Effectiveness, Privacy, and Safety Concerns About the Supplemental Use of Mobile Apps in Counseling

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Objectives

1. Types of mental health-related mobile phone apps available through iTunes and Google Play stores.
2. Effectiveness, safety and privacy issues related to mental health-related mobile phone apps.
3. Ethical implications related to supplemental use of mental health-related apps.
Mobile Phones

• 95% of Americans own a cellphone of some type
  • 77% are smartphones
• Minority Americans outpace Caucasians in their use of cell phone apps
• Reliance on smartphones for online access is more common among younger adults, non-Caucasian, and lower-income Americans.

Mobile Phone Apps

• 3.8 million Android and 2 million Apple apps
  • as of end first quarter 2018
• Average person uses around 30 apps each month and launches 9 per day
• Average user spends 2hr 15 min /day using apps
Types of Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (iTunes and Google Play stores)

- Relaxation/breathing/meditation
- Online counseling (video and/or texting)
- Assessment tools
- Self-guided treatment (PTSD Coach) and coping skills training
- Daily motivation, inspirational messages, daily lessons (Worry Knot)
- Brain training/stimulation (Luminosity)
- Behavior/emotion tracking
- Games, social media

Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps

- Common keyword examples
  - Depression, anxiety, meditation, stress management
- App examples
  - Alysa – an artificial intelligence app for online counseling
  - Headspace – A guided meditation app
  - Talkspace – Online counseling (video, texting)
  - Moodpath Evaluation – Mood tracking and information on depression
  - Remente – self assessment/evaluation
Just some of the problem...

- Limited testing regarding efficacy of apps
  - Difficult to know if an app is useful, safe, and effective
- Ethical implications of using/recommending apps in counseling
- Lacking a regulatory system that administers or polices apps that claim to help individuals with mental wellness
- Privacy and safety concerns

Safety and Privacy Issues Related to Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (1 of 3)

- Enter personal health information
- Accept terms and conditions without reading them, collect information
- Individual information is collected/required to download and/or sign in
  - Age, gender, location, phone number
Safety and Privacy Issues Related to Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (2 of 3)

• Links to social media and email accounts
  • Also collect friends information which is a threat to users contacts
• Third party keyboard – info is available to developers of keyboard
  • Content of discussion is accessible

Safety and Privacy Issues Related to Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (3 of 3)

• Some apps require widgets and push notifications
• Wi-Fi, unsecure networks
• Non-encrypted data
Ethical Implications Related to Supplemental Use of Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (2 of 5)

- Non mental health-affiliated developers and conflicts of interest
- Data collection, where stored? (third-party keyboards, downloads)
- Privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, HIPAA
- Evidence, efficacy not well established
  - C.7. Treatment Modalities, C.7.a. Scientific Basis for Treatment

Ethical Implications Related to Supplemental Use of Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (1 of 5)

Ethical Foundational Principles - ACA Code of Ethics

**Beneficence**
- Working for the good of the individual and society...

**Nonmaleficence**
- Avoiding actions that cause harm
Ethical Implications Related to Supplemental Use of Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (3 of 5)

• Informed consent and disclosure (H.2.a.)
• Special populations (children, rural communities, cognitive impairments)
  • B.5.a. Responsibility to clients who lack capacity to give consent
• Possible risks involved not disclosed
  • C.7.b. Development and innovation

Ethical Implications Related to Supplemental Use of Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (4 of 5)

• C.2.a. Boundaries of Competence
• Counselors practice only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, state and national professional credentials, and appropriate professional experience. Whereas multicultural counseling competency is required across all counseling specialties, counselors gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, dispositions, and skills pertinent to being a culturally competent counselor in working with a diverse client population.
Ethical Implications Related to Supplemental Use of Mental Health-related Mobile Phone Apps (5 of 5)

• ACA Code of Ethics addresses Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media (Section H)
• H.1.a. Knowledge and Competency
  • Counselors who engage in the use of distance counseling, technology, and/or social media develop knowledge and skills regarding related technical, ethical, and legal considerations (e.g., special certifications, additional course work).

What would you say?

Your established client mentioned during session that her friend suggested she try an app called “Fight Depression Naturally.” She said it’s awesome and asks your opinion about it. What do you say?

Your established client mentions during session that her friend said she find a good app that helps with anxiety symptoms. She asks you if you know of any that you would recommend? What do you say?
12 Recommendations for counselors

1. Consider platform (Android vs Apple)
2. Be wary of users ratings/reviews
3. Credibility of developer
4. What’s the cost?
5. Personal information required?
6. Genre of app classification

7. Emergency resources available?
8. Evidence-based / research-based
9. Impossible claims ("cure depression")
10. Other apps made by developer
11. Evaluative tools
   • PsyberGuide for app information
   • APA Evaluation tool with client
Thank you!

Questions? Comments?