

Peace of mind at your fingertips

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Apps that record sleep and exercise habits may have the side-effect of improving mental health.

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In October 2010, more than 200 people sat down in the middle of Melbourne and began to meditate. Entrepreneur James Tutton was responsible for the "med mob" - an altogether different event to those he may have been more typically associated with as founder of the art, food and wine phenomenon, Moonlight Cinemas.

The mass meditation was to launch a free website and smartphone app he co-founded called "Smiling Mind", which today boasts more than 200,000 users. Targeted toward young people - though Tutton says half of registered users are adults - it aims to treat stress, anxiety, and depression through guided audio meditation.

It is one of hundreds of apps available on the market for those hoping to improve their mental health.

"Seventy-five per cent of mental illness has its onset during adolescence, and depression is predicted to soon be the biggest debilitating disease in the world," Tutton says.

"I had discovered mindfulness and mindfulness meditation as a way to manage demands, and wanted to build a tool to teach young people these skills too." Mindfulness meditation encourages people to focus on the present by engaging with senses like sound and touch.

To create Smiling Mind, Tutton says he and co-founder Jane Martino called upon international literature and mental health experts to ensure the program was evidence-based. The app is already being piloted in Australian schools and he aims to have Smiling Mind on school health curriculums by 2020. The app is being supported by youth mental health service ReachOut.com by Inspire Foundation.

With so many health apps on the market, it can be hard to determine which ones are built on good evidence. A review of smartphone-delivered mental health programs published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* concluded that while mental health apps have the potential to significantly improve treatment accessibility, most lack scientific evidence about their efficacy. "The public needs to be educated on how to identify the few evidence-based mental health apps available in the public domain to date," the researchers, from the Black Dog Institute in Sydney, write.

It's an area University of Sydney researchers hope to address by using online technology to develop effective tools to improve youth mental health. Director of the Software Engineering Group at the School of Electrical and Information Engineering, Associate Professor Rafael Calvo, and the director of the Brain and Mind Research Institute, Professor Ian Hickie, are collaborating with the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre to gather evidence to create mental health apps that work.

"We've been particularly working on what sort of apps appear to be easy to use, and we are also focusing on factors people can easily change," Hickie says. "So our focus is on sleep-wake cycles and physical activity, which are both extremely relevant to mental health and general health as well."

There is already strong evidence that sleep patterns and exercise impact on mental health, Hickie says. By downloading and using an exercise monitoring app, or an app to record sleep, people may already be experiencing improved mental health, even if that was not what they originally downloaded the app for. But particularly important are those health apps that record statistics and improvement of the user.

"There is a lot of evidence that monitoring progress is more likely to lead to change," Hickie says. "People love to see their progress and get feedback thanks to apps that record stats, and fitness apps are very good at this."

But in mental health therapy, patients were usually told to prepare to be in for the long haul, that they may not see improvement for weeks or months. If people did not see progress, then they usually didn't stick to interventions.

By partnering with exercise and sleep apps which record improvements in exercise duration or sleep quality, Hickie hopes an app may be developed that positively impacts on overall mental health. Some Fitness apps, like Runtastic, asks users to record their mood at the end of a workout, something a sleep and exercise app with the added focus of improving mood could also monitor.

"If someone is anxious, they may immediately search for an anxiety-treating app," Hickie says. "But they actually may find quite a lot of benefit from apps which focus on fitness or sleep."



Illustration: Michael Mucci.

Because exercise and sleep are important factors across several mental illnesses, a diverse range of patients could benefit from an app monitoring both those factors, he says.

Hickie says it would be important for mental health professionals to embrace innovative apps, and work with the creative people responsible for developing them. While treatments such as self-help books and counselling may continue to appeal to certain people, they could also be restrictive to the less verbally driven, he says.

"As these technologies get simpler and more interactive, they can engage more people in getting help," Hickie says. "That's why it's important for us to understand how apps can be used in ways that may provide smarter treatment than some of those available now."

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