

Top 25 Mental Health Apps: An Effective Alternative for When You Can't Afford Therapy?

Psycom highlights the best mental health apps for 2020 and experts weigh in about just how effective they are as an alternative treatment

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What do you do when you can't afford therapy but are struggling to handle your mental illness alone? You could download an app. In recent years, there's been a proliferation of mental health apps available to smartphone users. These reasonably-priced, or most often free, mental health apps offer a wealth of resources that make therapeutic techniques more accessible, portable, and cost-effective.

Within minutes, you can find and download a myriad of apps that incorporate proven techniques such as [Cognitive Behavioral Therapy \(CBT\)](#) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT), and address everything from depression to eating disorder recovery, anxiety, PTSD, [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#), and more.

While the vast majority of these apps do not have peer-reviewed research to support their claims¹, health experts predict they will play an important role in the future of mental health care by providing innovative solutions for the self-management of mental health disorders. Some researchers are working on guidelines for mental health apps² and in the meantime, the American Psychiatric Association has developed an [app rating system](#) to help psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychotherapists, and other mental health clinicians assess the efficacy and risks of mobile and online apps.³

To be clear, the American Psychiatric Association doesn't explicitly rate mobile health apps for their members. Their app evaluation model gives practitioners a way to make informed decisions when considering whether an app works for them and their patients. The system provides feedback about the app in the areas of safety/privacy; scientific evidence supporting efficacy; easy of use and interoperability (the app's ability to enable downloading/sharing of the data for further interpretation).

Will Mental Health Apps Be the End of Therapy?

Sal Raichbach, PsyD, LCSW believes mental health apps have the potential to reach people who would otherwise not receive help by removing the barriers to treatment. “Sadly, only a small percentage of people actively seek professional help for their mental health problems,” he says. “This could be for any number of reasons: they may not be physically able to leave their homes due to severe anxiety or lack of mobility, or they may not have the financial means.”

Another part of the appeal of smartphone-based apps is their anonymity. “The apps also allow for privacy and confidentiality and can be a safe space for individuals who may be too ashamed to admit their mental health issues in person or who may feel that they will be negatively labeled or stigmatized by others,” Dr. Raichbach explains. “The privacy of using an app gives some individuals the feeling of separation they need while still being able to find answers to their questions within the comfort of their own homes.”

So, what kind of mental health app could be of real value to people struggling with mental health challenges? According to Dr. Raichbach, “the ideal app will also have mental health practitioners onboard, ready to answer questions, plus a 24/7 support hotline for more severe cases.”

But other mental health professionals question the effectiveness of mental health apps when used in isolation. Tanisha Ranger, PsyD, a psychologist who has used a variety of mental health apps with her patients, finds they’re an excellent way to help people stay connected outside of sessions to the work they are doing in therapy, but is critical of their use as an alternative or replacement for traditional treatment.

“I see mental health apps being very useful for people who cannot get to sessions as often as they would like, but I do not view them as a substitute for therapy,” she says. “If a person is actually in need of therapy, these can be a great supplement, but they cannot take the place of engaging with someone who can offer individualized interpretations and insights that an app cannot provide.”

Jean Otto, PhD, a psychologist in California, agrees. “I don’t think the apps can replace traditional therapy, even in the future,” she says. “The work that is done in therapy requires vulnerability and exposure on the part of the patient, in the presence of another person, followed by an empathic connection to promote change and acceptance.”

While ideally these new digital tools would be used as a supplementary treatment to traditional therapy, for those who aren’t able to access the support of a mental health practitioner, mental health apps offer valuable support and guidance.

If you lack the time or resources or just want some additional help in addressing mental health needs, take a look below at our roundup of mental health apps and see if using one can help you feel better.

(*Note: App selections based on user feedback; not scientific methods.)

Suicide Prevention App

1. notOK



[notOK](#) is a free app developed by a struggling teenager (and her teen brother) for teenagers. The app features a large, red button that can be activated to let close friends, family and their support network know help is needed. Users can add up to five trusted contacts as part of their support group so when they hit the digital panic button, a message along with their current GPS location is sent to their contacts. The message reads: “Hey, I’m not OK! Please call, text, or come find me.”

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

General Mental Health Apps

2. What’s Up



What’s up is an amazing free app that uses Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) methods to help you cope with Depression, Anxiety, Stress, and more. Use the positive and negative habit tracker to maintain your good habits, and break those that are counterproductive. We particularly love the “Get Grounded” page, which contains over 100 different questions to pinpoint what you’re feeling, and the “Thinking Patterns” page, which teaches you how to stop negative internal monologues. Try it out for yourself. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

3. Mood Kit



MoodKit uses the foundation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and provides users with over 200 different mood improvement activities. Developed by two clinical psychologists, MoodKit helps you learn how to change how you think, and develop self-awareness and healthy attitudes. The journal feature is a great way to practice self-care by reflecting on the day, noting any distressing thoughts, and documenting how you overcame them. (\$4.99; [iOS](#))

Addiction Apps

4. Twenty-Four Hours a Day



Based on the best-selling book of the same name, Twenty-Four Hours a Day offers 366 meditations from the book, making it easier for people in recovery from addiction to focus on sobriety wherever they are. (\$5.99 [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

5. Quit That!



Quit That! is a completely free app that helps users beat their habits or addictions. Whether you're looking to stop drinking alcohol, quit smoking, or stop taking drugs, it's the perfect recovery tool to track and monitor your progress. Track as many vices as you want and find out how many minutes, hours, days, weeks, or years it's been since you quit. (Free; [iOS](#))

Anxiety Apps

6. Mind Shift



Mind Shift is one of the best mental health apps designed specifically for teens and young adults with anxiety. Rather than trying to avoid anxious feelings, Mind Shift stresses the importance of changing how you think about anxiety. Think of this app as the cheerleader in your pocket, encouraging you to take charge of your life, ride out intense emotions, and face challenging situations.

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

7. Self-Help for Anxiety Management (SAM)



SAM might be perfect for you if you're interested in self-help, but meditation isn't your thing. Users are prompted to build their own 24-hour anxiety toolkit that allows you to track anxious thoughts and behavior over time, and learn 25 different self-help techniques. You can also use SAM's "Social Cloud" feature to confidentially connect with other users in an online community for additional support.

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

8. CBT Thought Record Diary



The centerpiece of cognitive-behavioral therapy is changing your emotions by identifying negative and distorted thinking patterns. You can use CBT Thought Record Diary to document negative emotions,

analyze flaws in your thinking, and reevaluate your thoughts. This is a great app for gradually changing your approach to anxiety-inducing situations and your thinking patterns for future situations.

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Bipolar Disorder Apps

9. IMoodJournal



Part personal journal and part mood tracker, IMoodJournal can be used to record everything from mood and symptoms, to sleep, medications, and energy cycles. By tracking these various factors, you're able to analyze your daily feelings through summary charts that indicate where your stress levels rise and fall. (\$2.99; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

10. eMoods



eMoods is a mood tracking app designed specifically for people with bipolar disorder. Throughout the day, users can track depressive and psychotic symptoms, elevated mood, and irritability and give an indication of the severity of their symptoms. Users can then see their mood changes on a color-coded monthly calendar and even export a monthly summary report to identify specific triggers and better understand their fluctuating mood. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Depression Apps

11. Talkspace Online Therapy



Can't afford to visit a therapist but still wish you had one to talk to? Talkspace makes that possible. Starting at \$65 per week, you can text message a trained professional as often as you need and receive responses daily. They also offer services for individuals and couples, so if your significant other want to learn how to support you through your depression, they can download the app too.

(Various plans available ranging from \$65 to \$99/week; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

12. Happify



Need a happy fix? With its psychologist-approved mood-training program, the Happify app is your fast-track to a good mood. Try various engaging games, activity suggestions, gratitude prompts and more to train your brain as if it were a muscle, to overcome negative thoughts. The best part? Its free!

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

13. MoodTools



MoodTools aims to support people with clinical depression by aiding the path to recovery. Discover helpful videos that can improve your mood and behavior, log and analyze your thoughts using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) principles, develop a suicide safety plan and more with this free app.

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Eating Disorder Apps

14. Recovery Record



Recovery Record is a great app for anyone recovering from an eating disorder and wanting to develop a more positive body image. Keep a record of the meals you eat and how they make you feel using the app and complete questionnaires that'll help you track your progress over time. One user calls Recovery Record a "remarkable recovery tool"; "It helps me stick to my meal plan, provides an outlet to vent about my food concerns and helps me stay intact with my body to work with it rather than against."

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

15. Rise Up and Recover



Rise Up + Recover is a unique app as it not only allows you to track your meals and how you feel when you eat them, but you can also transcribe your progress into a PDF printout. Pull up the Rise + Recover app on your mobile when you feel the urge to binge or skip a meal, and need quick coping strategies.

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

16. Lifesum



Unlike the other apps featured in this list, Lifesum is a broader resource for all things healthy living. The app allows you to set personal goals, from eating healthier, to building more muscle and getting in more steps each day. You can also enter your own personal data and let Lifesum generate a “Life Score” to get a personalized roadmap to better health. With reminders to drink water and eat regularly throughout the day, Lifesum is a great option for anyone trying to live healthier, but for people with eating disorders, this app can be used to help you redefine how you think about healthy body image. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Apps

17. nOCD



nOCD was designed with the help of OCD specialists and patients to incorporate two treatments: mindfulness and Exposure Response Prevention Treatment. You can receive immediate, clinically-supported guidance when an OCD episode strikes, take weekly tests to assess the severity of your OCD, and have motivational support along the way. One user calls nOCD “a free therapist in your pocket!” (Free; [iOS](#))

18. Worry Watch



One of the most frustrating parts of living with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder can be dealing with intense anxiety despite the fact you know your worries are irrational. Worry Watch aims to help users identify their trigger points for anxiety, note trends in their feelings, reflect on when the outcomes were harmless, and change their thinking patterns for the future. Think of it as your personal, password-protect, worry diary. (\$3.99; [iOS](#))

19. GG OCD



GG OCD aims to improve OCD symptoms by increasing the user's awareness of negative thoughts and training the brain to push those aside to embrace a more positive outset. The app takes the users through various levels, each consisting of short games around a specific theme. From how to automatically replace negative self-talk with positive thoughts, to belief in change, building self-esteem and more, this app takes its user on a journey towards a healthier thinking pattern. (Free; [iOS](#))

PTSD Apps

20. PTSD Coach



Created by the VA's National Center for [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#), PTSD Coach offers everything from a self-assessment for PTSD, to opportunities to find support, positive self-talk, and

anger management. What's great about this app is that you can customize tools based on your own individual needs and preferences, and integrate your own contacts, photos, and music.⁴

(Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

21. Breathe2Relax



Sometimes you just need to breathe and remind yourself you are okay. Breathe2Relax is made for just that. Created by the National Center for Telehealth and Technology, this app is a portable stress management tool that teaches users a skill called diaphragmatic breathing. Breathe2Relax works by decreasing the body's 'fight-or-flight' stress response, making it a great option for people suffering from PTSD. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Schizophrenia App

22. UCSF PRIME



Schizophrenia patients are prone to social isolation even when their condition is treated. The PRIME app, created by psychiatry professor Danielle Shlosser, connects people with schizophrenia to their peers through a social network style interface. It also lets users track "challenge goals," things they'd like to accomplish or improve about themselves. (Free; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Mindfulness and Meditation Apps

23. Headspace



The Headspace app makes meditation simple. Learn the skills of mindfulness and meditation by using this app for just a few minutes per day. You gain access to hundreds of meditations on everything from stress and anxiety to sleep and focus. The app also has a handy “get some headspace” reminder to encourage you to keep practicing each day.

(\$12.99/Month or \$9.99/Year for students; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

24. Calm



Named by Apple as the 2017 iPhone App of the Year, Calm is quickly becoming regarded as one of the best mental health apps available. Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music. This app is truly universal; whether you’ve never tried meditation before or regularly practice, you’ll find the perfect program for you.

(\$12.99/Month; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

25. Ten Percent Happier



Want to sleep better, find relaxation, be more mindful and, well, ten percent happier? This is the app for you. Ten Percent Happier has a library of 500+ guided meditations on topics ranging from anxiety

and stress to parenting and sleep, as well as videos, bite-sized stories, and inspiration you can listen to on the go. New content is added weekly so you'll never tire of having to do the same meditative practice again and again. (\$12.99/Month; [iOS](#) and [Android](#))

Source: <https://www.psycom.net/25-best-mental-health-apps>