

Digital Therapy

OFFERS NEW HOPE FOR

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

BY DEBRA STEVCO MILLER

As celebrities and sports figures continue to express vulnerability toward their own mental health, it could be a good motivator for others to seek help who are struggling with some form of psychological anguish.

However, what may feel too personal to discuss with a therapist or doctor can now be approached from a digital perspective — which also aids those who have limited access to traditional therapy services.

One-on-one sessions with a counselor or therapist are no longer the sole method of treatment for those who are hesitant to express their concerns in-person. Today, research is showing something different.

Emerging rules-based technology is bridging the gap between patient and doctor with digital therapies that deliver support through private chat-based conversations rather than face-to-face exchanges about a mental health issue.

“Unfortunately, there is still some stigma out there that people have, whether it’s externally influenced maybe or just an

internal belief, that (they) don’t want to talk to another person about this,” explains Tarun Kapoor, MD, MBA, senior vice president of Clinical Integration and Digital Transformation at Virtua Health. “But maybe they would be open to talking to a digital relation agent, and maybe they start to get more comfortable about the concept of talking about their thoughts, and maybe that opens the door for them to talk to a therapist in the future.”

For several months, clinicians throughout the Virtua Health system have been testing an AI-powered digital companion from Woebot Health™. So far, about 40% of therapy patients given a code to freely access the closed-system mental health app have used it. The cute robot design is an appealing way for it to pose pertinent questions so that users are empowered to discover answers for themselves.

“Woebot has a certain style to it, a certain tone to it,” Dr. Kapoor said. “It’s not a cure-all for everyone; it’s not meant to be that. It’s an additive.”



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Photo courtesy of Google



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There are many other apps in the digital world that focus on mental health for stress, anxiety, eating disorders, sleep, meditation, and more. However, discerning which is best for an individual's personal situation requires professional input; not an internet search.

"Seek the advice of mental health professionals as to which digital media they use or gravitate toward," suggests Frank Ghinassi, MD, senior vice president of Behavioral Health Services at RWJBarnabas Health and CEO and president at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care.

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 Photos, above and below, courtesy of Getty Images

The recent rollout of an electronic health records platform at RWJBarnabas Health has also helped capture important patient information, such as biometric indicators and medical evaluations that can be shared across different health care settings. If there seems to be a mental health issue, communication is more fluid among providers today.

"Mental health disorders are not worse, better or different than any physiological disorder or dental disorder. All behavioral health was thought to be psychogenic (in the past). We're now seeing that it's a very complicated web of genetics, bio chemistry and environment, and digital media is helping to tie into all of these threads. We have grown a long way," Dr. Ghinassi said. "They are things that go awry most often not through any cause or fault of one's own. (Individuals) should feel as willing to seek help for a behavioral health, mental health, or addiction disorder as they would for a toothache or body ache or flu or COVID."

And then, there are the effects of social media. Last year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued an advisory from Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy:

"While social media may offer some benefits, there are ample indicators that social media can also pose a risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Social media use by young people is nearly universal, with up to 95% of young people ages 13-17 reporting using a social media platform and more than a third saying they use social media 'almost constantly.' Among the benefits, adolescents report that social media helps them feel more accepted (58%), like they have people who can support them through tough times (67%), like they have a place to show their creative side (71%), and more connected to what's going on in their friends' lives (80%)."

"So, it's a double-edged sword on social media," Dr. Kapoor said. "But there's also opportunities for us to use these (digital therapeutic) tools to help people especially in a time when accessing health care is not only difficult but will continue to get more difficult in the upcoming years." ❖



DR. TARUN KAPOOR

Tarun Kapoor, MD, MBA, senior vice president of Clinical Integration and Digital Transformation at Virtua Health.

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 Photo courtesy of Virtua Health



DR. FRANK GHINASSI

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