

Research Evidence for Digital Mental Health in Adults (18yrs+)

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 interventions?

Psychological Intervention A structured, interactive program or service for 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}.



- 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.



- 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 with 50% below diagnostic thresholds.

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.



| Smiling Mind

- A website and app teaching mindfulness meditation to young people and adults.
- Evaluated in 11 trials across varying contexts, both standalone and in broader programs.
- An RCT in university students showed reduced depression and improved resilience compared to an active control after 10 days.
- An RCT in working adults found a reduction in burnout after 8 weeks, while no changes to mood were observed.

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}. While there is a need for further high-quality research, these services meet a clear demand with SANE Forums supporting over 300,000 users²⁶. The presence of trained moderation can help ensure the quality and safety of peer support²⁷.



- SANE offers counselling, peer support and information for adults with recurring, persistent or complex mental health issues and their support people.
- An online survey of SANE forum users found 72% felt safe, 53% felt connected, 47% gained knowledge, and 53% found it easy to use.
- A mixed-methods evaluation of SANE's guided recovery service showed improved quality of life and recovery after 12 weeks, with no change in distress.



| Daybreak

- An app providing community support and tools to help people change their relationship with alcohol.
- An RCT of Daybreak showed significant improvements in AUDIT-C scores, alcohol intake, quality of life, and distress after 3 months.
- 'Probably dependent' participants more than halved their use from 40.8 to 20.1 standard drinks, while 'hazardous/harmful' alcohol users reduced intake from 22.9 to 11.9 drinks.

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-seeking²⁸.

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