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Technology and the Future of Mental Health Treatment

■ How is technology used for mental health treatment?

Technology has opened a new frontier in mental health care and data collection. Mobile devices like cell phones, smartphones, and tablets are giving the public, health care providers, and researchers new ways to access help, monitor progress, and increase understanding of mental well-being.

Mobile mental health support can be very simple but effective. For example, anyone with a phone or computer can call, text, or chat the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) at any time.

New technology can also be packaged into an extremely sophisticated app for smartphones or tablets. Such apps might use the device's built-in sensors to collect information on a user's typical behavior patterns. Then, if the app detects a change in behavior, it can signal that help is needed before a crisis occurs.

Some apps are stand-alone programs designed to improve memory or thinking skills. Other apps help people connect to a peer counselor or a health care professional.

Excitement about the huge range of opportunities technology offers for mental health treatment has led to a burst of development. Thousands of mental health apps are available in iTunes and Android app stores, and the number is growing every year. However, this new technology frontier includes a lot of uncertainty. There is very little industry regulation and very little information on app effectiveness, which can lead people to wonder which apps they should trust.

Before focusing on the state of the science and where it may lead, it's important to look at the advantages and disadvantages of expanding mental health treatment and research into a mobile world.

■ What are the pros and cons of mental health apps?

Mental health apps and other technology have a lot of potential, both for people seeking mental health care and mental health professionals providing such services. Some advantages of mobile care technology include the following.

- **Convenience:** Allows treatment to take place anytime and anywhere, such as at home in the middle of the night or on a bus on the way to work, making it ideal for people who have trouble getting to in-person appointments
- **Anonymity:** Lets people receive treatment anonymously and privately from the comfort of their homes
- **Introduction to care:** Acts as a good first step for people who have been reluctant to seek mental health care in the past
- **Lower cost:** Makes care more affordable through apps that are free or cheaper than traditional in-person care
- **Greater outreach:** Helps mental health professionals offer treatment to people in remote areas or to large numbers of people in times of sudden need, like after a natural disaster or traumatic event
- **Interest:** Encourages people to continue therapy by making care more appealing and accessible than traditional in-person treatment
- **24-hour service:** Provides around-the-clock monitoring or intervention support
- **Consistency:** Offers the same treatment program to all people
- **Support:** Complements traditional therapy by extending in-person sessions, reinforcing new skills, and providing support and monitoring
- **Data collection:** Collects information, such as location, movement, phone use, and other data

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need more information on their effectiveness.

The following are some limitations of the technology that researchers and developers are trying to answer questions about.

- **Effectiveness:** Is the app supported by scientific evidence showing that it works and works as well as traditional in-person methods?
- **Audience:** Does the app work equally well for all people it is meant to help?
- **Privacy:** How does the app maker guarantee users' privacy, considering many apps deal with sensitive personal information?
- **Guidance:** How do people determine if an app is effective when no industry-wide standards exist for evaluating quality?
- **Regulation:** Who should regulate mental health technology and the data it generates?
- **Overselling:** Does the app promise more than it delivers and turn people away from using other, more effective therapies?

+ What are current trends in app development?

+ Who creates mental health apps?

+ Who evaluates mental health apps?

+ What is NIMH's role in research on mental health intervention technology?

+ How can I find a clinical trial on mental health intervention technology?

+ Where can I learn more about mental health intervention technology?

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