Self-Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Deploying Mobile Mental Health Resources to Support Service Members, Veterans, and the Public

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The VA’s National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD) and the Defense Health Agency’s Connected Health Branch collaborate regularly to bring evidence-informed mental health digital resources to Veterans, Service members, and the public. During a time of unforeseen loss, isolation, and stress, the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for both departments to develop new technologies to meet the moment, and to leverage existing implementation efforts to expand the reach of digital self-help resources. The first talk in this panel describes a national effort that resulted in over 17,000 Veterans being introduced to NCPTSD mobile mental health apps for self-care during the pandemic. The second talk offers a closer look at staff participants in that project, specifically how staff perceptions of the technology and of their own abilities predicted the number of Veterans they introduced to mobile mental health apps. The third talk provides an overview of the rapid development of the COVID Coach app for self-care, discusses analysis of anonymous usage data, and describes implications for future research. The final talk describes program evaluation of a time-limited text-based service to help military couples cope with stress related to the pandemic. Together, this panel demonstrates innovation in the development, dissemination, and adoption of mobile mental health tools during an unprecedented moment in history. Further, presentations will highlight lessons learned in meeting the immediate needs identified during the pandemic, procedures and resources for engaging various user populations, and new areas for dissemination and study.

Keywords: mobile apps, COVID-19, implementation, self-care, Veterans, Service members

Fostering Technology-Supported Self-Care:
Expanding the Reach of VA Mobile Mental Health Apps During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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VA’s NCPTSD developed a suite of mobile mental health apps to supplement treatment and support self-care for Veterans and members of the public who are affected by PTSD and related issues, including a new Safety Plan app module to support suicide prevention. Unlike many publicly available apps, NCPTSD apps are free, do not collect identifiable user data, and are evidence-informed. A two-year implementation project was conducted to expand the reach of these apps, in 19 VA facilities nationwide. Multidisciplinary staff (N = 1,110) along the care continuum received training on NCPTSD apps and how to demonstrate them to Veterans and caregivers to facilitate self-care, promote mental health literacy, and provide links to additional support. Participants’ mean scores on a knowledge check measure significantly increased from pre-training (M = 80.8%, SD = 15.77%) to post-training (M = 91.1%, SD = 9.57%), F(1, 758) = 318.79, p < .001, and how to use apps, Z = -15.13, p < .001, compared to pre-training. With respect to applying knowledge to practice, in the first year of training, participants introduced apps to 17,044 Veterans, which was 12,211 more than the project target. This talk describes the training program, adaptations made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and implementation strategies used to establish a sustainable program of mobile mental health adoption at participating facilities.

Predictors of Multidisciplinary Staffs’ Introduction of Mobile Mental Health Apps to Veterans: An Application of the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology Model

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COVID Coach: Creating and Exploring Usage of a Public Mental Health App for the COVID-19 Pandemic

Beth K. Jaworski (National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs), Katherine Taylor (National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs), Kelly M. Ramsey (National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs), Adrienne J. Heinz (National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs), Sarah Steinmetz (National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division, Stanford University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences), and Jason E. Owen (National Center for PTSD, Dissemination and Training Division, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs).

Mental health apps, because of their scalability and potential for reaching underserved populations, can be useful as part of a government response to public health disasters. COVID Coach was designed by the VA’s National Center for PTSD to provide tools and resources specifically for addressing stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing anonymous analytics data collected from COVID Coach between May 1, 2020, and May 15, 2021, we examined the use of stress management tools, psychoeducational topics, and assessments for tracking mental health during a key period of the pandemic. The sample included 79,563 unique user codes (a proxy for individual app users) and 5,203,419 in-app events (Android = 1,603,182 events; iOS = 4,510,004 events). We found that the interactive tools for coping and stress management were most utilized. Overall, the tools were used 568,942 times by 56.7% (n = 45,115) of app users. The psychoeducational content was utilized far less frequently. Topics within the Learn section were viewed 84,107 times by 20.4% (n = 16,281) of users. Within the Mood Check section, 26.8% of users (n = 21,328) completed a total of 67,469 assessments to screen for symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and mental well-being. As the pandemic’s impacts on mental health continue to become more evident, COVID Coach’s uptake is promising. Future research should address how to best raise awareness of digital mental health resources and understand for whom and under what conditions the app is most helpful.

My MilLife Guide: An Evaluation of a Beta Text-Based Wellness Service

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Post-disaster research indicates the potential for negative psychological and health outcomes for the general population. Although there has been no specific research on members of the military community, there is the possibility that they could be at-risk for these negative outcomes. The Military Health System and Military Community and Family Policy both have an established portfolio of digital health resources (e.g., mobile apps, websites, podcasts, interactive tools) that have been developed to mitigate the risks of negative health outcomes for active-duty service members and their families. Dissemination of these resources to the military community is often difficult even through targeted social media, email marketing, installation advertising, and outreach. These agencies partnered together to develop a beta test of a text-based wellness service, My MilLife Guide. This eight-week program was designed to help active-duty service members and spouses fight COVID-19-related stress and strengthen their overall wellness by pushing out timely resources, information, and support. Service members (n = 631) and spouses (n = 631) could opt-in to one of the two tracks over a six-week period starting on January 11, 2021. The program was evaluated using key performance indicators (e.g., usage, opt-in/out, conversion rate, web sessions), an online user satisfaction survey, and user interviews. This presentation will describe the development of the program, the findings from the program evaluation, and discuss recommendations for improvement.

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