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- Mental health apps are convenient and often low cost but may present misleading information
- Check with your mental health provider or therapist to see if they can help you choose an app that fits your personal needs
- Don't replace your mental health providers/therapists and support system with an app, use apps as a supplemental tool
- Be aware of the privacy of your personal information when using apps. They are not required to follow HIPAA.

## What is a mental health app?

Applications, or apps, are available on smartphones and other electronic devices to help users improve issues with sleep, stress, disordered eating, substance use, depression, anxiety, and more.

Some popular areas of app development include the following categories:<sup>1</sup>

- Self-Management (user puts information into the app and it provides feedback/tools)
  - MindShift
  - Wysa: Mental Health Support
  - Sanvello
- Improving Thinking Skills (provide exercises to help thought processing)
  - Headspace
  - Calm
- Skill-Training (help users learn new coping skills in the form of games/videos)
  - Tappy: Self Care Fidgeter
  - Happify
- Illness Management & Supported Care (allow users to interact with another person, such as peer support or a trained health care providers/therapist)
  - Better Help
  - Talkspace
  - Social media forums (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram)
- Passive Symptom Tracking (collect data using sensors built into smartphone)
  - Moodfit
- Data Collection (collect information without help from the user to aid in research)

## Pros vs. Cons:<sup>1</sup>

### Pros

- Convenient
- Often free or low cost
- be a good first step for people who are unsure about seeking help from a mental health professional for their mental health
- Available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

### Cons

- May not be helpful in improving symptoms for some
- Information presented is not regulated
- Privacy may not be protected
- Some people may not have an electronic device or understand how to use the technology

## Are mental health apps helpful?

- Scientific reviews of the current evidence for use of mental health apps have reported promising results in favor of these apps as an addition to traditional treatment with therapy +/- medication<sup>9</sup>

- Some apps may give incomplete or information about mental health that is not evidence based.<sup>2</sup>
  - Reviews on the App Store or in blog post comments are based on individual personal experience.
  - If able, try to have a mental health professional or trusted advocate look at the app prior to using it.
    - The American Psychiatric Association created an App Evaluation Model:<sup>3</sup>
      - <https://psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/practice/mental-health-apps/the-app-evaluation-model>
- Apps may not have tips and tools appropriate to help in a crisis situation, such as suicidal thoughts, escalating self-harm feelings or behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Resources for crisis situations include:
  - Helping a loved one in crisis:<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/crisis%20guide/INFO-Warning-Signs-of-Crisis-ENG.pdf>
  - 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:<sup>6</sup> Call or Text 988 or Online Chat on the website

### How do the app creators use the data they collect from users?

- Mental health apps feel less revealing and anonymous, but this may not be entirely true.
- Apps (and app creators) are not required to follow the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), a law that protects patients' personal health information across health care settings.
- A research study showed that nearly half of the apps reviewed did not have a privacy policy. Many of the ones that did have one mentioned that the policy could change at any time without alerting the user.<sup>7</sup>
- Apps may share and sell your personal information with other websites, such as Google and Facebook, for advertising and marketing purposes.<sup>8</sup>
- Other reasons given by creators for collecting personal data included research, fundraising, and website development.<sup>7</sup>
- If you have privacy concerns, check for a privacy policy and other disclosure information before downloading an app



Go online to find more information and to view the references for this toolkit.

[aapp.org/554471](https://aapp.org/554471)