media and a reliance on cellphones have been blamed for a rise in poor mental health. Numerous studies have found that excessive phone use is correlated with poor sleep, increased stress, heightened anxiety, and depression, which begins at as young an age as two. [30][31] One study of late night phone users even found that they were 11% more likely to have bipolar disorder and 6% more likely to have depression. [32] Despite all of these negatives, mobile apps could also be the answer to the growing mental health crisis. By creating a level playing field that anyone can access, they can help ease signs and symptoms, empowering people to look after their own wellbeing.

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