Research Snapshot

Finding digital mental health tools during the pandemic: A synthesis of resources

What you need to know

Researchers conducted a rapid review of academic and grey literature as well as a stakeholder environmental scan to identify and synthesize knowledge on available digital mental health tools and interventions. The general population can use this research to support mental health during and after the pandemic. The researchers also aimed to uncover strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the interventions. The study uncovered a total of 31 mobile health apps and 114 web-based resources, which will be made available via web portal and shared widely.

What is this research about?

A large number of Canadians are experiencing mental health challenges that may be linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of digital interventions has become one way to support the mental health needs of Canadians, and these digital tools can help with managing access and capacity challenges for the mental health care system, given the continued need for social distancing.

The number of available digital mental health tools has grown to be quite large. However, many of the tools are not well known or are under-utilized in the delivery of mental health care. There is also no clear vetting and evaluation process to help people sort through the large amount of emerging online information in order to find tools to suit their needs and context.

The purpose of this research was to identify, synthesize, and mobilize knowledge related to digital interventions that the general population could use to support mental health during and after COVID-19. This work also aimed to uncover strengths, weaknesses and gaps in these interventions, applicable to the COVID-19 context.

What did the researchers do?

This work involved three phases. In Phase 1, researchers conducted a rapid review of academic and grey literature to identify digital interventions which could be used to reduce the potential mental health impacts of COVID-19 for the general Canadian population. The researchers searched empirical databases (from 2002 onwards), search engines, app stores and curated mobile app libraries for common mental health themes such as insomnia, anxiety, meditation, depression, and alcohol/substance use. The researchers developed an initial list of digital resources based on their findings from the rapid review.

In Phase 2, the researchers conducted a stakeholder environmental scan of digital mental health knowledge users and experts. They sought input on additional resources to include ease of use, suggestions for organization and categorization of the tool, barriers to accessibility, and format preferences.

Phase 3 is an ongoing process of knowledge mobilization efforts including presenting in webinars and virtual conferences, and distributing the information widely among stakeholder group networks, research reports and academic publication, in order to get the tool into the hands of the

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general population so they can make use of these resources.

What did the researchers find?

This study uncovered 31 mobile health apps and 114 web-based resources, which fit the inclusion criteria. The following number of interventions were identified in each study phase:

- Academic literature

  - Digital interventions: 2

- Grey literature

  - Web resources: 75

  - Mobile apps: 27

- Environmental scan

  - Web resources: 39

  - Mobile apps: 4

For Version 1 of their list, the researchers organized the digital interventions into two sections (websites, mobile apps), and provided a link and brief description for each resource identified. Based on feedback from the environmental scan, the researchers switched to a more interactive platform to develop Version 2 of their list, which allows for easy filtering and viewing of the information into various sub-categorizations (e.g., intervention type, main features, population focus, specificity to COVID-19, cost, developer type, and mental health conditions supported, etc.).

How can you use this research?

The lists of resources developed through this research are intended to be shared widely, to support the mental health of Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic. Service providers can use it as a care-planning tool to help identify support options in cases where traditional face-to-face services are not accessible for a variety of reasons, including COVID-19.

Version 1 (Genial.ly):

- Resource document: https://view.genial. ly/5f199d85c68a2d0d434bfc56/dossier-reporting-digital-mental-health-intervention-document

Version 2 (Airtable):

- Websites: https://airtable.com/shrROcallvqXxc3RZ

- Mobile apps: https://airtable.com/shrmR51IX5bDwQn9E

Limitations and next steps

Stakeholders who participated in the environmental scan

About the researchers

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pointed out equity and accessibility considerations: Namely, that some populations may not have access to internet connection, technology devices or data plans needed to make use of many of the resources. They highlighted a need for the list to include phone or text services that did not require end-users to have access to a data plan and the need for a printable option for people without easy access to technology.

Next steps: The resource lists will be shared. A manuscript is under preparation, which further details the methodology and findings as they relate to strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the identified interventions and an assessment related to key equity concepts.

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context behind the research, the terminology used, the research methods and the findings may not provide the full picture for this particular topic. Also, there might be a lag between when the study was conducted and when it was published, so it might not reflect the current evidence.

Keywords

This *Research Snapshot* was based on the Final Report , "Digital Interventions to Support Population Mental Health during COVID-19: A Knowledge Synthesis".

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