

Research Evidence for Digital Mental Health

Digital mental health refers to the use of digital technologies and platforms to provide mental health support, intervention, and resources. With the increasing prevalence of digital devices and internet connectivity, digital mental health enhances the accessibility, affordability, and effectiveness of mental health care.

What is the evidence for digital treatments?

Psychological Treatment A structured, interactive intervention that treats a specific mental health issue.

- In clinical trials, there is strong evidence that digital mental health treatments outperform inactive controls¹ and treatment as usual² in symptom reduction. Digital mental health treatment programs generally have good acceptability and users report high levels of satisfaction³.
- Digital mental health treatment programs with added therapist support perform as well as face-to-face treatment in clinical trials^{3,4,5}. There is strong evidence that therapist-guided digital mental health treatments are both cost and clinically effective in routine care⁶.
- Research shows that self-guided programs are also effective in symptom reduction^{7,8}, and are most suitable for people with sub-threshold anxiety and depression or mild symptoms².
- Digital treatments are also effective for people with moderate to severe symptoms^{2,9} or more complex mental health conditions, though therapist-support or blended care is recommended for these groups^{10,11}.
- The evidence for digital mental health treatments is most established for anxiety and depression^{2,3,12}. There is also growing evidence for a range of other mental health conditions including substance use^{1,13}, PTSD¹⁴, and suicidality^{15,16}.

MindSpot

- Free clinician supported online programs for stress, worry, anxiety, depression, PTSD, chronic pain, and chronic health conditions in adults.
- Over 80 clinical trials with over 9,000 people.
- Participants on average experienced a 50% reduction in symptoms of anxiety and depression, with most sustaining improvements for 3 months.

THIS WAY UP ↑↑

- Online clinician-guided and self-guided CBT treatment programs for anxiety, depression, insomnia, chronic pain, PTSD, OCD, social anxiety and stress.
- 40 RCTs and 24 effectiveness studies with over 4,000 people.
- 80% of individuals who complete a THIS WAY UP treatment show a significant improvement in their mental health.

What is the evidence for other service types?

Counselling Support for people to work through a problem or crisis and information on where to get further help.

There is a strong demand for crisis intervention and social support that is provided by digital counselling services, with Lifeline, Australia's largest crisis support line, receiving over 1 million calls annually¹⁷. There is evidence that crisis phone lines reduce short-term distress¹⁸, and immediate suicidal urgency¹⁹, and call-back services may improve smoking cessation rates²⁰. While the evidence for counselling phone lines and online counselling in reducing mental health symptoms is limited, most are not primarily designed for symptom reduction¹⁸.

Symptom Management and Wellbeing Tools Tools that can play an active role in prevention or interventions but are not designed to serve as a complete treatment.

The evidence regarding digital tools, which may include apps for symptom management or programs designed to enhance wellbeing, is varied. Some research indicates that apps have small positive effects for reducing symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression and improving wellbeing when used regularly in the context of a research trial^{21,22}. However, there is concern about the quality and safety of many apps on the market, with as few as 2% of them being supported by published research^{23,24}. Before recommending a tool, we advise that practitioners check whether it has research support, or confirm that its content and function are consistent with safe, evidence-based practice.



- An app to help individuals overcome low moods and anxiety by discovering new and better ways of coping.
- In an RCT, MoodMission resulted in a decrease in depressive symptoms and an increase in mental wellbeing. There were no changes in anxiety in the treatment or control groups.



Black Dog Institute

myCompass

- A free self-help tool-box that aims to promote resilience and wellbeing for people experiencing mild to moderate stress, anxiety and/or depression.
- In an RCT, MyCompass resulted in improvements in symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress and work and social functioning, with improvements persisting for 3 months.

Peer Support Services that facilitate connection to a trained peer worker or a community of peers.

There is growing evidence supporting the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness of digital peer support in reducing mental health symptoms and facilitating recovery processes^{11,25,26}. While there is a need for further high-quality research, these services meet a clear demand with SANE Forums supporting over 300,000 users²⁷. The presence of trained moderation can help ensure the quality and safety of peer support²⁸.

REACHOUT

- Free professionally moderated anonymous discussion forums and peer chat.
- Over a 12 week trial, young people using Reach Out demonstrated modest reductions in symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression.
- The proportion of participants at high risk of suicide also reduced.

MOST / Digital

- MOST provides a safe, moderated online community offering access to self-directed therapeutic content, helpful tailored information, practical tools, and real people to talk to.
- A pilot evaluation found MOST to be feasible, acceptable and safe.
- It also found significant improvement in distress, stress, wellbeing, depression and loneliness.

Information Services that provide information and advice on mental health topics.

There is limited evidence that psychoeducation alone improves mental health or wellbeing, but it can improve mental health literacy, reduce stigma, and increase help-seeking²⁹.

View our online resource with the full reference list.



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