Mental Health Apps: How to Make an Informed Choice

The number of mental health apps is growing every day. Just knowing what's available can be a challenge; determining which ones are reliable and actually work is even harder. That's why the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) have worked together to create an assessment framework that will make it easier for people to find the right apps for their specific needs – uniquely designed with the Canadian context in mind.

The guiding principles and assessment criteria set out in the proposed framework will help people across Canada make more informed app decisions. That includes individuals who want to manage their own mental health, healthcare providers looking to make good recommendations to patients and even app developers seeking to improve their products.

FACT: NOT ALL MENTAL HEALTH APPS ARE EQUAL

Some apps have proven mental health benefits. Some make mental health services more accessible by knocking down the barriers of cost, geography and stigma that keep people from getting support. But other apps are ineffective, potentially unsafe or have serious privacy/security flaws. The aim of this framework is to help people determine the difference.

Evidence base	**Gender responsiveness**	**Cultural appropriateness**
Is there proof that the app is effective?	Does the app consider the needs and preferences of men, women, boys, girls and gender-diverse people?	How appropriate is the app for people from a variety of cultures?

App assessments based on this framework should also be:

- **user-centred:** Apps that are designed with and for the intended end user are more likely to meet their needs and expectations.
- **risk-based:** The level of risk to a person's health must be taken into account. An interventional app like a drug-dosing calculator, for example, has more risk and needs a more detailed assessment than a fitness tracker.
- **innovation-friendly:** Assessments should not stifle innovation or burden developers. They should encourage the ongoing development and advancement of effective apps.
- **open, transparent and fair:** Providing clarity about the nature of the assessment and its outcomes is essential to ensuring its integrity and usefulness.
- **consistent with ethical norms:** If an app is part of a research study, it's necessary to ensure that the guidelines for ethical research involving humans are followed.
- **internationally-informed:** With so many apps developed and distributed globally, the assessment process should be aligned with international frameworks to promote greater use.

HOW THE FRAMEWORK WAS DEVELOPED

In November 2016, MHCC and CIHR brought together a diverse group of stakeholders from across Canada: app users and developers, healthcare providers, mental health advocates, people with lived experience of mental health problems and illnesses, policymakers and researchers.

Together, they discussed and reached consensus on the guiding principles and criteria to be included in a made-in-Canada framework for assessing mental health apps. This document reflects the outcomes of that discussion, consolidating some of the agreed-upon wording for ease of use.

What to look for in a mental health app

Here are some key criteria to consider when assessing any potential mental health app. Many of these are 'informative' criteria: while there's no right or wrong answer, the information gathered will still be useful in the overall assessment. Others are called 'evaluative' criteria because certain answers will be definitively better than others.

EVALUATIVE CRITERIA

Effectiveness
What is the app's intended purpose? Can it actually do what it says it will? Is there proof?

Clinical claims
If the app makes certain clinical claims (e.g., reducing stress or anxiety), does it give proof of its efficacy?

Usability
Is the app user-friendly and engaging enough to make people want to keep using it?

User desirability
Will the people the app is designed for actually want (or be able) to use it?

Security and privacy
Does the app clearly state how it will collect, store, use and protect personal health information? Is this information easy to find or hidden deep within the app? Does the app meet all applicable federal and provincial/territorial legislative standards and requirements regarding personal health information?

INFORMATIVE CRITERIA

Functionality
What functions does the app offer (e.g., journaling, mood tracking, guided exercises)?

Interoperability
Does the app use open standards allowing it to exchange data with other health apps or tools (if applicable)?

Supported platforms
Is the app exclusive to one platform, which may create accessibility barriers? Or is it available to many users across Android, iOS and other devices?

Target users
Who is the intended audience for the app? Is it clear who should or should not be using it?

Price
Is the app upfront about its cost or are there hidden/extra fees? Will the price create accessibility barriers for the intended users?

Transparency
Does the app clearly state the individuals or organizations involved in its development? Does it clearly state who provided the funding for its development?

Inclusion
Were the target users involved in the development and testing of the app to ensure it responds to their needs and expectations? How diverse was the user input? Were people from a variety of populations with unique mental health challenges involved (e.g., immigrant, refugee, ethnocultural and racialized communities, First Nations, Inuit, Métis, LGBTQ2+, people who are homeless, seniors, youth)?

What's next?

Because technology-based interventions for mental health are still relatively new, this framework has the potential to influence future research, policies and programs in the field; however, there is still more work to be done. For example, is it possible to calculate an overall score for an app by assigning ratings to some criteria? Should there be minimal acceptable thresholds for other criteria? Answering these questions – in a way that aligns with the framework's guiding principles and responds to the unique needs of app users across Canada – will be an important next step in creating a more rigorous and practical assessment tool.

Find out more! For more information on mental health apps and technologies, visit mentalhealthcommission.ca

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

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