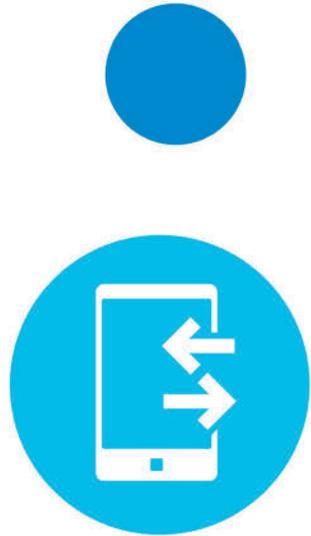Mental Health Commission of Canada
Commission de la santé mentale du Canada

MENTAL HEALTH, TECHNOLOGY AND YOU

The development of this document was made possible through the input, feedback and guidance of people with lived experience of mental health problems and/or illnesses, as well as those who work alongside them. The storyboard, vignettes and infographics are based on the personal reflections and realities of people who have sought out, or continue to use, technology in their care and recovery. Vignettes are meant to be interpreted as a snapshot in someone's unique mental health journey, and is not intended to oversimplify or overgeneralize the complexities of an individual's personal experience.

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Generously volunteering their time to add value, experience and rigor to the body of knowledge on e-mental health, the Mental Health Commission of Canada is grateful for their contributions in the development of this project.

The views in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the MHCC.

WHEN IT COMES TO MENTAL HEALTH

not everyone has the same needs or expectations of care. Maybe you're looking for ways to feel good and stay mentally well. Maybe you need help with a specific problem. Whatever the case, digital technologies can give you more choices and potentially better access to supports and services that are right for you.

Be empowered.

Mental health technologies can be almost anything, from mood-tracking smartphone apps and social media peer support forums to online treatment programs. They're tools that can give you the power to take more control of your mental health and where and how you manage it.

More access. More choice.

Digital technologies are powerful because they can be used almost anywhere. They can give you more options to fit your lifestyle and schedule, whether you live in a big city, a suburb or a remote community. Technology also lets you get support faster, without long waits for appointments.

This resource is all about using technology to access services and supports – for yourself or for someone you care about.

RECOGNIZING THE PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) has long championed technology as a way of making mental health services and supports more accessible and farther reaching. In 2012, the MHCC published Canada's first mental health strategy, Changing Directions, Changing Lives, which included a recommendation to "increase the use of tele-mental health and e-mental health [mental health technologies] by building better infrastructure, providing on-going training and support, and greater flexibility in how services are funded."[1]

WHO ARE MENTAL HEALTH TECHNOLOGIES FOR?

In a word: everyone. Technology can help people of **ALL AGES** in **ALL PLACES** with **ALL KINDS** of mental health needs. Here are a few examples.

Remember, everyone's mental health needs and experiences are different. These stories describe what worked for some people. Something else might work for you.

Abigail has **struggled with body image issues since she was young**. At 16, she started purging. She knew she needed help so she started looking online...

Hannah **noticed she was drinking more**, feeling worse and starting to think about suicide. Then her cousin told her about a way to get help...

Aditya began **experiencing bipolar disorder symptoms** after moving from India to Canada. When a major depressive episode left him unable to care for his children, his wife started looking for new solutions...

Benoit **felt unfocused, anxious and cut off** from his friends after coming home from university. After his symptoms led to a full-blown panic attack, his doctor referred him to an online therapist...

Phillip has **never been comfortable with his own sexuality**. At a high-stress time, racked by internalized homophobia, he found a crisis chat service online and things started to change...

Jacqueline never imagined she would spend her 70s alone. **Angry, depressed and lacking the energy** even to clean her apartment, she thought she'd never feel better. But a surprising suggestion changed all that...

ABIGAIL'S
STORY

Abigail has struggled with body image issues since she was young. At 16, she started purging. A friend found out and sent her the link to a video on eating disorders. Abigail realized she needed help but was afraid her parents would freak out if they knew – so she started looking online.

One of the first things Abigail discovered was a web-based peer support forum where she could talk about her experiences anonymously with other people who have been through the same things and were now in recovery. She made friends quickly and began to feel a sense of hope. Several members of the group connected her to advice and information, and one suggested an app for monitoring diet and mood.

Abigail downloaded the app, which helped her better understand her triggers and develop healthy coping skills to deal with them. The knowledge she gained made her feel less ashamed about her challenges. With that renewed confidence, she sought online therapy. She still hadn't told her parents, so getting help online meant she could get support without raising questions by leaving the house.

Abigail's therapy gave her even more strategies for managing her eating disorder. She continues to work with her therapist over the Internet, keeping tabs on her diet and mood, and chatting with peers to maintain her recovery.

NOTE: Abigail has what would be considered a mild to moderate eating disorder. If her condition worsened, she may have needed in-person therapy to recover.
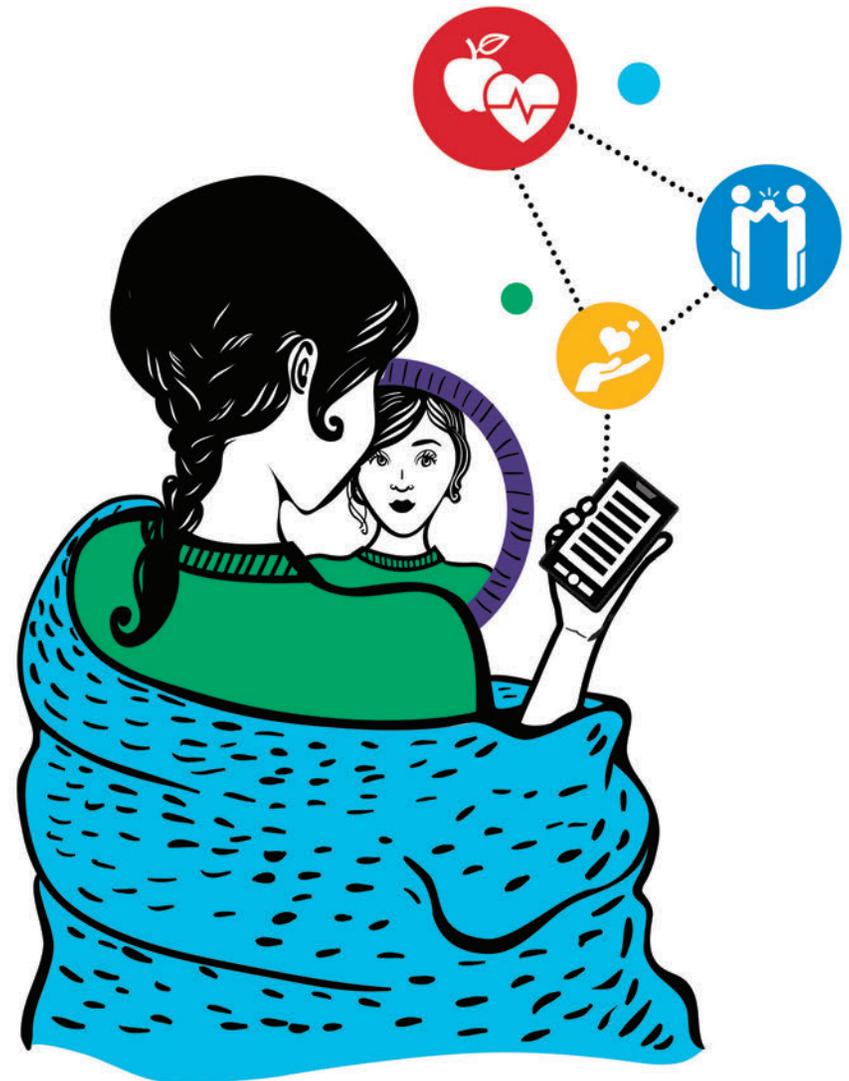
HANNAH'S
STORY

Hannah lives in a remote First Nations community. Many days, she and her friends would pass the time drinking. Recently Hannah noticed she was having to drink more and more to get the same effect she used to – and feeling worse and worse. She told her cousin she'd been having suicidal thoughts and was urged to get help.

Hannah didn't want to go to the community health centre because she was afraid people would know she was having problems. Her cousin said there was a number she could call to get help privately. She used it and connected with a clinician in the city down south who worked with a lot of youth struggling with substance use and suicidal thoughts.

Talking sometimes by voice and sometimes by chat, the clinician gave Hannah strategies for dealing with her alcohol abuse and thoughts of self-harm. Hannah also connected with a First Nations and Métis wellness helpline, which gave her access to traditional healing and the chance to talk about the impact of intergenerational trauma.

As Hannah got further into recovery, she realized many other youth in her community could use help, too. She decided to start a peer support group and then invited the friends she used to drink with to join. They get together every week and new young people join all the time. Hannah still talks and chats with her clinician regularly to maintain her recovery.

ADITYA'S STORY

Aditya first experienced bipolar disorder symptoms as a teenager in India. His doctor was a great help – and has been through all the years since. When Aditya moved to Canada with his wife and kids, that trusted support was lost. He didn't know where to turn when his symptoms came back. Unfamiliar with Canadian health care and with English as a second language, he experienced a major depressive episode that left him bedridden and unable to care for his children for several days.

Aditya's wife searched online for help and found a live chat service with translation support. Aditya was able to chat with a psychiatrist about his disorder in his native language – from his home, on his own schedule. The psychiatrist concluded Aditya's medications were likely out of balance, possibly triggered by the stress of the move and living in a new country. In addition to adjusting Aditya's prescriptions, he sent Aditya links to online self-help resources and a couple of trusted mobile apps.

The self-help resources gave Aditya more insight into his disorder and the warning signs to watch for. One of the apps made it easy for him to track his medication and take his pills as directed, while the other helped him track and monitor his moods. Now when he notices any change, he uses the chat service for support. Together, the tools have helped him take control of his mental health again and be the father he wants to be.
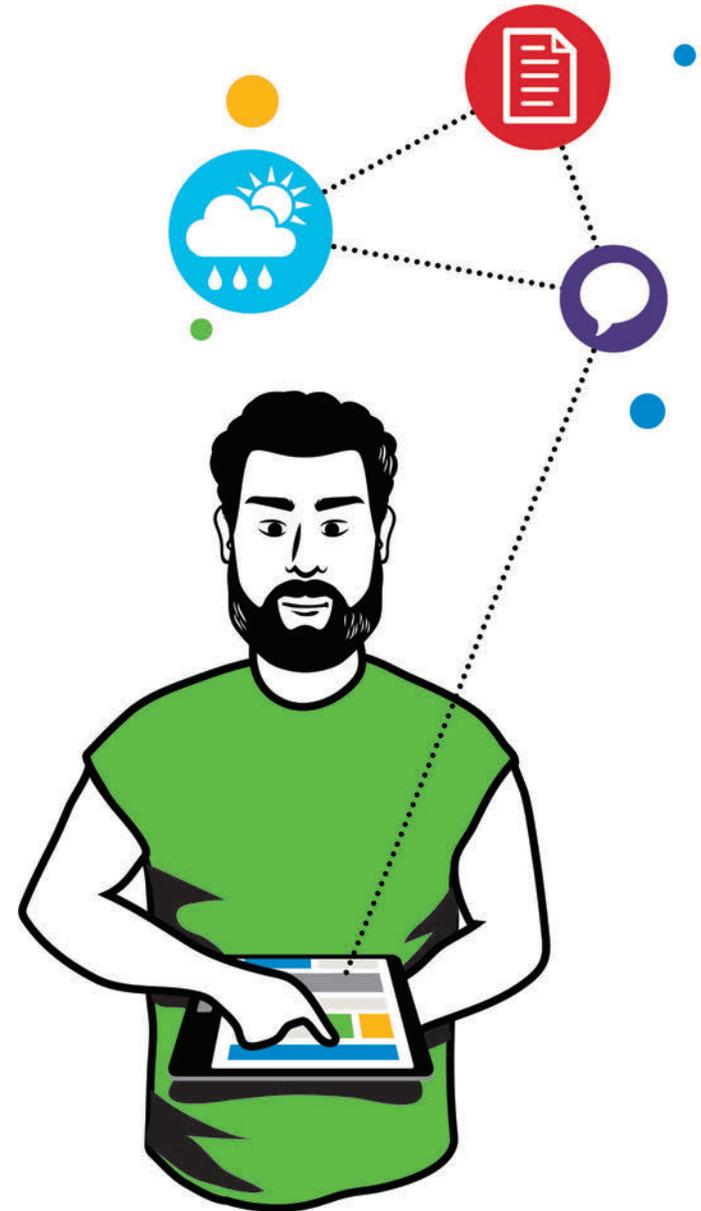
BENOIT'S
STORY

About a month after he moved back home from university, Benoit started feeling not like himself. He missed his school friends and felt isolated in his small rural hometown. He couldn't concentrate on his job search and started to have frequent headaches, stomach pains and tense muscles. One night, he was sure he was having a heart attack.

He got medical help. The local doctor gave him a clean bill of physical health and suggested Benoit may have had a panic attack. As there was no local psychologist to consult, the doctor referred Benoit to a therapist with whom he could video-conference. The therapy helped stabilize his symptoms and also linked Benoit to an online community of people dealing with anxiety disorders. He quickly made friends and started to feel better knowing he was supported and not alone.

One of his online friends recommended an app to help him recognize when a panic attack was coming on. It included guided breathing exercises to follow when an attack occurred. He also found a relaxation app with guided meditations and calming nature sounds to ease him to sleep.

Over time, Benoit began to feel more relaxed. He continues to use both apps when he needs them to feel calm, rested and equipped to deal with the stresses in his life.

PHILLIP'S
STORY

Phillip was bullied constantly for his sexuality in school. When he came out to his parents, his father threw him out of the house. The homophobia he internalized through those experiences severely damaged his feelings of self-worth as an adult. During a particularly stressful period, he stopped going to the gym and his performance at work declined. His boss noted this, which made Phillip feel even worse about himself. He began to think he would be better off dead.

Those thoughts of suicide scared Phillip into action. He found a crisis chat service online and the person he talked to suggested he try a web-based cognitive behavioural therapy program – some of it self-directed, with online coaching support available.

The therapy helped Phillip challenge his negative thoughts and perceptions. Over time, he began to feel more at ease with himself and searched out other people who could relate to his struggles. He found an online forum specifically for LGBTQ+ people, making friends, finding potential partners in his city, and eventually joining an in-person peer support and social group.

His new circle has become Phillip's family of choice, providing the acceptance and support he never got at home. He continues to access web-based therapy, which he finds helpful when he is stressed and detects negative thoughts creeping in.
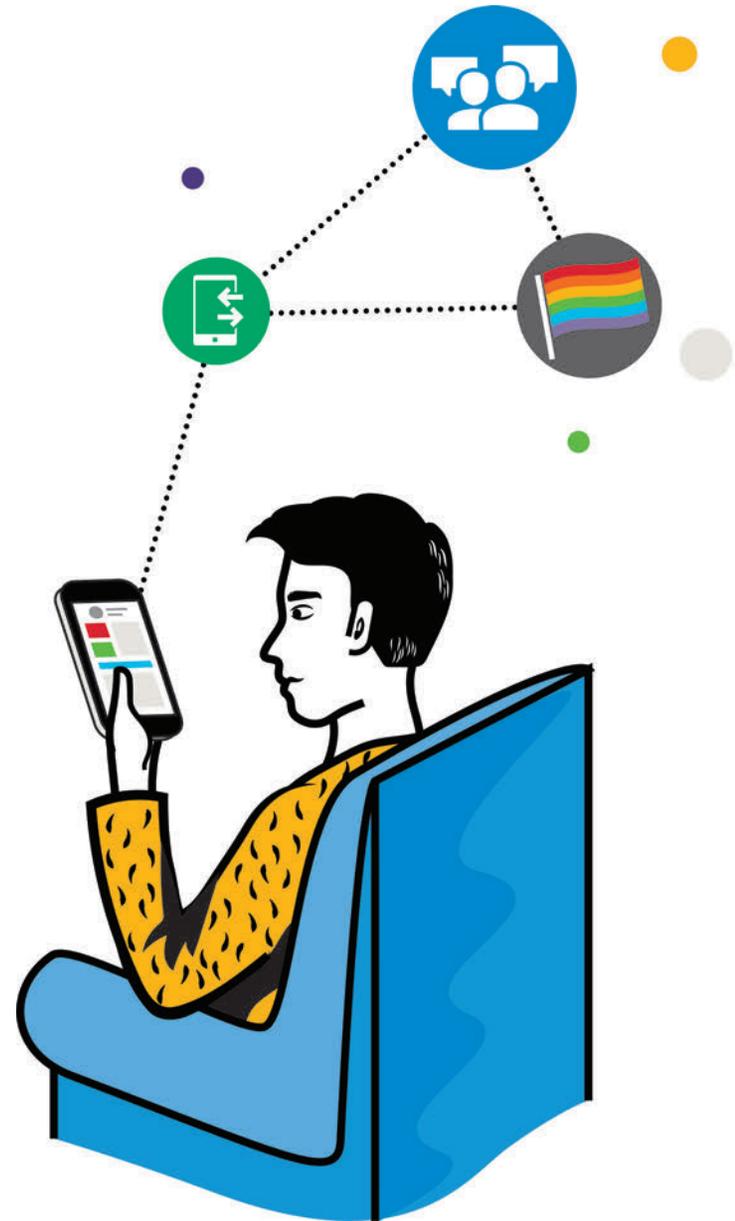
JACQUELINE'S STORY

Jacqueline has lived alone since her husband died four years ago. With her arthritis she finds it hard to get out and see friends, and her children and grandchildren are busy with their own lives. She never imagined she would spend her 70s by herself: she feels neglected and lonely, and has even lost the motivation to clean her apartment.

A neighbour, who noticed Jacqueline wasn't acting like her usual self, managed to get her to talk about her feelings and suggested she connect online with other seniors. Jacqueline was instantly intrigued. She had often used social media to check on her family, but never considered it for peer support.

Chatting online with people who could relate to her concerns made her feel validated and less alone. It also helped her realize she was likely depressed.

One of her online friends suggested she get a pet to keep her company. Jacqueline had always been a cat lover but was afraid she wouldn't be able to take care of an animal. That's when another friend offered the idea of a robot cat. Jacqueline at first thought it was strange, but warmed to the idea. She's now had her robot cat – Eve, she calls it – for several months. Having a pet to cuddle and talk to has helped her feel much less lonely. Eve responds by purring when petted, which Jacqueline finds soothing and relaxing.

WHY DO WE NEED MENTAL HEALTH TECHNOLOGIES?

When people experience mental health challenges, it's important for them to be able to access help in a timely way. But this doesn't always happen.[2,3] High demand for in-person services often means long wait times. Not all services are available everywhere across the country, and sometimes stigma – the fear of being judged for having a mental health problem – can keep people from seeking help at all.
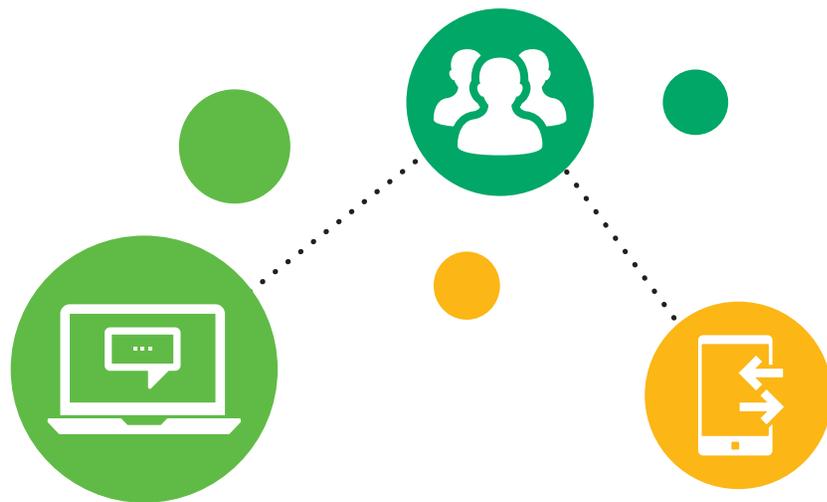
Mental health technologies make it possible for more people to get more of the kinds of help they need – faster than ever before, and no matter where they live. And the more advanced technologies become, the better able they are to help manage or treat mental health problems and illnesses.[4] Today, it's possible to learn coping strategies for depression with the help of a chatbot, face a phobia using a virtual reality headset, or learn how to manage anxiety through a self-guided online program. It's also possible to speak with a clinician online, by video or via text message, which means you can get support even if you live somewhere remote.

Although there is increasing research to support the use of technology in mental health, some types of technologies have more research behind them than others. As advances in mental health technologies continue, we expect to see more research to show what works well and in what circumstances. For more information, including some of that evidence, download: *E-Mental Health: Transforming the System Using Technology: A Briefing Document*.

WHAT TECHNOLOGIES CAN BE USED TO SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH?

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PEER SUPPORT PLATFORMS

Social media, online chats and other technologies that let people connect and talk to others can be powerful tools for mentoring, empathetic conversations and peer support.

COMPUTERIZED TREATMENTS, RESOURCES AND MOBILE APPS

Many treatment programs can now be followed online – on a computer, smartphone or tablet – as downloadable programs or apps. Some of these may be guided by a clinician or coach, while others are completely computer-based.

TELEHEALTH/TELEMEDICINE

A wide range of mental health services and supports is available over the phone or through voice or video chat on a smartphone, tablet or computer – giving access to care from home, a clinic or health centre, or a mobile device.

WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY

Like the name suggests, "wearable" technology is technology you can wear on your body – like a watch, armband or anklet. These devices can measure and track your health statistics and monitor your wellbeing.

VIRTUAL REALITY (VR)

Virtual reality or "VR" uses special equipment like goggles, helmets and gloves with sensors and screens to let you experience simulated environments. VR-based psychotherapy is likely going to be used more and more often as part of therapies to help people work through mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

ROBOTS

Robots can come in all shapes and sizes, from machines that simulate pets like cats and dogs to ones that administer certain kinds of care in health settings. Interacting with robots has been shown to reduce loneliness and increase social interactions.

GAMING

Video or computerized games can be used as part of mental health therapies to help people learn about their problems or illnesses and even help them face and overcome challenges.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

As computers continue to get "smarter" they can perform tasks that would otherwise require a human to think through – like diagnosing mental health problems or illnesses based on how a person responds to a set of questions or tracking a person's improvement

BIG DATA, BIG POSSIBILITIES

Scientists and clinicians can use "big data" – massive amounts of information in computer systems and online – to identify mental health patterns and trends across thousands or millions of people, and then use that information to design more effective tools and programs. This big data is anonymous: it's not about any one person but instead about getting the big picture on mental health to improve care for everyone.

WHAT'S YOUR JOURNEY?

Technology empowers people from all walks of life to monitor, manage and improve their mental health.

It's all about access – getting to the supports that serve each of us best.

HOW CAN TECHNOLOGY[5] HELP?

COACHING
- Online therapy
- Video, text and voice chat

PEER-LED SUPPORT
- Online mentoring
- Peer support apps

MONITORING
- Mood and medication tracking apps
- Wearable technology

ONLINE SELF-HELP
- Cognitive behavioural therapy apps
- Anxiety/panic-management apps
- Self-help modules
- PTSD coaching apps
- Dialectical behavioural therapy apps

INTERVENTION + TREATMENT
- Text-based counselling
- Social media, chat rooms and instant messaging
- Clinician follow-up and referral
- Tele-medicine video conferencing
- Video-based counselling

WELLNESS + PREVENTION
- Gaming
- Wearable devices
- Relaxation, meditation and mindfulness apps
- Sleep aid apps
- Robot companions

RECOVERY
- Web/Internet support
- Social Media and YouTube videos
- Online forums
- Recovery trackers for eating disorder

CRISIS SUPPORT
- Hot-spot app notifications
- Online chat support
- Phone help lines and text support

LEGEND

WELLNESS AND PREVENTION
Practice healthy habits to maintain or improve your overall mental health while you're feeling well.

COACHING
Work with a trained professional to deal with a mental health problem or illness.

PEER-LED SUPPORT
Chat with people who know what you're going through, get encouragement, learn coping strategies and more.

INTERVENTION AND TREATMENT
Consult online with a specialist for assessment, treatment or follow-up, or to be referred to other services.

ONLINE SELF-HELP
Access resources to learn about mental health problems or conditions and how to address them.

MONITORING
Track your moods, medication use and more to identify issues early and manage your recovery.

CRISIS SUPPORT
Get immediate help if you're experiencing a mental health crisis.

RECOVERY
Live a satisfying and hopeful life, even if you experience ongoing symptoms of a mental health problem or illness.
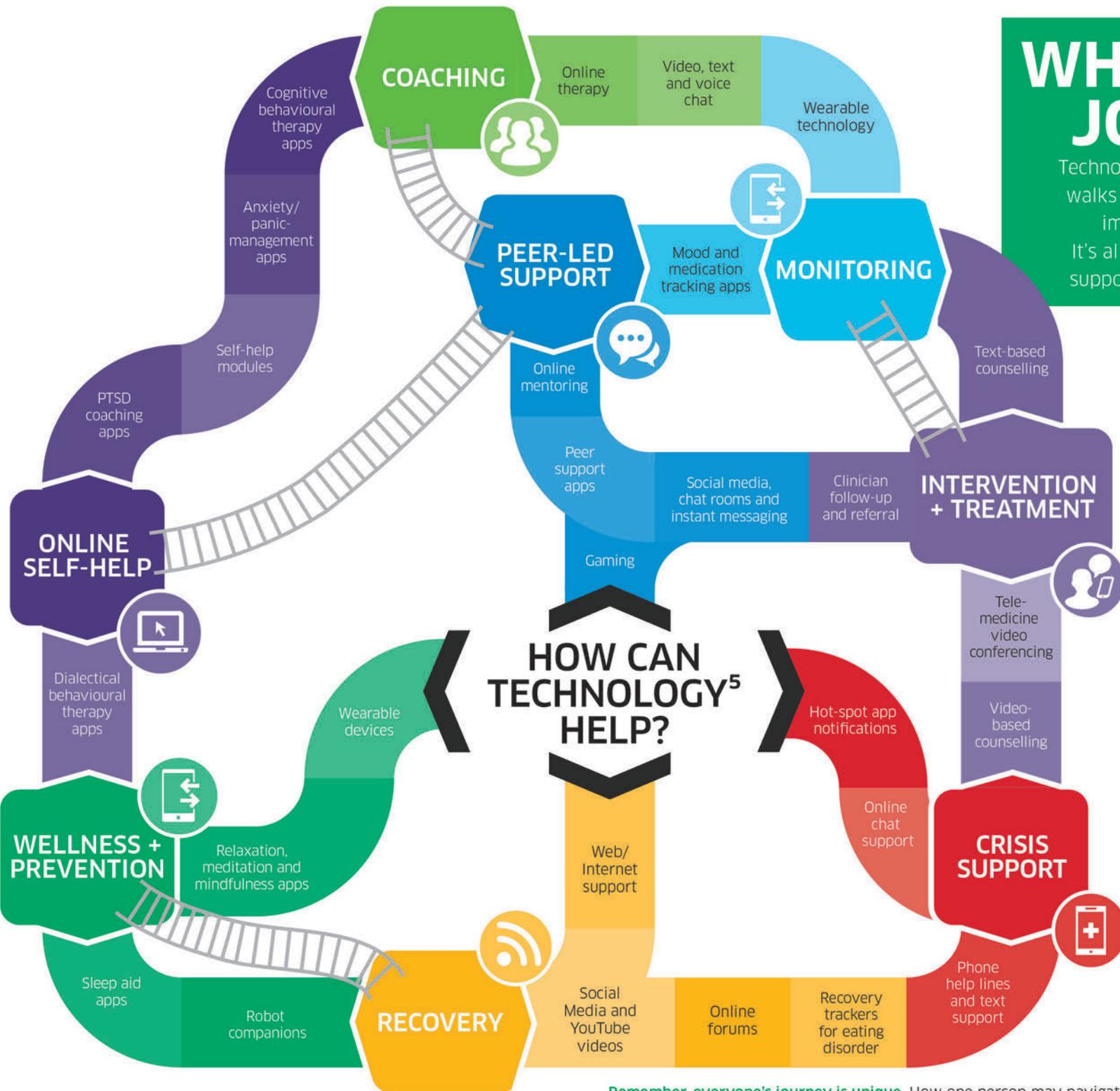
Remember, everyone's journey is unique. How one person may navigate and access a range of services across the continuum depends on their unique needs and circumstances. This infographic is for demonstration purposes only.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF ONLINE

When you access mental health technologies or information online, you want to know they're trustworthy and reliable – and that any experiences or personal information you share online will be kept private. Here are some tips to stay safe.

1. Always ask, "Says who?"

Check to make sure a website or app comes from a source you can trust. Look up the author or company and see what other people say about them. Find out when the information or app was published – if it's recent or old – and if it was based on academic research. If a site or app seems unprofessional or badly written, that can be a sign it's not trustworthy.

2. Check reviews and ratings.

App sites like the Apple App Store and Google Play encourage users to post reviews and ratings that can help you decide if an app is high-quality. Don't just look at the number of stars: read the reviews to learn why people said something is good or bad. And if you use an app yourself, be sure to rate it to help the next person!

3. Read the fine print.

Everyone jokes about how long and boring user agreements and privacy statements can be, but when it comes to personal information about your mental health, always read the fine print before using an app or service. Find out what data will be collected, where it will be stored and if it will be shared with anyone other than the service provider. If you use a public computer to access a service, always clear the browser history before you sign off.

4. Share selectively.

One of the advantages of getting mental health help online is that you can be anonymous. Sometimes that makes it easier to share thoughts and feelings, and it also helps you protect your information privacy. That said, sometimes the person or service you're working with needs to know personal details to help you effectively. If you've determined the service is one you can trust, share what you need to.

5. Be "digitally literate".

Some people are more comfortable with technology than others. If you aren't confident about your "tech skills", look for opportunities to learn – from friends, family members or even your local library, which may have computers, Internet access and staff who can help you.

Find the mix that's right for you.

Technology, face-to-face peer support, therapy from a clinician – you have a wide range of options when it comes to your mental health journey. Use the full mix of tools and services to get what you need.

LEARN MORE ABOUT TECHNOLOGY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Get the fuller story on what the Mental Health Commission of Canada and its partners are doing to help raise awareness of mental health technologies and the benefits they can bring.

Visit the MHCC website:
http://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/focus-areas/e-mental-health.
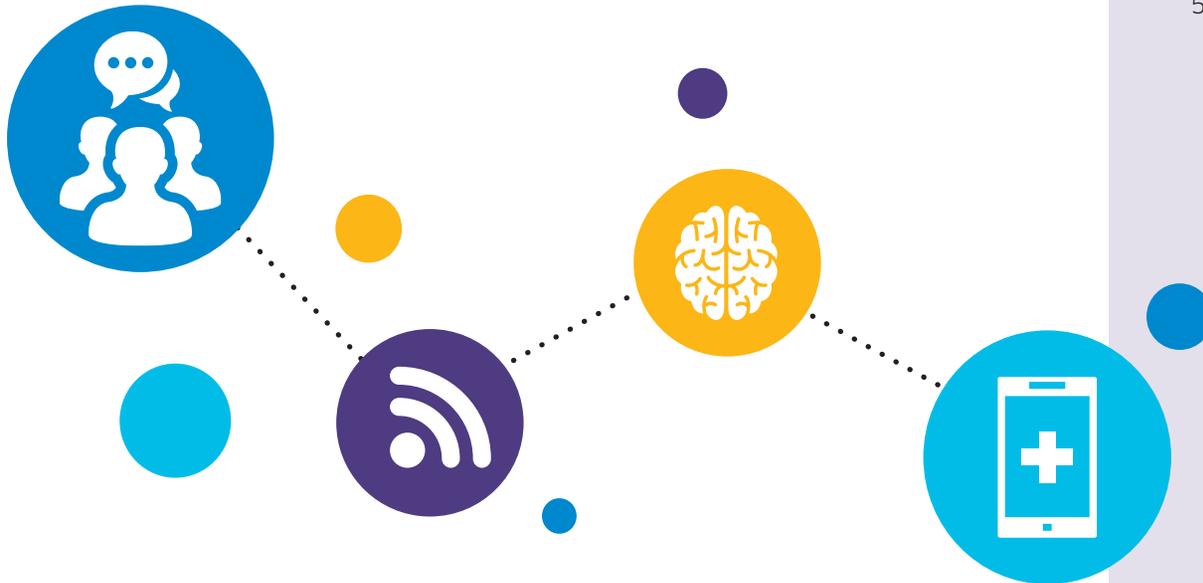
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5 This is not an exhaustive list of technologies.

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