



Youth Mental Health Apps Can Help: What You Need to Know

Based on “A Framework for Evaluation of Mobile Apps for Youth Mental Health.” Yuri Quintana, PhD, John Torous, MD.

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Table of Contents

Intro	03
How Mental Health Apps Can Help	04
What to Look for in a Mental Health App	05
How to Help a Friend in Need	08
Additional Resources	10



Intro

If you struggle with mental health issues, you're not alone. A lot of young people grapple with things like depression, anxiety, drug or alcohol problems, mood disorders, and other mental health challenges. They can have a significant impact on how you function at home, at school, and with your friends and family.

But, luckily, there are supports and treatments that could help you feel better or manage your symptoms more effectively. One place you might look for help is your phone. It's not just for posting on Instagram or watching the latest

Tik Tok challenge. You can also get real support through mobile apps designed to help address your mental health issues.

But how do you know which apps actually work and are right for you? Supported by research from Homewood Research Institute, this guide can help you figure out how mental health apps can fit into your life and help you feel better.



How Mental Health Apps Can Help

When you think of treatment for mental health issues, medication, talk therapy, and group peer support likely come to mind. Those are important strategies for improving your mental health and managing symptoms — but could someone cope when they can't access those supports?

Maybe you're on a waiting list for them, or you experience a crisis between sessions.

There are apps for almost every mental health issue. Some allow you to text a counselor when you're in crisis. Others keep track of how many days you've gone without using the substance or behaviour you're addicted to. Some apps can even set up a list of contacts so that you can reach out to friends with the touch of a button when you need help or are thinking about self-harm.

Mental health apps can be used by themselves or in tandem with each other. For example, if you struggle with a mood disorder, you might want to get an app designed to help track your moods to see how they are impacted by your routine. You might also decide to use an app that gives you access to a therapist in an emergency.

These apps can also be used in concert with treatments that your doctor or therapist may have prescribed.



What to Look for in a Mental Health App



Not sure which app(s) to download? Here are some questions to help you find the right mental health app for you:



1

What is the app for?

What mental health condition(s) are you struggling with? There are apps made specifically for youth experiencing things like depression, anxiety, mood disorders, addiction, and suicidal ideation. Finding an app designed with specific issues in mind can help you get targeted treatment or support.

2

Who developed the app?

You should look for an app that uses tested methods to help improve your mental health. Were mental health experts involved in creating the content for the app? That might mean it will be more likely to work.

3

Is there evidence the app works as advertised?

Mental health apps can make claims about how they can make your life better, but do they back that up with research or data? Look for apps that have been evaluated by qualified mental health experts or scientific studies published in journals showing their effectiveness.

4

When was the app last updated?

Mental health research and recommendations change. If an app hasn't been updated in over two years, it might not be using current medical best practices. Look for an app that updates more frequently.



5

Do you have control of your own data?

Sharing your personal mental health data is an act of trust. Ensure you know who is going to see that data and how it will be used. Can you delete your data from the app and its servers if you decide to uninstall the app?

6

Is your data secure?

Before you sign up, read through the app's privacy policy to make sure that you know how they will protect or encrypt your data and that you feel comfortable with how your data may be used.

7

Is your data private?

Apps can sometimes share anonymous user data with other companies. Make sure to read the fine print so that you know how your data will be used and that you feel comfortable with it.

8

Can you afford it?

While many mental health apps are free, some require that you pay for a subscription or make in-app purchases. Make sure you know these costs upfront before downloading the app.



9

Can you personalize it?

Once you start using the app, are you able to personalize it to fit your needs? For example, you may not want an app that recommends you do things that will help individuals with social anxiety when you don't experience anxiety in social situations.

10

How useable is it?

Some apps are designed better than others. If the app is confusing to use, you'll be less likely to stick with it. Find an app with a design you like, as well as whose content works in supporting your needs.

How to Help a Friend in Need



If one of your friends is struggling, what can you do to help? Jack.org, an [RBC Future Launch partner](#), created [Be There](#), a guide that emphasizes five steps to be there for someone:



**SAY WHAT
YOU SEE**



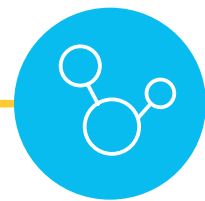
**SHOW
YOU CARE**



**HEAR
THEM OUT**



**KNOW
YOUR ROLE**



**CONNECT
TO HELP**

Say, Show, Listen

Many young people struggling with their mental health feel overwhelmed, uncared for, or misunderstood. If you think a friend isn't doing well, reach out and ask them how they are. This can be as simple as a quick chat, or by sharing the change you've seen without judgment or assumptions. Show them you care by sharing class notes with them, having a meal together, or by simply asking how you can best support them. Then listen attentively to what they share with you.



Remember, you're not a mental health expert

You can help make your friend feel heard and supported — but you're not an expert or a medical professional. It's important to know your role as part of their support system and help your friend find and connect with the community or professional mental health support that they may need.

Parents might be able to handle this, but not all kids feel comfortable telling their parents they're struggling. If you can, work with a guidance counsellor or supportive adult to identify community supports that they can access — from group therapy sessions to public programs that offer free counselling.

You can also help your friends find the right mental health apps and support them in using them. If a friend doesn't have a lot of energy or feels hopeless, they might not be able to do the research to find the right apps. That's where you can step in. Using the questions above, evaluate the apps on the market. Which ones look like they would be more effective? Make a list for your friend and then encourage them to try those apps.



For example, if your friend is struggling with thoughts of suicide, you can suggest that they get an app that notifies a small number of people when they're having suicidal thoughts. Offer to be on that list of people and follow up with them quickly if you get an alert.



If your friend is using a cognitive behavioural therapy app that suggests things that they can do to improve their mood, offer to do some of those things with them. For example, some apps might suggest going for a walk outside or spending time with friends. Offer to walk with them or get a group of friends together to hang out in the park.

One of the scariest things about trying to help someone struggling with mental health issues can be not knowing if it will help and worries that you'll suggest the wrong thing.

But mental health apps developed by experts may help you support your friend using methods that have been shown to help.

Ultimately, as with most health conditions, there will be ups and downs with mental health struggles. While apps aren't a cure-all, they may help make the bad days a little less bad and may even help increase the number of good days.

Additional Resources



Check out these additional resources, many of which are also supported by RBC Foundation through RBC Future Launch's commitment to youth mental well-being:

Text a helpline or speak to a counsellor (powered by Kids Help Phone):

- Kids and youth: Text CONNECT to 686868 or Call: 1-800-668-6868
- Adults: Text WELLNESS to 741741

End the stigma, join in the change-making or learn how to be there for someone:

- [National standard for mental health and well-being for post-secondary students](#)
- [Join the jack.org movement](#)
- Know someone who might be struggling with their mental health? Learn to [Be There](#) for them

Find professional support at an integrated youth service hub near you:

National (across Canada)

- [ACCESS Open Minds](#)

Alberta

- [Camrose Open Door](#)
- [The Alex Youth Health Centre](#)

British Columbia

- [Foundry BC](#)

Manitoba

- [Norwest Co-op Community Health Youth Hub](#)

New Brunswick

- [Government of New Brunswick Integrated Service Delivery](#)

Nova Scotia

- [Laing House](#)
- [Phoenix](#)

Ontario

- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#)

Quebec:

- [Aire Ouverte](#)

If you don't see your region above, The model may not exist yet in that your area. RBC is working actively with other foundations and non-profits across Canada to bring this model to life in other jurisdictions nationally.

Be There

Learn more at **BeThere.org**

The information shared by RBC Future Launch is intended to provide young people awareness about some of the services and programming available to them to help enhance/protect their personal mental well-being. RBC Future Launch is RBC's commitment to empowering Canadian youth for the jobs of tomorrow. RBC is dedicating \$500 million to help young people access meaningful employment through practical work experience, skills development, networking and access to mental well-being supports and services.

If you are experiencing health distress, suicidal thoughts, or behaviours for your safety please call a helpline 9-1-1 or emergency services or go to your nearest emergency department for assistance.

Reference: Quintana, Y & Torous, J. A Framework for Evaluation of Mobile Apps for Youth Mental Health. Homewood Research Institute Report, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, May 20,2020.

Full report available at: [Homewood Research Institute's website](#) (this research was supported by RBC Foundation.)

For more information on RBC Future Launch's support on youth mental well-being, please visit [our website](#).

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