

Digital Mental Health 101:

Clinician Quick-Start Brief

This issue brief is an introduction to the broad considerations for psychiatrists when engaging with mobile health (mHealth) solutions. Look out for a full resource document on how to incorporate this into your practice!

Background

The goal of mHealth is to improve health outcomes through convenient, patient-driven mobile mental health support and self-management tools.

The most common uses for mHealth apps today are focused on promoting patient self-help and augmenting clinical support via data and physician consultation. Digital solutions have the potential to strengthen the therapeutic alliance and improve clinical outcomes while lowering costs, but can come with risks. This brief aims to educate and inform about the risks and benefits of mHealth in your practice.

Digital Mental Health Implementation

The mHealth App Landscape

The app ecosystem is constantly evolving, with 90,000 new digital health apps released in 2020 alone and over 10,000 related to mental health. These apps can perform myriad functions: symptom tracking, habit formation or targeted behavior change, peer support and more. Sometimes these apps are meant to be used as an adjunctive in coordination with a mental health professional while many “health and wellness”- apps are intended for unguided self-help.

Understanding the Technology

Hardware Considerations

Clinicians can establish patient access to hardware through a few questions, including whether the patient has access to a mobile device and stable internet or a data plan, and whether the patient feels comfortable using it.

Software Considerations

Additional considerations include: 1) Whether the app will work on the patient’s device or operating system; 2) If the patient has internet access or if the app can operate offline; and 3) If the app is accessible to the patient’s level of digital literacy and any accommodations the patient requires (e.g., cultural and linguistic appropriateness, visual limitations).

Addressing App and Technology Literacy

Onboarding and change management processes should go beyond the app to include assistance with basic technology functions such as accessibility, battery charging, operating system issues, device security, and data privacy.

Access to Mental mHealth: Moving from Digital Divide to Digital Inclusion

As of 2021, 7% of US adults say they do not use the internet. In the context of health and mental health, digital inclusion means ensuring a person has the knowledge, confidence, and skills to engage with digital health services across a variety of media and platforms. Strategies to boost digital literacy include training peer specialists as digital navigators.

Goodness of Fit: Reviewing App Options

The American Psychiatric Association’s expert consensus-driven APA App Evaluation Model provides guidance for psychiatrists and other health care providers when choosing an app to recommend for patient use. These hierarchical criteria include: basic facts about the app and its developer; risks, privacy, and security; clinical evidence; ease of use; and interoperability.

Ethical and Legal Considerations

When in doubt, core medical ethical principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and autonomy can be used to guide decision-making.