

5 Questions to Ask

FINDING THE RIGHT MENTAL HEALTH APP



With stress management a key part of the treatment plan for IC/BPS, smartphone apps that support stress reduction, mindfulness, tracking and regulating emotions, and other practices that support mental health can be an important—and low-cost—support. As many as 15,000 mental health-related apps are now available, and studies suggest that they can make a meaningful difference in treating depression, anxiety, and other, more specific mental health conditions.

However, unlike mental health providers or medications, these apps aren't regulated—the Food and Drug Administration has taken a hands-off approach to what it calls “low risk” digital general wellness and mental health apps. With that in mind, here are five questions to ask:

1. Is the app based on evidence-based practices?

Many apps have been developed by mental health professionals and are based on evidence-based practices. However, studies have found that some apps directly contradict best practices for mental health. As a result, it's important to do your homework.

Reputable apps will provide links to studies highlighting either its efficacy or that of the strategies it employs, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Instead of relying solely on app store reviews, consult with sites which use mental health experts to review apps. Examples include the M-Health Index & Navigation Database (mindapps.org/Home), the One Mind Psyber Guide (onemindpsyberguide.org), which lists 231 apps for the treatment of stress and anxiety, or this list from the University of California San Francisco (psych.ucsf.edu/copingresources/apps).

2. How much does the app cost?

Apps may be completely free, have a one-time purchase price, or require an ongoing monthly or annual subscription rate. Some may make limited features free but require payment for the full range of features after a trial period. Make sure pricing policies are clear and transparent before clicking the “purchase” button.

3. Does the app respect user privacy?

Many smartphone apps have come under fire for providing user information to advertisers or selling it to other companies. That's why it's important to understand whether a mental health app has a privacy policy—one 2019 study found that fewer than half of mobile apps for depression had an express policy about safeguarding user data. Even if the app does have a privacy policy, it's important to understand what that policy says about what data is collected and how it is shared. Can users opt out of sharing information? Will user data be deleted if the user stops using the app or cancels their subscription?

4. Who is developing the app?

Is the developer a for-profit company, a healthcare company, an academic institution, or a non-profit or the government? App stores often offer descriptions of the developer or company, as well as participating experts or providers.

It may be worth paying attention to one particular developer—Uncle Sam. Different federal agencies have developed apps for specific audiences, including veterans, that are free and available to all, including PTSD Coach, Mindfulness Coach, CPT Coach, Breathe2Relax, and Virtual Hope Box.

5. Do you have other supports?

No app can replace a skilled mental health professional, and many are intended to be used along with ongoing therapy or treatment. If you continue to struggle with your mental health or are in crisis, be sure to speak to a professional.