

# Research Evidence for Digital Mental Health in Young People (12-25yrs)

Digital mental health refers to the use of digital technologies and platforms to provide mental health screening, support or intervention. With digital devices and internet connectivity integral to the lives of young people, these tools enhance the accessibility and affordability of mental health care tailored to their unique needs and challenges.

## What is the evidence for digital treatments?

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

- Digital interventions, particularly i-CBT, have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in adolescents (12-17) and young adults (18-25) compared with inactive controls<sup>1-6</sup>. There is also evidence that i-CBT performs as well as face-to-face therapy in symptom reduction for anxiety and depression<sup>4,7</sup>.
- Low to moderate levels of engagement, adherence and completion are common among young people, particularly in fully automated formats<sup>5,8</sup>. Adherence and outcomes improve significantly when there is additional online or face-to-face support from health professionals, parents, or peers<sup>5,7-9</sup>.
- The strongest evidence for digital treatments in young people is for addressing anxiety and depression<sup>1,2,8,10</sup>. Evidence for the effectiveness of digital interventions in autism, ADHD, disordered eating, PTSD, substance use, psychosis and OCD is mixed, with varying levels of effectiveness across studies<sup>1,7,10,11</sup>.

### The BRAVE PROGRAM.

- Self-guided CBT treatment programs to help children and teenagers (3-17yrs) better cope with their worries, with optional parent or caregiver components.
- The BRAVE Program has undergone extensive research for over a decade, including a number of RCTs and evaluations.
- There is good evidence that the BRAVE Program is effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety in children and adolescents.

### MOST / gen Digital

- Peer and professional web-chat support service with modules to help young people (12-25yrs) with depression, anxiety or sleep problems.
- There are 15+ pilot studies and RCTs supporting the efficacy of MOST for improving symptoms of depression, anxiety, distress, social functioning and wellbeing across diagnoses.
- One large scale evaluation of MOST found that users experienced a significant reduction of depression and anxiety after 12 weeks.

## 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 Kids Helpline providing over 70,000 counselling sessions in 2023<sup>12</sup>. There is some evidence that for adolescents, helpline counselling may decrease immediate suicidality urgency and improve mental state<sup>13</sup>, while text therapy may reduce mental health symptoms<sup>14</sup>. While there is limited evidence for counselling phone lines and online counselling in reducing mental health symptoms, most are not primarily designed for symptom reduction<sup>15</sup>. While studies to date provide preliminary support for positive effects of digital counselling services, more high quality research is needed to draw definitive conclusions on effectiveness.

**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-seeking among young adults<sup>16</sup>.

**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.

Evidence for the use of digital tools, including symptom management apps and wellbeing programs, for symptom reduction in young people, is limited due to the small number of studies evaluating their effectiveness<sup>17-19</sup>. There is also concern about the quality and safety of many apps on the market. Only a small proportion of apps available to young people are supported by published research<sup>7, 19</sup>. Apps supported by clinical trials are limited but those that have been studied show promise in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress in youth, particularly when integrated into traditional therapy<sup>17, 19</sup>. Before recommending or using 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 online program offering six self-guided, positive psychology challenges for young people (13-16yrs), to reduce stress and improve focus, friendships and emotional wellbeing.
- An RCT found that compared to control, people using BITEBACK with high adherence (30 minutes or more per week) reported significant improvements in depression, anxiety and wellbeing. Those with low adherence (less than 30 minutes per week) did not experience significant improvements.



**Sleep Ninja**

- An app to help young people (12-16yrs) improve their sleep quality.
- An RCT found that Sleep Ninja reduced symptoms of insomnia (at 6 and 14 weeks) and symptoms of depression (at 6 weeks) compared to the active control condition.

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

The evidence supporting the effectiveness of digital peer support for reducing mental health symptoms in young people is limited, with mixed findings<sup>20, 21</sup>. There is, however, evidence supporting the use of digital peer support to increase feelings of hope and social connectedness<sup>22, 23</sup>. While there is a need for further high-quality research, these services meet a clear demand with ReachOut forums supporting over 100,000 users in 2022-23<sup>24</sup>. The presence of trained moderation can help ensure the quality and safety of peer support<sup>22</sup>.

**REACHOUT**

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

**kids helpline | MyCircle**

- Kids Helpline offers My Circle, a safe, confidential peer support platform for young people (12-25yrs) with mental health, relationship and substance use issues to connect and learn from each other.
- A mixed methods exploratory study found that after 6 weeks of engaging with My Circle, young people experienced significant reductions in depression, anxiety, stress and general distress.
- A majority of users reported feeling less mental health stigma and greater willingness to seek help in the future.

**View our online resource with the full reference list.**



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